

TO TACKLE THE COUNTRY'S DIVISIONS, WE MUST START LOCALLY

Clare Thomas, Consultant, London's Giving

There are divisions between us, divisions among us

One of the key narratives that emerged following the Brexit debate was about a country divided: big splits between old and young, left and right, between rural and urban. The tone from some commentators was one of dismay: how had we not seen this before? Except that there were plenty of signs. It's simply that such polarisation did not impact the people on the 'right' side of the divide. Until Brexit happened.

'Such divisions exist within London as much as they do between London and the rest of the country.'

The trouble with recognising polarisation is that it's scary, and this fear can exacerbate things. We close ranks. We retreat to our tribes, our echo chambers, communities of people like us. 'It's safe in here'. And yet often these differences of life experience, of view, of wealth, of opportunity, exist on our doorsteps. What we really need is to be able to exist alongside, engage in mutual support with, people whose views may differ wildly from our own. And that means starting where we are. It means thinking locally.

When we have a place in common we can work to overcome other differences

Another issue with the discourse around divisions that emerged around the EU referendum is that it is oversimplified. 'Brexit was a rebellion against Westminster. The rich, metropolitan elite up in London versus the regular people'. Except most people in London aren't the rich elite. And such divisions exist *within* London as much as they do between London and the rest of the country.

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Flash back for a moment to Islington in 2010. The UK was emerging from the longest post war recession on record. Public expenditure cuts resulted in the collapse of thousands of small charities largely dependent on small grants. Non statutory youth and advice services, befriending schemes, drop-in centres for older people, were slashed. All this in the context of increasing polarisation with the gap between rich and poor in the capital worsening.

The Cripplegate Foundation, founded in 1500, had an unrivalled knowledge of local need and was concerned about rising debt, ill-health and increasing social isolation. It commissioned Rocket Science to research the 'real' Islington. The report, *'Invisible Islington'* produced some shocking data.

- 1 in 5 people were living in poverty.

- The borough was ranked in the bottom 10% of deprived areas in England.
- It had one of the highest levels of child deprivation: 38% of its children were living in poverty.
- It had the fifth highest level of older people suffering deprivation in England.

The impact of poverty reaches into every aspect of life. If you are poor in Islington you're more likely to suffer from serious physical and mental health problems. Life expectancy for men in the Borough was one of the lowest in the country and it had England's highest rates of serious mental ill health.

While a Borough of contrasts, it is also home to a vibrant Voluntary and Community Sector, several charitable trusts and diverse, enterprising communities. But clearly new solutions to the worsening problems of poverty and social isolation were vital. Invisible Islington served as a catalyst to bring together funders, charities, concerned businesses and residents to explore collective action.

Coming together locally can help build community cohesion

Under the leadership of Cripplegate Foundation, collaborative work began under the title 'Islington Giving'. This project involves large, medium and micro business united in tackling poverty and inequality. The CEO of the Islington Business Design Centre, for example, has supported Islington Giving from his own Foundation, acting as an ambassador for Islington Giving and encouraging his staff to engage in fundraising. The local fish and chip shop, restaurants and pubs offer free convening spaces and sometimes hospitality for local charities. A high profile venue incentivises newcomers to learn more about Islington Giving.

It also involves local people. That's because, while a strong and robust evidence base for need like Invisible Islington is a rallying platform to get people involved, that tells you only *what* the problem is. It's key to know *how* to tackle it. And for that, consultation is critical. So because Islington Giving invests in young people, finding out what they want is vital in funding effectively and addressing need. In 2015 Islington Giving consulted with 340 young people, often in street focus groups. *Making the most of free time* showed a desperate need for young people to be involved in activities and projects outside of school. Inevitably, cost stopped young people participating in many activities. That's why Islington Giving is setting up a new, Young Catalyst Fund, to provide small sums of money that ensure young people can benefit from the best activities on offer.

And crossing sector boundaries can help us cross social ones

Islington Giving has inspired and informed London Funder's London's Giving project. Through the programme, we aim to change the funding ecology in London by promoting local or place based giving in all its forms: money, time, talents and resources. We do this by helping build collaborations of funders, community organisations, businesses and residents who make their boroughs better places to live, work and study.

'Big and small businesses, local and regional funders, universities, residents and volunteers are pooling resources and talents to meet local needs.'

Over 20 boroughs are involved in developing campaigns, eg, raising awareness about childhood obesity and ill-health in Southwark, older and disabled people in Barnet or supporting young people in Kensington and Chelsea.

Each campaign responds to local need and collaboration steers the giving campaign (see Figure 1). Campaigns involve fundraising, grant making and volunteering, offering the opportunity for anyone to improve their Borough. What's new is the cross sectoral collaboration of the 'unusual suspects.' Big and small businesses, local and regional funders, universities, residents and volunteers are pooling resources and talents to meet local needs.

London's Giving uses the lessons learnt from different initiatives to share good practice and how it may be applied elsewhere. We run masterclasses, offer action learning sets and consultancy and always encourage peer-to-peer learning. Our brokerage role connects funders and businesses with local giving. There are now 21 boroughs with active or developing giving collaborations.

Figure 1: London Funders' London's Giving model



We must maximise a communities' strengths, not obsess over their problems

One of these new collaborations is Lewisham Local. It's demonstrating that even in a cash strapped Borough—one that lacks local foundations and has a business sector comprising predominantly micro business—can mobilise its communities and encourage residents and businesses to do more. It is encouraging greater engagement and participation in community life by promoting a stronger sense of 'place'.

'An asset based approach focuses on maximising a community's strengths, their existing relationships and networks.'

The initiative takes an 'asset based' approach, which focuses on maximising a community's strengths, their existing relationships and networks. In Lewisham, one asset that was identified was the local University, Goldsmiths, whose students could be encouraged to volunteer and give to local good causes.

National giving campaigns such as 'Giving Tuesday' offers the chance to mobilise local voluntary organisations, residents, students and workers to get involved and improve their neighbourhoods. 'Student Volunteering Week' generates more opportunities. Students and staff get involved in local organisations attracting wide range of business donations to help with materials and refreshments. Future plans include co-hosting with the Young Funders Network, a student event whereby local causes are supported in a Dragons Den style giving circle.

The Lewisham Local initiative recognises the value of voluntary and community engagement via the Community Contributor Card developed by Rushey Green Time Bank. A member of Lewisham Local's Steering Group, Philippe Granger, writes:

'This free card gives access to a growing number of favourable deals from local, independent shops and businesses who want to support volunteers—'community contributors'—by acknowledging those who give their time and skills to benefit communities ... It covers all types of giving whether it is traditional volunteering, time banking, befriending, and grassroots localism initiatives, anything where citizens contribute their time to benefit each other and the wider community.'

Businesses are enthusiastic about the card knowing increased footfall will benefit their bottom line but also that they are responsible businesses. Each business carries a sticker in its shop window. This helps communicate the message that Lewisham Local is a positive movement, encouraging people to get involved and help make Lewisham a great place to be whilst encouraging residents to shop local.

'Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can'

We know that stickers in shop windows are not going to solve all of the many complex problems at play in the divisions revealed by Brexit. But initiatives like Islington Giving and Lewisham Local help us to think and act a little more locally. And being involved more in communities of *place* means we're spending less time in our echo chambers and more time with and supporting people who think a little differently from us. It allows us to contribute in a way that is within our grasp: on our door step. Like the saying goes: *'start where you are, use what you have, do what you can'*.

'Being involved more in communities of place means we're spending less time in our echo chambers.'

[This essay is part of a series on transformation from the boldest voices in the sector.](#)



About the author

Clare Thomas runs a consultancy on grant making, charities and organisational development, and works with London's Giving. For 17 years she ran City Bridge Trust, and has worked at the Home Office advising on policy relating to charities, volunteering and funding national infrastructure organisations. She is a former chair of the Association of Charitable Foundations, The Building Exploratory and The Advisory Group on the Third Sector at NOMS, and is currently is a board member of Scope and the Human Trafficking Foundation.

TRANSFORMING THE CHARITY SECTOR

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NPC occupies a unique position at the nexus between charities and funders. We are driven by the values and mission of the charity sector, to which we bring the rigour, clarity and analysis needed to better achieve the outcomes we all seek. We also share the motivations and passion of funders, to which we bring our expertise, experience and track record of success.

Increasing the impact of charities: NPC exists to make charities and social enterprises more successful in achieving their missions. Through rigorous analysis, practical advice and innovative thinking, we make charities' money and energy go further, and help them to achieve the greatest impact.

Increasing the impact of funders: NPC's role is to make funders more successful too. We share the passion funders have for helping charities and changing people's lives. We understand their motivations and their objectives, and we know that giving is more rewarding if it achieves the greatest impact it can.

Strengthening the partnership between charities and funders: NPC's mission is also to bring the two sides of the funding equation together, improving understanding and enhancing their combined impact. We can help funders and those they fund to connect and transform the way they work together to achieve their vision.

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