

We transform lives for people in Islington.
We're independent, and trusted.
The money we give improves lives for
local people, building a better future for us all.

Cripplegate Foundation Helping since 1500



Unlocking the potential: Volunteers in Islington

*Executive summary of a report
for Cripplegate Foundation
by Kim Donahue,
Institute for Volunteering Research*

Cripplegate Foundation

Cripplegate Foundation is an independent grant-giving trust which works mainly in Islington. We spend over £1.7 m a year on grants which meet the Foundation's priorities of:

- addressing and alleviating poverty
- increasing access to opportunities
- building social cohesion
- bringing about lasting change

We have a number of grant programmes:

Our grants to voluntary organisations extend valued existing services and fund new activities and ways of working where we have identified a gap that needs to be filled. The programme supports organisations such as youth groups, mental health projects, welfare rights services and projects for older people.

We run a small grants programme on behalf of Islington Strategic Partnership. It mainly supports volunteer-led organisations, funding activities such as self-help groups, arts, advice and information. The programme allows a wide range of small and growing groups, notably new refugee and black and minority ethnic groups, to access support and funding.

Our small grants to individuals provide much-needed household goods. All applicants are offered a benefit check and are referred to other services such as counselling, money advice or training, giving them an opportunity to change their circumstances in the long term.

The Foundation also has a wider role in identifying needs, championing unpopular causes and supporting new developments in Islington. This role ranges from participating in local partnerships to facilitating a neighbourhood management approach to services.

Cripplegate Foundation commissioned this report to provide an informed base on which to build its grant programmes over the next five years. The detailed insight it gives us into the real lives of poor people in Islington will shape our activities and grants so that, more than ever, we will be meeting the needs and aspirations of those we serve.

Cripplegate Foundation
www.cripplegate.org

1. Executive Summary

*This society would collapse without volunteers.
It just wouldn't be able to function.*

1.1 Introduction

In November 2009 Cripplegate Foundation launched 'Invisible Islington: Living in Poverty in Inner London'. Islington is a borough of striking social extremes: London's richest and poorest residents exist side by side, living entirely different lives. Cripplegate Foundation commissioned the research to shine a light on the poverty that exists in Islington, to explore the factors that make it so entrenched – ill health, debt, isolation and lack of opportunity – and to rethink the actions needed to tackle it.

Cripplegate Foundation is using the report's findings to inform the local and national policy debate about tackling poverty. We believe that volunteering is potentially a very powerful way to address isolation. Islington Community Chest (ICC), a small grants programme, involves over 1,500 volunteers who develop confidence, skills and networks through their involvement in grassroots organisations.

Cripplegate Foundation commissioned the Institute for Volunteering Research to assess the impact and value of volunteering in Islington's small community and voluntary groups, and to develop recommendations for the future support and development of volunteers in Islington. The research is based on volunteering activity in groups that received grants from ICC during 2007-2008.

Despite pockets of great affluence, Islington is home to entrenched poverty and the isolation and exclusion that so often accompany it. Islington is the eighth most deprived local authority area in the country. Recent statistics give a snapshot of the borough¹:

- half of all the accommodation in the borough is social housing, much higher than the London and national averages.
- Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups account for almost half of the residents of social housing.
- an estimated 5-10% of the population are refugees.
- 16% of residents describe themselves as having some type of disability.
- men in Islington have the second lowest life expectancy in London; women have the third lowest.
- 42% of Islington's children are raised in families dependent on benefits (national average of 16%).

¹ Islington Strategic Partnership, 2008, Borough Profile.

- 20% of households are lone parents with dependent children, double the national average.
- nearly one fifth (18%) of the working population receive incapacity benefit – double the London average and three times the English average.
- levels of mental illness are significantly higher than elsewhere in London and the UK.
- levels of drug misuse are the worst in the country.
- the number of residents with no qualifications is much higher than both the London and national averages.

The voluntary sector in Islington is large, varied and active. Islington is supported by hundreds of small volunteer-based groups – almost three times the national per capita average². More than one in every five people in Islington volunteers at least once a month³, many more volunteer on a less regular basis. Collectively, this volunteer community makes a unique and powerful contribution towards tackling the challenges faced by one of the UK's most deprived boroughs.

The aims of this research were:

- **to identify the impact and value of volunteering on:**
 - the volunteers themselves
 - the groups they helped
 - users of services
 - local decision-makers
 - the wider community
- **to identify lessons relating to the recruitment, management and support of volunteers** within small community organisations.
- **to identify any barriers** to volunteering.
- **to develop recommendations and new approaches** that will help Cripplegate Foundation and others foster and support volunteering.

This report is aimed at all those who would like to encourage and support volunteering in the community. It provides clear evidence of the many benefits of volunteering, particularly in small groups, exposes the challenges faced by these organisations and presents concrete recommendations for the future.

The research was carried out by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) in June 2009. It was a qualitative study that included focus groups with leaders and volunteers of ICC groups, interviews with stakeholders, case studies and background desk research.

² Office of the Third Sector, 2009, National Survey of Third Sector Organisations, conducted by Ipsos MORI, London.

³ This result (22.8%) is drawn from Q15 of Place Survey 2008: "Overall, about how often over the last twelve months have you given unpaid help to any group(s), club(s) or organisation(s)?"

1.2 Headline findings

A. Why do people volunteer?

People volunteer with small groups for a number of reasons:

- to fill time due to a change in circumstances such as retirement, unemployment or ill health.
- to address a pressing need in their local neighbourhood or among friends or family.
- as a route to assimilation into, or greater familiarity with, British culture.
- as a form of reciprocity or ‘giving back’ to the society/community that has previously given something to them.
- because family or friends want or need them to help.

Many of these motivations are echoed by national research findings but some – in particular volunteering as a route to assimilation – are more specific to Islington and other areas with significant migrant communities.

The volunteer establishes a base in this country where he can say yes those people know me. Every year we get one or two volunteers and they go out and get a job and we say we are happy because wherever they go they take a part of us with them.

The data suggests that volunteers involved with small groups in Islington are not coming from ‘external’ communities but are found within communities, helping each other as neighbours.

I have done no volunteering and didn't know any neighbours at all and I've lived here for 10 years before I joined and it's quite incredible that I can't leave the house now without bumping into people, which is lovely. And that's what I got from it more than anything else, the kind of community feeling, it's very nice.

B. The benefits of volunteering

Volunteering in small groups has many positive inter-related impacts:

- **For volunteers**, it increases well-being, provides skills and work experience, reduces isolation, and gives structure, purpose and a connection to society.
- **For users of services**, it offers cost-effective, local services that are provided by people who are passionate about what they are doing and knowledgeable about the community they serve.
- **For the most excluded**, it provides a route through which to connect to the wider community and access mainstream services and support.
- **For the community**, it brings different people together, breaking down cultural barriers and fostering equality, openness and a more cohesive and self-reliant society.

- **For local and national Government**, the improved well-being and increased skills generated by volunteering help to reduce state intervention and benefit dependence. Small groups also provide cost-effective services that meet needs that the public sector cannot cover.

Volunteering in small groups can have the biggest impact on people who are most vulnerable or most excluded in the community.

After 6:30 until around 9:30, that is quite a tough time for a lot of people... being able to get involved in a community project has really helped fill their time so that they are not reduced back to being the way they often do feel at those tough times. Not only does it give them the chance to give something back to the community, it is meaningful to them.

C. The challenges faced by small groups

Despite the many important roles played by small voluntary groups, these organisations face considerable challenges:

- a lack of recognition
- a lack of legitimacy, voice or a seat at the table
- a lack of financial and organisational sustainability
- a lack of the right kind of support

D. Recommendations

Four main recommendations emerged from this study which together would help to address these challenges, unlock the potential of small volunteer-based groups, and avoid the further marginalisation of the excluded communities they serve.

- **Recognition and voice**
The wider voluntary sector, funders, local and national government can acknowledge and celebrate the varied role that volunteers and small groups play. From that recognition needs to flow legitimacy and a commitment to give these groups the opportunity to make their voices heard.
- **Support**
The right kind of support would help volunteers to develop and flourish.
- **Understanding**
Small groups have limited resources. Funders and stakeholders could simplify their requirements to make them more manageable.
- **Innovation**
New models of volunteer recruitment, management and support need to be developed to ensure independence.

E. Cripplegate Foundation's response

Cripplegate Foundation is committed to fostering volunteering and small volunteer-based groups that it supports through Islington Community Chest and other funds.

We will use the findings of this report to inform how we work in future, specifically:

- Intelligence gathered through small groups will shape and influence Cripplegate Foundation's grants programmes.
- We will celebrate and recognise the work of small groups. The Foundation will be launching an award to recognise those who make a difference.
- We will promote partnerships between small community groups and statutory services to improve access to health and council services.
- Volunteers and leaders of small groups will be involved in developing the Islington Community Chest programme.
- We will introduce a new small grants application form with all small grants funders in Islington. The application form will simplify the application process for small groups.
- We will actively promote employee volunteering in large public bodies such as Islington Council and NHS Islington as well as private companies.
- We will actively identify and promote opportunities for private sector organisations to offer volunteering opportunities in Islington for the benefit of their employees and Islington residents.
- Through a new campaign with other funders, Islington Giving, we will actively encourage new volunteers.

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