

Paper 1. “Hidden Voices” – An Overview of Key Issues in Islington

Box 1: Key facts on hidden voices in Islington

- The Islington based charity Help on Your Doorstep helped 1158 Islington residents last year. 55% of those helped said that they had not previously accessed any services from Islington Council or any other public or voluntary sector agencies.
- According to the 2009 Place Survey 34% of people feel that they can influence decisions in their locality and only 26% of people were satisfied with the opportunities for participation in local decision making provided by Islington Council.
- In 2009/10 96 people were found sleeping rough in the borough. From April to October 2010, 168 homelessness applications were accepted by Islington Council.
- In 2009/10 1481 domestic offences, 440 racist offences and 74 homophobic offences were recorded by the police. Although it is not formally recorded as hate crime, survey evidence conducted by Islington Council suggests that some residents in Islington are regularly targeted because of their religion or disability.
- 5-10% of Islington’s population are of first generation refugee origin. The four largest refugee communities are defined as Turkish speakers (including Kurds), Somalis, North Africans and Latin Americans (largely Colombians and Ecuadorians).
- There are 802 young carers (aged 19 and under) in Islington – significantly higher than the national average. There is strong evidence that young carers are more likely to experience poverty and social exclusion.
- 46% of children in Islington are growing up in poverty. Overwhelmingly, these children come from families where neither parent works.

Introduction

1. On the surface Islington is a vibrant and engaged borough. Turn out at local and general elections is similar to neighbouring boroughs. Many residents rely on public services and services are well used, for example there were 985,151 contacts made to Islington Council’s Contact Service in 2009/10. The voluntary sector is also thriving in Islington with 1763 documented third sector organisations engaging with local residents - almost three times the national average. In addition to this according to the 2009 Place Survey around 21% of Islington residents volunteer at least once a month.

2. Despite all of this activity there are still many residents in the borough who do not engage with public sector services or any other agencies and can be termed ‘hidden voices’. Many of these people have an active network of family and friends and participate in community life without engaging with these agencies. However many others are vulnerable do not have such a network, they may find it hard to make their voice heard, feel isolated and be in need of support but not know where to go for assistance. This poses a real challenge for fairness and equality in the Borough. It is important that processes such as the Fairness Commission hear the views and experiences of the whole community, particularly hidden voices as they are often the most vulnerable members of the community. Engaging with hidden voices is also important in terms of service delivery and creating strong and active communities.
3. Investigating who hidden voices are, why their voices are hidden and who their voices are hidden from can help the Commission to identify which activities, processes and structures need to be in place to make it easier for people to make their voice heard and participate in community life.
4. This paper provides an overview of some key issues for the Commission to consider as part of its deliberations and inquiry about how to make Islington a fairer and more equal place for those that live and work here. The accompanying papers explore some issues for hidden voices in greater detail:
 - Paper 2. Working with “hidden voices” in Islington : A review of Delivery and Action
 - Paper 3. In our own words: Case studies from hidden voices in Islington
 - Paper 4. Key Issues for disabled people in Islington

Hidden Voices in Islington

5. There is not a single definition of people who are hidden voices. People may have certain characteristics or be facing particular situations that make them more likely to have a hidden voice; box 2 below lists some of the groups that it has been suggested are less visible or vocal in the public space in Islington.

Box 2: Characteristics often attributed to hidden voices

People who don't speak English, older people, young people, 18-30 age group, disabled people, carers, people living in poverty, people worried about debt, some BME groups, some faith groups, transgender people, people with drug and alcohol issues, homeless people, sex workers, domestic workers, street population, refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, young people in care, people with no recourse to public funds, travellers, domestic violence victims, hate crime victims and many other people.

6. However it is often too simplistic to use the characteristics of an individual to identify their circumstances. On the one hand identifying particular groups of people as hidden voices risks reinforcing people's marginalisation and excluding the most hidden, as the list can never be definitive. On the other hand, labelling particular groups as hidden voices ignores those residents with similar characteristics who are thriving and who are well able to articulate their views. Defining people by their characteristics can also hide the fact that in real life people don't fit within labels and they will often have multiple characteristics and

more complex needs. A more helpful way of understanding hidden voices is to focus on why voices are hidden, from the perspective of the residents, community groups and service providers. The next section outlines some of the key reasons why voices are hidden.

Understanding Hidden Voices in Islington

Practical barriers to voices being heard

7. There can be some practical reasons why some residents are not able to be fully seen or heard that cause real barriers to fairness and equality. The accompanying paper on disability identifies some of the ways in which some residents are unable to play a full role in society and may feel isolated from their communities and services. For example, impaired mobility may stop people from utilising certain leisure activities available to others in Islington. In other cases, some residents may not know how to make their voice heard or understand that there are opportunities to speak out or influence their circumstances.

Societal barriers and perceptions

8. People's perceptions of themselves and the society in which they live can influence whether they are willing to be visible or speak out on a particular issue. A belief that certain issues are taboo and feelings of shame or fear may result in residents remaining silent and not asking for the assistance they are entitled to receive. This means that sometimes residents who are very visible and vocal in some aspects of their lives may well be hidden voices. For example, a resident might be a member of a community group or write to Islington Council about their recycling collections, but they have a 'hidden issue' that they don't want to speak out about such as being a victim of domestic violence or a victim of a hate crime. Some residents may also have (an often misguided) perception that other people will judge them or be hostile if they speak out and are open about their situation.
9. Voices can also remain hidden where the right questions are not being asked or residents aren't being engaged in the right way. Sometimes agencies may assume they know what certain groups of people need and do not ask them about any other aspects of their lives that they may wish to speak about. Sadly, sometimes there may also be prejudice, stereotyping or judgements made about individual residents.

The role of active communities

10. Many people have an active network of family and friends and participate in community life without having any contact with public sector services or other agencies. These people could be termed as hidden voices by the public sector or particular agencies but engage regularly with other agencies, neighbours, families and friends as the examples of community groups in box 3 below shows.

Box 3: Some examples of community groups, supported through Islington Community Chest, working with local residents who are not actively engaged in mainstream services:

Community Language Support Services

Community Language Support Services was set up in March 2005 to provide advice, support and information for Islington residents. Its main users are refugees and asylum seekers including Sudanese, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Turkish communities. It provides interpreting and translating, support in filling out welfare rights forms, signposting outreach support, as well as ESOL and exercise classes. Many of those helped now act as volunteer advisors themselves.

'Every year some of our volunteers go out and get a job and we are happy because wherever they go they take part of us with them'.

Interviewee – 'Unlocking the Potential: Volunteers in Islington' Report

Fit Women

Fit Women was set up in May 2005 by 4 local Somali women to address the lack of recreational facilities in the area. The group now has 135 members, representing a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, and provides free weekly aerobics, pilates and healthy eating classes at the Jean Stokes Community Centre on the Bemerton Estate.

'We have real community cohesion and the activity takes place in a relaxed environment where women share ideas and socialise with each other thus also increasing community spirit'.

Chair, Fit Women.

Room2Heal

Set up in 2007, Room2Heal provides therapeutic rehabilitation project for asylum seekers, refugees and others who have suffered gross human rights violations. Current activities include: story- telling and drama workshops; psychotherapy support groups, English language classes, and a gardening and food-growing programme in partnership with the Culpeper Community Garden (CCG).

'When we first saw her, she was so fragile and timid, one could barely notice her. She joined the Room2Heal Women's group. She is now a very active member of the support group and the gardening and food growing group. She also started volunteering with Culpeper Community Garden'.

Interview with therapist at Room2Heal

11. It is also worth noting that there are also large numbers of residents in Islington who choose not to be widely seen or heard in the public space, probably as they don't consider this to be a priority for them. These residents are not necessarily disadvantaged as such, and so their engagement may not primarily be an issue of fairness or equality. Often agencies use a variety of consultation and engagement methods such as on line surveys, public meetings, letters, or text messaging to endeavour to engage these residents with varying levels of effectiveness.

Addressing issues for Hidden Voices

12. Identifying and responding to the views of hidden voices is fundamentally an issue of fairness. Everybody in Islington should be able to live a fulfilling life and play an active role within the community. As part of this it is important that processes such as the Fairness Commission hear the views and experiences of the whole community, particularly people termed hidden voices as they are often the most vulnerable members of the community. Engaging with hidden voices is important in terms of service delivery and also for creating strong and active communities.

Engaging with hidden voices to deliver services

13. The market research organisation Mori has asserted in their article Listening In: A Framework for Customer Feedback and Opinion that 'what makes people hard to reach is not anything about themselves, it is about the relationship between them and the particular agency' (2004). This places the emphasis and responsibility on statutory authorities and other agencies to examine their structures and processes and the way they deliver services. To do this learning to interpret and listen to silence is vital. For example there is a wealth of data held locally in Islington about the demographic make up of residents in the borough. This information should invite investigation into why we do not see or hear from a wider representation of residents coming forward for their entitlements or expressing their views.
14. The council and its partners have a statutory duty to listen to the local community including people who may be hidden voices. For example in April 2009 the Duty to involve, through the Local Government and Public Involvement Health Act 2007, came into force making public involvement in local government functions a requirement. Another example is the Equality Act 2010 Public Sector Equality Duty that includes the need to 'encourage persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.' There are also a wide range of other legal obligations that different services have to comply with to engage the local community in their decision making.
15. Listening to the views and experiences of people with hidden voices enables the shaping of services around their needs, drives service improvement and increases customer satisfaction with services. In addition to this by listening to the views of hidden voices agencies may find that when an individual has multiple issues, taking a holistic approach rather than addressing a single issue could prevent that person from needing further help in the future. The joining up of services in this way could make some financial savings. This approach is currently being piloted with the setting up of 'community budgets' to tackle the issue of child poverty.
16. Not understanding the needs of residents can also impact on resource allocation. Central government funding for Islington is partly determined by levels of deprivation identified from census data. Because some voices remain hidden in Islington it is estimated that the Council has lost out on around £750,000 deprivation funding over four years.

Engaging with hidden voices to create a strong and active community

17. Everyone including the most marginalised and hidden residents in the borough have social, cultural and material assets that they can bring to community life in Islington. These assets can include things such as cultural traditions, life experiences, skills, knowledge, time and energy. Identifying and mobilising these assets can help people to work together to

overcome the challenges they face and contribute to the wider community. According to the Asset Based Community Development Institute finding and connecting existing assets is the most important work a community can do. They state that 'the more assets that are connected and mobilised, the stronger a community becomes. No one can be left out of the process if it is to succeed, everyone must be included' (2005).

18. Islington should therefore engage hidden voices not solely to provide and improve services but to become aware of what assets people have to offer and to create connections and build relationships between people. The statutory sector needs to increasingly think about how it can tap into the skills of the vitality of resident engagement. To do this the assets of each individual must be identified and there is a need for good 'community connectors' - individuals who help to empower and build relationships between people.
19. Gaining a deeper appreciation for how non-financial community assets and resources, such as skills and knowledge, are accessed and shared across social networks can in principle indicate which people and agencies are best placed to make good use of available funding.
20. Research produced by the Department of Communities and Local Government in the last few years has increasingly recognised the importance of the full range of relationships in a particular location and they have identified six key relationships that need to be better understood outlined in box 4 below:

Box 4. Key Relationships (Communities and Local Governemnt 2010)

Horizontal relationships:

1. between friends and neighbours
2. between people and public spaces
3. relations across people of different backgrounds



Vertical relationships:

1. between service providers and service users
2. participation in voluntary activity
3. participation in civic and political activity

21. The Young Foundation, a centre for social innovation, claims that 'while investing in community relationships can seem like an additional burden there is a strong value for money argument'. For example a community connector and their local work to strengthen volunteer involvement in schools may remove the need for a school to pay for classroom assistants. While such savings will be welcomed by public purse holders they are likely to be locally contentious and politically challenging. A future where more civil society and less public service resources are used to meet local needs is a circle not easily squared and Islington will need to have honest conversations and debates with communities about this.
22. People are less likely to become isolated, lonely, and ill in flourishing communities where everyone has someone to talk to, neighbours look out for each other, people have pride and satisfaction with where they live and feel able to influence decisions about their area. The Cripplegate report 'Invisible Islington' shows that social contact and connection, be it with family, friends or community, are critical to happiness and well being. 'Family in particular is a source of comfort, support and pride and a key factor in determining peoples' levels of happiness, but other sources of social interaction also have an equally important role to play' (2009). With increased wellbeing people are less likely to need public sector services and so there could also be a financial saving.

What other people think and do to address and engage hidden voices

Box 5. Some examples of the ways other local authorities are encouraging active communities

Social Network Analysis New Cross Gate

Social network analysis has been used by the RSA Connected Communities Project to study social networks in New Cross Gate. It was found that getting people to map their own community connections can in itself increase the strength of connections in local communities. This social network approach gives a clear understanding of patterns of social inclusion and exclusion and has the potential to create some leverage to reach those who are most excluded, because it can indicate ties through which the most excluded can be reached. The research in New Cross Gate found that familiar strangers such as dustmen, post men, lollipop ladies wield significant power in the community and they suggest that community initiatives should consider how they can better harness this for communicating local information and listening to hidden voices.

Community Entrepreneurs North and South Tyneside

A pilot scheme in North and South Tyneside offers 'community entrepreneurs' paid positions with the local authority to work with up to 20 families to tackle poverty locally. They have become experts in making the links between all public sector services operating locally, increasing take up of key benefits and signposting to employment opportunities. Each entrepreneur receives a package of work-based learning and family support to develop the skills to engage with their own neighbours on community building projects. This scheme is resource intensive, but shows the value of focusing the creative energies of an individual on issues like debt, which do not fall into a single department or institution.

Community dividends in Lambeth

Community dividends are intended to bolster existing volunteerism and incentivise new local action, by financially rewarding communities that take action themselves to tackle chronic issues in their local area. The London Borough of Lambeth announced in February a new strategy of mutualism that will pilot an Active Citizen Dividend offering a council tax rebate to those involved in community organisations or mutuals that take responsibility for services. This is based on research that suggests that where both employees and users become involved in the provision of a service, they become far more intolerant of waste and bureaucracy, and significant savings can be made.

23. Historically the debate around hidden voices has tended to focus on the vertical relationships between agencies as service providers and residents as service users and participants in civic and political activity. However increasingly the importance and value of residents forming friendships, networks and community groups is being recognised as a key determinant of fairness and equality.
24. The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce (RSA) states that 'community strength does not mean monolithic geographical areas where everybody knows everybody else, but multiple and diverse community networks that are strong in so far as they have points of contact through which they can share skills, information and support' (2010). Both 'bonding social capital' defined as 'the networks and ties that exist between people of similar social characteristics' and 'bridging social capital' defined as 'the networks and ties between people of different social characteristics' (Putnam 2000) has to be encouraged to strengthen communities.

25. A lot of the research into fostering community cohesion stresses the importance of 'community connectors'. In November 2010 government announced that 5,000 full time professional community organisers will be trained over the course of the current parliament, the idea is that these people will be trained with the skills they need to identify local community leaders, bring communities together, help people start their own neighbourhood groups, and give communities the help they need to take control and tackle their problems. The research in New Cross Gate suggests that the most effective way of listening to hidden voices may be to direct resources towards people identified as 'community networkers' and that there should be more explicit emphasis on discovering and developing networking skills as part of community policy.
26. An early evaluation of the Total Place initiative stressed the importance of local leaders who understand communities, pull together different strands of provision, break down internal silos, seek feedback and build relationships. Whether housed in the community or inside a public agency, they are creative and well networked local people with the legitimacy and status backed up by senior champions to take new ideas forward. (Total Place: Interim Research Report 2009).
27. Places where communities can meet each other and congregate are also mentioned as being crucial to increasing community cohesion and these are not necessarily public sector owned places such as parks and community centres. For example in the social network analysis in New Cross Gate pubs were identified as important places through which community concerns and activities were communicated. (RSA 2010)
28. The focus on community cohesion and community empowerment is important for the hidden voices debate as it is through community connections that voices can be heard. This is supported by the 2008-2009 Citizenship Surveys finding that 'people who felt they belonged very strongly to their neighbourhood were more likely than those who didn't belong strongly to have taken part in any civic engagement and to feel that they could influence decisions affecting their local area' (CLG 2010).
29. Finally, The recent Localism Bill (December 2010) sets out how the Coalition Government is committed to decentralisation, and aims to 'empower communities to do things their way – by creating rights for people to get involved with, and direct the development of, their communities'. Most conceptions of empowered communities recognise the importance of 'hidden wealth' (David Halpern 2010), namely the non-financial resources comprised of local skills, trust and know how, useful contacts and care based exchanges.

Key issues for the fairness commission to consider

30. The following key questions may be helpful for the Commission to consider as part of its deliberations and inquiry about how to make Islington a fairer and more equal place for everyone who lives and works in the borough including those people who may find it hard to make their voice heard.
 - How can we ensure effective engagement with hidden voices?
 - How can we develop strong communities and community empowerment so that everyone can live fulfilling lives and play an active role in the community?
 - How do hidden voices impact the way we do business- allocate budgets, design services?
 - What can we do to bring hidden voices into the Fairness Commission process?