

Voluntary**Action**Islington

Meeting the needs of our **communities** in tough times

Islington Voluntary and Community Sector Conference

23 November 2013



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1 Introduction

- 1.1 Arranged in partnership with Voluntary Action Islington (VAI), Islington Community Network (ICN) and the London Borough of Islington (LBI), the third annual voluntary sector conference brought together over 130 staff, volunteers, trustees and statutory partners of the VCS from diverse communities. Frank discussions were held on how voluntary and community groups can continue to effectively work with those most in need while demand for help goes up and money to pay for it goes down.

“Well done! Loved the Twitter”



- 1.2 While discussions were going on, key messages were picked up and [tweeted](#), and those tweets were displayed in the conference hall as they were written. For those not familiar, tweeting is a way of quickly sharing short messages on an internet site called Twitter. You can find those messages by searching for ‘#ivscon13’ on Twitter.

- 1.3 During breaks, attendees browsed information stalls from an array of local services:

- Voluntary Action Islington
- Islington Volunteer Centre
- London Borough of Islington
- Evidence Hub, Creative Islington
- Healthwatch
- Voluntary Action Academy
- Target HR
- Metropolitan Police Islington
- Islington Giving / Cripplegate
- Locality Navigators
- Octopus Community Hubs Network
- Advising Islington Together
- Islington Faiths Forum
- Splash Pillion
- Disabled People Against Cuts
- Islington Refugee Forum.

- 1.4 An overview of the discussions is given in parts 3 to 5 below. For the full notes from the day, see appendix 1, which has been prepared as a separate document.

2 Speakers and presentations

Andy Murphy, Chair of VAI, opened proceedings with a warm welcome and the essential housekeeping.



Cllr. Barbara Sidnell, Executive Member for Tenants, Residents and Communities, highlighted the importance of the voluntary sector to the community and encouraged delegates to network.



Cllr. Andy Hull, Executive Member for Finance and Performance, gave a bleak picture of the rapidly diminishing council budget but pledged to look for creative ways to support the VCS.



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Paul Butler, Chair of London Voluntary Service Council, Interim Director of Council of Somali Organisations, and founding board member of United Way UK, shared key data on the state of the sector.



Cllr. Richard Watts, Leader of Islington Council, acknowledged that these are challenging times for the voluntary sector but said that it makes a huge difference to those in poverty.



Emily Thornberry, MP for Islington South and Finsbury, praised the voluntary sector as the borough's 'social glue'.



Jeremy Corbyn, MP for Islington North, said how proud he was of the borough's history of social action leading to lasting change.



To share experience and to inspire thoughts of what can be done despite today's challenging circumstances, representatives of three recently formed VCS groups talked about how they had got going.



Ruth Hayes informed us of Advising Islington Together, a partnership of advice organisations working to improve services through collaboration. It has delivered Welfare Benefits First Aid training, held form filling clinics and campaigned on changes to legal aid.



Andy Greene introduced Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC), a campaign network led by people with disabilities that undertakes joint works with various other groups and invites people to set up their own local chapters using the DPAC constitution.



Howard Garrick talked about Splash Pilion, the social enterprise he set up to help vulnerable people moving into new homes get them decorated to a clean and healthy standard.

3 Recommendations

Based on discussions and suggestions at the conference, recommendations for work over the coming year have been agreed. They are listed below, together with the organisations that will take a lead on implementing them. Recommendations from the 2013 conference, and the progress made towards meeting them, are listed in appendix 2.

- 3.1 To put on a voluntary sector conference for 2014, with the priority of considering how we can work together more effectively to support the most vulnerable members of our community. **ICN / VAI / LBI**
- 3.2 To support community action and volunteering by all sections of the community by giving more recognition to local volunteers and taking action to remove the barriers that some residents experience when they want to get more involved in the community. **VAI / LBI**

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- 3.3 To support collaboration and partnership work by organising networking events and supporting joint bids for funding and more cross borough collaboration. **ICN / VAI**
- 3.4 To encourage social enterprise by providing information and training including information about funding and successful approaches to running a social enterprise. **VAI**
- 3.5 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**
- 3.6 To ensure that information held by the Council, and other public sector bodies, about the borough, including local need, is made available to local voluntary and community organisations. **LBI / VAI**
- 3.7 To provide support to local organisations to minimise the cost of maintaining and using premises for community activity, including by encouraging the sharing of premises. **VAI / Octopus Community Hubs Network**
- 3.8 To encourage the private sector to play a bigger role in meeting local community need and ensure that local voluntary and community organisations have information about potential support from the private sector. **VAI / Octopus Community Hubs Network**
- 3.9 To ensure that maximum use is made of opportunities for residents to develop skills and experience related to employment through local voluntary and community organisations. **VAI / ICN / LBI**
- 3.10 To recognize the important role of the voluntary sector in providing advice to local residents and to support greater collaboration between local voluntary and community organisations so that vulnerable local residents are more aware of their rights. **Advising Islington Together / VAI / ICN**

4 Messages for policymakers and funders

“Great event, very well organised and excellent content. Many thanks!”

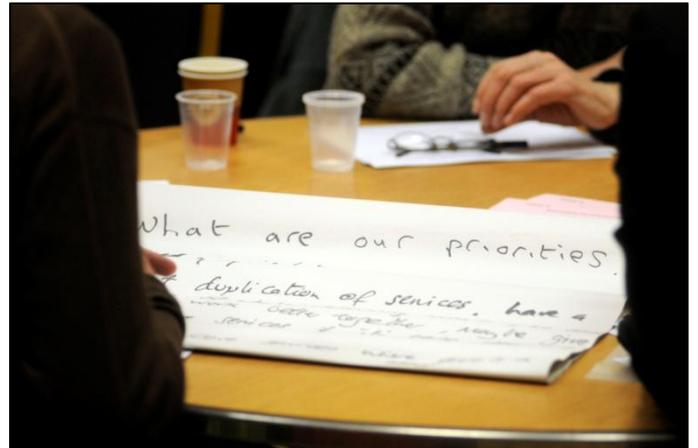
- 4.1 Delegates emphasised the importance of sustainable, core funding for VCS organisations. The disadvantages for smaller groups competing for contracts were discussed - and ways to tackle them: longer contracts, greater value placed on local knowledge, and more funding given through grants.
- 4.2 Andy Hull's warning about the council's finances was acknowledged and thought was given to what support besides funding might be offered. Sharing public sector information was suggested, so that groups could use it in support of funding bids. More detail about the deprivation in Islington would help to change funders' perceptions of the borough. Perhaps the council could also assist groups to find premises, and to minimise the cost of rent and bills.
- 4.3 Advice came through as a strong theme in conversations. Continuing funding and support for advice services was considered to be important for vulnerable people to be aware of their rights and the services available to them.
- 4.4 Support was requested to facilitate networking and partnerships. Specifically for things such as premises sharing, joint funding bids (particularly mechanisms to include smaller organisations) and to enable cross-borough work.
- 4.5 Some discussions highlighted administrative problems faced by people looking for work. Some are being prevented from volunteering by their Job Centre. Others find the transition into work and off benefits leads to confusion, for instance with council tax and housing.

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- 4.6 It was felt that a change of attitude to volunteers is needed. Grass-roots community activity and more formal work should be seen as equally valid.
- 4.7 Delegates wanted policy-makers and funders to keep on protecting the most vulnerable among us. One key way they can help with this is to identify where deprivation and need are greatest.
- 4.8 Policy-makers and funders were asked to listen to the VCS and to prioritise their feedback.

5 What are our priorities?

- 5.1 One of the top priorities was felt to be maintaining a focus on the most vulnerable and ensuring that their needs as whole people are met, cutting across particular services and symptoms.
- 5.2 Delegates strongly prioritised partnership and collaboration. They wanted to share resources, work together more, and address duplication of services.
- 5.3 People talked about the importance of knowing what support our community needs, and what impact current services have on that need, so that the right priorities can be set. It was thought that the breadth and flexibility of the borough's community groups should be maintained so that changing needs can be responded to. But where the core mission still addresses real need, groups should focus on continuing it despite the many challenges that they, and the people they work with, face.
- 5.4 Finding sustainable funding was discussed as a priority. It was acknowledged that this could mean looking at new sources of funding and more effective business planning.
- 5.5 Other priorities noted were: volunteering, older people, young people, and employment.



6 How can we do things differently?

- 6.1 Collaboration was again a focus of discussion, whether it be through information sharing, formal partnership, consortia or mergers. The sharing of resources was a key theme and suggestions included bulk purchasing and sharing premises.
- 6.2 Many conversations recommended working with the private sector to access specialist skills, entrepreneurship and sponsorship. Groups were encouraged to set out clear aims for partnership with the private sector and to take the time to build links step by step. Some called for these relationships to be brokered by a dedicated team.
- 6.3 Encouraging more volunteering, and making it more effective for all involved, was considered to be important. Ways of improving access, motivation and skills were talked about.
- 6.4 A strong theme was social enterprise, and other new funding models. Many wondered about the possibility of social enterprise and training and information on the subject would be found useful.

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7 Next steps

- 7.1 Islington Council has agreed to fund a fourth voluntary sector conference, which will be held on the 29th of November 2014.
- 7.2 Islington Community Network, Voluntary Action Islington, Islington Council, and their partners, will work to meet the recommendations listed above. Information on how they are getting on will be presented at the 2014 conference.

**“useful, helpful, informative,
inspiring and enjoyable”**



Ben River serenading our delegates - www.benriver.net

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
200a Pentonville Road, London
N1 9JP

Mike Sherriff

Chief Executive
Voluntary Action Islington
T 020 7832 5802
E mike.sherriff@vai.org.uk
200a Pentonville Road, London
N1 9JP