

# OPPORTUNITIES AND FAIRNESS COMMISSION

## Submission by Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA)

### A FAIRER CROYDON WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

In its daily work CVA comes into contact with the individuals, families, neighbourhoods, local communities, small enterprises and voluntary groups operating at every level of civil society. The concepts of opportunity and fairness, when applied across the whole of Croydon's civil society, begin to address many of the key outcomes Croydon is seeking - empowered individuals, coping families, strong communities and thriving enterprises. This submission focuses on initiatives that are already underway in Croydon and making significant progress in tackling inequality. With the Opportunities and Fairness Commission's endorsement, the following actions can become further established as borough-wide priorities.

- **Asset-based community development (ABCD):**

Over a span of five years Croydon has established a claim as the leading exponent of ABCD in the UK. The asset-based approach is now being adopted at Government levels, with its practice creating a strong evidence-base that captures the benefits of empowering individuals while at the same time strengthening communities. From the first project targeting older people in 2011 to the most recent focusing on families and early intervention, Croydon's ABCD work has transformed relationships by creating peer-support networks at the street level and partnerships of practice between professionals. In both cases the emphasis is on enabling growth from within communities based on local people forming local solutions, supported by *Community Builder* practitioners and their *Community Connector* volunteers. The ABCD projects across the north and south-east of Croydon have supported local people within an activity base bringing individuals together around a common purpose – to achieve healthier lifestyles, to make their communities safer, to improve their job prospects or to enjoy their leisure-time more by playing sports, making music or simply by sharing good company. From this practical and self-managing activity base, we've developed the foundations of a new community empowerment strategy for Croydon. In submitting its *Our Place* localism plan to the Government, Croydon Council signed up to the principle of appointing ABCD Community Builders across the whole borough. Since then, funding has been identified through early intervention (*Best Start*), local regeneration (*Big Local*) and health/social care (*Make Every Contact Count*) programmes with Croydon's GPs and Pharmacists supporting the aim to scale up ABCD across every GP Network. In carrying out its mission to identify untapped assets across the borough, the Commission has a stake in supporting the mainstreaming of ABCD projects by local policy-makers and commissioners.

- **Voluntary and Community Organisations (VCOs) - Working in Partnership:**

Fairness and opportunity in the voluntary sector can be gauged by how well resourced the sector is, how highly valued its services are and how much of a balance is struck between support for well-established specialist services and early-intervention and preventative

projects innovating new solutions. VCOs are set up to create opportunities for their client groups and fairness often equates to accessing more effective services and removing barriers that prevent people from playing a full role in society. The Commission will be aware that many people in Croydon face multiple barriers and often find it difficult to access personalised support that meets their range of needs. The VCS has a tradition of working in partnership and a commitment to joined-up service delivery that revolves around the person using services rather than the agencies delivering them. The value, appeal and reach of an integrated support programme tracking individuals across a spectrum of needs has been evidenced in Croydon through successful partnerships delivering healthy living centres, family support services and pathways to employment. Partnership requires coordination and relies on cooperation above competition, although in a more competitive funding environment a track-record in collaborative working counts for much. The Commission will note that the *Social Inclusion* and *Combatting Poverty* objectives in the European 2020 Strategy identify the need for *integrated packages of support* to address the *multiple disadvantages* communities face in more deprived areas. Accessing European funding over the next year will enable VCOs working in the north and south-east of the borough to promote fairness and opportunities not just in the form of employment support but also by advising on debt, family problems, drug and alcohol dependency, childcare and active citizenship. The Commission will be observing that service delivery is highly valued by communities across Croydon and that by combining the energy and innovation of new groups with the expertise and experience of proven providers, Croydon can maximise its potential to reach into the deeper issues underpinning poverty and social isolation.

- **Volunteering:**

By managing to get the population of Croydon more involved in volunteering we can release the biggest untapped asset in the borough. There is massive potential for people who work in Croydon to get involved as well as those who live in the borough. A campaign is needed to encourage people to give up their time - especially those people who have expertise that can be shared with those who are most in need of support. The demand for volunteers is great, but one of the bottlenecks is the time taken to responsibly process and match volunteers to good opportunities. The number of volunteers could be expanded even more if extra resources were put into the brokerage process and with several organisations involved there is the potential to rationalise and share out brokerage roles more effectively. The ability to recruit, support and retain volunteers is invaluable, as is the wide range of placements on offer. Volunteering as a pathway to employment is hugely relevant to fairness and opportunities in Croydon, but the risks taken in compelling people to volunteer in order to receive benefits could backfire. Volunteering is most effective when it's entered into freely and there is strong evidence showing that reluctant volunteers don't put as much in and don't get as much out.

## **FURTHER SUPPORT**

CVA is happy to provide further oral or written evidence to the Commission if helpful.