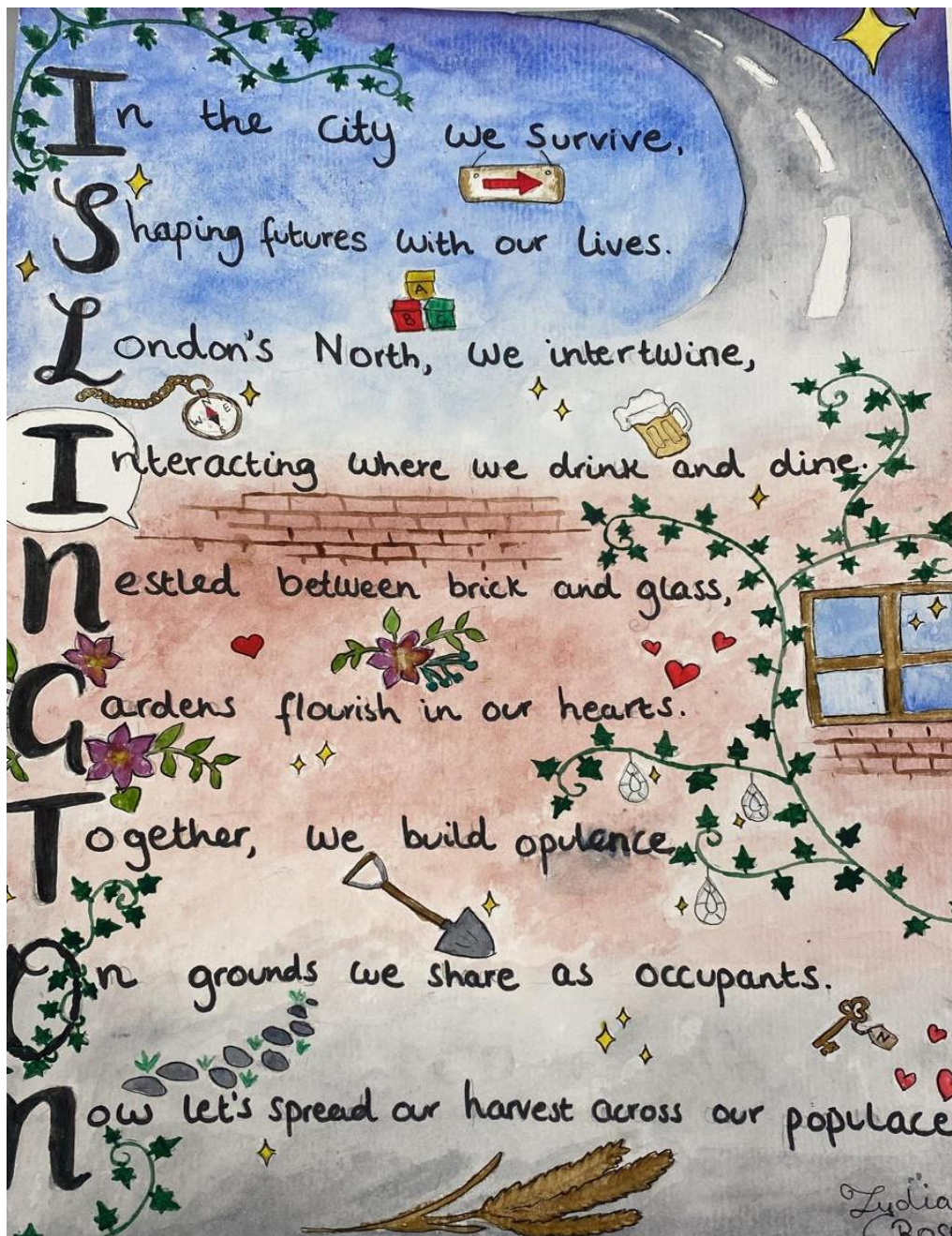


Challenging inequality through community connection in Islington

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Acknowledgements

Image credit: Lydia Rose

About Power With

We empower organisations to see people as more than just numbers on a spreadsheet and to recognise the value of human experiences.

We share knowledge and provide practical support to understand and re-distribute power.

We cultivate spaces where people with lived and learnt experiences of social systems – such as housing and health & social care – can feel safe, connect as humans and drive systemic change.

We do this through **“co-production”**, which is where people come together as equals, to create something as a group, that works for everyone involved.

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Executive summary

This report is produced as the final output of a research project that sought to listen to and learn from residents in Islington about their lives and experiences, in order to think about how Cripplegate Foundation might best continue making grants towards its aims of reducing poverty and inequality in the borough.

The project took a community based research approach, working with a group of community researchers who were residents in Islington to help design and deliver the research. They reported that this was a valuable experience and way to deliver the project:

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

“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.”

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

The research considered how people’s lives 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. Overall, participants felt a sense of worsening inequality, with mental health in particular being a large concern.

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.

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

It was felt that local, place-based funders such as Cripplegate Foundation 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.

Introduction

This report is produced as the final output of a research project that sought to listen to and learn from residents in Islington about their lives and experiences, in order to think about how Cripplegate Foundation might best continue making grants towards its aims of reducing poverty and inequality in the borough.

This project follows two previous projects that similarly sought to listen to residents of Islington and understand their current situations, concerns and hopes: *Invisible Islington* (2008), and *Distant Neighbours* (2012).

The research questions posed at the start of this project were:

- Have people's lives changed over the last ten years? If so, how?
- How are residents and communities faring – economically, socially, health-wise, and culturally? What's got better? What's got worse?
- What might the future hold?
- And what can we do about it? What is our role as a local, place-based funder? How do we best use our resources to address inequality in Islington and Cripplegate Ward?

The austerity agenda that began in 2010 has had an ongoing impact on the council's budgets. In the past year, the council had to make savings of £6.7m, and in total it is estimated that 11 years of austerity have meant that a total of £281m has been cut from council budgets¹. This makes a challenging operating environment for public services.

Moreover, in just the last three years, there have been a range of significant events in the social, economic and global context, all of which have had an impact on life in the UK and on poverty and inequality in different ways, including but not limited to:

- the Covid-19 pandemic
- the cost of living crisis
- global conflicts and an increasingly hostile environment to migrants and refugees in the UK
- Brexit

¹ <https://www.islington.media/news/islington-council-unveils-budget-to-create-a-more-equal-islington-in-face-of-cost-of-living-crisis>

- increased understanding and awareness of systemic racism and the Black Lives Matter campaign
- ongoing attention being brought to the climate crisis and importance of environmental sustainability.

Methodology

Literature review

A rapid literature review was initially produced to identify other research and insights that shed light on life and inequality in Islington.

A literature search was carried out covering the last 10 years from local voluntary sector organisations, think-tanks, the local authority, community groups and any other relevant local stakeholders to identify other research and insights that shed light on the research questions.

The literature review showed that there is a lot to be proud of within Islington – its diversity, its sense of community and vibrant and active community sector, the satisfaction that people feel overall with living in the borough.

The recent Let's Talk Islington community engagement process carried out by Islington Council to consider how to tackle inequality demonstrated how engaged and invested in their community residents are.

The literature also made clear that the idea of 'two Islingtons', the haves and the have nots, has not gone away and that residents feel a sense of inequality persisting. While Islington is a diverse borough, it is of course still affected by structural inequalities and divides within society that continue to affect its residents.

These themes were further explored using a community research approach.

Community research approach

A community research approach was taken to carry out this project, whereby the research is designed, delivered and analysed with members of the community (in this case, residents of Islington).

A group of six community researchers were recruited, chosen for demonstrating a clear commitment to the project and representing a range of different characteristics. They were remunerated in line with the London Living Wage and were provided with personal support throughout their involvement in the project. Flexibility was given to suit individual needs with regards to timings and participation in the project.

Group meetings and training were held to discuss the project and make collective decisions on how to carry it out. Community researchers then worked alongside Power With to deliver the fieldwork, analyse the themes that arose, and to compile this final report.

Community based research approaches have been used widely in a range of settings, and have been shown to help make research accessible and relevant to people's lives², to support effective research design and give valuable interpretive insight into results³. For community researchers, benefits can include being part of a productive team, feeling listened to, and expanding their horizons⁴.

This was the first time that Cripplegate Foundation had commissioned research to be carried out in this way and it was felt to be a hugely beneficial exercise. Two community researchers shared their views:

Working together with other Islington residents to explore the knowledge, needs and experiences of people in our borough has been an enriching, empowering and enlightening experience. I hope the insights we've gained into the lives of local people will help inform Cripplegate Foundation's

² Israel et al, 1998. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev.Publhealth.19.1.173>

³ Akinwale et al, 2015 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23120053.2014.11441558>

⁴ Flicker, 2008.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/45055233?saml_data=eyJzYWVsVG9rZW4iOiIxODZkMzU5OC04YmFjLTQ3OTktYmUyNy00NWRINmQzMzdM2EiLCJpbmN0aXRldGlvbkIkcyl6Wyl5OTE5YmNmYiImOWYwLTRIYTktYmEzNi0wNzMwOTQxODcyMzciXX0

important investments, making our borough a happier, healthier and more equal place to live.

This has been a very enriching experience that made me learn about research and put me in touch with people from different walks of life in my community. 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.

Interviews and focus groups

A qualitative research approach was chosen to be the most appropriate way to understand a range of residents' views of life in Islington. Twelve semi-structured interviews and five focus groups were held, which engaged with a total of 36 participants who were residents of Islington.

A purposive sampling approach was used, whereby the team recruited participants widely through existing networks in the community and then picked people specifically based on certain characteristics.

There were many ways in which the community researchers set the design and direction of the research:

- While the research questions and the method of using interviews and focus groups were set at the start by Cripplegate Foundation, these were checked with and approved by the community researchers before the research commenced.
- The community researchers put together the recruitment approach for the interviews and focus groups, including connecting Power With with community groups they knew of and advising on how to frame the opportunity to take part.
- The community researchers strongly felt that there needed to be online and in person options for interviews and focus groups, in order to make sure that they were accessible to different people. Cripplegate Foundation and Power With responded to this and allocated more time and budget for in person sessions. Community researchers felt that it was important to

bring the research to those who might not otherwise participate, and consequently one dedicated focus group was held at a local community group for people in recovery from substance use.

- The community researchers created the interview and focus group guides, thinking through the ways in which questions were asked, and what needed to be considered to make people in interviews and focus groups feel comfortable.
- They carried out the fieldwork alongside Power With team members, most often taking the lead in conducting interviews and focus groups.
- The interviews and focus groups were recorded and thematically coded, and analysis was carried out with the Community Researchers through debriefs and reflections, and two sessions devoted to checking the findings together, discussing interpretations and links between themes, and refining key messages.
- Finally, the community researchers also provided valuable feedback on the production of this report.

Limitations

The qualitative approach that was used for this research did not seek to be statistically representative of Islington as a whole; 36 participants were spoken to, 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. Demographic limitations of the participants who engaged in the project can be seen in the following section, Profile of Participants.

It is also noted that not every aspect of life could be covered within the discussions. The semi-structured interviews were designed and carried out in a way that allowed participants to speak about their experiences and views based on what they felt comfortable talking about, and there are therefore undoubtedly many dimensions of social life that are not covered here.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the research sought to provide a snapshot of life lived in Islington and residents' views on inequality, how it manifests and how it can be tackled.

Profile of participants

Everyone who participated in the project was an Islington resident, and 20 participants opted to fill in an equality and diversity form.

The age range of participants spanned 18-25 to over 65:

18-25	1
26-35	5
36-45	3
46-55	2
56-65	7
65+	1
Prefer not to say	1

Everyone that provided their gender identity identified as either male (5) or female (15). The participants predominantly identified as being heterosexual (15), with 2 identifying as queer, one bisexual, and two who preferred not to say. It is noted that inequality with regards to sexual identity or gender identity were not raised in discussions by participants; this is felt to be a limitation to the research and not reflective of a lack of inequality experienced by these groups.

Participants described themselves as being from a range of different ethnicities:

- Irish
- Caribbean and East Asian
- Ukrainian
- White British
- African
- White
- Arab mixed.
- African Black British
- Indian

- Asian other
- Any other white background
- British – Nigerian
- White British
- Mixed race
- Indian
- Latin American /Hispanic
- White black/mixed Caribbean
- Mixed
- Black British (African descent)
- Mixed Middle Eastern and European Jewish

Participants were predominantly UK citizens, but not exclusively:

British or Irish citizenship	15
EU/EEA citizenship settled status	2
Indefinite or exceptional leave to remain	2
Work permit	1

Of those who expressed how long they had lived in Islington, most had been in the borough for a long time. Six people said they had been living in Islington for under 5 years, 2 people for 5–10 years, 4 for 10–20 years and 7 for over 20 years.

Findings

Poverty and inequality

There has long been an understanding of the inequality experienced in Islington, with an image of ‘two Islingtons’ pervading. This has been referred to in various reports, including one by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies back in 2014⁵, as well as being alluded to in the titles of two previous research projects commissioned by Cripplegate Foundation: *Invisible Islington* and *Distant Neighbours*. These titles show the idea of Islington as being at once a borough of

⁵ https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/London%20Final%20Report_0.pdf

wealth, and a borough of struggle, where those living in poverty are hidden and separate from those living with more wealth.

Gentrification – the process of an area changing by the moving in of more wealth – was a concept discussed by many participants who felt that this has happened and continues to happen across Islington. They felt that this is noticeable in a variety of ways:

- the shops changing
- the type of housing being built
- some areas being ‘cleaned up’
- prices going up

As one person summed it up: *“It’s cleaner and newer”*

Several people elaborated on the way in which shops and prices have changed. For example, one participant noted that there are a lot of smaller supermarkets that are local or express versions of big chain stores, which are more expensive than large superstores or independent greengrocers, bakers or butchers. This means that people who are older, time-poor or struggle with mobility and have to rely on local shops may end up paying more than they need to.

“Small businesses are being replaced by other shops that are maybe more for new residents”

The sense of gentrification prompted several participants who had lived for a long time in Islington to question who Islington is for.

“I think there should be a balance and it’s good to take into consideration the needs of the community that was already in the area rather than just opening new places that make them feel priced out, well I’m priced out too, when it’s £4 for a coffee who can afford that?”

“I remember when I was, throughout school, throughout my 5 years of school, I remember seeing that getting built and looking at the houses there and the prices there now, it’s like no Islington resident is going to be able to afford that so who are they actually for?”

“The shops on the high street are aimed at a certain income level, they’re not aimed at people who don’t have loads of money so there’s not a

balance with being affordable... it's not a very welcoming place, it's more for people who are coming from outside, I think there's a focus on that"

In contrast with the signs of gentrification, many participants also felt that poverty is an ongoing visible issue in Islington. While there are areas that have been 'cleaned up', at the same time people notice 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.

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

Despite the 'cleaning up' of certain areas, it is felt that this has not solved problems of poverty, but rather just moved people and issues to different places.

"I don't know how much the problem went away but it just moved"

This again raises the question of who belongs in Islington, and who certain public spaces are for. This highlights a risk of lack of belonging being experienced by people who have less access to wealth.

Many participants talked about experiencing financial challenges themselves. One participant described not being able to eat dinner when he was in receipt of benefits, and others named foodbanks as a particularly valuable lifeline.

The idea of there being 'two' Islingtons implies a dichotomy that may be, in reality, more complicated: it hides the fact that even those who were not actively living in poverty still find Islington an expensive place to live in, and one where support can be hard to come by. Undoubtedly, those living in extreme poverty in Islington have a completely different experience of life to those who live with extreme wealth, but the participants in the project also painted a picture of an expensive borough where even those who do not live in poverty struggle.

This is illustrated, for example, by one participant talking about the challenges they experienced when trying to find childcare:

"I don't think Islington supports parents who work or want to work, there's a culture of either you're on benefits or you're working, and the people who are in between who are working but not earning loads of money get lost"

"I don't feel I can access leisure and shopping in the borough"

Even when participants did not feel that they were living in poverty as such, it was noted that a lot of activities have now become expensive, meaning that there are things people are priced out from or that it is hard simply to find spaces to spend time and socialise affordably.

"when you're unemployed you don't have this luxury to pay even £15 for something for an hour or so, I must say I was surprised that I couldn't find a lot of things I was looking for"

One participant called this 'experiential inequality' – the idea that some experiences simply aren't open to people because of their income. The income disparity and high prices for certain types of activities and lifestyles in the borough can lead to a sense of lack of community or disconnection.

"People live in their own little bubbles and don't meet people from different backgrounds. This can create tension and conflict between different groups"

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.

"I see people struggling financially, it's not nice seeing that"

This has an impact on everyone, producing a sense of unfairness: one participant said that she worries about other people, and another said that she feels 'dismayed' by Islington, let down by the fact that some people can thrive while others struggle to survive.

Crime and safety

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 experiences themselves or told anecdotes of muggings/thefts that had happened to others they knew. One person had observed someone dodging a bus fare on their way to attend the focus group, and watched as the person pleaded with the bus driver to let them on, saying that they could not afford the fare. Another participant reported that

“Recently a man threatened to kill me when I was walking home by myself in broad daylight – that was scary.”

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. Overall, this led to a greater sense of alertness, and in some cases, some people avoiding certain areas at certain times of day.

“Before, you could go anywhere and you didn’t have to check, you just went. Now you do. You used to walk down the high street at 10pm on your phone. Now your phone stays in your pocket.”

“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”

Awareness of knife crime seemed to be high amongst participants; knife crime incidents reportedly increased by 30% in the borough from 2021/2022 to 2022/2023⁶. While one person reported having witnessed a shooting, overall the discussions about safety were about less violent crimes and perceived risk.

There was an understanding of crime being linked to young people, and many saw this as a consequence of a lack of investment in young people and positive activities and places for them to spend their time. For example, one participant

⁶ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04304/SN04304.pdf>

explained that there used to be more youth centres but since these types of services were closed due to funding cuts, young people would congregate on stairwells, messing about, or break into cars. This is discussed further in the young people section.

Substance use was a particular concern linked to safety, with participants noting that this seems to be very high in the borough, and notable in public spaces such as parks and stairwells. A couple of participants spoke about the lack of enforcement action that could be taken to address this:

“Everything is there, we have an antisocial behaviour team, we have cameras, but do they actually do anything you know? Everything is there but nothing actually works”

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. It was felt that there should be more substance use support organisations, and that without the right support available, this can lead to further divisions across the community:

“Why aren’t we working with them [substance use support organisations], why aren’t police working with them, to support people who clearly have problems? The only suggestion is to join Neighbourhood Watch but it’s a cesspool for biased thinking”

This is considered further in the health and wellbeing section.

Housing

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

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. One person moved into a property nine years ago and has had ongoing issues with damp and mould:

"[Islington Council] have neglected it at every single turn... it's always my fault."

This situation has escalated so much that a private surveyor deemed the house uninhabitable, and the participant is now going through a lawsuit with the council. As a less extreme example, another person said that they had an unusable room for four months. There was a sense that it can be very hard to get repairs done in housing association properties and that residents often do not feel listened to. Indeed, one woman said: *"you need to have the strength of an ox"*, and wondered: *"What about people who aren't articulate and strong enough to keep nagging?"*

The gentrification discussed previously in the Poverty and Inequality section has particularly affected housing, and it was widely agreed that housing in Islington is incredibly expensive, whether private renting or buying. This is borne out in the data, with popular property website RightMove reporting in October 2023 that house prices had increased by 3% from the peak prices rose to in 2020⁷.

"I'm third generation and um, they don't want you here anymore it feels like.. They just want to knock down council flats, move you a bit further out so you're not where you're born and bred and then five years later you go past and it's a block of flats with about 2% council houses and the rest is all private so what are you doing, everything is being cleansed, they're kicking the poor out of Islington, that's how it feels to me."

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. This was

⁷ <https://www.rightmove.co.uk/house-prices/islington-87515.html>

particularly noted by someone who was very new to the borough. Rough sleeping has been rising over the last decade, with 171 people found rough sleeping in 2011/2012, and 337 people seen in 2022/2023, according to the Mayor of London's statistics⁸. One participant talked about the effects of seeing people living on the streets around him, and being regularly approached and asked for money. Partly, it creates a sense of questioning the safety nets that exist:

"I guess I just wonder if there's something more that can be done to support those people who are going through a difficult time at the moment"

This affects the participant personally, and they perceive this as leading to further divides in society:

"I feel sad that I can't do more, because I also have to watch my money and these are just people in this particular circumstance and they're being vilified and I don't think they should be, it upsets me a little bit"

Finally, it results in a feeling of helplessness:

"It's a feeling of powerlessness, I don't know what I could do within my own circumstances"

Participants strongly felt that everyone should have somewhere decent to live.

"Just because you live on a council estate doesn't mean you should live in anything lower than say a private estate or private housing... you've got standards to keep"

"Everyone has the right to live somewhere that's decent and fit for purpose"

It was recognised that while there are not enough affordable homes in Islington, there are unused and under-used homes, and a couple of participants felt that there should be schemes to make these available to others who need them.

⁸ <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/chain-reports>

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”*.

Equally, someone who is a homeowner but lives in a small property echoed a similar sentiment:

“I want to stay here but I don’t know if I can afford to stay here.”

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. While this was acknowledged by participants, several felt that healthcare services still work with a divide, tackling either mental health or physical health in a silo. Furthermore, wellbeing is an important part of looking after one’s physical and mental health and preventing poor physical and mental health. The community researchers therefore felt it was important to include wellbeing alongside health.

In terms of physical health, some participants reported that they felt access to physical healthcare has improved over the years. However, it was also noted that more housing has been developed but this hasn’t been matched with more healthcare provision, and it can be hard to get doctor or dentist appointments. One participant who has been a resident of Islington for over 50 years noted how much more difficult it is to get an appointment now than it used to be; doctors’ surgeries used to be more relational, where you knew everyone and could pop in to be seen without an appointment.

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

Several of the participants had used mental health services themselves. Some had had positive experiences, reporting that they had had better experiences in

Islington than in other boroughs and that local services had been accessible and helpful for them.

However, at the same time it was noted that mental health services have long waiting lists and this was experienced negatively by other participants.

One person said that *"The waiting list goes on for years, without any structure or solution"*, and this sentiment was echoed by several others. For example, another person spoke about how they had been on a waiting list for psychotherapy since 2014, and only managed to receive the psychotherapy after they had a breakdown and subsequently went to prison. They felt that *"now the only reason they're giving it to me is because I went to prison"*.

"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?"

It was also strongly expressed that there is nothing available in the meantime, while being on a waiting list. This was felt to be problematic, with waiting being frustrating and leaving people feeling rejected or uncared about, as well as risking worsening health in the meantime. For people who use substances to cope with mental health challenges, the risk of relapsing is high while having to wait for a service.

Strict criteria for accessing mental health support can also be a challenge: one person spoke about feeling that they were not deemed to be unwell enough, and therefore had to wait while they were really struggling. This left her feeling very alone and unsupported. Even when support was accessed, it can be very short term and then *"you're back to feeling abandoned again"*.

Two people spoke about their experiences of mental health crisis, expressing that they felt that earlier intervention and support could have prevented them from reaching the point of becoming very unwell.

It was also felt that there is a real need for more aftercare and recovery services as well as more community-based services and alternative therapy:

“Mental health needs to be seen more holistically – it’s not just about a helpline or a therapist.”

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.

“Days are long when you’re a recovering addict”

Those who had not experienced mental health challenges themselves were still acutely aware of the importance of good quality, easy to access mental health support in the borough and felt that this was lacking. This was often referred to in the context of substance use; as discussed earlier, participants saw high levels of substance use in the borough, and connected this with mental health challenges, poverty and inequality.

“I think that’s one of the consequences of people being consistently left out to the point that they don’t have any hope.”

“People who are using drugs need support and need to be in an environment where it’s possible for them to attain something else.”

While participants saw these connections, it was felt by those who have experienced addiction that this more holistic view was not taken by health services:

“the GP said that they couldn’t refer me to any organisation for mental health because I have problems with addiction as well, but obviously mental health and addiction go hand in hand.”

This led to an overall sense that mental health support is one of the most important community provisions that can affect the health and wellbeing of people living in Islington, but that it needs a whole systems approach to being tackled.

“The way we approach mental health is so old and out of date – it needs to be more holistic, and recognise trauma”

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. Accessibility and mobility were significant themes – while one person did explain that wider pedestrianised streets are helpful for their child with a disability to be able to get around, another commented that the move to promote more cycling in the borough is not possible for her child with a disability, and they do not have a bus stop near to the house that her child can reach, so therefore they have to drive.

Another participant with a disability fed back that there are fewer bus routes to central London, and that accessibility is an afterthought:

“if you have access needs, you’ve got to sort of say hey, I’ve got access needs, but people cared more about access needs 8 years ago it seems to me.. Everything seems a bit more depressing.”

It was 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. It was recognised how crucial a warm home is to maintaining one’s health, and that the rising costs in local shops may be disproportionately affecting people with mobility issues who may find it harder to travel further away to benefit from cheaper prices.

In discussing experiences of being carers for people who are ill or have disabilities, it was noted that there is a lack of support for carers in the borough. Carers often live on low incomes and spend a lot of their disposable income supporting the people they care for, as well as caring taking up a lot of their time.

“I’m a carer for my dad so I don’t have a lot of spare time.. I can’t control my own life, I can’t do what I want to do.”

Caring is also an emotionally and physically challenging role and there could be more in terms of affordable activities and support for them.

"We don't look after the people I call the unsung heroes."

Racialised minorities and migration

Participants felt that one of Islington's strengths is its multicultural and diverse society and 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.

Four participants spoke of their own personal experiences of racism in Islington. One participant discussed being from a Caribbean family and experiencing racist abuse and threats from neighbours when she moved to Islington. The police did not take her family's complaints seriously and she experienced a real sense of not belonging:

"We're isolated in this hell and nobody's doing anything about it - and I was born here"

This led her to a sense of feeling closer to other people who had migrated to Islington, as she felt that she could empathise with the experience of being treated as an outsider, despite having been born in the UK.

One person who grew up in Islington recounted how he could not travel on public transport when he was young because he received so much racist abuse; he was pleased to be able to say that this has changed; this was in contrast with a young person who was interviewed who said that he had experienced direct racial abuse once.

Another spoke about her experiences of not feeling welcomed:

"[a local community project] is very much older white people with lots of money and I don't really feel very welcome there, I've had some really uncomfortable situations, but that said a lot of them are really nice but you know it only takes one or two people to be unkind and racist for it to be, for it to feel not welcoming"

Racism can play out in subtle ways as well; one participant spoke about how harmful an underlying pressure to conform can be for people from racialised minority backgrounds:

“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... I’ve seen the harm that it does, having to be forced into alignment with the values of the borough...this has harmed the wellbeing of a lot of African and Caribbean communities. You’ve either had to change yourself or you move out, and it’s not just being priced out, it’s your own cultural values, it’s how the police and the order behave with you if you’re not in line with how they describe you should behave. It’s very systematic.”

Celebrating and welcoming different cultures – such as music, food, and having culturally specific shops – can promote wider inclusivity and belonging, whereas feeling a pressure to conform to a white, English standard can be harmful for those moving to the country or those from other heritages. At the same time, it was felt to be important to promote connections between different cultures so that communities do not experience isolation.

One participant, who came to Islington as a Ukrainian refugee, praised the welcome and support that she had received.

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

She felt that the warm welcome that Ukrainian refugees have received has led to a sense of investment in the local community:

“Ukrainians want to help the community because people have opened their doors and welcomed them.”

The physical environment and sustainability

There were a mix of views about green spaces within Islington. A few people felt that the parks are great, although expressed concerns about anti-social behaviour taking place within them. More commonly, participants felt that there should be more green spaces in the borough.

“The parks are run down, do I even want my kids to play in the park?”

It was recognised that access to recreational areas is positive for health and wellbeing, and for community connections, allowing people to take part in outdoor activities, relaxation and community gathering. It is also important for children and for play.

"We live in a flat so we don't have green space, so parks are very important. Charities can step in here and help organise barbeques for families. You would not realise if you don't have a garden... I don't have a simple place for a barbeque with my family. It's not a big thing but if you think, it's such a simple thing but it makes you happy, it makes a difference. These kinds of things can be done very easily."

Traffic was felt to be a problem, even though there are Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs). Being stuck in traffic also causes more fumes to be produced. While roads have been made more bike friendly, and several participants noted the presence of more cyclists, there was a feeling that the high population of Islington still means that there is more construction and more cars around.

It was felt that some areas of Islington are not very well looked after; dog fouling was brought up by several participants as being a problem, with streets not being cleaned.

"The environment seems to focus on LTNs but the things people can physically see with their eyes are not as looked after."

Older people

One participant, a pensioner, noted that there used to be more transport specifically for older people to help them get to day centres. A few people commented that there are fewer social support opportunities for older people, and that there is a higher risk of isolation now.

Similarly to those with disabilities, it was recognised that high prices and gentrification can have a negative impact on older people who are living on reduced incomes, if they are only able to travel to local, more expensive shops. This can also access what they have available to buy.

“Where we live you can eat from the four corners of the world, you can get your hair cut in 20 places, but you can’t buy socks.”

There was a sense that there is a lot that caters for working people – such as market stall food at lunchtime – and for younger children and families, but less for older people. One participant reported knowing some elderly people who actively avoid going out at lunchtime because the streets are busy and full of workers, and they worry about being knocked over.

Several people spoke about knowing isolated senior residents of Islington who lived near to them. One person felt that they ‘have no voice’, and that there should be more outreach for older people – such as a part time engagement worker to visit people, and build up activities and relationships with older people.

One participant, a pensioner, said that she has a group that she goes to once a month for older people but that there is not much more than that that she is aware of – and the others at the group say the same. Another participant, also a pensioner, felt the same way and said that more projects for the elderly would be helpful, as it can be easy for people to become isolated.

Another participant shared that the local community has stepped in for people that she knows:

“You see older people alone and you wonder how they can look after themselves, but in my estate there are some old ladies that are looked after by some people that live here, it’s not a charity or anything, it’s just people in the community supporting other people living in the same estate”

Digitisation

The move to digitisation was felt to be an area where older people experience inequality – the ‘digital divide’ means that some people who do not have technological skills or access to devices or the internet can be left out. Community activities were felt to often be advertised online, or require online registration, and this can mean they are inaccessible to people who do not or cannot spend a lot of time online.

“We’re not being looked after, we’re being left far behind.”

However, it is not just elderly people who may have difficulties engaging with information and activities online. Those on lower incomes may not be able to afford Wi-Fi or devices, and those with disabilities may find it difficult to participate in activities that are not designed thoughtfully – for example, one participant shared that she cannot participate in Zoom meetings without audio captions.

“We’ve gone too far in one direction – what happened to phone calls? What happened to ringing someone up and speaking to them without a Zoom meeting?”

This was echoed in discussions about community services, which have also moved to being on the phone and online. Two people reflected on being offered counselling over the phone, which they felt was not suitable:

“An hour on a phone with a stranger you can’t put a face to is pointless.”

Young people and families

Eleven of the 18 interviews and focus group spoke about young people. Several participants had young children, and it was felt by some that there are a lot of opportunities for young children. One participant praised the breastfeeding support and activities for available for children, but another parent – who has older children as well as a baby – felt that there is less available as children get older. There were also concerns about costs of activities and childcare, leading to further inequality for some families.

“if you have money, so much is open to you”

Childcare costs were felt to be expensive, and one person felt that this felt like a disincentive to work. Finding childcare during school holidays was particularly challenging; one participant had grown up in Islington themselves before having children and compared the place where they used to go during the holidays as a child to how it runs now:

“Now it’s messed up, I think it costs £18 a day to send your kid there, unless you’re from the upper class who can afford to send your kid there? When I went it was £2.50 a week, and now it’s empty and dead”

There was a strong sense that there are fewer resources and opportunities for teenagers now than there were 10 years ago and that these are more expensive; this was commented on by many participants who did not have teenagers themselves. It was widely perceived that there are fewer youth club options now. Many participants linked this to the rise in street activity for young people who simply have nowhere to go and socialise – families on low incomes and living in small properties cannot be expected to host groups of young people who want to spend time together.

“My son just doesn’t know where to hang out – it’s parks or streets or stairways”

“They’re just hanging around on the streets – it wasn’t like that when we were kids”

Some participants also linked this to the rise in crime; youth centres played a key role in keeping youngsters off the streets, keeping them interested in activities, keeping crime levels low. However, when young people are bored and have nothing to do, and lacking in opportunities and resources may get drawn into low level crime or gangs.

“it’s a means of getting money, dignity – that’s what they really need”

“I think when young people see that everyone around them with money or accessing things they feel excluded from, it’s quite dangerous really”

"I wouldn't want to be a 15 year old boy here now, it's not fun, there's too many knives on the streets and the youth clubs that there are, are underfunded"

One participant, aged under 25, spoke about the range of pressures faced by young people in Islington and the challenges they face:

"With regards to my age group, direction, what are we doing... a lot of young people don't know what they want to do and they feel stuck, and I understand why they feel stuck. Houses are expensive, cars are expensive... there's so much pressure on young people... do this, do that, have it by a certain age."

Overall, participants saw obvious responses to this: the further funding and provision of activities and spaces for young people to gather, to build skills, to hang out with each other, and to have opportunities for the future.

"In order to stop something you must prevent it from the grassroots, so that's through, you know, children at a young age being given, um, spaces safe spaces to develop and flourish"

Reflections on 'community'

A sense of community was one of the strongest positive things that participants felt about Islington, with 16 of the 18 interviews and focus groups talking about the importance of community. The community researchers felt it was interesting to reflect on what 'community' means, and what it looks and feels like when it is in action.

Their ideas were:

- having a common purpose or vision
- people naturally find roles in a community, there can be leaders and other roles to play

- there is some sort of agreement about how you want to live or be together, a sense of creed/rules
- involves looking after each others' needs
- involves a shared reality of the community and acting on this together
- emotions we associate with community are safety, connection, belonging, intimacy
- involves leaving behind individualistic tendencies in order to think about the group as a whole and how to support each other

"We can have our differences but we need to have mutual respect"

From interview and focus group participants, some of the ways in which they talked about how community is shown included:

- saying hello in the street, knowing the people around you and interacting with them
- inviting people in, welcoming them, hospitality
- seeing events and flyers around, knowing that there are opportunities for bringing people together
- connections with others being able to be formed organically because there are opportunities to meet others locally
- supporting each other, for example, helping with childcare, bringing parcels in, checking in if you haven't seen a neighbour for a while
- cooperation, involving people working together to achieve something or start something for the local area
- embracing and learning from each other's differences, and respecting each other

Research carried out in 2022 found that 8% of Londoners are severely lonely, and identified social connectedness and a sense of belonging as qualities that can prevent loneliness, and a support network and psychological resilience as being protective shields⁹. Certain groups may be more susceptible to experiencing loneliness as they may lack social connectedness and a sense of belonging due to structural inequalities – for example, people from minority groups or who are living in poverty.

⁹ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/tackling-loneliness/loneliness-in-london-why-are-some-londoners-severely-lonely/>

Several participants mentioned feeling isolated and lonely:

"I've felt isolated - I know people in London but I've found it difficult to meet people in the borough"

"It gets really difficult, you feel so alone, you feel you don't have anyone to call"

"Whenever I have some problems, I don't know who to talk to, where to look, I have no idea... my fridge is broken, I want to buy a fridge but at this moment I cannot afford it.. I don't know where to look, who can help me, I have no idea"

If a sense of strong community spirit is something valued by Islington residents, it is important for local stakeholders to consider their role in promoting, encouraging and strengthening this. At a time when participants spoke evocatively about the challenges of living in the borough, particularly when many of these challenges such as house prices, unregulated rents, the cost of living, stagnant wages are national issues that may not be able to be solved locally, building and maintaining a strong sense of community is even more important.

Community spaces were seen as being a vitally important resource, and one that has been neglected over recent years. A couple of participants spoke about the value of their faith based communities and crucial support that they had received from those, but at the same time, many others spoke of community halls being underused or being unaffordable, and community venues closing, whilst also voicing a strong desire to have more spaces where people can come together, meet each other and support each other without needing to pay.

In several discussions, it was felt that there should be more done with community spaces. Pubs have closed or become expensive bars and there was a significant feeling of a lack of spaces for adults to come together – and it is these types of spaces that allow community to flourish.

"The main community services I see are either charitable or expensive business types of things"

“Myself and a group of other mothers wanted to hire a community centre but we didn’t have the money. So the community centres are closed, the doors are locked, unless big organisations are hiring them to do things in the community – but they’re not actually providing a resource in the community that the community can afford.”

“Estate halls should be made more use of... there are buildings available but they lie idle”

Other buildings and amenities too – such as swimming pools, cinemas and school buildings – were suggested that could be used more creatively during their downtimes to support access for people who might not be able to afford them. In one focus group, it was felt that having services that are localised and spread out, rather than huge facilities, would be better. This could combat the ‘experiential inequality’ that one participant described, whereby some people have access to many different types of experiences that allow them to grow, develop new skills, have fun and meet others, and other people do not have these same opportunities.

Practical suggestions

A range of practical ideas that could be done to challenge inequality in Islington came through in the interviews and focus groups.

- Make more use of community spaces and maximise existing spaces
 - Work proactively to make use of derelict buildings
 - Maximise use of under-used existing spaces e.g. gyms, cinemas, school facilities, estate halls
 - Make the opportunities free or cheap so that they’re affordable and reduce the inequality in opportunity for people to access local facilities
 - Promote youth clubs and youth spaces
- Hold more events and activities
 - Particularly for those who are at risk of being isolated in the community

- Invest in prevention support services, not just crisis services
 - Mental health should be treated holistically
 - Therapy should be made more accessible without long waiting times
 - Befrienders can help build community connections and help people feel less isolated

- Access to services and support
 - There needs to be more awareness, marketing and knowledge of what services and support are out there
 - In particular, caution should be taken around making everything digital by default as this can be exclusionary
 - Community hubs could help promote knowledge of support that's available
 - Neighbour and community mediation services

- Housing improvements
 - Build more affordable housing
 - Create forums where residents can have their concerns listened to and responded to
 - Creative solutions like bringing people together for house swaps could be a way to meet more people's housing needs

- Improve access to green spaces
 - allotments and community gardens can support food sovereignty
 - clean up parks and promote more places for children to play

- Support people to have solar panels and electric heating

- Improve public conveniences
 - More accessible public toilets
 - More seats for people with mobility issues to be able to rest
 - More lighting

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:

- 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"

To counter this, funders should recognise that people often know the solutions to their own problems, and work to enable these to be realised. This involves being approachable and ensuring that local people are listened to and engaged with, in order to give residents more control over their lives.

"How can we as residents be able to solve our own problems?"

"Community spaces should have ownership from local people"

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.

Participants in the research who were involved in community activities and activism felt a sense of purpose and belonging, and it was felt that Cripplegate can continue building community and purpose, for example by promoting programmes that train people and invest in grassroots initiatives. One participant gave several examples of initiatives that she is involved in, that have allowed her to make positive connections with people locally as well as feeding in policy suggestions that have been taken on board. She said

“I feel really empowered living here”

However, it was warned that careful attention should be paid to accessibility and equality when creating opportunities for local residents to engage and create solutions to problems, and it is important to make sure that promoting community is done in a way that is accessible for all:

“There’s a strong sense of community, people want to do things, and they want to get things done, and they realise that if the council’s not going to do it then they will do it but that does seem to be people who have money who are able to, who are retired, or are able to do that, they have the time and money to do that”

- Influence other community organisations and promote dignity

As a funder, Cripplegate can influence the practices of other organisations, and can use its influence to ensure that those it funds are promoting dignity, are treating local people with respect, and are accessible. This may involve, for example, supporting wider marketing and advertisement of support services that are already available, or providing training for charity staff; one person suggested that a valuable topic would be *“how to speak to people without making them feel like they’re undermining them or it’s their fault.”*

While Cripplegate Foundation supports local charities, there was a sense that the traditional charity model can sometimes be perceived as paternalistic, or promote the idea of “giving to the deserving poor”, which can further stigmatise people experiencing challenges.

“That comes across very differently to service users, it eliminates their dignity because they’re being seen as a charity case and you know there’s someone that’s coming along positioning themselves as a saviour and the power differential in that isn’t great, and it doesn’t solve the problem either”

“Islington does do a lot when it comes to community and charity, Islington’s one borough that definitely does that... but at the same time, if you go to foodbanks and stuff like that... it creates more inequality”

Ways to counter these issues were felt to be investing in leadership from people with lived experience of issues, and considering how to support different organisational structures that allow people on the grassroots to be more involved, or promote equality in different ways, such as workers cooperatives.

“I think there is a need for people with lived experience to be a part of what’s happening because their role as having experienced different things in the community means they can speak from a place of knowledge, of personal knowledge rather than book knowledge”

- Accessible funding processes

It was felt that funding application processes need to recognise that smaller groups are unlikely to have professional or experienced bid writers to draw on, yet these are the groups that participants felt should have more access to funding. One participant fed back that there is a lot of red tape involved in setting up an organisation and applying for funding, which can be a barrier to residents enacting their dreams and ideas. There is therefore a role for charitable funders to consider how they make sure that resident-led initiatives know about funding available, and are able to apply for it easily.

Similarly, for individuals applying for funding, it is important for funders to make processes quick and responsive. One participant spoke about applying for help

while she experienced mobility issues through illness, and the process was so long-winded that she did not get the help she needed in time.

Application processes should also consider carefully the experience of the applicant, ensuring that they do not inadvertently promote stigma.

“For me, one of the problems is – how do you make applications dignified? How do you not make people feel terrible about what you need to ask for?... It felt like you had to go over and beyond, it was stigma bearing.”

Conclusion and recommendations

Several participants questioned ‘who is Islington for?’ when discussing poverty and inequality in the borough. There was a strong sense that the borough should be a place where everyone feels safe and supported, but 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.

To finish, the research questions posed at the start of this project are reflected on.

- Have people’s lives changed over the last ten years? If so, how?

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. Overall, participants felt a sense of worsening inequality, with mental health in particular being a large concern. 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 worsening¹⁰.

¹⁰ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2023>

- How are residents and communities faring – economically, socially, health-wise, culturally? What's got better? What's got worse?

There are ways in which Islington has been 'cleaned up', making it more attractive for working people, building new housing, 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.

At the same time, these are not aspects of the borough that benefit everyone equally. There are concerns that the 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 sense of desire to continue having opportunities to come together, create activities and continue building Islington's culture. This came through particularly strongly in the common suggestions about making more use of community spaces.

- What might the future hold?

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.*"

There was a sense that inequality and poverty are likely to continue getting worse. Speaking of gentrification, another participant said "*it's a matter of time*" until the smaller, independent shops that she sees will close and be replaced with bigger, more expensive chains.

This leads to increasing societal divisions:

"It's very easy to be divisive. When things are poor and when you're suffering more, it's easy to blame other people for the misery."

While residents saw these increasing problems, they were all positive about living in Islington and wanted to stay; however, the increasing cost meant that many were not sure about their futures in Islington. 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"

- And what can we do about it? What is our role as a local, place-based funder? How do we best use our resources to address inequality in Islington and Cripplegate Ward?

The negative feelings that came through in the research were when people felt a lack of control, a lack of being supported or cared about, and a lack of being listened to. A local, place-based funder such as Cripplegate Foundation has the strength of being embedded within the local community, and the ability to really listen and respond to local residents.

To combat the frustration and powerlessness that people felt when speaking about their daily struggles, it was felt that local, place-based funders should prioritise listening to local people, and investing in grassroots projects. It is important to recognise in particular the value of investing in services and projects as preventative measures – having purpose, belonging and connection plays a big role in preventing worsening ill-health, crime, or conflict.

"Don't treat [grassroots] organisations like children, like they don't know what they're doing."

"Do what residents want, not what the council wants."

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.

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“Those people have been unfairly targeted by the government, and sanctioned and then kill themselves or driven into such poverty that they’ve starved, so I want to do something.”

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

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