



**Islington BME Forum and Islington Community Network  
Submission of Evidence for**

**Islington Equalities Review**

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## 1. Introduction

This report was compiled in partnership between the Islington BME Forum and Islington Community Network to respond to Islington Council's Equalities Review. Feedback was collated from a well-attended equalities review consultation meeting held at Voluntary Action Islington on the 11th of April 2012. Around 27 representatives from local organisations took part in the consultation. Participants were representative of a broad range of equalities strands, including age, LGBT, gender, disability, BME and refugees. Using thematic groups of housing, health and social care, education and employment, participants gave their experience of the Council's knowledge and engagement with groups on equalities issues. Individual organisations were also encouraged to provide specific case examples where appropriate. This report is the synthesis of this consultation meeting, and represents a broad spectrum of views from the voluntary and community sector. Responses do not necessarily indicate the views of every organisation.

This was a well attended and positive meeting. Participants were enthusiastic about encouraging improved communication and relationships with the Council on equalities and welcome the opportunity to respond to the review. The report concludes with key actions that the council could implement to develop their work in this area, and also improve broader relationships with community groups.

## 2. Executive Summary

Participants acknowledged the difficult economic climate the local authority is faced with, resulting in cuts to funding and services. Groups gave feedback to demonstrate how the cuts have had a disproportionate impact on lower income families, who have tended to be from BME communities and other key equality groups, such as disabled residents and older people. Cuts to the funding of voluntary and community sector (VCS) groups have also had a detrimental effect on efforts around achieving equality in Islington.

The participants highlighted 4 areas where the council can improve outcomes for equality groups:

### **1. Knowing our community, understanding and reaching the community**

The Council has good knowledge and data on inequalities, but sometimes this is not translated into an adequate understanding throughout all services and departments. This includes demonstrating awareness of both the root causes and cultural knowledge to deal with these issues. As a result the Council can find it difficult to reach the most isolated communities.

### **2. Involvement and engagement**

Some departments and staff in the Council are actively seeking the involvement and engagement of the VCS to deliver improved equalities

outcomes for residents. Unfortunately this ethic does not pervade all areas of the Council and there is not enough awareness of who the dedicated equalities personnel are, or a consistent framework on engagement that can be adopted across all council departments and services.

**3. Scrutiny and compliance**

There is no clear structured way for VCS to hold local authority to account for non-compliance of Equality Act (2010).

**4. Private sector regulation**

Equality groups are particularly vulnerable to private sector exploitation, specific areas of concern being the increase in betting and payday loan shops, and poor private rental practices.

Participants provide recommendations for the council to address these issues, which include improving communication, outreach and visibility, regulation, training and a clearer framework for working with voluntary and community sector in decision making and policy development in the area of Equalities.

### **3. Findings - Strengths and Weaknesses**

In each area, participants identified Council strengths and weaknesses in relation to achieving equality.

#### **3.1 Knowing, understanding and reaching the community**

##### **Strengths**

- The Council seems to be aware of issues for equalities groups face
- The Council maintains good, accessible information on inequalities
- Many officers have good awareness of the VCS and there are some examples of good practise in relation to working with the sector to reach communities.

##### **Weaknesses**

Poor customer service from frontline staff has disproportionate impact on BME communities and other key equality groups such as refugee communities, older people and young people. Groups reported that staff are often culturally insensitive to issues faced by communities and cannot respond appropriately. For example:

- Housing – local voluntary groups found that BME communities and other equalities groups are disproportionately affected by poor customer service from the “Housing Aid Centre”, and are often faced to “pick up the pieces” and resolve housing issues which should be dealt with by the council. Insensitivities in re-housing policy have also lead to families being split up and being moved out of the Borough.
- Education – There is a lack of BME teachers or teachers with cultural understanding of BME pupils’ background in primary and secondary schools. There is need for teacher training on equalities, cultural understanding and sensitivity, so that schools can deal with race inequalities effectively and appropriately. This should have long term positive outcomes for pupils and staff.
- Health - Language barriers can affect work with groups. This was particularly highlighted in the area of mental health

##### **Case studies**

- The single Equality Act (2010) can have the effect of diluting some issues that may unique to specific strands, thus leaving some issues unaddressed. In relation to the age strand, some participants felt that issues for both isolated pensioners and young people were not being addressed or being picked up in key documents such as the Fairness Commission Report. Participants want to see visible action plans to address inequalities experienced by these communities.

### 3.2. Involvement/engagement – providing appropriate channels for the VCS to engage with key decision-making and policy development in the area of Equalities.

#### Strengths

- **There are some examples of good practice in working with VCS** - For example in the area of health, the stop smoking campaign and mental health champions were viewed positively.
- **Staff** - Some departments and officers within the council are aware of, and do try to engage with the sector.
- **Opportunities** - There are some good existing opportunities to engage in local decision making and service delivery, e.g. the Single Employer Face and Ward Partnerships.

#### Weaknesses

- **Visibility** - Equalities representatives in the council are not visible enough, and it is not always clear who to speak to. For example there is no clear representative to refer to on engagement and involvement. There is also no clear communication on what work is being done on inequalities and the impact of the work.
- **Representation** - There is a lack of BME representation in existing channels for engagement. As an example, in education there are not enough BME school governors, while in local and national democracy there is underrepresentation of black voters.
- **Inconsistencies** - Sometimes help depends on individuals, and officers' knowledge can be inconsistent. Not all groups get the same information, and communication about issues and events can be inconsistent.
- **Mistrust** - There is still a perception that efforts by the council to involve communities are a "tick box exercise" and do not lead to meaningful outcomes for equality groups. This could be improved by demonstrating the impact of the Council's work on equality.
- **Communication** - Council meetings about the VCS and equalities are not promoted enough to groups.
- **Support** - There is lack of awareness of the support available and staff who work with the VCS. There is lack of structure for voluntary groups to give formal feedback, and share their own statistics and case studies.

### 3.3 Scrutiny and Compliance

#### Weaknesses

- **Demonstrating impact** - There isn't enough communication reviewing or demonstrating the impact of Council initiatives such as the Fairness Commission, and Race Equality Scheme.
- **Non-compliance** – There is no structured way for the VCS to engage in reviewing the progress of schemes tackling race equalities and other equality issues, and no clear information regarding the consequences of non-compliance. This is particularly relevant in schools and their requirements under the Race Equality Scheme. Participants also gave the example of how the Council should demonstrate the benefits of Section 106 and its benefit for communities.

### 3.4. Regulation of the Private Sector

#### Weaknesses

- **Demonstrating impact** - The Council needs to demonstrate the community benefit of arrangements with the private sector. For example it should be shown how Section 106 is helping the most vulnerable communities. Social impact assessments in planning policy are critical in demonstrating the negative outcomes of the expansion of betting shops and payday loan shops.
- **Protecting the most vulnerable** - In housing, lower income clients such as refugees and students are disproportionately referred to private landlord schemes and VCS housing support organisations are facing pressure to push clients on to them. This leaves many low income residents vulnerable to exploitation and this issue is not being addressed adequately. Private rental prices in Islington are rising, and much private housing is attainable only by upper-middle and upper class residents. Many low income residents also face appalling eviction processes and poor housing standards in the private sector. Some participants stressed that pensioners are particularly vulnerable to poor housing standard.

## **4. Recommendations**

### **4.1 Knowing, understanding and reaching communities**

#### **Provide training**

- Ensure all staff are equipped to deal with clients from BME and other equalities groups.
- Frontline staff need to be better equipped to develop cultural understanding of key equality groups and the barriers they face. This will improve customer service and provide more effective support to equalities groups.
- Policy making officers need frontline experience of equalities issues. Participants recommended developing a work shadowing scheme in which officers can shadow frontline staff in the VCS, particularly those working with the most vulnerable.
- Teachers should be supported to improve cultural and equalities awareness.

#### **Develop framework for consistency throughout the council**

- Develop a framework so there is consistency across the Council, ensuring all officers have awareness and understanding of equalities issues. We recommend that dedicated personnel are visible to the community and actively engage. There needs to be a visible response to under performance in equalities within Council departments and services.

#### **Have clear priorities for each equality strand communicated across the Council and to residents**

- This would ensure that issues which impact the community are clearly recognised and understood.

#### **Outreach**

- There is a need for more Council events to be conducted in the community, for example in places of worship and community centres.

#### **BME teachers**

- Develop ways to encourage more BME teachers to work in the Borough.



## 4.2 Involvement and Engagement – providing appropriate channels for the VCS to engage with equalities decision-making and policy development

- **Better communication** - There needs to be better outreach and communication with equalities groups about the opportunities for engagement. For example a webpage specifically publishing a list of all public meetings and council engagement networks where VCS representation is needed would be beneficial. There also needs to be better communication of how the Council is engaging with VCS groups on equalities.
- **Representation** - There should be voluntary sector representation on equalities and communities committees. This would help the Council better understand issues faced by equality groups.
- **Resources and support a VCS equalities group or forum** - This initiative would enable VCS representatives to come together and identify priorities to achieve better outcomes for equality groups. This forum would also be able to work with the Council to shape the equalities agenda and help demonstrate compliance.
- **Encourage community involvement** - A programme to encourage BME and underrepresented groups to be more involved in local politics and decision-making could improve civic involvement. This would include increasing the number of BME school governors.
- **Dedicated and visible personnel** – Key officers need to be known in the community. VCS groups need to know who they can contact to voice equality issues and how the Council will respond.

## 4.3 Facilitating scrutiny and compliance

- **Clearer processes for the VCS to hold the Council to account for non-compliance** - There should be an accessible and visible action plan on equalities, which is regularly reviewed and engages residents and VCS equalities groups.
- **Publish underperformance** – Areas of underperformance and proposed rectification plans need to be more widely communicated to VCS groups and residents.
- **Provide training for VCS equality groups on the public sector equality duty**

#### 4.4 Private sector regulation

- **Private sector advocacy** – Work with the sector to address issues such as BME and youth unemployment.
- **Improved regulation and social impact assessment** - Tackle and reduce the exploitation of equality and low income groups from poor private sector practices.
- **More support for groups facing exploitation from the private sector** - Improve processes for complaints and dispute resolution in private sector housing.

## 5. Conclusion

This report in response to the Council's review of equalities practices provides clear recommendations about how to work with VCS to provide fairer outcomes for equality groups. A key message from the consultation with community groups was that performance could be improved if there is clearer way for the VCS to review and monitor progress towards equality. This requires that the Council actively engages with equality groups and is accountable for the work which is undertaken. One practical suggestion to improve relationships and practices was the establishment of a VCS equalities forum or network. This group should be resourced and facilitated to work proactively with the Council, voice issues and engage in policy development. Most critically the Council are encouraged to improve their communication with VCS equality groups and also acknowledge policy gaps. A number of recommendations have been suggested to help the Council improve communication, and provide greater consistency across all departments and services. We hope that this report assists the Council to develop improved policies and approaches that reduce inequalities for all residents in the Borough.

## 6. Appendix

### List of participants

Participants	Organsiation
Nick Antjoule	Galop (LGBT)
Colin Adams	Hanley Crouch Association
John Worker	Islington Pensioners Forum
Trevor Mbatha	Mildmay Community Partnership
Zaynab Hassan	Family Action
Tracey Bignall	Race Equality Foundation
Nita Upadhyay	Mental Wellbeing Champions project, Manor Gardens
Desmond Riley	Islington Link Up
Ruth Hayes	Islington Law Centre
Sukpal Grewal	Job Centre Plus
Kemi Legbe	NHS Islington Public Health
Kwaku	BBM
Oliver Biggs	Resident
Sofia Hailemariam	Sanctuary Housing
Muhsina Akhtar	Islington Bangladesh Association
Rahel Geffen	Islington Disability Action
David Borwick	Single Homelessness Project
Judith Wren	Empower Islington/Islington LINK
Goha Saed	Kurdish Middle Eastern Women's Organisation
Nigel Gansell	Islington Pensioners Forum
Michelline Ngongo	Islington Refugee Forum/Light Project International
Eyasu	Islington Refugee Forum
Josette Punter	Parents 4 Parents/Islington BME Forum
Shanice Lindsay	St. Luke's Parochial Trust
Ann	Islington Pensioners Forum