

Voluntary**Action** Islington

Response to the London Borough of Islington Consultation on the Council's Support to Local Voluntary Organisations (Islington Community Fund)

Introduction

Voluntary Action Islington is the membership organisation for voluntary and community groups in Islington. We support the development of local organisations, encourage organisations to network and collaborate, promote volunteering and represent the sector to statutory and other bodies. We exist to sustain a thriving and dynamic local voluntary sector that is maximising the role of local residents in meeting local need, organising and co-operating to reduce poverty, and improving health and education.

At a time when statutory funding is being cut we are committed to working with the Council to realise the full potential of local voluntary action. Together we can develop new and innovative ways to make the best use of the knowledge, skills and experience of local people to help to create a fairer Islington.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation about the future of the Council's support to local voluntary organisations. We believe that this support is essential in a borough where residents can make a huge difference and where financial and other resources from the Council can enable this to happen.

Supporting the Local Voluntary Sector

At a time of reduced public funding we think it is important that there are robust and effective arrangements for collaboration between statutory agencies and community organisations on **joint** priorities for the borough. It is not necessary to have costly bureaucratic structures to support this but more can be achieved if long term relationships are developed and there is regular dialogue with local organisations that champion action to address poverty and promote employment, education and health. This can best be achieved by the Council collaborating with, and funding long term arrangements for, key representative bodies such as the Community Network. There should also be opportunities to bring together grass roots groups and specialist organisations quickly to consider particular issues and to take advantage of any new opportunities – such as opportunities to apply for funds from external sources to support new local initiatives.

Providing **support for networking** arrangements is a cost effective way of having arrangements that enable a quick response to external initiatives and developments. We support the objective that more local organisations should hold contracts to deliver local services and are committed to working with the Council to develop and implement the VCS Procurement Action Plan. We believe that it is particularly important that the added social value that local organisations can contribute should be recognised and supported by the Council. These include:

- Opportunities for people from Islington's diverse communities to work together to deliver public services,
- Encouraging local organisations to deposit funds with the local credit union,
- Opportunities to provide employment and apprenticeships for Islington residents,
- Expertise gained from local organisation's networks and local knowledge,
- Reduced environmental impact (e.g. transport costs) from procuring locally.

Financial resources are vital when addressing priorities for the borough but they are not the only resources. The voluntary sector organises residents and maximises the non-monetary value of resident's experience, knowledge and skills. We bring together people from different backgrounds in new ways to innovate and tackle local priorities. These initiatives will usually be led by local residents and local organisations but in addition to funding the Council has an important role in creating conditions that support and enable this creativity – for example by supporting opportunities for people to meet, organise and develop new initiatives and by providing information about the borough and its needs.

Islington Community Fund

Grants have an important role in supporting the local voluntary sector and can facilitate a more dynamic and flexible relationship between the Local Authority and voluntary organisations and a more responsive approach to changing local circumstances. They are less bureaucratic, can be used to leverage other funding, and support innovation. See Local Grants for a strong independent local voluntary sector:

<http://www.navca.org.uk/publications/localgrants>

We fully support the Local Authority in continuing with a grants programme. At a time when the ability to respond flexibly and to bring in additional non-statutory sources of funding and support are likely to be more important we believe the Council could consider opportunities to extend this method of funding, where it will maximise benefits to local

residents and reduce costs of procurement -for example to arrangements for funding services such as youth provision and luncheon clubs for the elderly.

Prior to the May 2014 local elections we worked with our members to produce a **voluntary sector election manifesto** (included as an appendix to this response). This received wide support and backing from local politicians. The manifesto identified priorities including:

- The commitment to a grants programme to support local voluntary organisations including grants for community hubs
- Continuing the community chest grants programme, with an increased emphasis on support for groups working with Islington's most disadvantaged residents
- Continuation of charitable business rate relief
- Providing support for residents to take part in volunteering and community action, including support to help remove some of the barriers that prevent people getting involved (such as the cost of DBS checks)
- Support for sector infrastructure to ensure that the potential of the sector to help and support local residents is maximised

At a time when there are huge changes in welfare support, that have a disproportionate impact on Islington's poorest residents, we believe it is a priority that there are opportunities for people to obtain advice that is independent of statutory agencies.

Voluntary Action Islington has been a partner in the Advising Islington Together Lottery funded partnership. This has been very successful, through initiatives such as Benefits First Aid Training, in building the capacity of community organisations and creating stronger links between grass roots community groups and specialist advice organisations. We are keen to work with the Council, and other partners, to sustain the impact of this project.

When statutory resources and services are decreasing there is a risk that a highly competitive culture develops with different groups trying to maximise their share of the remaining resources and services. In this context it is more important than ever that the Council support organisations and approaches, such as the Islington Community Network and neighbourhood based community hubs that bring people from different groups together and support mutual understanding and a culture of **collaboration and joint action across** Islington's diverse communities.

Community hubs

Community hubs bring different groups together from particular neighbourhoods – for example from across generations and minority ethnic communities. They can provide an accessible first point of contact for a wide range of services. We think that providing funds to support local centres that provide a range of different activities (provided by statutory agencies, private organisations and community groups) is an effective way for the Council to support neighbourhood activities. **There should be a borough wide approach to funding neighbourhood based services and activity**, with emphasis on ensuring that these are most accessible to residents living with the highest levels of need.

Community cohesion, engagement and advocacy

As outlined above we think the Council should support and fund effective arrangements for collaboration between statutory agencies and community organisations on **joint** priorities for the borough. It is also important that voluntary and community organisations can come together in a forum that is independent of statutory agencies to develop responses and solutions that will benefit local residents. These arrangements do not have to cost a lot. The Community Network currently receives just £20k from the Local Authority plus resources from Voluntary Action Islington. It supports networking, provides information through a newsletter, organises thematic meetings and events, and supports dialogue with statutory agencies. This is a very cost effective way of **enabling Islington's diverse community organisations to act together and have a voice and influence**.

Funding an organisation to represent each of the 9 characteristics protected from discrimination is not the most effective way for the Council to support the voluntary sector to promote equality. What is important is that community organisations generally develop an understanding of discrimination, and an ability to tackle all forms of discrimination related to the 9 protected characteristics. The Council should prioritise funding to those organisations that represent people in the borough who are most excluded and find it most difficult to access mainstream services – for example because of communication or other barriers that mean use of services is more problematic. The Council can cost effectively access the most marginalised residents by collaborating with community groups that represent their interests.

Voluntary Sector Support

Voluntary Action Islington is the lead organisation providing support to local voluntary and community groups in the borough. In the last four years we have transformed the way in which we deliver our services and we are committed to continuing to change and develop making best use of innovative forms of communication and increasing our use of pro bono and peer to peer help.

We believe that **support services for the voluntary sector should be independent of funders**. This is a view that has been strongly expressed by our members and service users.

In 2013-14 Voluntary Action Islington provided advice to 104 organisations through our surgery sessions. We regularly provided information about funding and other opportunities by email to over 350 people and there were 20,626 visits to our web site last year. We work closely with established sources of pro- bono help such as Businesses in Islington Giving but **have also brought in new pro-bono help worth thousands of pounds to Islington groups**- for example negotiating an arrangement for staff from a National Charity based in Islington to provide pro-bono advice and also staff from a bank that is not involved with Businesses in Islington Giving. In addition London-wide organisations providing advice to voluntary organisations often work through our advice surgeries and regularly use our e- news group to provide information to Islington groups about their offer.

Voluntary Action Islington won a contract to provide more in depth support to organisations from the Children and Young people's voluntary sector in Islington. We have delivered this service in partnership with Children England. It has provided support to organisations with tendering, building consortia, governance and developing new models for income generation. We think consideration should be given to whether this service could be extended to other parts of the local voluntary sector for example organisations working with older people and those contributing to the health and social care sector.

Voluntary Action Islington is developing its role as **a hub for local voluntary sector support**. We provide specialist expertise on running local voluntary organisations and are well positioned to help local groups link this with, and make the best use of, the various pro bono offers available. We are currently developing the way in which we help organisations to coordinate the way in which they use pro bono help.

As a hub for local voluntary sector support we also provide information and put local organisations in contact with others that have similar or complementary interests. Currently the Council provide £40k to support this work by Voluntary Action Islington and to sustain this support role financial help from the Council is vital.

Volunteering

Over the past four years Voluntary Action Islington has continued to provide an **accredited Volunteer Centre** to serve Islington residents. We have used our reserves to do this. Our commitment to using reserves for this purpose is up until the end of March 2015.

Many local residents get involved in volunteering by approaching a local organisation directly. However, thousands of residents use the brokerage services of the Volunteer Centre. This is particularly important in a borough where population turnover is high. It can take a long time for a new local resident to find out about the range of volunteering opportunities available with local community organisations. It is relatively easy to find out about our volunteer brokerage service and through this the full range of local volunteering opportunities. Some organisations, particularly smaller groups run by people from excluded sections of the community, need help to promote the opportunities to volunteer with their organisations more widely. The Volunteer Centre plays an important role in enabling them to do this.

Voluntary Action Islington is the local partner for the national volunteering database, Do-it.org. We believe it is important for **Islington to be an active participant in this national volunteering brokerage network**. Many people come from outside Islington to volunteer here and local residents can benefit from volunteering opportunities in other boroughs, for example opportunities that relate to their future employment ambitions. A strong relationship with Do-it.org can benefit local residents but to get the most benefit from this national resource it is essential to have a local partner to support and develop its use locally.

Do-it.org is currently under-going a radical transformation and we think that Islington Council should fund activity to support volunteering that positions the borough to take full advantage of these changes. When the new database is introduced later this year organisations will be able to post opportunities directly to the site. The role of Volunteer Centres will evolve, with more emphasis on helping local groups to develop volunteering

opportunities, and helping them to make use of the resources available through Do-it.org. Volunteer Centres will help people to use Do-it.org along with a range of other approaches to recruit volunteers. Only accredited local Volunteer Centres will have access to the overview of volunteering activity in the area, available through Do-it.org. Voluntary Action Islington, as the accredited Volunteer Centre for Islington, is well positioned to take on this role locally.

The new Do-it.org will also be accessible to social action projects - this means that a group of individuals can sign up, create a project profile and start posting requests for volunteers. Whilst some of this activity may not need support, there are many groups that struggle to get going and to recruit the volunteers they need. Voluntary Action Islington aims to be in a position to provide help to groups so that they can take full advantage of this resource.

In addition to supporting the use of the new national volunteering database in Islington we think the Council should put more emphasis on **supporting people to take part in volunteering who face barriers to getting involved**. One of the biggest potential sources of volunteers is people who are currently or have previously used services. Voluntary Action Islington ran a successful pilot project in partnership with the Cranstoun drug treatment service that encouraged service users to volunteer. The report on the project can be viewed at: <http://www.vai.org.uk/2014/03/13/report-on-substance-misuse-and-volunteering-project-published> This pilot project demonstrated the benefits for individuals, in terms of employability and development of skills and confidence, that can result from participation in volunteering. Services also benefit from being co-produced with current and previous service users. However, this type of initiative requires resources and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss with the Council how this form of volunteering can be encouraged and supported with service users including people who have been in hospital, people with mental health difficulties and people who have been in the criminal justice system.

Other barriers to getting involved in volunteering are similar to those faced by people wanting to take up employment and include child care, travel expenses and the cost of DBS checks. We think the Council should continue with its scheme of providing free DBS checks for small and medium sized local organisations involving volunteers in projects working with vulnerable Islington residents. We also think that the Council should continue to recognise that a good use of grant funding is to cover any travel or other out of pocket expenses incurred by local volunteers.

As part of its voluntary sector support service Voluntary Action Islington **helps local groups to manage volunteers effectively** and this is an increasingly important part of the advice that we give to local organisations. Today 90% of the groups we work with seek help with managing and recruiting volunteers and last year we worked with over 460 organisations to assist them with issues such as help with developing volunteer role descriptions, understanding safeguarding, volunteer expenses, implications of claiming benefits whilst volunteering, and training and support arrangements. It was this trend that was part of the rationale for the original merger of the Islington Volunteer Centre with Islington Voluntary Action Council. **Help with recruiting and managing volunteers is of critical importance to sustaining and developing a vibrant local voluntary sector and we think it should be central to the Council's approach to providing support to local voluntary organisations.**

Community engagement and resident participation

Community engagement and resident participation is not currently a theme within the Islington Community Fund. There is a theme that supports arts organisations that facilitate community engagement. This relates to the Council's cultural strategy.

It is not entirely clear from the document what the Council is consulting about in relation to this theme. We think it is important for the Council to support opportunities for residents to engage in creative and physical activity and that there are significant health and social benefits from doing this. Engagement in cultural activity can also assist with future employment prospects. **We think the Council should target its support to enable engagement by residents with the highest levels of need** – particularly in terms of finance, health and isolation. We also think that the Council should be seeking community cohesion outcomes from supporting engagement and participation –for example supporting opportunities for inter-generation engagement and engagement of people with diverse social and economic backgrounds.

Discretionary Rate Relief

The continuation of the discretionary rate relief scheme is very important to the local voluntary sector. It was one of the main points in the widely supported Islington voluntary sector election manifesto. The scheme helps many community organisations that do not get any other financial support from the Council. It also supports organisations

that provide rented accommodation to other community organisations and so there would be a detrimental effect on many more organisations if it was curtailed.

Islington, as a central London borough, is unlike many other parts of the country. The costs of accommodation are a significant barrier to voluntary action and the current discretionary rate relief scheme plays an important role in mitigating the impact of high accommodation costs. We think the scheme should continue giving priority to small and medium sized organisations providing services to local residents, premises used by several voluntary and community organisations, and local not for profit social enterprises that exist to meet the needs of low income residents. We think it is important that provision continues to be made to include new applicants during the next 4 year period of the scheme.

Premises

The lottery funded Community Buildings Project, managed by Voluntary Action Islington and working with a local partnership, has recently completed its programme of work. Following the project Islington now has more community centres than anywhere else in the country, that have achieved the charity commission recognised Visible Quality Standard. The project assisted 33 local organisations to find premises and provided one-to-one help to 60 organisations on a range of subjects including leases, asset transfer, sharing premises, business rates and risk management. The final stage of the project was a training programme in which 143 participants took part. To build on this success and continue to support local organisations a website has been developed to provide resources to assist local voluntary organisations with the management of premises.

Voluntary Action Islington anticipate that premises will continue to be an important issue for voluntary organisations in the borough with groups searching for affordable premises and issues such as leases, sharing premises and reducing costs continuing to be priorities for those organisations with responsibility for managing buildings. We plan to meet these needs by continuing to provide a free service advertising groups need for premises through our e- newsletter and by providing free resources for organisations managing premises on the new web site. We are also considering how we might provide some free pro bono premises advice through our advice surgeries for local organisations.

In addition we are developing a paid-for service with our associates to help organisations deal with complex issues such as leases, making the best use of their building and

developing new arrangements for sharing facilities. We are aware that it is only the larger organisations that are likely to be able to afford this service and we would be keen to work with Islington Council to develop arrangements that would make this service affordable to smaller organisations and to make use of its expertise in strategic premises developments in Islington.

Advice

To date the local voluntary sector has not been engaged in the discussions by statutory partners about the development on a “local support services framework”. We think that, in accordance with the principles and commitments in the Compact and to ensure the best outcome for residents it is important that this initiative is developed with the sector, including grass roots groups working with the most marginalised communities.

Voluntary organisations in Islington have a significant role in reaching residents, both through resident membership of community and faith groups and through outreach services such as Help on Your Doorstep. These organisations provide a first point of contact and help on a range of issues for residents who are not necessarily accessing mainstream services. We think that this range of different organisations is important in a diverse borough where **multiple routes to more specialist service provision is the most effective way of engaging people who are in most need** but who would not necessarily access services through a single point of entry. It is important that these front line organisations have strong relationships with specialist providers and this is the approach that has been developed through the Advising Islington Together project.

As stated above, Voluntary Action Islington is a partner in the Advising Islington Together initiative. It has helped to ensure that front line groups have relevant up to date information and are connected with the specialist voluntary sector advice providers. We think that a priority for Council funding of advice should be to ensure that these relationships are strengthened and developed, including links between front line groups and providers of other relevant services such as help with IT skills and employability.

In a context where resources for advice are reducing there is obviously a question about what should be delivered in-house by the Council and what by the voluntary sector. Voluntary organisations are keen to work with the Council to get the best service for residents. We think that, at a time of change, it is particularly important that residents can

access **provision that is independent of statutory agencies**, that there are multiple routes into advice provision from community organisations and services, and that advice services are well networked with a wide range of other relevant services that exist to help local residents. This can best be achieved by adequately funded local voluntary sector advice provision.

Small grants

The widely supported Islington voluntary sector election manifesto argued for a **continuing commitment to the Community Chest grants programme** with a focus on providing grants to groups serving the most disadvantaged residents. The Community Network provide 3 representatives to the Community Chest grants panel and the Network as a whole is committed to advocating for the grants available to be allocated to enable residents groups that do not have access to large sums of money to take part in activities from which they would otherwise be excluded.

We think the criteria for awarding a Community Chest grant should be periodically reviewed to ensure that the grants scheme is used to meet the priority needs of Islington residents. Grants should mainly be awarded to small organisations, but there is also a case for grants to be awarded to organisations such as community centres for activities that are undertaken by groups operating within the centre that are not formally constituted in their own right.

At present the guidance on what the Community Chest will fund lists: running costs including rent, venue hire, bills, insurance, stationery etc.; salary costs, including National Insurance and employers' contribution; and materials and equipment. These are mainly organisational costs and we think that more emphasis could be given to funding activities and the costs of engaging volunteers and training in volunteer management. The exclusion of outings should also be reviewed.

In the past Voluntary Action Islington has provided a capacity building service to groups in receipt of a Community Chest Grant. This consisted of one-to-one help for groups identified as a priority, a general workshop on managing a Community Chest Grant and workshops on 3 topics identified as priorities by grant recipients – financial management, sustainable funding and communication about your work. This programme of capacity building support is not currently funded. Feedback from the last programme indicated that it was highly valued by grant recipients and we think consideration should be given to funding a similar programme in future.

Funding mechanism

In the current difficult circumstances facing local government Voluntary Action Islington believes that it is especially important that the Council adhere to the principles and commitments in the Compact. We are pleased to see that, to date, the Council are generally doing this. We understand that uncertainty about the Council's financial settlement with central government means that it is not possible to enter into a 3 or 4 year funding agreement in 2015. In these circumstances the proposal for two year plus two year agreements is reasonable. If circumstances arise that mean there will be a smaller grants programme from 2017 **we seek a commitment from the Council that there will be a clear and transparent process, with Compact-compliant consultation and notice periods, to reach decisions about grant funding beyond 2017.**

The consultation paper appears to lack clarity about the role of organisations and institutions in meeting local need and providing services. At one point the assertion is made that "we want to ensure that valued local community institutions are not lost to the borough". Later the paper states that "some of our themes have been criticised for being too closely framed around the needs of particular organisations, rather than on services and the needs of residents". It is important to be clear that organisation and organisations are necessary in order to effectively respond to local need and provide local services. Effective local organisations are constantly changing in response to local needs and priorities for services. Many have a very strong track record of adapting to change and identifying emerging needs and we think that the Council should be supporting organisations in this process and working in partnership with local voluntary organisations as we adapt to changing priorities. Local voluntary organisations are able to do this because they have built strong relationships of trust with residents and service users, which do not simply transfer from one agency to another. These relationships are about values and identity and not based solely on transactions.

It is inevitably the case that not all organisations will be reaching maximum levels of performance all the time and this applies to local voluntary organisations as well as to the Council. In times of limited resources it is of course more important to aim to optimise performance. It is, however, disappointing that the consultation paper highlights weaknesses in performance but does not also point out the many cases where local voluntary organisations have taken on additional tasks and responsibilities and responded to changing local circumstances in ways that are beyond and above what was originally

agreed with the Council, when their grant was first awarded. Often organisations take on these additional tasks at the request of the Council and it is important to recognise that organisations do not have spare capacity. Therefore taking on an additional responsibility means reconsidering existing priorities. A grant funding mechanism that enables this to happen is a more dynamic way for the Council to work with the local voluntary sector. However, it should be recognised that voluntary organisations can no longer simply take on new priorities without an impact on existing commitments. It is important that there is **a monitoring process that supports dialogue about priorities and how these are changing.**

Voluntary Action Islington fully supports the Council in seeking evidence about effectiveness and requiring minimum standards in safeguarding, whistleblowing, governance and financial management. We also think that it is important that staff and volunteers are effectively supervised, that organisations demonstrate a commitment to promoting equality and that there are clear arrangements for reporting progress- both internally and externally. We are committed to working with our members to meet these standards. Where organisations are not meeting relevant standards we advocate an approach that minimises risk whilst enabling organisations to make improvements to reach required standards.

Voluntary Action Islington does not think that the Council should specify minimum or maximum grants. The size of the grant should relate to the role and functions that an organisation is taking on. When considering the overall level of grant awarded to an organisation we think it is important that the Council do not make awards that are unrealistically low in relation to what it is expected will be achieved. There is probably a greater risk of this happening when resources are scarce with a possible consequence that more work is expected than can possibly be delivered effectively with the level of resources allocated. In addition to considering what is sought from grant funding we think the Council should also realistically consider how likely it is that an organisation can acquire resources from elsewhere to carry out particular roles and functions.

Additional comments and overall conclusion

Voluntary Action Islington fully supports the Council's commitment to continue with a grants programme and recognises that difficult decisions will need to be made about future funding by the Council of local voluntary organisations. In the current climate for local public spending we think that the local voluntary sector has a vital role in mobilising non-

statutory resources to support local residents, mitigating some of the worst impacts of austerity and helping to make the borough a fairer place.. We are committed to working with the Council to maximise the non-statutory resources available to the borough and to make the best use of these resources to meet the needs of residents To support this approach, we think that it is important that the Council commits to a programme of financial support to local voluntary organisations and that the voluntary sector does not face disproportionate cuts or impacts as a result of the difficult situation faced by the borough.

1st August 2014

Appendix

Islington Council Elections

22nd May 2014



A **manifesto** from voluntary and community organisations in Islington

Introduction

Islington voluntary and community organisations make a huge contribution to the borough. We organise and support communities, provide services, employ local people, bring in funds and other support and engage residents in volunteering and community action. At a time when statutory services are being cut and people are under increasing pressure due to welfare reform and increases in the cost of living it is vital that local voluntary and community organisations are supported and sustained.

On May 22nd Islington's voters will go to the polls to elect a new Council. The sector believes that it is important that whoever leads the Council after the election strengthens the relationship with local voluntary and community organisations and provides support that will nurture and sustain a flourishing and dynamic local voluntary and community sector.

We therefore seek a commitment from all political parties to:

Building a strong **partnership** with the sector by supporting and actively working with the Community Network, and the networks and groups that form it, to tackle poverty and inequality and build a community which includes the most vulnerable, challenges stereotypes of people who are marginalised, and works together to attract and make the best use of available resources.

An active role for the sector in all stages of **commissioning** services including consultation about needs, priorities and service design; and procurement processes that support involvement by local organisations and value the knowledge and relationships that we bring to service provision.

Providing **financial support** to ensure the sustainability of community organisations which support the most vulnerable members of the community and provide good value for money; and particularly to recognise the advantages of grant funding.

Continuing the Community Chest **grants** scheme and focusing this on groups serving the most disadvantaged residents, so that they can access resources for their activities.

Support the retention of **assets** that are managed and used by local organisations by continuing charitable business rate relief, ensuring affordable rents in buildings owned by the Council, facilitating asset transfer and providing grants to community hubs.

Providing support so that all Islington residents have opportunities to take part in **volunteering and community action** by working with the sector to remove barriers to participation and ensure effective brokerage arrangements.

Supporting the **infrastructure** of the sector so that organisations receive help to plan and operate effectively; generate income from enterprise, grants and contracts; and collaborate with each other, and statutory agencies, to improve the services provided to local residents.