**ICNC Minutes 18 July 2016**

**In attendence:**

Ruth Hayes Islington Advice Alliance (Chair)

Guljabeen Rahman Voluntary Action Islington

Chris Taylor Voluntary Action Islington

Mark Brennan Islington Homelessness Network

Anita Grant Islington Children and Young Peoples’ Voluntary Sector Forum

Denise Ward Islington Children and Young Peoples’ Voluntary Sector Forum

Ken Kanu Help On Your Doorstep

**Apologies:**

Colin Adams Octopus Community Network

Roz Miller Islington Faiths Forum & Mental Health and Poverty Networking Forum

Despina Tsiakalou Islington BME Forum

Tessa Newton Age UK Islington

Janan Aljabiri Islington Refugee Forum

Nicholas Watts Islington Environment Forum

Phill Watson Manor Gardens

1. **Statement of VAI’s ongoing capacity to support ICN**

Members were reminded that the grant funding provided by Islington Council to support Islington Community Network (ICN) will cease at the end of September. Some elements of ICN work may be incorporated into Voluntary Action Islington’s (VAI) core programme of work, based around capacity building, for which VAI is funded by the council as a ‘Borough-wide Partner’. These may include some of: the newsletter, networking events, the conference and four ICN meetings a year. It was stated that VAI needs to be able to demonstrate impact of the work that it does, and that this will apply to any ongoing support for networking, whether as ICN or otherwise.

1. **What functions of ICN do we most want to maintain?**

Members saw all elements of ICN work as important and found it difficult to pick out particular ones to concentrate on in the future. These elements were described as parts of a cycle, and so reliant on each other: the network gathers information on residents’ needs and voluntary and community sector (VCS) views; then puts these forward to influence statutory partners; and then informs the VCS of policy decisions, and so on.

Current ICN functions which members valued were:

* A forum to share knowledge of the practices of different LBI departments, allowing both good practice and problems to be highlighted.
* The enabling of joint-work.
* Holding the council to account.
* Providing representatives from the VCS to the Community Chest Panel and Safer neighbourhood Board.
* A forum for the Executive Member for Community Development to regularly sit down with key VCS partners.
* Bringing together knowledge of what’s happening to residents across Islington and in relation to various issues, which can then be presented to the council.

It was noted that ICN is a strategic network for strategic thinking across the VCS and that it creates partnerships. Members think that ICN has helped the cohesion of Islington’s VCS, encouraging more collaborative relationships between organisations.

It was felt that ICN has good relationships with some councillors and council officers, particularly the VCS Development Team, but that the reach of this influence through all council departments is limited. In Islington conversations between sectors do happen, which is good, but the VCS needs to be able to take a lead in them, whether through ICN or some other mechanism.

Members emphasised the role of VCS infrastructure, including VAI, in supporting the ‘bubbling cauldron of activity’ that is grassroots community action. It was thought that the fact that many good projects and ideas spring from this more informal work shows that it is valuable in itself and must be encouraged, even though many commissioners and funders prefer to work with more ‘professional’ groups, and encourage community action to be formalised.

1. **What alternative ways of working can maintain those functions?**

Members discussed whether a network could focus on informing groups about partnership models and facilitating development of them. However, there was some scepticism over the idea that partnership work can bring in funds for smaller groups and it was thought support around this might raise false expectations. In order to consider facilitating partnership work with the aim of VCS groups winning contracts with statutory bodies, a network would need to know exactly what contracts are available in good time, and for the VCS to be involved in the development of contracts.

It was thought that VCS networks and infrastructure groups could aim to influence commissioners to change their approach rather than, for instance, encouraging community groups to form partnerships to bid for contracts. The VCS in Westminster has had some success in this regard.

It was agreed that networking face-to-face is more effective than virtually. For instance, the VAI newsgroup is already a good virtual way of sharing information and keeping informed.

Holding networking events rather than meetings was looked at as an option. It was said that this would risk losing continuity of work as events won’t attract the same audience each time.

1. **What alternative models to ICN are there for networking the local voluntary sector?**

The role of ICN in providing a voice was considered. Members discussed in what sense they provide representation at ICN. The consensus was that they give voice to the experience of residents rather than aiming to represent grassroots community groups. It was noted that most, if not all, members are not resourced to reach out to grassroots groups in this way.

It was suggested that in future more work on campaigning for causes and programmes, and providing a representative voice for the VCS, particularly smaller groups, could be undertaken.

It was agreed that as any future network will have less capacity and so will do less work, the purpose of meetings will have to be more focused. It was commented that there isn’t a strong sense of shared mission at present. Members also wanted the VCS to set a strong agenda, both for its own networks and for work with statutory partners.

Thought was given to the possibility of inviting input to future ICN meetings from the wider VCS, for instance the membership of ICN member networks. Members weren’t sure whether groups would engage with a general request for their input, but it was put forward that they could be asked what issues they would like to be raised, perhaps in terms of concerns, changes to need, and gaps in provision. These could then be taken to the meeting, shared and responded to.

**Action:** CT to ask all ICN members to comment on this discussion by email.

**Action:** CT to develop a map of ICN showing the reach of member networks and co-optees through the local voluntary and statutory sectors.

It was agreed that at the next meeting members will discuss revision of the ICN aims.

1. **Future meeting dates & AOB**

Tuesday 27 September, 13.30 – 15.30, VAI