

Campaigning in the spotlight

Do voluntary groups delivering services still campaign for the interests of their service users and communities? This is the question examined by the latest in our series of reports on the Future of Voluntary Services. “Saying Less and Doing More” by Mike Aiken reaches troubling conclusions. Though small informal groups and activists are still very much in evidence, local voluntary services groups who historically combined their services with advocacy and campaigning are under increasing pressure to button their lips. While some of the larger charities who are “contract heavy” show much less interest in campaign work for their disadvantaged clients.

The findings show a climate of fear and muzzling of freedom of expression, and follows on the tails of a Charity Commission investigation into Oxfam after the charity warned of the “relentless rise of food poverty” in the UK. [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30546517> 19.12.14] The investigation was instigated after a complaint against Oxfam by Tory MP, Conor Burns. It adds to fears raised by the ex-Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, who said this week that charities and campaign groups have been “frightened” into curtailing their public work by the new Lobbying Act [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30935367> 22.01.15].

Mike concludes that “the injunction to silence knowledgeable voluntary groups from talking about their experiences would be quite at home in any totalitarian regime seeking to crush independent and divergent voices”.

Here’s a summary of his main points. The full report can be downloaded [here](#).

What do people say about voluntary groups and campaigning?

“In our campaign voluntary organisations were very nervous about saying anything which might compromise their funding....The worrying thing is public sector disintegration....services are now done by the voluntary sector....these people are all on zero hours contracts...so the welfare state becomes privatised, but the voluntary sector is also privatised.” (Anti-privatisation campaign)

“We made a number of attempts to work with the local mainstream/council-funded voluntary sector organisation and it just wasn’t happening....politics has replaced sex as the thing that can’t be named.” (local activist network)

“We didn’t win it (the contract), so fell off the radar...the people who won, there is no sense of them wanting to work with us, they come from outside the town.”(local community group).

Save the Children has been held back from “criticising British Gas price rises in order to avoid damage to their corporate partnership with the energy company” (Dominic Nutt)

“The concentration on service delivery as the main or sole purpose of voluntary actionrelegates other historic functions...such ascampaigning and advocacy roles to the margins” (Colin Rochester)

“It is a democratic country...we are saying what we see....we have evidence...it’s about being courageous and speaking out. We go to the media....it’s important that we counter the media messages about shirkers... to give a voice to people to tell their story....if you are not independent you can’t speak out.” (National welfare service)

“We’re politically and financially independent....that means we’re able to shine a light into dark corners and speak upwhen others find it uncomfortable to do so” (World Development Movement)

Why is campaigning important?

The UK is not even half way through the cuts in public expenditure announced before the autumn statement in December 2014, with further cuts described as “catastrophic”. There is a political consensus to move from public provision to private markets; from collective to individual responsibilities. It involves a fundamental shift in power and resources away from democratic governance to powerful elites residing particularly within transnational corporations. It is poor people who are at the sharp end of these savage cutbacks and dismantling of public protections.

Many voluntary services are providing the last line of support for those affected and have experience of the impact of these policies. They are in a unique position to “show and tell” what is happening to their beneficiaries and what needs to be done to put things right. Voluntary groups have a contribution to make to democratic life in which “independent initiatives...represent ...legitimate, political opposition...an effective set of bulwarks around civil society”.

What silences voluntary groups?

The research shows the multiple muzzles around the voice of voluntary groups. Many groups face reductions in capacity due to cutbacks in their own funding. However, there are other equally influential pressures. Restrictions arising from service contracts, which actively muzzle what they can say, due to confidentiality and gagging clauses, or which create “contract fascination” and “mission drift”. Subtle or explicit pressures, “nods and winks” or direct threats to funding and from the Lobbying Act. Being political is frowned upon and even considered inappropriate, while severe cutbacks are accepted as “normal”, part of understanding new realities and not political. Self censorship and fear arise from a coercive atmosphere aided by government statements which go unchallenged by local and national “leadership” bodies. Leaving many groups isolated and without the connections needed to take collective action and speak out.

What helps groups to speak out?

Despite this hostile climate, some voluntary groups do speak out and take steps to confront the root causes of poverty and inequality. Most have sources of income, and resources, which do not depend on government largesse. Smaller groups and networks have a much freer hand when compared to those delivering public service contracts. They appear strong on political education and analysis. They are not afraid of “the political”. These groups are characterised by discretion and self-determination. Groups which speak out align themselves with their beneficiaries, often on specific issues, join in co-operation with other allies, and are willing publically to speak truth to power, regardless of the consequences for their organisation or their professional status. Such groups are driven by their “soft resources” – vision, ethics, principles, justice; by authentic voluntary action, and not by funding and contractual requirements.

What can be done?

The report points out that “the themes of the future...have not originated from the farsightedness of rulers or from the struggle in parliament – and certainly not from the cathedrals of power in business, science and the state. They have been put on the social agenda....by entangled, moralising groups”.

There are many examples in the report of such groups which act against the impact of austerity and loss of social protections – from local activists to national professional bodies. Voluntary services can join with and learn from these groups. Funding can, and does, act as a brake on the ability to campaign. But all the examples in the report, of speaking out, are associated with using – or finding room – to exercise discretion to do this. An important lesson is: how can voluntary organisations protect and extend the amount of discretion they have in order to use this with beneficiaries and others.

The report calls on voluntary services to re-assert their unique position: offering services which act for collective social justice by using its knowledge to demonstrate alternative provision and challenge root causes of poverty. This role can be understood as their organisational responsibility and ethical duty rather than a “maverick intent”. The “show and tell” role provides opportunities to speak with authority and legitimacy to policy makers and service providers and can enable the voice and experience of the most disadvantaged to be heard in the corridors of power and by other citizens.