

Challenging inequality

through community
connection in Islington



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islington
giving



Cover image:
'Make it Happen'
funded project,
Islington, 2022

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Introduction

This report was produced as the final output of a research project that sought to listen to and learn from residents in Islington. The report details insight from residents lives and experiences, and how Cripplegate Foundation might best continue working towards its aims of reducing poverty and inequality in the borough.

The qualitative approach that was used for this research did not seek to be statistically representative of Islington as a whole. Researchers spoke to 36 participants, all of whom were people who could express themselves in English. It is therefore not purported that the views represented in this report are those of everyone living in the borough.

Our Approach

The research project took a community-based approach, working with a group of Islington residents. Together with Power With, we trained this group as community researchers, and they then helped to design and deliver the research. They reported that this was a valuable experience and way to deliver the project.

Twelve semi-structured interviews and five focus groups were held, which engaged with a total of 36 participants who are residents of Islington.

Image (right):
one of the
Golden
Grant Maker
consultation
sessions, 2023



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“Working together with other Islington residents to explore knowledge, needs and experiences of people in our borough has been an enriching, empowering and enlightening experience.”

COMMUNITY RESEARCHER, 2023

“I was proud that we gave voice to people who are typically not heard and that they came up with practical solutions to reduce inequality and foster community in the borough.”

COMMUNITY RESEARCHER, 2023

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25%

of people in Islington
are living in poverty
(Trust for London)

38%

of children live
in poverty
(Trust for London)

Executive Summary

The research considered how people's lives have changed over the last ten years. Findings showed that there has been significant change, with participants frequently mentioning the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis as having an effect on their lives and the lives of those around them: increasing isolation, and increasing financial difficulty.

There are ways in which Islington has been 'cleaned up', making it more attractive for working people, building new housing, and becoming more cyclist friendly. It continues to be celebrated as a diverse borough, and one that people enjoy living in for its excellent location and range of leisure activities.

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“Overall, participants felt a sense of worsening inequality with mental health being a particularly large concern.”

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At the same time, these are aspects of the borough that don't benefit everyone equally. There are concerns that leisure activities are costly and therefore only open to those who can afford them, and wages are not rising while the cost of living increases. There are fewer spaces for people to meet, socialise and connect affordably, and this is particularly perceived in relation to young people having fewer spaces and opportunities.

Access to healthcare can be a challenge, with long waiting lists meaning that many feel unsupported or become more unwell, and both substance use and mental health in particular were felt to be key challenges in the borough.

Residents perceive a strong sense of community, and there is a desire to continue having opportunities to come together, create activities and continue building Islington's culture. This came through strongly in the common suggestions about making more use of community spaces.

It was felt that local, place-based funders such as Cripplegate Foundation (including Islington Giving) have a strong role to play in helping to create purpose, belonging and a sense of empowerment through their work, specifically by recognising that people often know the solutions to their own problems, and supporting them to realise these solutions.

Funders can also influence other community organisations, in terms of the way that they operate. It was felt to be important to consider how charities promote dignity and respect for their beneficiaries, and investing in leadership from people with lived experience of issues as well as investing in grassroots organisations and groups were ways that participants felt funders could support the community.

Finally, making sure that funding processes are accessible to a range of types of groups and well-advertised was also seen as being important.

Above all, there is a strong desire from residents to continue building on the strengths they see within Islington already, and this provides Cripplegate Foundation with an excellent base for continuing its efforts to engage with local people and support the community.



Findings



POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

“You can see the poverty line, the divide in a way, it’s quite apparent from looking at two different areas”

There has long been an understanding of the inequality experienced in the borough, with one report in 2014 calling it ‘two Islington’s’.

Islington is undoubtedly a wealthy borough with the 6th highest GDP of all London boroughs. Gentrification was discussed by many participants who felt that the increase in wealth was noticeable in areas being ‘cleaned up’, changing shops and prices going up.

“...I’m priced out too, when it’s £4 for a coffee who can afford that?”

Many participants felt priced out of social activities and noted that people who are time-poor or struggle with mobility and rely on local shops may end up paying high prices.

In contrast, many participants felt that poverty is an ongoing visible issue in Islington with high levels of homelessness, areas where litter does not seem to get cleared up, people using drugs in public spaces and leaving detritus around, and buildings appearing run-down.

It was clear from the interviews that the participants saw poverty and inequality as everyone’s problem – even when participants were not experiencing poverty themselves, they were aware that others are suffering.

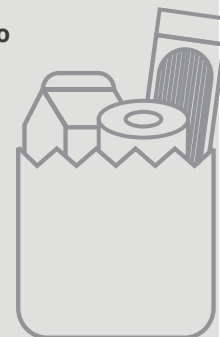
The Islington Food Bank served

832

clients in 2012 compared to

5684

clients in 2019, indicating increasing numbers of people struggling to pay for food.





CRIME AND SAFETY

“If it’s late I won’t go out because I’m afraid for my safety, even though I’m not mixed up in crime I could be caught up in it, it’s frightening as an older person”

Of the 18 interviews and focus groups, 16 brought up crime and safety as a concern, and there was a sense that this has been getting worse over recent years. Several people had experience of or told anecdotes of others who had experienced muggings or theft. Two participants with young children, spoke of antisocial behaviour affecting them, and being worried about their children seeing drug use or not feeling safe in certain parks. In particular, women spoke about being wary about walking by themselves.

However, more broadly, participants understood these issues as being representative of a need for more support services, in particular for those experiencing mental health problems, as a solution to high levels of substance use.



HOUSING

Participants lived in a range of types of housing, including social housing, private renting, and home ownership, and housing was mentioned in every interview and focus group as an important issue.

“Everyone has the right to live somewhere that’s decent and fit for purpose”

It was noted that there is a huge disparity in the quality of housing in Islington. There are high-quality new-builds, and large multi-million-pound houses. At the same time, there is run-down housing where people live in overcrowded conditions. A couple of participants reported living with severe issues in their properties.

Homelessness was noted to be high, and a very visible sign of housing inequality in addition to the disparity in living conditions in different areas.

Overall, there was a widespread concern that the high costs of housing made participants feel that they or future generations may not be able to afford living in Islington. This created a sense of instability for some participants, for example, someone who is renting said

“Sooner or later I will be the one who is priced out”



HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Participants recognised that physical health and mental health are interlinked; poor mental health can have an effect on one's physical health, and vice versa. Some participants reported that access to physical healthcare has improved over the years, but it was also noted that increased housing hasn't been matched with healthcare provision, and it can be hard to get doctor or dentist appointments.

Mental health was more of a prominent concern, with half of the interviews and focus groups discussing it as an issue.

Participants expressed a desire to have ongoing support that comes through wellbeing activities, compassionate staff and volunteers, and having places to go where people can meet in person, and can help to structure their weeks.

"I needed therapy and I wasn't able to get it, and I'm quite vocal so I can imagine there were other people who weren't able to get support"

"You feel like giving up. I've tried this, I've tried that, what else is there?"

Islington has the

**5th
highest**

rate of people experiencing
severe mental ill health in England
(Islington Council)



DISABILITY

Participants felt that there are a range of ways in which people with disabilities experience inequality. Some of the examples given were that there is little available in terms of activities for children with disabilities, or that it is difficult to get transport to hospital appointments.

Participants noted that the cost of living crisis is likely to disproportionately affect those with disabilities, who may be at home during the day a lot more, and therefore may need to spend more on heating.

“We don’t look after the people I call the unsung heroes.”

In discussing experiences of being carers for people who are ill or have disabilities, it was noted that there is a lack of support in the borough.



RACIALISED MINORITIES AND MIGRATION

Participants felt that one of Islington's strengths is its multicultural and diverse society. It was noted that there have been waves of migration over the years, resulting in a range of different cultural communities living in Islington, including Turkish, Somali, Irish and Kurdish people. Not everyone has experienced Islington as a welcoming and connected place to live.

Four participants spoke of their own personal experiences of racism in Islington.

“Islington is steadfast in its values in terms of a class system and orderly system and not integrating other people's cultures, so much so that if you're not careful you lose your own...”

Others, however, had a very different experience. One participant, who came to Islington as a Ukrainian refugee, praising the welcome and support that she had received.

“If I want to do something, people help me and give me advice”



THE ROLE OF CHARITABLE FUNDERS

Many participants recognised the interplay between national issues and government policies, and how these can affect people on a local level:

“It’s the people that fall through the net... But it’s not just Islington or just London, it’s the UK”

While this was acknowledged, participants were confident that there is a crucial role for local funders such as Cripplegate Foundation. Funders hold power in terms of influencing others and promoting best practice, as well as being able to use their funds to create or generate new initiatives.

Several key suggestions came through from the research including the need to create purpose, belonging and a sense of empowerment.

Through the research, there was a sense of helplessness that some participants expressed in the face of deep inequality and people not feeling listened to or not feeling in control.

“A lot of people are frightened to go to the council to ask for help, they see it as an oppressive type thing”

“I want to feel confident and in control of my activities”

These are just some of the areas covered in the research, with further exploration on areas including: The physical environment and sustainability, Older People, Digitisation, Young People and Families, Reflections On ‘Community’, and Practical Suggestions.

The community researchers involved in this project fed back that participating in this research had been hugely beneficial for them. Cripplegate Foundation intentionally set out to involve members of the community in this research in a meaningful way, and this has been shown to be a positive way to engage with people.



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Conclusion

Throughout the research, there was a strong sense from participants that the borough should be a place where everyone feels safe and supported. The findings from this report highlight that there are many people who do not feel that the borough caters for them, embraces them, or makes them feel welcome – the question ‘who is Islington for?’ was posed by several participants.

The past ten years have seen significant change, and participants frequently mentioned the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis as having an effect on their lives and the lives of those around them: increasing isolation, and increasing financial difficulty. The majority of participants felt a sense of worsening inequality, with mental health in particular being a large concern.

One of the community researchers reflected on the research, saying:

“it feels like there’s no light at the end of the tunnel”

This was echoed by a research participant, who said

“I think it’s going to get worse before it gets better”

These findings chime with the national context, where recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that increasing numbers of people are living in destitution, public services are struggling to cope and as a consequence, people’s mental and physical health is worsening.

While residents saw these increasing problems, they were all positive about living in Islington and wanted to stay. However, increasing cost means that many are unsure about their futures in the borough. One person who had lived in Islington his whole life said:

“I always want to live in Islington no matter what, it’s my home, but the issue is it’s too expensive to live in Islington these days”

Overall, participants perceived a strong sense of community, and there was a desire for opportunities to come together, create activities and continue building Islington’s culture. This came through particularly strongly in repeated suggestions about making more use of community spaces.

Above all, there is a strong desire from residents to continue building on the strengths they see within Islington already. This provides Cripplegate Foundation with a solid base for continuing its efforts to engage with local people and support the community.

What Next?

The findings of this report, together with the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of each programme, will inform the priorities of Cripplegate Foundation over the coming years. This will help to guide how we can best use our resources to address inequality in Islington and Cripplegate Ward. We will be looking to refresh current grant programmes and to design new ones, and will seek to use the findings in this report to ensure that our available funding is used to address some of the issues raised by residents.

In addition to this report, we aim to use our embedded position in the community to continue listening and responding to the concerns and views of local residents and working to address and change feelings of frustration and powerlessness by shifting power to local people. We will do this through our resident led grant making panels, by listening to the groups we fund and visit, and through our partnerships with organisations across the borough.

We will continue to invest in grassroots projects and placing trust in the expertise of local people through our grant-making. We will also continue to support projects which provide ways to build purpose, belonging and connection.

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“Help local people come up with solutions – from the bottom up.”

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About Us

Cripplegate Foundation is a local grant-making foundation supporting residents working in the London borough of Islington and a small area of the City of London. Our vision is of a society where everyone can live a rewarding and fulfilled life, free from poverty and inequality. We work towards this vision by listening to, and learning from, local people and communities, making grants and working in partnership with local people and organisations.

Islington Giving is a coalition of local people, businesses and organisations, working together to raise funds, support local projects and connect with each other in Islington. Islington Giving is a restricted fund of Cripplegate Foundation, established in 2010 as a new way of connecting people with their communities to create change, and the first of the London's Giving movement. A core part of Islington Giving's place-based work is via resident-led grant making programmes.

Power With is a community of people with lived and learnt experience of system inequalities who want to enact change. They provide co-production consultancy and training to health and social care service-providers and social research organisations. Power With aim to share knowledge and provide practical support to re-distribute power and cultivate spaces where people with lived and learnt experiences of social systems can connect as humans and drive systemic change.



Contact details and to find out more:

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Foundation***

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