

Voluntary**Action**Islington

Report on the Islington Voluntary and Community Sector Conference:

Promoting Resilience

19 November 2011



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“Unity to be real must stand the severest strain without breaking”

Mahatma Gandhi

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1. Introduction

This report reviews feedback provided by participants and facilitators of the morning and afternoon seminars at the Islington Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) conference, held at Islington Assembly Hall on the 19th of November 2011.

While the focus of the morning seminars was on how VCS organisations can promote fairness, the afternoon seminars looked at the support needed by Islington groups in the current economic climate. The seminar groups were facilitated and supported by representatives from key VCS organisations, Voluntary Action Islington, Islington Community Network and Islington Council. Participants were asked to provide feedback, which was collated and the key findings are presented in this report. The seminar groups were:

Seminar Group	Facilitators	
M1 – Work and Poverty	Neil Jameson - Founding Director, CitizensUK	Denise Ward - Chair, Children and Young People's Voluntary Sector Forum
M2 – Mental Health	Monika Schwartz - Chief Executive, Nafsiyat	Hazel McKenzie - Co-ordinator, Camden and Islington Providers' Forum
M3 – Community Safety	Derek Millar - North London Manager, Victim Support	Jugjit Samra - Islington Council
M4 – Education and Youth	Daniel Baker - Education Co-ordinator, Cubitt	Katy Fattuhi - Director, Creative Islington
M5 – Advice and Debt	Alison Lamb - Chief Executive, Islington CAB	Elinor Hopson-Hill - Voluntary Action Islington
A1 – Strengthening Communication and Lobbying	Ruth Hayes - Chair, Islington Community Network	Cedric D'Amico - Islington Council
A2 – Engaging and supporting volunteering and volunteers	Philip Boye-Anawomah - Voluntary Action Islington	Elinor Hopson-Hill - Voluntary Action Islington
A3 – Community Hubs as centres of community action	Colin Adams - Chair, Octopus Community Network	Julie Parish - Octopus Community Network
A4 - Improving the quality of services	Janet Keighley - Voluntary Action Islington	Mike Sherriff - Voluntary Action Islington
A5 – The needs of newly formed and developing groups	Yvette Ellis - Voluntary Action Islington	Jo Eve - Islington Council

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2. Work and Poverty

2.1 Work, poverty and Islington's community groups

Volunteering and apprenticeship opportunities were identified as ways in which the voluntary and community sector could increase opportunity for local people. This extended beyond the issue of NEETs to include older unemployed people also. Apprenticeships were strongly supported by the seminar group as they allow people to earn money, while actively developing their skills. It is important, where practical, that people are able to access paid apprenticeships rather than internships. Volunteer opportunities were also identified as a way in which the sector can positively improve opportunity for local people by providing skills for employment. However they need to be properly supported and the costs associated with recruiting and developing volunteers, along with the costs volunteers incur, need to be recognised. Adequate support needs to be available for volunteers and organisations to provide a worthwhile experience. Other areas in which the VCS can support local residents include the promotion and implementation of the London Living Wage, and also a new idea to promote a London Living Rent to help address the rising cost of living.

2.2 Barriers and challenges to the provision of services

Participants were asked to identify some of the barriers that were faced in addressing fairness and the ability of organisations to develop projects to improve fairness. Issues identified included:

- Lack of awareness and understanding of poverty and the issues faced by unemployed people;
- The market economy, which in Islington creates high private rent costs and associated living costs;
- Language barriers and a lack of ESOL provision;
- Cuts in funding for social programmes and the VCS, along with those to benefits;
- A climate of cuts may create less cooperation between organisations competing for resources.

2.3 Recommendations

Based on the opportunities highlighted by looking at the role of the VCS, and thinking of the barriers faced in addressing fairness a number of recommendations were tabled. These identified ways in which the VCS can work with statutory partners and local residents to improve outcomes for the unemployed, and help to mitigate the impact of poverty. The key recommendations from the seminar group were:

- Highlight the advantages of volunteering through the recording of learning and development in the role, and providing opportunities for accredited training;

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- Develop and support a high quality apprenticeship scheme across all sectors. This could include a brokerage system, and also a way to share apprentices across organisations to share the costs;
- Provide positive rewards for local employers taking on unemployed people through placements and apprenticeships;
- Ensure ongoing support for ESOL classes;
- Support and promote the London Living Wage and review ways in which the VCS could better implement it;
- Promote a campaign for a London Living Rent or similar cost of living related lobbying;
- Increase campaigning around poverty issues and the impact of cuts on families.

3. Mental Health

3.1 Mental health and Islington's community groups

The VCS has an important role to play in improving opportunities for people experiencing mental health problems. One of the key ways is working across the sector in partnership, raising awareness of the barriers faced by people with mental health issues, working to eliminate stigma and provide support. This awareness raising and support needs to start from an early age so that children are aware of the issues and can access help. Many organisations have actively sought to provide practical opportunities to people with mental health issues, and the sector should continue to take on volunteers and promote employment and training opportunities in this area. It is important that the sector takes on a role of ensuring appropriate protection of vulnerable people by promoting the safeguarding of adults and children. VCS organisations provide an important link between statutory and clinical organisations and resources, information and awareness can be better shared between these groups. The sector can also play a key role in providing training and support to employers in recognising the signs of mental illness and help on providing support in the workplace.

3.2 Barriers and challenges to the provision of services

In order to identify ways to improve the provision of support to residents experiencing mental health problems, participants looked at the barriers faced. Barriers identified by the group included:

- Decreasing funding and support to organisations working in the area of mental health;
- Changes and cuts to benefits and other social programmes will increase the pressure on many people, exacerbating existing problems and increasing the number of people experiencing mental illness;
- Increasing demand on VCS organisations will make it difficult to cope, coupled with reductions in funding to support residents;
- Staff and volunteers will face increased pressure;

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- The personalisation programme faces continued issues of assessment and cost allocation.

3.3 Recommendations

In the context of the role of the VCS in supporting residents facing mental health problems, and the barriers which are faced in addressing the issues in the current economic climate, the seminar group made the following recommendations:

- The NHS should increase the amount of available counselling sessions to support people experiencing anxiety and depression;
- VCS organisations should increase their links and involvement with the private sector particularly on the issue of support for staff with mental health issues, and how they can recognise the signs and symptoms of mental illness;
- Ensure that social programmes and the partners providing them (for example the Work Programme), have the expertise to work with clients with mental health issues.
- Access to crisis care is critical, and it is important a good level of crisis support is provided in the Borough.

4. Community Safety

4.1 Community safety and Islington's community groups

VCS organisations have a significant role to play in making Islington a safer borough. It is critical that crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) are not seen as just problems for the police, but are an area in which VCS organisations and communities come together in mutual support. In this case the VCS has a role in communicating and coordinating with service-users and other sectors to address issues of community safety. This might include helping parents improve their parenting skills, mobilising members to safeguard their local area, facilitating conferences and meetings between young people and the police, and establishing stronger links between groups, such as tenants' and residents' associations. The sector can also help to improve community safety by providing more generic support to residents. This could involve creating new volunteer opportunities and developing skills, particularly of younger people. Support to groups could include facilitating better partnership working with statutory organisations and promoting emerging groups.

4.2 Barriers and challenges to the provision of services

In this seminar group barriers and challenges were mostly practical, and focussed on resources and communication. Issues identified by the group included:

- A lack of understanding of different communities' safety needs – for example those of disabled people;

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- Communication gaps between communities – particularly those which are new and those which are well established;
- Lack of communication and progress reporting from all sectors on addressing community safety;
- Concerns about how marginal groups with broader issues will be heard as local governance is devolved;
- Resources and capacity building are needed for groups addressing community safety issues, which includes support with the use of volunteers (training and safeguarding);
- The VCS needs better links with statutory providers and those partners need more experience in working with small groups;
- Groups need to know where help is most needed and how to best organise resources across all sectors.

4.3 Recommendations

A clear message from the seminar participants was that community safety is not just about administering the law, but also involving communities to address the problems and issues. The police have a key role, and it is important that they continue to undertake effective partnership working both with the VCS and other statutory organisations. Considering the points raised, the seminar participants tabled the following recommendations:

- To encourage partnership working council officers need to be involved with VCS groups more actively and establish positive relationships across the community;
- Strong links need to be established between all sectors on the issue of community safety, and effort should be made to target marginalised or hidden groups;
- Groups need to promote their successes and demonstrate what they are doing to improve community safety;
- Action on crime should not solely focus on punishment. People who commit crime and ASB should be provided with opportunities to become productive and peaceful members of society;
- Ensure that safer neighbourhood panels represent the ward's population, for example young people and diverse communities;
- Enable vulnerable members of the community to report crime and ASB through improved engagement;
- A single number for reporting ASB needs to be adequately promoted and supported, as well as being accessible to all.

5. Education and Youth

5.1 Education, youth and Islington's community groups

This seminar looked at the ways in which the VCS can contribute to the development of youth and education in the Borough. Currently the sector has been contributing through involvement in key programmes such as Islington

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Reads, volunteer brokerage, childcare / early intervention programmes, extended schools and homework clubs.

Confidence, self esteem and skills development enable young people to benefit from engagement with VCS led activities in formal and informal educational settings. A particularly important contribution of the sector is providing skills that will help young people in their path to gaining employment. This could be through their involvement in organisations as apprentices, volunteers, board members and mentors. Such roles help young people develop their skills and teach team work, self-discipline and respect for others.

Organisations working with young people can improve provision by sharing their knowledge, skills and resources. Some ways this can and has been done includes links between different but complementary services, sharing knowledge of different communities' needs and issues, and signposting young people to appropriate providers. On a more practical level, organisations can provide spaces and facilities to use in the provision of education and youth services.

5.2 Barriers and challenges to the provision of services

Barriers and challenges that were identified by participants included:

- Understanding how to develop appropriate and effective ways to engage young people;
- Reaching young people who can benefit from different organisations' activities and ensure their engagement;
- Establishing a more holistic approach to youth work, including other services such as housing;
- Lack of awareness about where to access information. Residents need to be aware of the provision of youth services and issues across the Borough.

5.3 Recommendations

Considering the issues presented above, the seminar group came up with an extensive list of recommendations to help improve the provision of education and youth services. The recommendations included:

- Making Council and VCS organisations' facilities more easily accessible for activities involving young people, to enable groups to continue offering activities for free;
- Ensure that relevant VCS organisations communicate about family needs, such as through parent forums / groups, working with schools to provide family activities at weekends, involve family members as mentors, board members and advocates;
- Embedding Islington Reads in existing activities, and not just as an additional and separate project. This could involve community hubs and VCS organisations;

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- Maximise opportunities to connect the local creative sector to schools;
- Use public spaces in a more effective way. This could include school and leisure facilities being open to groups to provide activities at weekends and providing subsidised / cheaper access;
- Provide spaces for young people to display artwork, which is accessible in the evenings and weekends;
- Ensure that there is a useful central database of service providers which is up-to-date and maintained;
- Make certain that bureaucracy does not get in the way of good ideas for youth engagement;
- The VCS can improve knowledge sharing, skills and resources related to children and young people;
- Sharing knowledge on communities, i.e. mapping of gangs / territories;
- Young people teaching / mentoring other young people.

6. Advice and Debt

6.1 Advice, debt and Islington's community groups

Access to advice and debt services is important to ensure residents are fully aware of their rights and options. VCS organisations which support residents in these areas have a role in identifying debt trends and developing procedures for people when debt starts to become a problem. Advice and debt agencies have an important communications role in ensuring that small organisations have information on key topics, and also know where to signpost clients for advice. VCS organisations can make residents aware of their full entitlements, for example in relation to benefits, and actively engage clients about finances and financial management. Advice agencies in the Borough can help residents by making sure that groups know about the CAB and the Law Centre, having open doors (including offering services on weekends), and providing face-to-face support.

6.2 Barriers and challenges to the provision of services

The nature and bureaucracy of government means that there are common barriers and challenges which groups face when trying to support their clients. Seminar participants identified the following issues which groups have to address when providing advice and debt services:

- Ensuring high quality staffing and HR, particularly regarding the adequacy, availability and skill of volunteers;
- Complexity of bureaucracy, for example form filling and the understanding of how the different agencies and programmes operate;
- Dealing with clients' own changes in circumstances and understanding how those will impact on the provision of services – for example how infrequent part-time work may impact benefit and tax credit payments.

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6.3 Recommendations

In meeting the needs of residents and focussing on providing services which address fairness in the Borough, the seminar participants offered the following recommendations:

- Provide or signpost to a specific 'one-stop-shop' website which provides accessible advice and debt information;
- Establish a 'debt first-aid' list which provides community organisations with short but comprehensive advice and support on how to deal with clients' problems;
- Look at ways to share best practice in debt and advice service delivery between organisations in the Borough;
- Focus on information and communication – use local media to promote issues, ensure information is accessible in a range of community languages, make community groups aware of how to access information, and use appropriate terminology when describing debt;
- It is important that the Council keeps control over licensing, particularly of gambling businesses.

7. Communication and lobbying

7.1 Current support for communication and lobbying

Participants identified a range of support currently available including training provided by Voluntary Action Islington, and the services of media charities such as the Media Trust. The networks which make up the Islington Community Network were also identified as a channel through which impact can be analysed and reported on through consultation.

7.2 Future support needs

The issues identified covered two primary areas: capacity building (including improved use of social media), and better coordination of communication with the council, which included the council making better use of online tools.

7.3 Meeting need with reduced resources

Key recurring messages from participants included the need to develop more partnership working in the form of joint communication and lobbying efforts, or by sharing skills and knowledge. Participants also suggested trying to get assistance from larger organisations or companies to share knowledge on communications and campaigning.

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8. Engaging and supporting volunteering and volunteers

8.1 Current methods of recruiting volunteers

The use of the Volunteer Centre at Voluntary Action Islington was one of the main ways that participants currently recruit volunteers. Other methods included using social media, events, leafleting and outreach work. Word of mouth was also identified as an important method.

8.2 Organisational need

A clear theme centred on the need for skilled or expert volunteers who can support the organisation in specialised areas, such as fundraising, web development, data analysis or supporting people with specific needs.

8.3 Benefits for volunteers

Participants identified a range of benefits which people gain from volunteering. These included satisfaction from supporting worthy causes, improving their skills and knowledge, transitioning into paid employment and improving their social life and experiences.

8.4 Supporting volunteering

This section of the seminar looked at the concerns participants had regarding supporting volunteering. Particularly prominent issues included the relationship between staff and volunteers, making sure that volunteers were not being used to replace staff, and that there was clarity in volunteers' roles. Being able to offer volunteers adequate training, maintaining their safety and ensuring their skills are adequately used were also key issues. The Volunteer Centre was identified as a way that such support has been available in the past. Ensuring that the relevant databases are used to promote volunteering in Islington was identified, along with developing ways to encourage older people and isolated individuals into volunteering.

9. Community Hubs as centres of community action

9.1 Barriers and challenges for community hubs in achieving impact

From responses to this question two clear themes were apparent. One was the need for capacity building and governance support to ensure hubs can achieve the best outcome for their local community. The second key theme was that of partnership working, ensuring partnerships across the hubs are supported and that there is greater cooperation which works in favour of all hubs, rather than just individual organisations.

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9.2 Priorities for supporting community hubs

Support with capacity building (including training) and facilitating partnerships were clear themes. Capacity building encompassed training, support to fundraise effectively, skills development, IT and media support. Referring to partnership working, participants saw benefits in joint bidding, more collaborative working, lobbying and closer relationships with ward partnerships. Another area of importance was monitoring and evaluation, specifically on demonstrating impact. Hubs need to be able to use effective impact tools and better understand why these are important, particularly in relation to responsiveness to local need and fundraising effectively. Respondents also identified how a hubs network could support the benchmarking of standards across hubs to ensure they are all providing a high level of service.

10. Improving the quality of services

10.1 Defining quality

This seminar first identified what was meant by good quality in the context of delivering services. The following key points were identified:

- Achieving organisational aims to a high standard;
- Quality is about how, while quantity is about what;
- It is about the service delivery of an organisation – meeting needs;
- It is about the accuracy and appropriateness of services;
- It is about the client/customer/service user experience;
- Finding out about the experience of people the organisation works with – feedback, complaints.

10.2 Quality in Islington organisations

Participants raised a number of issues about quality in the context of their organisations. Some key themes which emerged included the resource intensive nature of achieving quality marks, or even initiating change in the way they deliver services. Capacity building and support were seen as important to achieve quality improvements in small organisations. Organisations are all different, and while some are aware of the importance of quality as a focus, others were less aware of the role it plays in improving outcomes and increasing the chances of successful fundraising.

10.3 Proposals for cost effective ways of providing support for quality

Participants used this section of the seminar to brainstorm ideas of how support on improving the quality of services could be provided in a constrained funding environment. The responses were classified into the following areas:

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- **Assessing impact:** Help with equality impact assessments, quality assurance, service improvement and evaluation.
- **Understanding needs:** Measuring for assessment, environmental and shared horizon scanning, understanding service users' needs and the limitations of what can be done (boundaries).
- **Quality standard:** Measuring outcomes as well as outputs, help with getting a quality mark to raise the prestige of an organisation and help with funding. A local trustee bank would be helpful.
- **Good people delivering:** Pooling procurement of services is a way that is cost effective, e.g. outsourced services such as HR, ICT, book keeping; provide a central source to recruit high end/high skilled volunteers to work in their local wards.
- **Policies on quality systems:** More effective partnership building, sharing information and resources.
- **Well run organisations:** Provide back office support; effective governance systems; skills bank; recruitment project to communicate with the 55% graduates who live in Islington and to recruit highly skilled trustees, board members and volunteers.
- **Good communication:** Help with clarity of mission and vision that is understood by workforce (and volunteers).
- **Other suggestions:** Empowering users.

11. The needs of newly formed and developing groups

11.1 Cohesion of delivery

Discussion in this seminar centred on how partners across the Borough could work together to deliver advice and support to groups in a more cohesive way. This could include community centres and hubs, the Council and second tier organisations such as Voluntary Action Islington.

11.2 Recommendations for supporting groups

As in other seminars, participants were asked to make recommendations and suggestions about the type of support required to meet the needs of newly formed and developing groups. A large majority of recommendations came under the categories of governance and capacity building, which should be delivered in a coherent way using all the expertise available in the Borough.

Areas of capacity building and governance highlighted included support to improve fundraising, policies and procedures, and developing business plans.

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It is clear that the availability of capacity building assistance is still desired, and this includes the ability to provide one-to-one support.

Other areas of support suggested by participants included peer training, specialised workshops, support surgeries, mentoring and assistance in developing partnerships and consortia.

12. Conclusion

In a time of economic downturn it is clear that participants see developing partnerships to share skills and resources as a vital way to support Islington's voluntary and community sector. While a number of new ways to develop the capacity of groups and improve fairness were recommended, there is still a need to support existing services and provide ongoing capacity building, which includes face to face help for local organisations. These themes were prominent in all of the seminar groups. The aim now will be to take these recommendations and create a sustainable process for achievement. The VCS and Islington Council should work together to see how this report, and that of the Fairness Commission, can be used to make real, positive change in the Borough. As reductions in public services and welfare continue to impact the most economically deprived residents, it is vital that organisations across Islington have the support they need to provide both a critical safety net and a fairer community.

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