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Supporting Communities Together:
the route to social justice

Islington Voluntary and Community Sector Conference

29 November 2014

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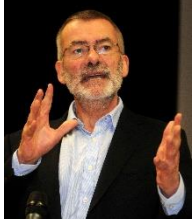
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1   Introduction

At the fourth Islington Voluntary Sector Conference, over 100 people living, volunteering and working in the borough came together to catch up and talk about some of the hottest topics for their communities and organisations. Once again, Voluntary Action Islington (VAI), Islington Community Network (ICN) and the London Borough of Islington (LBI) collaborated to make the event happen.

The day began with speakers setting out the context for voluntary and community work over the next year and suggesting creative ways of working. Delegates then got round the tables to mull over pressing areas of work in various workshop discussions. To finish off, our Next Steps Panel of active and experienced community members responded to the discussions with suggestions for how to make things happen.

Many local organisations talked to delegates about their projects at information stalls:

- Advising Islington Together
- Age UK Islington
- Creative Islington
- FoodCycle
- Healthwatch Islington
- Help On Your Doorstep

- Islington BME Forum
- Islington Faiths Forum
- Islington Giving / Cripplegate
- Islington Pensioners Forum
- Islington Refugee Forum
- Lakwera Services

- London Borough of Islington
- London Capital Credit Union
- Octopus Community Hubs Network
- Peter Bedford Housing Association
- Voluntary Action Academy
- Voluntary Action Islington

2   Speakers

Phil Kelly, Chair of VAI, began by noting that the sector faces significant changes and will have to adapt.	
Cllr. Rakhia Ismail, Executive Member for Community Development, spoke of how the voluntary sector's capacity for innovation can change the way the council works.	
Cllr. Richard Watts, Leader of the Council, was clear about the financial challenge for everyone but also that the council is committed to finding new ways to support VCS groups – the conversation about change starts here!	
David Robinson, co-founder and Senior Advisor at Community Links (http://www.community-links.org/earlyaction) talked about the importance of early intervention and asked us to keep on speaking up on behalf of those we serve.	

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3   Recommendations

Drawing on the workshop discussions and the responses of the Next Steps panel, recommendations for work in 2015 have been agreed. The final recommendation has been carried over from those made following the 2013 conference as it remains particularly relevant. Next to each recommendation is a list of the organisations that have been asked to act on them. The organisations involved are: Advising Islington Together (AIT), Islington Community Network (ICN), London Borough of Islington (LBI), London Capital Credit Union (LCCU), Octopus Community Network (OCN) and Voluntary Action Islington (VAI). Recommendations from the 2013 conference, and the progress made towards meeting them can be found on the VAI website: http://www.vai.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Islington-VS-Conference-2013-report.pdf

3.1   Access to Services
- To keep the Directory of services provided by local voluntary organisations up to date and promote its use as a tool to improve access to services and increase collaboration. **VAI**
- To encourage organisations to share resources, including premises, within the voluntary sector and with relevant statutory and other organisations. For example, co-locating to deliver services at local community hubs, schools and GP surgeries. **ICN / LBI / OCN / VAI**

3.2   Employment Commission
- Local voluntary organisations to develop a better understanding about local employment opportunities and play a bigger role in helping people to access employment by collaborating (within the sector and with relevant statutory and business partners) to provide high quality volunteering, work experience, entry level employment and progression routes for people in employment. **ICN / OCN / VAI**
- The local voluntary sector to work in partnership to secure the best possible outcome for Islington from the new European programmes. **ICN / LBI / OCN / VAI**
- To consider the implications of increased self-employment and the role of voluntary organisations in providing advice to people about self–employment. **AIT / LBI / OCN / VAI**

3.3   Fair Finance
- To promote the advantages of joining the credit union as corporate members to local voluntary organisations. **ICN / LCCU / VAI**
- To give more prominence in communications to the work of voluntary organisations (such as the credit union) involved in providing finance services and those campaigning for fairer finance. **ICN / VAI**

3.4   Food Poverty
- To give more prominence in communications to the work of voluntary organisations (such as community kitchens) involved in providing community food services and addressing food poverty. **ICN / VAI**
- To organise a networking opportunity for people involved in providing community food services and addressing food poverty including organisations that donate food. **AIT / ICN**

3.5   Social Enterprise
- To encourage networking by local social enterprises using a Facebook group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/1420618131561409/) and to encourage social enterprises to take part in relevant community network and voluntary sector events. **ICN / VAI**
- To include local social enterprises in efforts to promote commissioning and procurement processes that are more accessible to local voluntary and community organisations and which take more account of social values. **ICN / VAI**

3.6 Welfare Reform

- To increase the number of people aware of benefit provision and the changes to it following participation in Benefit First Aid training. **AIT / OCN / VAI**
- To develop a plan to support continuing collaboration between community organisations and advice agencies following the conclusion of the Advising Islington Together project. **AIT / ICN / VAI**
- To actively support dissemination of findings and recommendations from the Advising Islington Together research projects. **ICN / LBI / VAI**
- To encourage support for the Keep the Safety Net Campaign. **AIT / ICN**

3.7 Overall

- The Islington Community Network develops its role to encourage organisations to collaborate to improve services and secure funding and other resources. **ICN / VAI**
- To develop collaborative and innovative ways of working in order to sustain a healthy voluntary and community sector during a time of reduced statutory funding. **ICN / LBI / VAI**
- To ensure that the Council's VCS procurement plan is implemented and support long term contracts and recognition of the social value provided by local voluntary and community organisations. **LBI / VAI / ICN**

4   Workshop Discussions

> **"The workshop was really useful and informative"**

4.1   Access to Services

There was discussion of what stops people accessing services – from the amount and complexity of information and the formal and impersonal ways it can be communicated, to the difficult emotional response to asking for help, whether that's anxiety at having to deal with authority or a blow to pride.

Delegates wanted services to be more person-centred and service user led: talking to people where they are (community centres, tenants associations, doorsteps etc.), face-to-face and by building longer term relationships. Community based volunteers to befriend people and provide a link to services were suggested.

Better networking between services was thought important, both to make sure that people get to the service they need as soon as possible and so that services can work together, co-producing solutions, sharing premises, knowledge and more.

4.2   Employment Commission

People were concerned about access to job opportunities, with some jobs not widely advertised, a lack of knowledge of where job growth is happening and problems with childcare costs. The voluntary and community sector could help to share information about jobs. Advice and training on self-employment could also be useful and perhaps back office support for start-ups at 'business hubs'. Support for social enterprise was mentioned too.

Ways of helping people to become 'job ready' were talked about. Gaining 'soft' skills and experience through training and volunteering was considered. But persuading employers to take on local people, and people who often struggle in the job market (those with criminal records or learning difficulties for instance) was also discussed. And there should be care that once employed, people stay employed but do not suffer in-work poverty.

Delegates thought that networking and collaboration, within the VCS but also with the council and Job Centre Plus, would help to integrate services strategically. Shared resources, co-location and joint bids were suggested.

4.3 Fair Finance

To take action to reduce wealth inequality, caused by the financial services industry, VCS groups were encouraged to join a credit union as corporate members. It was recommended that a knowledge sharing directory of financial options be set up.

Working together, VCS groups can also lobby for the retention in some form of the social fund and share skills. The work of small groups needs to be recognised.

4.4 Food Poverty

Free school meals are provided in Islington, but food poverty is now being experienced in working families, including some who do not qualify. There is also a worry over children in poor households during school holidays.

Food Banks are a crucial service, but can be stigmatising. Providing food in more active, participative ways was advised. Getting people to bulk buy, cook and distribute food together would promote health, budgeting and community spirit. Community centres could host such gatherings.

Local groups could work together by sharing information on Food Banks and kitchens and by encouraging community involvement, for instance by brokering food donations from restaurants.

4.5 Social Enterprise

The group talked about opportunities and challenges. Social enterprise can give more potential for innovation and help to empower people. On the other hand, there is a danger that profit becomes the main motive. Also, staffing models may become more complex through trying to find a balance of business and vocational skills.

People thought it is important to ensure that social enterprises retain links to the community by establishing ways of getting feedback from the public. It was recommended to get social enterprises networked, perhaps setting up an online directory, and a consortium of smaller enterprises to bid together for start-up funds, capacity building support and contracts to run services.

4.6 Welfare Reform

There is a lack of knowledge about welfare. Language can be a barrier when claiming. The welfare system is complex and some people are left having to choose to heat, eat or pay rent. The group thought that it is still urgent to explain the changes to welfare and get information out through, e.g. fact sheets, group sessions and linking with GPs, community hubs, etc.

It was also considered important to look at the causes of problems by challenging the council to build more social housing, supporting education and skills development to empower people, and changing attitudes, for instance, towards people claiming benefit, with mental health problems, with refugee status, and so on.

4.7 Cross-cutting Themes

There were some common ideas that emerged in discussions. For instance, many people commented on the importance of taking services to people, rather than waiting for people to come to services. A good way to do that is by sharing spaces with other services (known as co-location), whether VCS or statutory. Libraries, GP surgeries, shopping centres and Job Centre Plus were all suggested as good places to meet people.

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Collaboration was another important theme. Networking to understand the wider sector, discuss solutions together and reduce competition was advised. Sharing premises, co-production and greater involvement with funders were considered. Many pointed out that networks can aid collaboration and also maintain the independence that is crucial for the small, niche groups which will always be needed.

The value of a person-centred approach was often emphasised. Human contact and building longer term relationships were recommended. That helps with understanding and responding to peoples' real needs by, for instance, mentoring, or helping them to develop soft skills.

5   Next Steps Panel

Colin Adams, Octopus Community Network	**Roz Miller**, Islington Faiths Forum	**Phil Kelly**, Voluntary Action Islington (Panel Chair)	**Cllr Rakhia Ismail**, Executive Member for Community Development	**Jeremy Corbyn**, MP for Islington North

Each discussion group posed a question for the Next Steps Panel to move the discussion on to what we can all do to make things happen after the conference.

5.1   **Access to Services questions:** *What can we do to bring organisations together to achieve early intervention? How are we going to approach community development and outreach work to both meet need and prevent escalation of problems?*

Panel Response: We must highlight the value of networks to help us pull together and share information. Networks can work strategically to bring about change. Groups should be supported to learn and develop, not to suffer in silence. We need to make people aware of all services and how they can access them, recognising the diversity of our community. We can work together to signpost services and to extend them by giving greater access to premises. We should recognise and utilise the resources we have such as City and Islington College and London Met University. A high turnover of residents in the borough means we must keep repeating our message.

5.2   **Fair Finance question:** *What should we do to redistribute the inequality of wealth caused by the excesses of the financial service industry?*

> **"Fabulous day! The report will hopefully result in action"**

Panel Response: We should raise awareness of the work of credit unions to counter the effects of the payday loan industry, extend work on increasing access to employment and benefits advice, and campaign for the living wage and to regulate rent levels rather than benefits

5.3   **Food Poverty question:** *How can the Voluntary and Community Sector be supported to collaborate in providing the necessary services and resources?*

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Panel Response: Both old and new communications are important, including social media, noticeboards, community groups and meetings. We can encourage the take up of benefits and free school meals, and confront the fear and embarrassment of those in need. The importance of supporting small local groups should be recognised.

5.4 **Employment Commission questions:** *If we are to avoid carrying on with "business as usual", how can we open up opportunities in sustainable ways? How do we map the funding resources and co-produce solutions?*

Panel Response: Mentoring projects in schools are important. Partnerships with business could give advice and develop work placements. Islington Council should employ more local people both directly and indirectly. Local people should be defined by more than a postcode - many people moved into Newham to benefit from the regeneration there, meaning some long-term residents missed out. Schools should do more to provide work experience and confront language barriers faced by young people entering the workforce. Unemployment can be isolating, especially for older people and we need to recognise their needs as well.

5.5 **Social Enterprise question:** *How could a consortium of small organisations that can bid for resources be supported?*

Panel Response: The local health authority and the council should ensure that contracts aren't skewed in favour of large businesses. We need to do more to support partnership in commissioning and make the process easier for small groups. A partnership should make sure it has a good, accountable lead organisation.

5.6 **Welfare Reform**. *How can Voluntary Sector groups get involved in implementing the conclusion of the Employment Commission?*

Panel Response: The council will make sure the Voluntary Sector will be involved all the way through. VAI should play a role too. The terrible effect of the benefit cap should be recognised and the principles of the welfare state defended. More should be done to support self-employment.

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