

# Equality in Islington

A voluntary sector response to the Single Equality Scheme approach to community engagement

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**Authors:** Aisha Forbes – Islington BME Forum c/o Every Voice  
Rahel Geffen – Disability Action in Islington  
Christopher Taylor – Islington Community Network

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## **1. Introduction**

The aim of this report is to provide a voluntary sector response to Islington Council's strategic approach to voluntary and community sector engagement in equalities, as set out in the Single Equality Scheme. This report proposes recommendations to ensure a meaningful, effective and sustainable engagement model that leads to significant progress on addressing inequality in Islington.

This report was compiled in partnership with Islington BME Forum, Islington Community Network and Disability Action in Islington.

Feedback was collated from a well-attended consultation meeting engaging 17 local community and voluntary organisations representing a broad range of equality groups in Islington, including BME and Refugee, women's groups, disabled people, young people and faith groups.

Reflecting on the Appendix 5 of the Single Equality Scheme: *Improving outcomes for Islington residents through community engagement*, participants shared positive and negative experiences of engagement with the Council, identified best ways to scrutinize and challenge council progress on reducing inequality, and provided recommendations on the proposed engagement model set out in the Single Equality Scheme.

This was a very positive meeting which we hope leads to more collaborative and strategic working with the council and between equality groups in the borough, on representing local people and communities and improving equality outcomes for all.

## **2. Executive Summary**

Groups acknowledged that Islington Council is a proactive and listening council however there are significant areas where engagement has been highly ineffective and despite having sound intentions, has been found to be tokenistic. This is a result of engagement initiatives being inaccessible and too "council-led" to allow for valuable two-way dialogue and accountability. There is a pressing need for the engagement approach set out in the Single Equality Scheme to be improved to avoid this continuing.

The findings of this document highlight the lack of a mechanism for on-going meaningful strategic engagement and present the need for an Equality Forum that is independent and VCS-led, to work closely with the Council as a partner, providing informed scrutiny, representative community voice and recommendations to improve equality outcomes for Islington's residents.

## 3. Engagement Experience in Islington

### 3.1 Current ways groups engage with Council

Groups reflected on ways they are currently engaging with the council. The most significant ways groups are engaging with the council are:

- Working with local Councillors (including one-to-one meetings, attending Ward Partnership meetings)
- Partnership meetings (such as VCS dialogue sessions, Healthwatch, Disability Equality Performance Group, Tenants associations)
- Commissioned work
- Equality Events

### 3.2 Positive experiences of engagement in Islington

- Islington Council is proactive about engagement and generally receptive to feedback.
- Councillors are very supportive, listen and work with groups to represent their issues and local needs.
- Partnership working between Council and voluntary sector groups, through commissioning and working together to improve access to services, is a positive way to address issues, but the group felt there needs to be equal emphasis on strategic engagement.
- Equality community events make people feel part of the community and promote cohesion.

### 3.3 Negative Experiences of engagement

#### 3.3.1 Partnership meetings:

- **Not accessible or representative:** often partnership meetings are not advertised widely enough and are by invitation only. This can lead to meetings that fail to engage a fair representation of the community and its equality groups, and instead engage the “same old spokespeople”. The outcome is often lack of accountability and other voices being overlooked.

Many groups are not aware of how to engage with the council or due to organisational pressures, do not have the capacity to engage.

Groups also noted that this is exacerbated by inaccessible language used in partnership meetings and lengthy consultation documents.

Groups felt that there is a need for better ways to engage those that cannot attend meetings or participate in consultations. It is not just about involvement but also about devising more accessible means of involvement for partners who are currently not engaging. This is necessary in order to

work towards a more representative voluntary and community voice and to be able to gather more intelligence on how to address inequalities.

- **‘Talking shop’:** Partnership meetings can feel like tokenistic ‘Talking shops’. they do not lead to strong discussions that can drive change. Groups were of the opinion that partnership meetings, such as VCS dialogue meetings, often provide a great means for the council to report back on progress on policy changes, but do not grant real opportunity for groups to provide meaningful, considered and informed feedback.

Groups felt that partnership meetings need to be better facilitated to generate more meaningful discussion that engages all participants.

One-off meetings mean that some attendees can feel they are not well enough informed to provide considered feedback, and there is a need for more consistent and long term on-going engagement and scrutiny rather than one-off meetings.

This highlighted the need for more strategic working with the voluntary sector.

- **On-going accountability and reporting back:** Groups felt that there is a lack of any published feedback, results or outcomes following partnership meetings, to report on their effectiveness or impact of how they have influenced decision-making.

The lack of accountability presents a need for a better mechanism for on-going informed scrutiny and two-way dialogue.

- **Reactive vs. more informed on-going engagement:** Groups felt that the general approach to engagement is reactive to timely issues, and could benefit from a more sustainable approach where there is on-going engagement on particular issues over a period of time. This would prevent issues from getting lost, and lead to more focused partnership working to affect change.

This presents a need for a platform for equality groups to regularly come together, to keep abreast and proactive about issues and maintain on-going informed engagement.

## **4. Recommendations for the proposed engagement model presented in Single Equality Scheme**

Based on their experiences of engagement as detailed in section 3, the group reflected on the proposed engagement model in Appendix 5 of the Single Equality Scheme: *Improving outcomes for Islington residents through community engagement*.

This section comments on each of the Council's proposed actions for engagement with VCS Equality groups and provides recommendations to ensure meaningful and sustainable scrutiny and involvement.

### **4.1 VCS dialogue sessions**

Recommendations included:

- Sessions need to be opened up to engage wider representation of the community. Limiting invitations to a select few is not the most effective way of reflecting people's experiences and opinions, when there is no means of accountability.
- Group felt there is a need to host more dialogue sessions at voluntary sector venues.
- Groups have experienced VCS dialogue sessions as 'too council-led' which can limit discussion. Agenda needs to be set and co-chaired in partnership with VCS and facilitated by a neutral body to allow for more in depth discussions that can gain more intelligence and insight on issues.

### **4.2 Forum for equality groups to review council's performance on equalities.**

Group felt that the proposed model for a council-led Equality Forum risks being an ineffective means of engagement.

The Group was unanimous about an Equality Forum that is led by the voluntary sector working closely and strategically with the Council.

Group envisioned the best means of representation to make up an Equality Forum would be a consortium of voluntary organisations partners representing all equality strands, facilitated, coordinated and led by a representative steering group.

#### **4.2.1 Aims of an independent VCS-led Equality Forum**

The aims would be to

- Provide leadership and accountability for representing VCS, to tackle inequalities
- Provide accessible means of engagement for VCS voices and capture reliable evidence through policy briefing consultation events, surveys and casework
- Be a strategic partner of the Council in addressing inequality in Islington, providing scrutiny and raising community voice to affect change.

Each partner organisation would have a remit to lead on their equality area and collect information from their service users to effectively represent their needs and the issues they are facing.

This would be captured through means such as meetings, surveys and casework, that ensure meaningful and accountable leadership in representing their community voice.

A consortium of partners would meet regularly to work on specific issues so there is on-going and measurable scrutiny and collaborative working with the council.

#### **4.2.2 Outcomes of an independent VCS-led Equality Forum**

The outcomes of such a model would be:

- Strengthened community leadership
- Strategic and effective voluntary sector led engagement in reducing inequalities
- Better frameworks and partnership working to effectively engage voices on the ground, leading to stronger and more reliable evidence and intelligence from communities on how they are affected by inequality and what they see as solutions that would affect change.
- A broader, strategic approach to collaborative working with the council to allow for on-going meaningful engagement. This will result in all parties being better informed and focused on specific issues throughout the year.
- More proactive and pre-emptive approach rather than the current reactive approach.
- Allow for more accountability
- Long-term engagement on issues

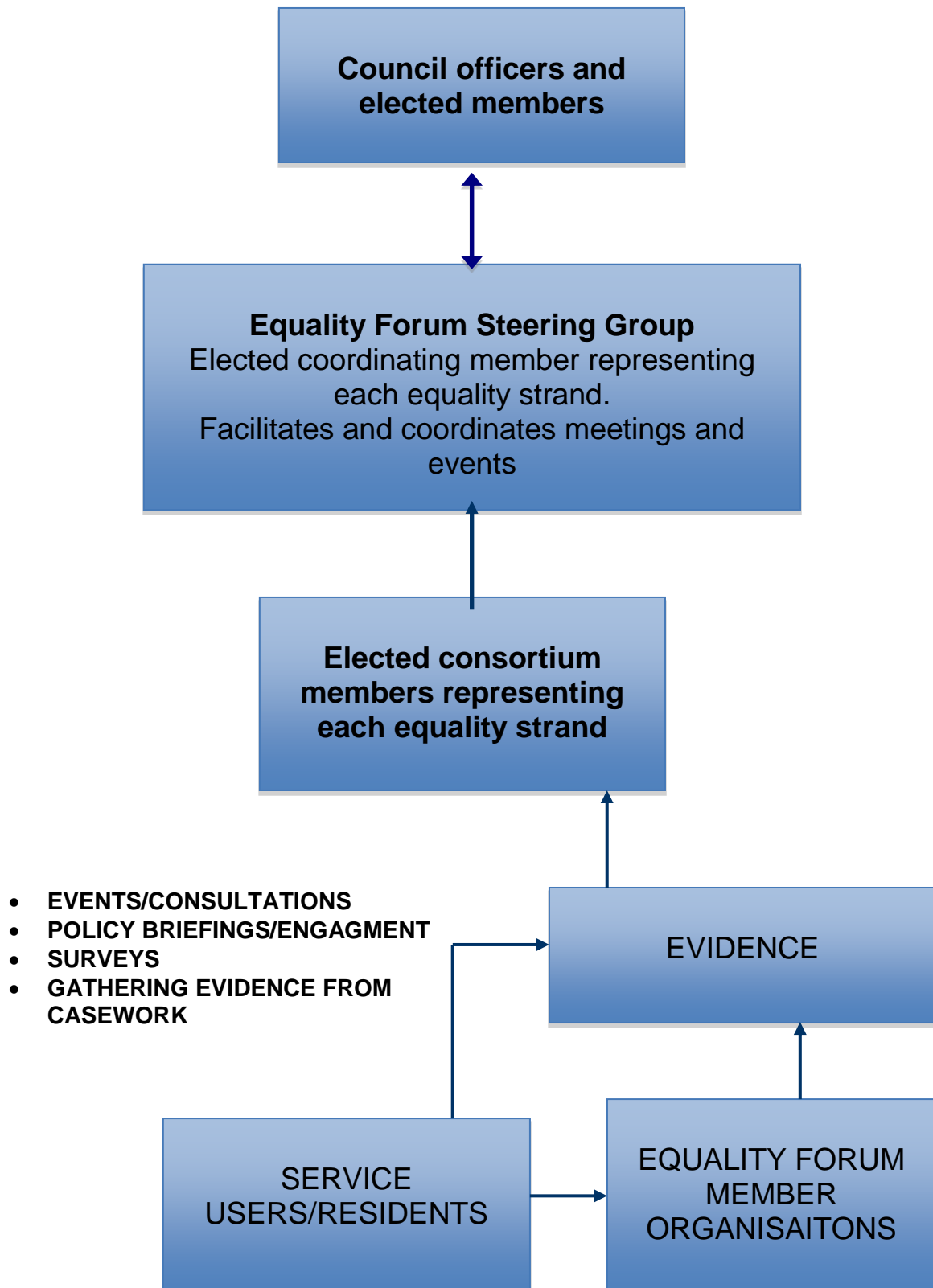
#### **4.2.3 Objectives of an independent VCS-led Equality Forum**

- Work collaboratively with the council as a strategic partner towards equality in six priority areas, with timely meetings and on-going focused engagement, providing scrutiny and informed, meaningful recommendations.
- Consortium leads to meet quarterly as a Steering Group to provide strategic direction and review and scrutinize council's performance on equality.
- Deliver wider forum events and meetings on specific issues to provide accessible means of engagement to wider voluntary sector partners
- Capture meaningful evidence from service users and community groups for reliable research and reporting, to effectively influence and engage in Council policy development.
- Steering group to work closely with Council officers to facilitate timely engagement and feeding-in to policy development.
- Utilise all channels of engagement
- Deliver broader Equality community events in the light of individual equality events such as Black History Month, LGBT History Month, International Day of the Disabled, International Women's Day etc. being scrapped.

Group felt that Islington's voluntary sector has the advantage of having the necessary skills and knowledge to work together more strategically in this area. This has been supported by training in engagement, Equality Act 2010 and partnership working provided by the BME Forum and Voluntary Action Islington.

#### 4.2.4 Proposed governance structure and engagement model

- STRATEGY
- SCRUTINY
- POLICY FOCUS IN SIX PRIORITY AREAS





#### **4.2.5 Resources needed:**

Financial resources would be required for

- Administration/coordinating role to support the Equality Forum and its Steering Group
- Venues for meetings
- Overheads

#### **4.3 Equality events**

Group felt that equality events such as Refugee Week, Black History Month, International Day of the Disabled, Holocaust Memorial Day, LGBT History Month and International Women's Day, engage thousands of residents and are important means of making people feel part of the community, celebrating Islington's diversity and promoting cohesion. Ceasing to host these events risks sending a negative message to residents that these issues and events are not valued.

This must be carefully managed, and could be an area of work that an independent Equality Forum could lead on to plan more sustainable and outcome focused events.

### **5. Conclusion**

There is a clear need for more strategic working with the Voluntary sector, to allow for more meaningful engagement.

This report and keenness of the sector to address inequality and work collaboratively with the council presents a great opportunity for the Council to improve its relationship with the sector and be a pioneer borough in supporting effective engagement.

This report invites support from the Council, and further discussion for development of an independent VCS-led Equality Forum, as a key strategic and supportive partner in addressing inequalities and affecting change.

The consortium of groups will be seeking external funding for the development of this initiative, and welcomes any support or resources that can be committed to the initiative from the Council.

## 6. Appendix

### List of Attendees and document supporters:

	NAME	SURNAME	ORGANISATION
1	Adams	Colin	Hanley Crouch Community Association
2	Ahmed	Yussuf	Islington Somali Community
3	Brennan	Brigid	RoSPA
4	Buba	Eyasu	Islington Refugee Forum
5	Caplan	Deborah	The Elfrida Society
6	Lawal	Sheri	Choices
7	McDonald	Rose-Marie	HealthWatch
8	Miller	Rosalind	Islington Faiths Forum
9	Restrepo	Maria	The Hyde Group, Housing Association
10	Safi Ngongo	Micheline	Islington Refugee Forum
11	Velasquez C	Carolina	Latin American Women's Rights Service
12	Walton	Wayne	Every Voice
13	Moftizadeh	Abed	Islington School Improvement Service
14	Riley	Desmond	Islington Link Up
15	Kwaku		British Black Music
16	Geffen	Rahel	Disability Action in Islington
17	Taylor	Chris	Islington Community Network
18	Aisha	Forbes	Islington BME Forum c/o Every Voice

