

THE SPARROW

"Not Just Surviving but Thriving in Tower Hamlets"

Issue 4 • Spring 2015

The Newsletter for Tower Hamlets Voluntary & Community Organisations

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We are Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service

We are an independent membership organisation for voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations in the borough of Tower Hamlets

We are a...



We are not part of Tower Hamlets Council:

Or any other public sector or government body. We are an independent, registered charity funded from a mix of sources (including the council) and we're here to support and represent our members - local voluntary and community organisations.

And we don't find volunteers for organisations:

We provide direct advice, training and support to the staff, volunteers and trustees of voluntary and community organisations.

* Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets - www.vcth.org.uk - can help your organisation to find volunteers.

TO FIND OUT MORE...

The articles in The Sparrow give a flavour of the kind of things we are up to at the moment. To find out more turn to the inside back page for the contact details of our helpful team! 

KIRSTY JOINS US

by *Kirsty Cornell, THCVS CEO*

I joined THCVS from Outward, a large charitable care and support provider working across North and East London. I have worked in Tower Hamlets for over 7 years, but in the brief time since joining THCVS I am quickly learning more about the voluntary, community and faith sectors in the Borough. I am keen to find out what is important to you, what your challenges are and to hear your views on how best we can address them.

There are clearly significant challenges for our sector coming up – including cuts to funding (both from the public sector and other funders) at a time when community need for its services is increasing. I think we can better tackle these issues by building a collaborative sector with the confidence to partner with other sectors in the borough.

I am really looking forward to working with the VCS in Tower Hamlets, with other infrastructure organisations and with front-line delivery organisations, and to meeting many of you soon. You can of course contact me at any time at kirsty.cornell@thcvs.org.uk



NEW PENSION LAW, ARE YOU READY?

by Kirsty Cornell

Some of you will have seen the recent TV adverts “we’re all in” about the changes to the law on workplace pensions. So how will the changes affect you and your organisation?

From October 2012 through to February 2018 every employer with at least one member of staff is required to enrol their staff into a workplace pension scheme and the employer must contribute towards it. This is called **automatic enrolment** – it is automatic for the staff as they don’t have to do anything to be enrolled into your pension scheme, but as an employer you will need to take steps to make sure they are enrolled.

When is it happening?

Each employer has a date by which they need to comply with the law – this is called your staging date. Each employer’s staging date varies depending on their size – larger organisations were required to auto-enrol their staff from 2012 but for many smaller organisations, their staging dates are from 2015 onwards. To see when this will apply to your organisation, you can find out your staging date by entering your PAYE reference number on the **Pensions Regulator website**.

Which employees will need to be auto-enrolled?

You may not need to auto-enrol all staff into a pension scheme. Your employees will only need to be auto-enrolled into a pension scheme if they meet certain basic criteria such as earning over £10,000^{*} a year (£834^{*} a month, or £193^{*} a week); and being between the ages of 22 and state pension age. If staff don’t meet these criteria at your staging date but do later on (for example by having a salary increase) then they will need to be auto-enrolled at that point. Staff who are already enrolled in a scheme that meets the requirements of auto enrolment will not need to be enrolled into a new scheme.

^{*}The above limits are based on 2014/15 figures and are expected to change each April.

What is a qualifying pension scheme?

Pension schemes will need to meet certain standards to be able to be used for auto-enrolment. If you already have a pension scheme for your staff, you can check with your pension provider to see if you can use it for automatic enrolment. If you can’t use it, you’ll need to choose a new one that meets the requirements of automatic enrolment. Details of the requirements are set out on the Pensions Regulator website. Alternatively, the government has set up a pension scheme called the **National Employment Savings Trust (NEST)** that all employers can use for automatic enrolment.

Is it compulsory for employees to join a pension scheme?

Yes. If employees meet the criteria above, it is a legal requirement for organisations to auto-enrol them into a workplace pension scheme and the employer must pay a contribution towards the pension. Staff have the opportunity to opt-out once they have been enrolled although employers are not allowed to encourage staff to opt-out and staff will need to contact their pension provider directly, not through their employer, to opt-out. If employers do not meet the new rules and auto enrol their staff, the Pensions Regulator can take enforcement action, including issuing statutory notices and penalty notices.

What do I need to do next?

There are a number of tasks that will need to be completed by your staging date, including assessing your workforce to see who’s eligible, choosing a pension scheme, and communicating to staff. To help you prepare the Pensions Regulator have set up an automatic enrolment action planner to help you find out what you need to do and by when which can be accessed from their website.

Where can I go for further information?

For further information about auto-enrolment, please see the links below...

IS RATE RELIEF UNDER THREAT?

Ryan
Admin & Information

In January of this year, many local groups received an unsettling letter from the Council announcing a full review of the local system for allocating business rate relief, and informing them that their current arrangements will cease on 1st April 2016. Two months later, the Government have added to the uncertainty by launching 'the biggest review of business rates in a generation'. But how worried should we really be?

An overview of business rates

Under the current system there are two categories of rate relief:

- **Mandatory relief of 80%**, which Councils are required by law to grant to registered Charities, and to registered Community Amateur Sports Clubs (CASCs), for properties used 'wholly or mainly for charitable purposes'. Non-registered organisations will also be eligible if they can prove they have charitable objectives. This relief is not automatic, organisations must actively apply for it.
- **Discretionary relief.** Local councils currently have the power to grant up to 20% additional relief to those organisations already receiving mandatory relief. Yet they also have the discretion to grant up to 100% relief to those not eligible under the mandatory scheme. The criteria for both types of discretionary relief are set by local authorities themselves.

Business rates are collected locally by councils and, until recently, the fees went into a national pot to be reallocated by central government. However, since 1st April 2013, under the 'business rates retention scheme', the government has created incentives for councils to 'go for growth'¹ by allowing them to retain some of the revenue generated for their own budgets. In Tower Hamlets, some 30% of business rates collected in the borough now goes directly to the council.

The Local Review

Some of the drive behind the local review

of business rates is to ensure that Tower Hamlets has a rate structure that responds to these incentives and encourages economic growth. But what exactly that will mean for the voluntary sector is still uncertain.

In a recent presentation to local VSC representatives, Jim Glover from LBTH Revenue Services made it quite clear that:

"...the review is not about cutting rate relief to charities"

According to Jim, the aim is to make the allocation of discretionary rate relief more 'locally determined', i.e. that eligibility will be based not just on 'charitable objectives' but on the impact and benefit for Tower Hamlets and local residents. Discretionary relief will therefore not be awarded to national charities who have few activities or direct beneficiaries in the borough; and the council seems particularly concerned to discourage larger, national charities locating here purely for cheap rent and rates. This seems fair in principle, and is in line with how many other councils have drafted their discretionary criteria.² However, some local charities have raised concerns about the need for clarity around the eligibility criteria and the definition of local benefit. In a recent email Jim stated that applicants for discretionary relief 'must demonstrate a benefit to a significant number of local residents in LBTH'. Yet the use of the word 'significant' raises questions about smaller, localised services - such as lunch-clubs - with a regular but relatively small group of beneficiaries.

As for how 'benefit' is defined, the Council have said there are no 'set criteria' and that 'each application will be considered on its own merits'. Such flexibility can work both ways. On the positive side it can allow the council to take a wider, more inclusive view of beneficial activities. But it does little to demonstrate transparency, or to guarantee that inconsistencies and bias won't creep into the way the Council's discretion is applied - regardless of officers' good intentions.

¹'Business Rates Review: discussion paper', HM Treasury, March 2015: www.gov.uk

²Examples from other councils: www.hackney.gov.uk/Assets/Documents/DRR-Policy.pdf •

www.newham.gov.uk/Documents/Business/DiscretionaryRateReliefApplicationAndGuidance.doc

Any new scheme will not come into effect until April 2016, and LBTH have said that there will be ample opportunity for existing recipients of rate relief to raise their concerns when the draft proposals are put out for consultation as part of the review. **We will of course notify the sector as soon as the dates and details of the consultation have been announced.**

The National Picture

But there is of course a wider national context. Outlined in a recent discussion paper¹, the terms of reference for the national business rates review are not limited to 'relief'. The review is reexamining the whole business rates system.

In terms of intentions regarding the voluntary sector, the paper echoes (though less strongly) the tone of the local review:

"The government does not intend to increase business rates for those most deserving of relief or exemption and it wants to consider carefully the impacts of any change."

However, while the withdrawal of rate relief for charities seems unlikely, government proposals³ to clamp down on the abuse of rate relief could also have negative impacts on the sector. Such alleged abuses include the avoidance of empty property rates through 'artificial/contrived occupation of properties by charities' or where charity property owners promise future charitable activities while keeping spaces empty for extended periods. The proposal to give councils new 'anti-avoidance' powers has been strongly resisted by NCVO and other leading umbrella bodies⁴ who are concerned that they may unfairly penalise charities legitimately striving 'to find innovative ways to use property' for their beneficiaries.

But the biggest issue may not be the threat to rate relief, but the increased incentives for councils to use business rates as a tool for economic development. On one hand, the business rate retention scheme gives incentives for local authorities to maximise income by encouraging (full rate paying) business occupation in preference to charities. Given the shortage of appropriate premises in the borough for the sector, this is an area of potential concern.

On the other hand the possible use of discretionary rate relief as a carrot to attract inward investment extends its purpose far beyond a focus on immediate community need. The amount of relief a council is financially able to offer is not infinite; and how each council chooses to balance the economic and social benefits of rate relief will also have important implications for the sector.

These two strategies - rate relief and maximising rate income - are not necessarily incompatible, and form the basis of the government backed Enterprise Zone (EZ) scheme⁵. Under the scheme, local authorities can offer businesses within the zone rate discounts for the first 5 years in return for a greater proportion of future business rate revenues generated in that zone (that would otherwise have gone straight to central government).

But perhaps there are also positive potentials within the national review. The government aims to make business rates 'fit for purpose in a 21st Century Economy'; key features of which it identifies as increases in home-working and the internet economy and a consequent decrease in high-street shopping and the need for 'bricks-and-mortar' commercial properties.

The discussion paper raises the question of whether business rates unfairly target those sectors 'more reliant upon property', and allows more virtualised services to contribute disproportionately less in business taxes. Arguably, the voluntary and community sector, with its focus on direct 'human' services, is one of these more property dependent sectors. A restructure of business rates to spread the burden more equally between sectors could therefore have a beneficial impact for the sector beyond that of mere rate relief.

For these reasons and more it is important that the sector engages in both the local and the national consultations. **The national consultation deadline is 12th June 2015, for details download the discussion paper¹.**

THCVS will of course continue to advocate on behalf of the sector and will keep you updated of developments. We will also be relaunching the **Premises Forum** soon, creating a space for the sector to develop strategic responses to these and other issues around property and premises. **To join the forum, please email ryan@thcvs.org.uk**

³'Business Rates Avoidance: discussion paper', DCLG / HM Treasury, December 2014 : www.gov.uk

⁴'Umbrella bodies reject government proposal to stop abuse of business rate relief', 3/3/15: www.thirdsector.co.uk

⁵Enterprise Zones: www.gov.uk/apply-for-business-rate-relief/enterprise-zones



RECHARGE YOUR WORK HERE...

- Low fees
- 25% discount to THCVS members
- Free membership for small groups



NEW TO FUNDRAISING TUESDAY 21 JULY

Useful to new fundraisers and as a refresher. Explore the modern funding landscape, hone your bid-writing skills and learn how to show funders the real value and impact of your projects.



HOW TO MANAGE: 1. PEOPLE

THURSDAY 13 AUGUST

Dealing with the legal obligations, the qualities of leadership and the people skills necessary for management. This course is equally relevant for existing and first-time managers.

HOW TO MANAGE: 2. ORGANISATIONS

THURSDAY 20 AUGUST

This course explores the systems, processes and strategic skills necessary to manage projects and organisations and help them realise their objectives.

LEAFLET DESIGN

In 10 easy steps

1

DEFINE YOUR PURPOSE

Who are you trying to reach? What types of people? Be specific! What designs appeal to them? What is your key message? What attitudes are you trying to change? What action do you want people to take?

2

KNOW THE CONTEXT

When, where and how will your leaflet reach your audience? What lighting? Near other leaflets with similar messages? Through the door? What layout / size / colours etc. will work best in this context?

3

BALANCE THE BRAND

How prominent should your organisation's branding be? Or your partners' branding? Should the event / service take prominence? What branding resources (from previous publicity) can you build on?

4

BRAINSTORM!

Write down words & concepts associated with your purpose. As many as possible. With these in mind, search your own photo archive, Flickr, google images and magazines for **inspiration (only!)**.

5

CREATE THE CONCEPT

Be creative, but keep it simple. Not too clever, just eye-catching and relevant. Often it is enough to match a strong, relevant image to a good slogan. But the message must be clear and coherent throughout.

6

DECIDE THE 'HOOK'

This is the central feature of your leaflet. It can be a slogan, and image, or even just the title of an event. This is the hook to catch your audiences' attention. Only then will they read the rest.

7

PRIORITISE ELEMENTS

Make a list of all the other elements you need to include - event title, place, date, slogan, logo etc.. Organise that list in order of importance. What 3 things do you need the reader to see and remember?

8

EXPLORE ALIGNMENT

Use your visual 'hook' as an anchor for your layout. Place it strongly. Then draw guidelines out from its edges, and from shapes and lines within it. Use them to start building a 'grid' to align other elements to.

9

ORGANISE LOGICALLY

Using tools of emphasis (size, colour, font weight etc) arrange and align elements logically on page so that eye is drawn from the 'hook' through your other elements in order of importance.

10

REVIEW & CHANGE

Design is a circular process. Take breaks. Step back frequently, change perspective. Ask other people (but make your own decisions). Keep changing / moving elements until they feel right.

THEN GO BACK TO STEP 1 to check you haven't strayed too far from the brief.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: We

by *Ryan* Admin & Information

Nestled modestly amongst a mosaic of trendy cafes, artisan workshops and social housing just north of Brick Lane, is a small tin-roofed hut, and a man with a mission.

Set back behind high playground fencing, I might have missed Weavers Community Centre altogether, had it not been for the lush growth of herbs and big leaved brassicas in large pots and raised beds around the hut. It was this abundance that told me that this space was receiving an extra bit of loving care beyond that of a council run 'green-space'.

I had come to meet Yousuf Khan of Weavers Community Forum which, since July 2010, has been running a range of activities to improve the lives of local people. Their lunch club feeds, connects and entertains Bangladeshi elders twice a week. The Forum also runs wider community events throughout the year, involving and celebrating local people and their contribution to their community.

But the main focus of this small local charity is on the growing number of young people who are 'not in employment, education or training' (NEET). Weavers ward, like the rest of Tower Hamlets, has a high rate of youth unemployment (29.1% compared with the 19.3% national average). Despite the surging property prices, Weavers also has a lot of social housing - high for the borough, and double the London average. Many of local young people live in out-of-work family households, often in overcrowded social housing.

Yousuf and the Forum have decided to try and meet these issues head-on, firstly by providing

a safe space for young people to socialise away from school and home, and then by offering them experiences and opportunities that widen their view on life and on their own potential. Access to positive role models and training in leadership is an important part of the Forum's 'youth empowerment' approach, and their 'Be Active in the Community' project. Activities such as an accredited football leadership training course, the Uniting Youth Conference, and other vocational and employment focused training have all helped to build self-esteem and real opportunities for their young participants.

Running a large range of activities within a such a small building is challenge. The centre is essentially one room, with a small toilet, and even smaller office, attached. But the Forum have taken a creative, 'swiss-army knife' approach to the space, making it as flexible as possible by using stackable furniture, a wall-mounted flat-screen for training (and the occasional computer game), and even a foldable pool table.

Demand for their services is high, but of course, funding is always a challenge. Despite the variety of the Forum's activities, they would still like to see greater use of the centre, and to generate more income from event hire. The community garden was set up in 2006 by local residents, and is maintained by a couple of local volunteers, but Yousuf is keen for it to reach its full potential as a community resource.

If you have a great idea about how your work could link with the Forum's resources, Yousuf would love to hear from you.

Leavers Community Forum

Khan
Community Forum

Want a 'Spotlight' on your organisation?

We love to visit our members to find out more about your work, your passions and the challenges you face. Just call Ryan on 020 8980 8427 or ryan@thcvs.org.uk to arrange a visit.

Want to know more about THCVS membership?

By joining THCVS, you make the collective voice of the sector that bit louder and our independence that bit more secure. You also become part of a sharing and learning network of people with similar values and concerns. And, as if that wasn't enough, other perks of membership include:

- 25% discount on training and other fees
- 1 free training place and a comprehensive organisation 'health-check' when you join
- The Sparrow delivered to your door

Membership is free for organisations with less than £25K income per year. Annual fees then start from £30 according to organisational income.

TO JOIN NOW, or for pricing and eligibility details, visit:
www.thcvs.org.uk/membership

OUR NEW TRUSTEES:

At our AGM in October 2014, elections took place for the THCVS Board of Trustees. Suzanne Firth continued as Chair, Sharon Hanoomansingh continued as Vice Chair and Anne Wilding took over as Treasurer from Abdi Hassan. Helal Ahmed also stepped down from the board. The following members were also elected as Trustees: Salman Alam, Aulad Miah & Mustafa Ibrahim.



Salman Alam **The Stifford Centre**

I have been involved with the voluntary sector for over 10 years now, starting as a project manager with Stifford Centre back in 2003 and progressing to the role of Centre Manager in 2006. I have been privileged to play an instrumental role in transforming the Stifford Centre from being a small grant-centric organisation to becoming a medium sized contract delivery organisation. I feel that the voluntary sector is at a crucial time, and the decisions we take as a group can pave the way for the future of the sector. We need to innovate and look beyond the usual income streams so that we are able to keep up with competition from the private sector. I will contribute my knowledge and strategic thinking to help shape policies and open up new avenues for the sector.



Mustafa Ibrahim **Tower Hamlets Somali Organisations Network**

I have 10 years' experience working at a senior, strategic level within the voluntary sector. For the past 4 years I have worked as Coordinator at THSON, a community organisation providing a range of services and promoting rights, independence, choice and inclusion for Somali organisations in Tower Hamlets. Through THSON I represent on behalf of BME communities in Tower Hamlets through contribution and participation of boards and forums including the Third Sector Advisory Board and Somali Advice Network. My experience and skills making strategic decisions, supporting unheard voices and building the capacity of voluntary BME organisations, will be an invaluable contribution to the THCVS trustees and the wider voluntary sector.



Aulad Miah **St Hilda's East Community Centre**

I am a member of the Senior Management Team at St Hilda's, a long established local community organisation, providing local community opportunities and borough-wide social care services. Under my leadership, it has now become recognised as an innovative community youth hub. I was born and raised in the borough and have extensive knowledge of the community. As a community representative and an activist, I have helped challenge unfair actions, such as successfully protesting against the digging by cross rail in Brick Lane. I am firmly committed to developing a strong CVS in Tower Hamlets to represent the interest of all community organisations in the borough.

Our Team



Ryan O'Kane

Admin & Information Officer
ryan.okane@thcvs.org.uk

When you ring our offices it will usually be either Ryan or Rushena that you talk to first. They will always do their best to help, or find you someone who can. They also manage the training programme, membership services, website, forums and e-bulletins - that's why there's two of them!

Rushena Miah

Admin & Information Officer (p/t)
rushena.miah@thcvs.org.uk



Gemma Cossins

Development Manager
gemma.cossins@thcvs.org.uk

Gemma's expertise in all things organisational is the foundation of our development services. Email her to arrange an appointment.



Kirsty Cornell

THCVS Chief Executive Officer
kirsty.cornell@thcvs.org.uk

As well as heading our team, Kirsty is busy building links with the sector and statutory partners, trying to get the sector what it needs.



Sanober Ismail

Finance Officer (p/t)
sanober.ismail@thcvs.org.uk

By keeping her eagle eyes on our accounts and our records, Sanober makes sure we spend our money wisely and fairly, and that we can prove that to the outside world.

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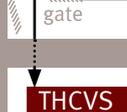
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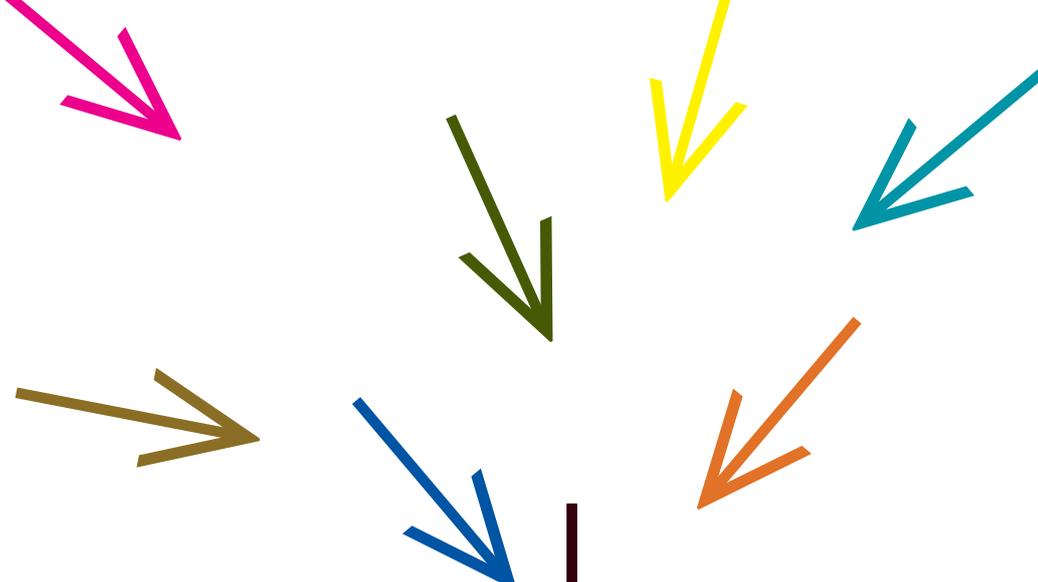
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www.thcvs.org.uk/membership

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INNOVATION
COLLABORATION
TOWER HAMLETS
VOLUNTARY
& COMMUNITY
SECTOR

A learning & networking event exploring potentials for innovation, collaboration & sustainability

CONFERENCE
2015

SAVE THE DATE:
TUESDAY 9th JUNE

Professional Development Centre, Bethnal Green Road, E2