

**Institute for
Volunteering
Research**

‘There’s no end to the potential’: Reviewing Volunteering in Islington

**A report for Voluntary Action Islington to inform the development
of a volunteering strategy**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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December 2009

Introduction

Volunteering extends well beyond the boundaries of the third sector into both the public and private sectors and offers a range of benefits to volunteers, local government and statutory agencies such as the NHS and the police, businesses organisations and communities. The wider purpose and impact of volunteering illustrates its potential role in community cohesion, social capital, increasing employability, sustainability, health and well being and ultimately in reducing poverty and improving neighbourhoods¹. These links to community cohesion, civic engagement, employability and increasing people's quality of life are acknowledged in both the Sustainable Community Strategy and the Islington Compact.

In order to achieve its aim of increasing volunteering, the Islington Strategic Partnership (ISP) commissioned Voluntary Action Islington to coordinate a review of volunteering in the borough, and subsequently to develop a volunteering strategy. In turn, Voluntary Action Islington commissioned the Institute for Volunteering Research to conduct the review. The review considers the purpose of volunteering, what volunteering opportunities already exist, how people are informed about them, what support people receive when they take up volunteering and how the different volunteering opportunities link together and with the overall objectives in Islington's Sustainable Community Strategy. The report represents the findings of that review. A small number of volunteering strategies have been developed in other areas which can also serve as a learning tool for the development of the volunteering strategy for Islington.

Volunteering is not what you think it is

In addition to the traditional definitions and understanding of volunteering there are a number of boundary areas of volunteering, including work placements, volunteering as part of a course requirement and volunteering by people who are paid to participate, as in some types of employer-supported volunteering. These areas will force a re-examination of concepts of volunteering and volunteers and this has implications for the development of a volunteering strategy in the borough.

The official volunteering rate in Islington is 22.8 per cent for people who are engaged in regular formal volunteering. This is defined as volunteering within a group or organisation at least once a month over the previous year. This compares favourably to the London average of 20.8 per cent and the national Place Survey average of 23.2 per cent. Volunteers are involved in a wide range of organisations and provide a diversity of skills and activities which benefit organisations and communities. In addition to the traditional types of volunteering activity; there are many other ways that people help organisations such as through Time Banks, employee volunteering, universities, work experience and the public sector.

¹ Ockenden, N. (ed) (2007). *Volunteering Works: Volunteering and social policy*. London: Commission on the Future of Volunteering.

Routes into volunteering

Word of mouth remains the most effective means of volunteer recruitment but also organisations are doing much of their own recruitment and only a small proportion of respondents have noted either the Volunteer Centre or Time Bank as their route into volunteering. These services as well as www.do-it.org.uk are probably under-utilised and under-publicised. Regular volunteers are giving higher than average amounts of time to volunteering and an increasing number of volunteers are coming in through job centres or employment programmes such as A4E.

The main barriers related to volunteering are seen as economic, language barriers, lack of information about opportunities, time commitment, long waits to start and Criminal Record Bureau checks.

Volunteers feel quite supported in their roles but more than half are not receiving expenses or supervision and additional training for volunteers is needed. There is wide agreement for the need for more social and networking events for volunteers, perhaps some centrally organised. There was also emphasis on the importance of involving volunteers with special needs.

Purpose and impact

The overarching purpose and impact of volunteering is centred on community cohesion and social capital, leading and managing organisations, building skills, improving employability and contributing to personal development such as increased confidence and reduced isolation. Volunteering is potentially a key component in achieving local agendas such as reducing poverty by increasing employability and fostering community cohesion, networking and linkages.

Supporting volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations

A need was identified to foster a climate of sharing information, referrals and volunteers; as volunteers need not operate within organisational boundaries. There is also a need to reduce the competitive environment and foster partnership and cooperation in relation to volunteering. Volunteer support gaps include; volunteer career progression both within organisations and in general, training, referrals system, signposting, monitoring and evaluating volunteer experiences and contributions.

There is wide agreement that volunteering efforts are not well linked in the borough and the need for a central point of contact regarding volunteering, or a 'one stop shop'. There is also a perceived need to do a better job of using and publicising the networks that are in place including the local, sub-regional, regional and national networks and forums.

Volunteering brokerage bodies include the Volunteer Centre, Time Bank, universities, v and the Council but there are also other organisations serving brokerage roles in Islington. There are still many volunteer-involving organisations and volunteers who are not familiar with these services or who do not see the need or value in these services. There is a need for outreach, coordination and education about the services available and their value.

There is a clear need to celebrate success stories and publicise the efforts of volunteers, which could include case studies of volunteers, conferences or regular media coverage of volunteer stories. Similarly, there is a need to tackle negative perceptions and stigma associated with volunteering and publicise its benefits. Lastly, there is a consensus that leaders need to embrace volunteering and foster understanding, especially within the Local Strategic Partnership.

Key actions

The findings from the review have seen an underlying, cross-cutting theme of the existing and potential contribution of volunteering to community cohesion. We have also shown the importance of not solely focusing on increasing volunteer numbers in Islington, but the need for a focus also on building a sustainable volunteering infrastructure in the borough that will serve to support potential and existing volunteers as well as the organisations that involve them. A sustainable volunteering infrastructure should include an emphasis not only on brokerage functions but also on supporting volunteer-involving organisations with best practice tools and approaches as well as developing key partnerships within the voluntary sector and the business and public sectors. These priorities in addition to the 'core functions' of volunteering infrastructure discussed later should be organised through a central volunteering infrastructure 'hub' which has the ability to secure long term core and project funding for these ongoing services.

Volunteering in Islington is clearly a vibrant and growing area which serves the needs of individuals, organisations, local government and the community. It has the potential to be a key driver in delivering the Sustainable Community Strategy, but currently lacks the coordination and capacity that would allow it to reach this potential. Specifically this should include a centrally coordinated volunteering hub which works with all sectors, volunteer-involving organisations and potential volunteers in the borough and which has the capacity in terms of core staffing and funding to deliver the activities.

The following key actions have been developed specifically with the Volunteering Strategy in mind. They are meant to accompany the development of the strategy and serve as an aide to its implementation. More thorough explanations of the recommendations can be found in the conclusion.

- 1. Clarification and development of roles associated with volunteering infrastructure.**
 - a. Agree the key roles required for a well-rounded volunteering infrastructure.
 - b. Build the support and capacity for volunteer management best practice.
 - c. Link to local and regional efforts related to the London 2012 Olympics.
 - d. Develop better partnership arrangements between Islington-based business and the third sector and public sector.

- 2. Identify and resource a lead body for volunteering in Islington.**
 - a. Develop the role of Voluntary Action Islington as the volunteering 'hub' for Islington.
 - b. Build the capacity, reputation and quality standards of the lead volunteering body.

- c. Identify resource needs and potential sources of funding for the lead body.

3. Removing the barriers to volunteering and supporting everyone who wants to volunteer.

- a. Target and support under-represented groups to enter into volunteering.
- b. Increase support for current volunteers.
- c. Support progression routes for workless people who would like to move towards employment by improving both soft and hard employability skills through volunteering.
- d. Provide more volunteer training.

4. Increasing the understanding and championing of volunteering locally.

- a. Championing of volunteering by leaders in the public, private and voluntary sectors.
- b. Increasing the understanding and benefits of volunteering by the statutory sector and other funders such as the local Council and NHS Islington.
- c. Increase dialogue between sectors about the scope of volunteering.

5. Promoting and publicising volunteering.

- a. Publicity efforts need to be joined up but targeted to specific audiences and geographic areas.
- b. Promotion activities should celebrate volunteering and tell volunteer success stories.
- c. Volunteering strategies must address negative perceptions and stigma associated with volunteering and publicise the benefits of volunteering.
- d. Improvements must be made in publicising the current resources and networks that are in place in relation to volunteering.