

**Submission to the Islington Employment Commission**

**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 and organising and co-operating to reduce poverty, and improve health and education.

We welcome Islington Council’s initiative to establish an independent Employment Commission to tackle the high levels of unemployment and worklessness in Islington. The local voluntary sector has 3 main roles in helping to tackle the barriers to employment faced by local residents:

1. As a direct employer
2. As a provider of a wide range of employment support services
3. As a provider of volunteering opportunities

**The voluntary sector as an employer in Islington**

Islington has one of the highest concentrations of voluntary organisations in the country. A recent study by NCVO suggests that there are 2,224 voluntary organisations in Islington with a total income of £2,840 million and 47,325 employees. Some of these organisations are national, regional or international in their scope, although many in this category are in a position to provide employment to local people. The number of local voluntary organisation in the borough identified by NCVO is 447, with an annual income of £348.7m and a total of 4,045 employees.

The voluntary sector is thus a significant local employer and, given the overall purpose of the sector is to benefit the public voluntary organisations as employers can and should work with the Local Authority to reduce barriers to employment for local residents.

In the borough, Voluntary Action Islington has made efforts to champion good employment practice. We have adopted the London Living Wage and encouraged other local and national voluntary sector employers to do the same. We are currently trying to engage an apprentice, through the Islington Council apprenticeship scheme. We are depositing some of our reserves with the local Credit Union and will be encouraging other charities to do the same. We think these are all ways in which local voluntary organisations can support broader objectives to benefit the public and make a difference for local residents.

In general the voluntary sector locally has a strong track record of employing a diverse workforce and we think that the sector should be supported and encouraged to continue to do this. There are voluntary organisations that have pioneered the offer of flexible working arrangements, including job share. Many organisations provide accessible working environments and more organisations are making use of modern buildings, although the position of some buildings that are still used by the sector means that not all working environments are accessible to people with some impairments.

In the past the funding of local voluntary organisations has often meant that a specific project worker, with experience, is employed to deliver a project paid for by an external funder. Sometimes it has been a requirement of funders to check job descriptions and receive confirmation that a new member of staff will be recruited to fill a vacancy arising as a result of funding for a new project. This means that it can be difficult to create entry level jobs and apprenticeships and also to offer more flexible working arrangements. As funding arrangements for voluntary organisations change it is likely that it will be easier for organisations to adopt employment practices that are less restrictive. However, making a recommendation to funders about more flexible arrangements for funding staff, and encouraging funders to actively support projects that include entry level jobs and apprenticeships is something the Commission should consider.

**The voluntary sector as a provider of employment support services**

The voluntary sector has a long tradition of providing employment support services, dating back to its involvement with the Job Creation Programme and Community Programme of the 1970s and 1980s. More recently it played a key role in the Future Jobs Programme. These programmes were all fully funded and it was relatively easy for even quite small organisations to play a role. There is anecdotal evidence that many people secured long term employment as a result of taking part in these initiatives, although the monitoring regimes were not as systematic as those associated with most programmes today.

Currently, it is much more difficult for voluntary organisations to play a part in employment support services, such as the Work Programme. A recent report from NCVO (Stepping Stones: the role of the voluntary sector in future welfare to work schemes - <http://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/about_us/media-centre/stepping-stones-vol-sec-and-welfare-to-work-work-schemes-jul-2014.pdf> ) calls for an overhaul of how welfare to work schemes are designed and paid for. It notes that the Work Programme is failing many people with complex or multiple needs and under-utilising the skills and expertise of the charity sector. To bid for a prime contract on the work programme organisations had to have a turnover of £20million. This excludes local voluntary organisations which also do not have the financial capacity to take on the risks associated with payment by results. The NCVO report argues for smaller contracts with more flexible payment models including grants and service fees with some payments based on achieving milestones. It would be helpful if the Employment Commission supported this approach, which would mean that local voluntary organisations could play a bigger role in employment support.

Although there are significant barriers for local voluntary organisations to get involved in employment support there are many examples of organisations that are playing a role – for example in ESF programmes co-funded by London Councils. Locally, the London Training and Employment Network (previously Islington Training Network) are delivering employability and vocational skills support to women through this programme. Other examples of projects supported through this programme include St Mungo’s Housing Association’ s work with substance misusers and Peter Bedford’s work with people with mental health needs.

The local voluntary sector has a huge potential contribution to make to employment support because organisations often have strong and trusted relationships with disadvantaged communities as well as relationships with employers, housing providers, Job Centres, health services, local authorities and training providers. Many provide a range of linked services including advice, family support and training. This means that local voluntary organisations can provide help that is holistic and joined up, rather than simply concentrating on one dimension of need. They can link people with other local services. Many organisations also employ people who have previously been service users, who understand the barriers faced by groups disadvantaged in the labour market.

Voluntary organisations also lead the way in developing new approaches to tackling exclusion in a changing labour market. The number of self- employed people has increased by 650,000 in the last 4 years. In response a new project developed by Community Links, in Newham, is pioneering work to equip people with entrepreneurial skills by providing workshops and one to one support from an enterprise advisor. See their issues that matter, policy briefing number 4: <http://www.community-links.org/uploads/editor/file/CL_Enterprise_briefing_Final.pdf>

In Islington the voluntary sector is playing an important role in employment support. For example Help on Your Doorstep is reaching people with complex needs and connecting them with relevant services. Community groups, such as Arachne Greek Cypriot Women’s Group, provide help to people seeking employment including help with writing a CV and training in skills including ICT. Employment support is just one aspect of a range of help that people can access through local community organisations.

There are a range of other examples of local organisations involved in employment support including Choices (London) based at Caxton House and working with young people to tackle issues of low self-esteem and confidence, Hillside Clubhouse provides a transitional employment programme for people with mental health needs and St Luke’s Community Centre provides a Job Club to help people write a CV, develop job search techniques, practice for interviews, and source on-line applications. They also provide a support package to residents interested in starting their own business.

**The voluntary sector as a provider of volunteering opportunities**

For many years volunteering has been one way in which people gain experience relevant to future employment. Often people who work in the social welfare and other sectors have gained some initial experience in a voluntary capacity – possibly with a local youth organisation, environmental project or through long term volunteering with organisations such as CSV or internationally with VSO. Most colleges and universities have volunteering programmes too. Currently many employees in larger city companies gain experience relevant to their future career prospects through volunteering as part of company corporate social responsibility programmes.

However, these opportunities to volunteer and gain experience relevant to future employment are often not accessible to all. Locally, Voluntary Action Islington runs the accredited Volunteer Centre, which connects residents with local volunteering opportunities. Resources to support this work are very limited compared to those available to many of the initiatives referred to above and have reduced significantly in recent years. Nonetheless Voluntary Action Islington made a successful application to be part of the Volunteering England/NCVO Volunteering for Stronger Communities Project. The independent evaluation of this national project found that investment in volunteering programmes can form an important part of overall approaches to increasing employability. Volunteering can help people to develop the skills necessary to get back into work and can successfully engage hard to reach job seekers. To do this the role of Volunteer Centres in supporting people into volunteering opportunities should be recognised. Voluntary Action Islington is actively following up the recommendation in this report that we should develop joint work with Job Centre Plus on employability issues. We urge the Commission to take up and endorse the recommendations from this project. See:

<http://www.ncvo.org.uk/images/documents/practical_support/volunteering/vsc-policy-final.pdf>

Locally, over a two year period, the Volunteering for Stronger Communities Project engaged over 500 people from groups defined as disadvantaged in the labour market in a wide range of volunteering opportunities. Two examples included in the final project report are:

* **Mark** (who volunteered as a driver): *“I am now back in a fulltime driving job. Thanks again for all your help and advice.”*
* **Lyabode:** *I am emailing to thank you for all off the support you have given to me during my time trying to find my first job in England. you referred me to the Peel centre which was an excellent experience for me and made me feel confident about my ability… I have now found work as a customer service assistant with Rail Gourmet UK Ltd.”*

In addition to the above project Voluntary Action Islington recently worked on a two year project with the local Cranstoun drug treatment service to engage people who were part of their abstinence programme in volunteering. The full report of this project is on our web site:

<http://www.vai.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Substance-Misuse-and-Volunteering_rw.pdf>

The project found that there were benefits from taking part in volunteering including providing structure and purpose to participants lives; building confidence and self-esteem; gaining skills, particularly in organisation and team work; providing social contacts and providing experience that can be included on a cv. Volunteering can provide a valuable intermediary experience for people who may not have the confidence or experience to go straight into employment. A case study from a project participant is detailed below:

**Joe Case Study**

Joe is in his fifties, and has a varied work history that included being a careers advisor, a delivery driver and labourer. Joe drank regularly with his colleagues after work, and also took cocaine at the weekends, but didn’t feel it was a problem.

Joe was married with two children. He started taking crack cocaine more and more regularly, which led to a relationship breakdown with his wife.

Joe formed a new relationship, and he and his partner used drugs together – drink, crack and ecstasy. Joe began to steal to feed his habit, and he got in trouble with the police on a number of occasions.

Joe and his new partner now had a child, and their drug use came to the attention of social services. Unless they sought help for their drug use, their daughter would be put into care. This prompted Joe to access treatment, and he got himself admitted to a detox and rehab.

Joe began attending AA and NA meetings regularly, and was introduced to Cranstoun services. Joe started volunteering for Family Drug and Alcohol Court, but this was only for 8 hours per week, and he wanted something more regular that would provide him with a daily structure. Cranstoun’s Eductaion and Training worker referred Joe to Voluntary Action Islington.

Joe is completely abstinent and actively works on the 12 step programme. At an appointment Voluntary Action Islington identified a role as a volunteer 12 step mentor at RAPT (Rehabilitation of Addicted Prisoners Trust). Joe telephoned RAPT to enquire about the role, and during the interview he was encouraged to apply for a different role – a paid apprenticeship as a drug and alcohol worker.

Joe was successful in his application, and started in February 2014 as an apprentice drug and alcohol worker.

*“Volunteering has undoubtedly normalised my life. Having volunteering experience gave me the edge when applying for the apprenticeship. Before I had a chaotic lifestyle, but now I have more self-esteem because I have responsibility towards others.*

*Being offered the apprenticeship was the icing on the cake. Without Voluntary Action Islington I would never have heard of the opportunity. I am now being paid to help others with drug and alcohol problems –it’s an ideal situation”*

There are many examples of residents gaining valuable experience and contacts through volunteering. These can assist with entering the labour market and in moving and progressing to employment which more clearly matches aspirations, after having found initial employment.

Some case studies of people supported by the Volunteer Centre in Islington are included below:

A is from South America and lives in Islington close to Finsbury Park. She has been a student in Islington and is a volunteer here.

A is looking for employment and has experience as a nurse in South America. However, she cannot work as a nurse here because her qualification is not recognised. She has therefore been applying for other roles in hospitals.

Volunteering is important for A. She had attended English classes but the opportunity to volunteer and speak English on a daily basis is “ the best English class I could have”. Volunteering has helped A feel confident about talking to native speakers and, as one of her volunteering roles is with a health organisation, has helped her to understand the health system in England. It has also helped her to make friends.

A.says that volunteering has helped her to show potential employers that she is self-motivated and takes the initiative. She is not just waiting for an employment offer.

Now that A has found a job she wants to continue volunteering 2 or 3 times a week. Two of the references she gave to get the job she is taking at a local hospital were as a result of taking part in volunteering.

V has lived locally since birth. He started volunteering at the age of 17, when he was involved in organising a “Love Music Hate Racism” event. After college he became a fundraising volunteer with the Arsenal Foundation and volunteered at the Volunteer Centre at Voluntary Action Islington. Volunteering gave V experience of and understanding of the third sector and helped him decide what paid employment he was interested in. He got to know about different third sector organisations and he says this helped him to make an informed decision about which organisation he wanted to work for. Volunteering also introduced V to the discipline and structure of work and gave him experience in working as part of a team.

M is a lone parent who has lived in in the EC1area of Islington with her son for the past 10 years. For the last two years she has been working as an administrator with a locally based think tank that helps charities and local government to improve their performance. For the past 6 to 8 months she has been a PA to the Director and is being training to be the office manager.

Before finding employment in an office M decided to volunteer as she had no previous office experience. She said: “After a year working as a volunteer my cv was looked at because of my experience as a volunteer”.

M applied to volunteer as a receptionist at the Volunteer Centre but it was suggested to her that she might take on a role matching people with volunteering opportunities. M said: “This helped me realise I do well with the public as well as my computer skills. It helped me to develop skills I didn’t even know I had. These skills helped me get the job I do today”.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The local voluntary sector has huge potential to make a difference to the employment prospects of Islington residents – as an employer, by providing varied experiences and support to people taking part in volunteering, and by directly running employment programmes.

We urge the Islington Employment Commission to recommend that:

* The Local Authority and other statutory agencies (such as Job Centre Plus) should engage local voluntary organisations in their interventions to promote employability in Islington and should adapt these so that local voluntary organisations can participate (for example taking account of the implications that when grants are used to employ staff they will need to increase each year if local voluntary organisations are to adopt the Living Wage).
* Funders of local voluntary organisations should adopt a more flexible approach to funding staff, and actively encourage the creation of entry level jobs and apprenticeships by local voluntary organisations.
* Smaller contracts with more flexible payment models including grants and service fees with some payments based on achieving milestones should be introduced to remove barriers to contributing to employment support programmes that are faced by local voluntary organisations.
* The role of local voluntary organisations in reaching some of the most excluded groups in the community and supporting people with multiple and complex needs into employment should be recognised, and receive more support as part of employment services provided to people in Islington.
* The value of a holistic approach to meeting need, and the strong connections that local voluntary organisations have with a range of employers and local services, should be recognised, and receive more support as part of employment services provided to people in Islington.
* Investment should be made in local volunteering programmes as an important part of overall approaches to increasing employability, particularly for those facing barriers to employment.
* The role of the local Volunteer Centre in supporting people into volunteering opportunities that can lead to subsequent employment should be recognised.