**Islington Council Consultation about the Council’s Support to Local Voluntary Organisations (Islington Community Fund)**

**Introduction**

Islington Council launched their consultation on support for the local voluntary sector on 19th June 2014. As the membership organisation for local community organisations Voluntary Action Islington has been encouraging its members to respond. On 14th July we also held a consultation meeting to introduce our members to the consultation document and provide an opportunity for discussion in groups about the consultation questions. Our commitment has been to share the points raised with participants and also to feed these back to the Council.

The consultation meeting was attended by 30 people from a wide range of local organisations including networks, community centres/hubs, organisations providing advice, organisations representing particular communities, smaller groups and one arts organisation. The feedback about the meeting was positive. Over 50% said they found the presentation very useful. Everybody found the workshop discussions useful. Everybody stated that there knowledge of the consultation had increased as a result of the event, and those with the least knowledge beforehand indicated the largest increase.

There were two opportunities for discussion during the event. The first dealt with general questions about the fund and the second focussed on specific topics chosen by participants. It should be noted that there was not necessarily consensus about all the points raised.

**General discussion**

The first discussion groups covered the following questions:

**How can the council and the voluntary sector work creatively together to meet priorities for the borough and address the issues that are of most concern to residents?**

 **What should be the main priorities of an Islington Community Fund?**

**What evidence should the Council ask for to ensure that grants are awarded to the most effective organisations?**

**Should the Council specify minimum core grant awards and, if so, at what level?**

**Are there any other comments to make about the council’s support to local voluntary organisations?**

The main points made were:

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| * The relationship between the Council and the voluntary sector has social consequences- it is not just about money
* It is important to ensure money is well spent and makes a difference
* Voluntary organisations can assist people into employment and help to deal with issues related to the cost of living. It is more difficult to help with housing but organisations can help mitigate the impact of bad hounding (e.g. overcrowding)
* Voluntary organisations have a big role in work with young people, mental health and work with old people
* There is value in funding a lot of groups meeting diverse community needs
* A strong preference for relationships with organisations that enable a flexible response to changing circumstances
* Some small groups currently feel “out of the loop”- there should be a small groups network
* Skills provision and community volunteering champions would be useful
* Mental health and education should be priorities
* There was not support for a minimum core grant (point made by two groups)
* The voluntary sector works with the most marginalised communities and the Council can often access marginalised groups through the voluntary sector
* It is important not to ignore “ soft outcomes” e.g. employability
* Collaboration is important – need to know who is out there and ensure not duplicating
* It is important to keep the Community Chest- people were not aware that the Local Initiatives Fund was comparatively larger
* It is important to be responsive to nee – softer targets are important
* Important to ask vulnerable people what makes the biggest difference to them
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In addition to the above priorities that were identified for feedback the notes from the discussion groups also include the following points:

* How is evidence that organisation’s make Islington a fairer place measured?
* Organisations can be brought together and work thematically
* There is a danger of losing specialisations- often the most marginalised are worst affected
* The process also needs to take account of reductions in other funding streams
* Council funding can unlock other funding streams.
* Some small charities do not necessarily bring money in
* What analysis of need is there?
* Local voluntary organisations undertake work in relation to food poverty, employment, NEET young people, mental health, anti-social behaviour,. Older people
* Without core funding from the Council it can be impossible for organisations to survive and continue to bring in funding from other sources such as charitable Trusts
* Advice is a lifeline for the community
* It is important to start where people are and consult with local people. Organisations can be self- interested
* Bigger organisations can be inaccessible to some groups e.g. Somali. Community organisations can consider community needs as one
* It is not possible to fund every group/equality strand
* There is a risk that big organisations “box tick” for “hard to reach” communities – let 100 flowers bloom
* Community Chest/small grant funding should be longer term i.e. for a period longer than a one off grant
* A lot of needs may not be met when “collaborating”
* Core funding should be enough for rent and some core services
* Demographic with highest needs should be supported e.g. Somali, Turkish in terms of language and culture – groups that do not access mainstream services
* Smaller organisations refer to mainstream services e.g. hospitals, Council , Law Centre
* There is a worrying trend towards in-house Council services
* There is more creative and collaborative work between voluntary and community sector services than with Council services
* Community centres are less relevant for some groups
* There should be more work with businesses and statutory services such as schools- many have spaces that could be used by voluntary and community groups
* It would be helpful to have a toolkit so people can see where they can work with other organisations
* Smaller organisations address multiple needs and advice e.g. letters, sanctions, bills, health- the mainstream does not offer that
* The risk with key performance indicators is that they can squeeze out flexibility to respond to a changing environment – organisations should stop doing things that are no longer relevant
* There should be more flexible monitoring – for example case studies
* It is important that LBI and the vcs work creatively together to meet priorities and address needs of most concern to residents
* Health should be a priority
* Premises can be shared
* The voluntary and community sector needs to be strong and robust enough to innovate
* Big organisations can support small organisations
* Focus on grass roots services which marginalised people can access and trust
* Information sharing is important
* Support small groups with rent for space
* There is a need for expert legal advice re. HR and tenancies- could there be a fund to provide these services?
* Training and support for administration could be provided e.g. completing forms, Charity Commission compliance
* Coordination of the work of LBI and non-statutory funders to address local priorities
* Coordination of information about available jobs
* Some small projects do not qualify for Community Chest as part of a larger organisations e.g. schools, Churches
* Not too many targets
* More participation by the voluntary and community sector with public health
* Local initiatives fund- level of funding should not be greater than the Community Chest and there should be more transparency

**Thematic discussion**

Participants self-selected the theme that was most relevant to them and considered related questions in the consultation document.

**COMMUNITY HUBS**

* **What do you think are the most important services that we should support the voluntary sector to provide in a neighbourhood? Do you think that community hubs are the best way of delivering these?**
* Providing support for smaller community groups and expanding further in the ward
* What do we get from core funding?
* Which are the hubs/Community Centres that are working?
* Define hubs?

**COMMUNITY COHESION, ENGAGEMENT AND ADVOCACY**

* **What activity should we fund to give Islington’s diverse communities a voice and enable them to shape and influence services?**
* **How can we encourage groups to collaborate and address wider equalities issues affecting residents from all protected characteristics?**
* BME and other specialist organisations have to meet all equality strands, because of diverse clients, complex needs e.g. disabled people are not just “disabled”- black, women, lgbt
* An equality forum could look for ways to collaborate and where there is a strand that is not funded they can help to meet that need
* Allow an equality forum to be member and vcs led and say how it should work
* Each strand has specialist needs – they can’t be diluted
* Resources need to be sufficient
* There should be space for forums to come together
* There should not be cuts from this strand as BME communities are living in Islington
* There is lots of bureaucracy
* Cuts have meant impact on staff workload and welfare.

**VOLUNTARY SECTOR SUPPORT AND PREMISES**

* **What specific support should we fund to sustain a robust local voluntary sector and how should this be delivered?**
* **What support do local organisations need to meet their accommodation requirements?**
* Support with social enterprise training
* Support with coping with the changing landscape
* Networking and information sharing
* It is good to work alongside other organisations
* Desk space with meeting space and event space attached
* Cannot afford a large office but important to be able to meet at the office
* Cost of premises is an issue

**ADVICE**

* **What role should the voluntary sector play within a ‘local support services framework’ to assist residents affected by welfare reform?**
* **What advice services should the council deliver in-house and what are voluntary sector agencies best placed to provide?**
* There are 3 main agencies providing advice (CAB, ILC and IPR). They are working well together to provide complementary service, although there is an overall issue re. capacity
* There is pressure on the Islington Advice line but people do get accurately passed between services
* Multiple routes into advice can be a strength as issues such as language and culture etc are relevant
* Advising Islington Together is going well and building direct relationships but what will be the resource at the end of Big lottery funding?
* For some groups the relationships are more important than being able to refer cases on
* A number of residents use other agencies as their first pot of call. It is not always easy for them to identify the best agency and there is a need for information for organisations/groups
* The benefits system is highly complex and a number of clients/residents don’t find it easy to navigate without assistance
* The voluntary sector can provide one to one help to get people to the right agency at the right time
* The Council could maximise the use of their staff time if other agencies helped service users in advance of appointments
* The Council cannot take itself to court e.g. on the bedroom tax
* There is a need for both in-house and external service providers as some people will engage more readily with one rather than another
* There is a need to see a “human being” rather than an “officer” from some people
* Getting message across via the media is working
* Not clear what is meant by duplication – there is a “messy reality” for residents which means that access points could be seen as more of a mosaic
* People need help before going to mainstream services

Key points

* Multi –access is a strength – especially if different needs
* Front line help can maximise the impact of other services – getting people ready, realistic expectations etc
* Work with front line agencies is a clear priority- for example with food banks. Capacity building working well

**DISCRETIONARY RATE RELIEF**

* **What type of organisations should we support with discretionary rate relief?**
* Discretionary rate relief should be kept
* There is an indirect benefit to organisations that are based in the premises of organisations that do benefit

**VOLUNTEERING**

* **Should we fund activity to support volunteering and, if so, what should this be?**
* Support for training volunteers
* Help with volunteer expenses
* Support for DSB checks
* People have accessed services often come back to volunteer
* Publicising volunteering opportunities in ways that are accessible to local residents

**SMALL GRANTS AND SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY ENAGEMENT AND RESIDENT PARTICIPATION**

* **What type of activities should our small grants programmes fund?**
* **What outcomes should we expect from organisations funded to deliver community engagement and participation?**
* The local initiatives fund is good for Islington small groups
* There should be sophistication when setting key performance indicators
* Activities funded should include work with disadvantaged youth, after school clubs, cultural activities, activities that break isolation, social skills to reduce anti-social behaviour, volunteering opportunities