Voluntary Action Islington

Report on the Islington Voluntary and Community Sector Conference:

Supporting Community Organisations and Residents: Are we getting it right?

24 November 2012

Contents

1 Introduction 2
2 Recommendations 3
3 Practical Support 4
4 Sustainability 6
5 Voice and Communicating Success 6
6 Conclusion 7
Appendix 9
1 Introduction

1.1 Herein is presented feedback from delegates participating in the workshop session held during the Islington Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) conference at Islington Assembly Hall on the 24th of November 2012.

1.2 The conference was arranged through the partnership of Voluntary Action Islington (VAI), Islington Community Network (ICN) and Islington Council (IC). Its purposes were to promote awareness of the support services available to frontline VCS organisations, both within the VCS and from the statutory sector, and to invite comment on the performance of those services.

1.3 The event was bookended by a selection of speakers who kindly gave their time to support the Islington VCS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Andy Murphy, Chair of VAI, opened proceedings with a warm welcome and the essential housekeeping.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cllr. Barbara Sidnell, Executive Member for Tenants, Residents and Communities, thanked the people and organisations that make the sector what it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cllr. Richard Greening, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance and Performance, voiced his concern at the effect of government policy on the VCS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Irvin, Chief Executive of the National Association of Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) and an Islington resident, was effusive about the opportunities for local organisations in the current environment. He made particular mention of VAI and its role in helping people to set up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy Corbyn MP gave a rousing speech about the importance of the VCS at a time of continued public sector cuts and encouraged organisations to involve younger people in community action, and the need for organisations to seriously involve youth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.4 The key forum for comment was the hour long workshop session. Participants formed discussion groups around the tables at which they were seated and each group (facilitated and supported by representatives from key VCS organisations, VAI, ICN and IC) talked about the same three themes. The main talking points were recorded and collated and the key findings are presented in sections 3 to 5 of this report. Issues that were raised in multiple discussion groups are presented as a paragraph whereas comments unique within the workshop are listed as bullet points. The themes and prompts for discussion were:
1.5 Practical Support
• Do you currently use any support services and, if so, how useful are they?
• What support would you like that you are unable to access at the moment?

1.6 Sustainability
• What help have you had with planning, managing change, and funding and was it useful?
• How could this be improved?

1.7 Voice and Communicating Success
• How do you communicate about your work and with whom?
• How can networks support you with this?

2 Recommendations

Based on the discussions and suggestions, the conference organisers have agreed recommendations to improve their services. In picking out recommendations, consideration has been given to whether they can reasonably be met given the resources available.

2.1 To put on a voluntary sector conference for 2013, with the priority of considering the changing environment for residents and VCS organisations and how they can respond to and influence change; and to invite senior representatives of local funders VAI / ICN / IC

2.2 To better promote relevant corporate social responsibility (CSR) offers from businesses, with a focus on business planning. VAI / ICN

2.3 To work with the council’s Business Employment Support Team (BEST) to develop a programme for working with larger charities and, particularly, to put effort into helping VCS organisations to offer work related opportunities. IC / VAI / ICN

2.4 To encourage giving by businesses to neighbourhood projects. 
Octopus Community Centres Network

2.5 To maximise the potential for volunteering from local businesses, including universities and large charities. VAI

2.6 To explore and improve communications so that: there is effective dialogue between VCS representatives on funding panels, organisations in receipt of funding and the wider voluntary sector; there are further efforts to publicise existing services so that organisations know where their support needs can be met; national charities based in Islington are connected to the local VCS, e.g. through Twitter. IC / ICN / VAI

2.7 To include a quarterly VCS feature in Islington Life magazine. IC / VAI
2.8 To ensure that at least some of the materials and news produced for the ICN is aimed at members of networks rather than the representatives of those networks. **ICN**

2.9 To keep abreast of new funding and policy opportunities and threats and to publicise them to networks at the earliest opportunity. **VAI / IC**

2.10 To strengthen relations between the council’s Resident Engagement Team and the VCS and to ensure that the Residents’ Champions have a good awareness of VCS organisations. **VAI / ICN**

2.11 To promote awareness within community hubs of the support services offered by VCS organisations. **Octopus Community Centres Network**

2.12 To promote VCS services to young people at the Saturday Night Project (see Appendix). **VAI / ICN**

2.13 To share knowledge of services supporting access (e.g. translation, signing, advocacy) so that minorities and ‘hard-to-reach’ groups are equally able to use the full range of services available. **Islington BME Forum / Islington Refugee Forum / Islington Faiths Forum / Islington Disability Network / VAI / ICN**

2.14 At Roundtable events, to identify good case studies of service user experience as a basis for developing future interventions by the council and VCS organisations. **VAI / ICN / IC**

2.15 To communicate, once they are finalised, the new commitments of the council specified in the action plan arising from the report of the Communities Review Committee; ‘**Supporting the Local Voluntary and Community Sector through Procurement**’. **VAI / ICN / IC**

3 Practical Support

3.1 There were many comments suggesting that support services could more actively encourage free, pro bono contributions from business, universities and national charities with local headquarters, by appealing to notions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). It was thought that larger, well-resourced organisations could, among other things, offer to share knowledge with, and mentor, members of local VCS groups. Brokerage could be sought from Islington Council and VAI. Specifically, VAI might coordinate a meeting of locally based national charities to discuss their support of smaller, local groups in identified areas.

3.2 Another common theme was discussion of improvements in signposting and awareness raising. It was proposed that Islington Council, the Community Hubs and other support groups could be more active in approaching organisations to offer their services, particularly by going out into communities. Methods to achieve this were noted:
having a presence at Chapel Market,
providing and updating public community noticeboards,
running fundraising workshops, etc., within communities rather than at, for instance, VAI.

A one-stop-shop online resource was considered – either a stand-alone Islington VCS website or a greater information resource on the VAI website. The facility for organisations to upload information to a central web resource themselves was recommended. Key requests here were that support services actively operate within community spaces and that there be central sources of information both on and off-line. Improving the reach of networks, collaboration between networks and other support services, and coordination of networks through, for instance, the ICN would help to achieve these aims.

3.3 The importance of greater infrastructure support for smaller VCS organisations was emphasised in a number of discussion groups. This was felt to be needed to support trustees and the recruitment of trustees; to compete for resources with larger organisations; to facilitate consortia building; and to navigate procurement processes. Recognition of the value of smaller groups was urged, due to their knowledge of communities. It was felt that their advice is not sought enough and that their skills and knowledge are not sufficiently valued due to a ‘professionalisation gap’ with larger organisations. For instance, when commissioning research the local knowledge and networks of small groups can be overlooked in favour of the ‘glossier’ services of larger groups.

3.4 People were keen to assist VCS service users and volunteers into employment: support for them to access apprenticeships and job opportunities was requested; it was suggested that Job Centre Plus be asked to accept volunteering as work experience; and the idea of a joint VCS bid for a worker to support unemployed volunteers to move on to paid work was put forward.

3.5 It was thought that support with childcare would increase the capacity of many people to volunteer.

3.6 The sharing of resources was recommended, both in terms of providing basic services (e.g. use of empty premises, photocopying, skills and equipment, etc.) and of the engagement of grass-roots groups with local services (e.g. libraries, Community Hubs, colleges, schools, etc.).

Further comments were that:

3.7 There should be a hyper-local version of Islington Giving.
3.8 Grant-giving organisations should share priorities and strategies.
3.9 There is a need to reduce tension between commissioners and service providers / grass-roots groups by improving mutual understanding.
3.10 CAB connects with relevant community organisations to access the language skills needed to support service users with little English.
3.11 There should be support to recruit and manage trustees and for trustees themselves.
3.12 Support for specialist, rather than generic, services should be retained.
3.13 There should be advice provision tailored for deaf people (staff training).
3.14 There should be greater engagement with Timebanks.
3.15 There should be free access to Council training.
3.16 The Islington Council Youth Quality Assessment Scheme is effective and should be expanded.
3.17 VAI and Cripplegate could broker and coordinate partnerships.
3.18 An on-going practical support email round robin would be very helpful.

4  Sustainability

4.1 Help with business planning, e.g. from Islington Council or via templates, was a popular ask.
4.2 There was a desire for independent facilitators to be available, e.g. for active mediation to enable partnership projects.
4.3 The Community Chest service was praised, both for providing funding and advice. The size of grants was particularly noted as they can make a big difference to small groups and it was thought that there should be more small grants spread among more, and smaller, groups.

Further comments were that:

4.4 There should be more core funding rather than highly specific grants that cut down options for organisations.
4.5 That Islington Giving should demonstrate transparency in funding flows and allocation.
4.6 Good legal and ethical representation is needed.
4.7 Consultancy has been a failure due to the lack of infrastructure within small groups.
4.8 A backroom bureaucratic service should be set up to support a range of groups.
4.9 A bid should be made via LBI / VCS to fund a role identifying funding opportunities for the sector.
4.10 Specialist money management advice is needed.
4.11 Information about the impact of the cuts on organisations and what organisations are doing should be collected.
4.12 Subscription systems would help organisations get more regular funding.

5  Voice and Communicating Success

5.1 A range of discussion groups recommended use of Islington Council publicity services such as: the website (though it could be more accessible), Islington Life, the e-bulletin and other promotional material. The Council was encouraged to use its media to promote the VCS.
5.2 Some delegates reminded each other that their audience includes local residents and other boroughs and can be reached through networks of family and friends and via Facebook.

5.3 There were suggestions that the ICN is a valuable resource for communication and should be strengthened. This could be by increasing the membership of Islington networks in general and by ensuring that new VCS groups are swiftly brought into relevant networks.

Further comments were that:

5.4 Communication is not prioritised by smaller organisations.

5.5 It can be difficult to keep responding to consultations. What other ways are there of feeding back? Better reporting of the results of consultations would provide motivation.

5.6 Connections between grass-roots community groups and more formally constituted groups should be improved.

5.7 Islington Council could use the monitoring information it receives to advertise services.

5.8 Recruiting volunteers to work on media, particularly social media, is useful but can be difficult as there is great demand for these skills.

5.9 Forums could help organisations develop effective partnerships (and could use that as evidence of their impact).

5.10 Service users could be trained to assess services and so demonstrate impact.

5.11 A brief, informative description of a group or service ought to be made available as the name may not be sufficiently descriptive.

5.12 Many young people are not aware of VCS services.

5.13 Street-level, word-of-mouth communication can be effective.

5.14 Partnering to advertise on single issues could work. The example was given of a poster reading 'don’t give to homeless people' and listing VCS groups that can be donated instead.

5.15 Rich and poor Islington residents lead parallel lives. We need to consider how to communicate what the VCS knows about deprived communities to the whole Islington community.

6 Conclusion

6.1 The discussions indicate that existing support services are valued. The resources offered by Islington Council, VAI, ICN, the Community Chest Fund (a partnership between Islington Council and Cripplegate Foundation) and the Community Hubs were recommended.

6.2 Delegates urged them to do more. We know that funding models are tending towards the ‘professionalisation’ of the sector (competing for commissions, developing sustainable business plans, demonstrating impact, etc.) at the same time as funding overall is decreasing. A range of discussion points (particularly 3.3, 3.9, 3.12, 4.3, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, 5.4) suggested that smaller organisations are finding that they need greater support in order to do justice
to the work additional to the delivery of services that is increasingly demanded of them.

6.3 This supports a recommendation of the ‘Supporting the local Voluntary and Community Sector in Islington through procurement report’ of the Communities Review Committee which the ICN is tasked with helping to implement:

‘7.2 The Committee, while recognising that in the current financial climate the Council has to achieve value for money when commissioning contracts, were of the view that more could be done to assist local organisations, particularly in the procurement process, where small organisations often have limited time and resources compared to larger national organisations.’\(^1\)

6.4 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. Delegates were keen for support services to facilitate partnerships (3.1, 3.17, 4.2, 5.3, 5.9) and for organisations to share resources (3.1, 3.6, 3.10, 3.14, 4.8, 5.6, 5.14). There is a role for Islington’s networks to play in arranging resource-sharing.

6.5 Again, the Communities Review Committee has made a related recommendation:

‘7.3 In addition the Committee were of the view that there should be more assistance given to support local organisations to enable them to be aware of opportunities to work with other organisations when procuring services and to be more aware of what the Council values in terms of community benefit.’\(^2\)

6.6 A common request was for support services to take a more active role in reaching out to communities and in communicating information, whether by extending existing services or setting up new ones (3.2, 3.18, 5.1, 5.3, 5.5, 5.7). The implications are that existing service provision around communication is useful and should continue, and that more effort needs to be made to include grass-roots groups both as recipients and providers of information.

6.7 To sum up, the range of recommendations for action it has been possible to make based on discussions at the conference, indicates both that the conference itself was a valuable exercise, and that support services in Islington can, to some degree, respond to and meet the needs of the borough’s VCS. It can be expected that demand for support will outstrip the capacity for supply, but there is a suggestion that infrastructure support is increasingly crucial for smaller groups and this needs to be borne in mind by both support services and funders. As reductions in public services and welfare continue to impact the most economically deprived residents, it is vital that voluntary and community organisations across Islington have the support they need to provide both a critical safety net and a fairer community.


\(^2\) Ibid.
Appendix

Links for support services and projects referred to:

- Voluntary Action Islington: www.vai.org.uk
- Islington Community Network: www.vai.org.uk/services/islington-community-network
- Islington Council: www.islington.gov.uk
- Islington Giving: www.islingtongiving.org.uk
- Islington Council’s Community Chest: www.cripplegate.org/islington-community-chest
- Islington Time Banks Network: http://blog.islingtontimebanks.org
- Saturday Night Project: www.aquaterra.org/sobell-leisure-centre/the-saturday-night-project%C2%AE

Islington Community Network members:

- Islington Advice Network: ruthh@islingtonlaw.org.uk
- Creative Islington: www.creativeislington.com
- Islington Disability Network: www.daii.org/what_we_do/islington_disability_network
- Islington Faiths Forum: www.islingtonfaithsforum.org.uk
- Islington Homelessness Forum: www.islington.gov.uk/services/housing/housingadvice/homelessness/ihforum/Pages/default.aspx
- Mildmay Community Partnership: www.mildmaycp.org.uk/mcp
- Octopus Community Centres Network: www.octopuscommunities.org.uk
- Islington Older People’s Network: r.hamilton@peelinstitute.org.uk
- Islington Play Forum: www.islingtonplay.org.uk/play-support
- Islington Refugee Forum: http://islingtongreefforum.org
- Sport Islington: http://sportislington.co.uk
- Islington Pensioners’ Forum: ipf@talktalkbusiness.net
- Islington Voluntary Sector Health Network: phillip@manorgardenscentre.org
For questions or comments please contact:

**Chris Taylor**  
Project Officer – Islington Community Network  
Voluntary Action Islington  
T 020 7832 5803  
E [christopher.taylor@vai.org.uk](mailto:christopher.taylor@vai.org.uk)  
200a Pentonville Road, London N1 9JP

**Mike Sherriff**  
Chief Executive  
Voluntary Action Islington  
T 020 7832 5802  
E [mike.sherriff@vai.org.uk](mailto:mike.sherriff@vai.org.uk)  
200a Pentonville Road, London N1 9JP