

An Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services Getting down to the detail

During 2013, NCIA is conducting an Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services. We set out here why we think this is needed, how we are going about it and what we hope to learn from the results.

NCIA is part of that broad landscape of voluntary action designed to tackle inequality, social injustice, disenfranchisement from civic life and the environmental crisis. In recent years, we have observed an increase in the 'de-coupling' of voluntary agencies that provide services (often with state funding) to individuals and communities, from the rest – activists and community groups. In 2013 we published 'Here We Stand: An Inquiry into Activism and Dissent', which took a look at what local activists are doing and where they find their support and solidarity. You can access the report that came from this work [here](#). This second Inquiry will investigate what is happening to the 'services' side of the voluntary sector.

The background

For generations voluntary organisations have provided services for individuals, families and communities. Before the establishment of the welfare state, these may have been the only social and welfare services available. The post war settlement saw the creation of a wide variety of rights and entitlements alongside the extended provision of free health, education, legal aid, income support and social welfare protections. The bulk of the welfare state thus created was provided directly by state agencies, decreasing the importance of provision by voluntary services. Many voluntary agencies re-positioned themselves as places from which to stretch the frontiers of state provision through innovation, and to provide informed policy and political critique of the shortcomings of that provision. Though the role of voluntary agencies as alternatives to state-run public services took some shape in the '80s, it was not until the New Labour years that the idea of voluntary services as an arms-length delivery vehicle for state policy and services took hold. This, in turn, created the conditions now being exploited by the Coalition Government to harness voluntary agencies as direct replacements for state services, with or without state funding (including as adjuncts to private sector provision).

Massive cuts in public expenditure are ruthlessly targeting and impoverishing already poor and marginalised communities. At the same time funding for voluntary services has itself been declining, damaging local organisations in particular. Because of the scale of public services privatisation and the opportunities for profit that it represents there has been rapid development of interest from the private sector and the corporate charitable sector.

All of these pressures, demanding and receiving the acquiescence of voluntary organisations, now create a situation in which the very legitimacy of voluntary services as a radical social force is in doubt. It is time to ask whether voluntary agencies, providing professionalised, 'managerialised' services under contract to the state or private companies have a future within a radical tradition of social justice? Whether these agencies can any longer be considered as 'voluntary' and instead should now be seen as a 'part of the problem rather than the solution'?

Our opening position

The dominant ideology which shapes our world today is 'neo liberalism', a belief in self regulating markets, removal of statutory social protections and an avowed reduction in the involvement of the state in everyday civil life (though the reality of this last point is contested). As a consequence, aspirations for equality, economic and social justice have been devalued and marginalised. With respect to that part of the voluntary sector that has the interest, experience and capacity to offer *services* to their local communities, a new narrative has been built, in which its role is shaped around the needs of the public services market and subject to shifting fads for service and contract design. The capitulation by many in the voluntary sector, notably its national leadership bodies, to these government agendas has done much damage to the ability of voluntary organisations to work with and represent the interests of vulnerable, oppressed and marginalised communities and stand beside them in solidarity.

This has left many running services in local communities caught between ideologically driven contract requirements of statutory or private commissioners, and the authentic needs of their users and constituents. Where these are in conflict with one another - as they are increasingly, in our view - this presents a dilemma to those running these organisations. Are they willing to, and if so how can they, adopt a radical and if necessary confrontational stance, to stand with and alongside those who are the victims of rising inequality, social injustice and environmental vandalism?

Why does this matter? This question has both a positive and a negative answer. Positively, voluntary groups providing services have made a unique and significant contribution to the development of public services – chiefly in the fields of welfare, health, employment, education, community development, advice, and legal protection. These organisations historically had the freedom to design and run services in an autonomous or semi-autonomous way. This allowed orthodoxies (about treatment for example) to be challenged, new ideas and ways of working to improve services tested out and priority to be shifted towards hard-to-reach groups. Where public money supported these services it was usually through a grant relationship – a gift from the state to the voluntary group – and the relationship was negotiated between the parties involved. In the main, the space occupied by these organisations was outside of, or on the margins of 'mainstream' public services.

Secondly, having the working skills, insight and experience of these service providers located outside of the statutory sector, allowed a freer critique of mainstream public services to be developed and at a level of detail needed to achieve tangible, practical improvements. Where voluntary groups developed alternative approaches to mental illness through running services, for example, they also became better equipped to comment professionally and operationally on the services of their colleagues in the public sector. Being independent also meant that they were empowered to express these views, forcefully where necessary.

Thirdly, locally based voluntary services groups have also played another important role within local communities, precisely because they arose from and were part of those communities. In themselves, they represent an expression of social capital, and in the involvement of and connections with local people and other voluntary groups, helped to build social capital more generally.

These benefits and strengths are undermined by the role change that is being imposed by the previous and present government – voluntary agencies as contracted public services providers, in place of services otherwise provided directly by public bodies. Voluntary organisations have been led to re-engineer themselves through procurement and commissioning strategies that began with the replacement of grants as the funding mechanism used for financial support; in other words the re-styling of existing budgets as contracts and the introduction of competitive tendering as the

mechanism for distribution. Now, at local level, we are increasingly seeing the tendering out of directly managed public services within the NHS and local authorities. This is presented as an opportunity for voluntary groups to grow and develop but it comes with demands, compromises and obligations, and on the basis of a relationship that is largely dictated from one party to the other.

There is another negative – or defensive - reason for saying that this issue matters. Entrusting public services to a market environment (and one that will inevitably be dominated by private sector organisations) is a vast, untested experiment and an experiment that bears huge risks for all of us as citizens, especially citizens who need help and protection from time to time. By volunteering themselves to help implement this experiment, voluntary groups are implicitly or explicitly supporting this privatisation programme. Many may find that their involvement ends in tears - declining income, raised contract requirements, increased demand, falling service and quality standards but nevertheless finding themselves *responsible* for these services. And those of us who need or want these services will not know who to complain to.

Local voluntary services groups are, therefore, valuable and an important part of the integrated ecology of a healthy voluntary sector and, beyond that, a healthy civil society. We use the expression *radical voluntary services* to describe organisations that show the positive attributes listed above. We need to find ways of re-building the vitality of this part of the voluntary sector and we hope that our Inquiry will provide useful pointers as to how this can be achieved.

What do we mean by ‘voluntary services’?

Voluntary action consists of a very wide range of activities including individual and political advocacy on behalf of people or groups of people, direct action to oppose or improve, and conviviality, the simple enjoyment of being with others or sharing a common interest. These activities make up the bulk of voluntary action.

More visible, however, is the role of voluntary groups in providing services and the infrastructure organisations that have been established to support them and whom often assert the legitimacy to represent them to Government, the state and others. It is this type of organisation working in our current social and political environment that we wish to review. We know that the profile of voluntary sector groups within this sphere of activity is varied and that the edges of what defines a ‘voluntary services agency,’ as opposed to other forms of independent action, will be blurred. We are especially interested in organisations that operate within local areas, including national charitable organisations that run local projects or services. We know that such characteristics as employing staff, adopting ‘professional’ identities and adjusting internal and external practices to comply with contract environments will be important factors in deciding who should be included within the definition of ‘voluntary services’. We expect that more sophisticated divisions and distinctions will emerge from the work that we intend to do.

The scope of our Inquiry

The scope of the Inquiry will be wide ranging, though will need to be contained within the meagre resource that we have available to commit to this work. We expect that the results of the work will express both a critique of the current situation and suggestions as to how the direction of travel might be reversed. We have identified a number of themes, expressed as questions below, but expect that these will achieve greater or lesser prominence, and new themes may be added, as the Inquiry proceeds.

- What are the implications and impact of the government’s privatisation programme and cuts to public services on voluntary services groups and what has been the sector’s response to this

programme, including the erosion of public and statutory duties, questions of accountability, service quality and the substitution of philanthropic or private funding for state funding?

- How has the dominance of the private sector within public services privatisation influenced the ideology, policy and practice of voluntary services agencies, including the rise of social enterprise, the impact of social investment, the development of the sub-contractor role and internal pressures to adopt business management and operational practices and assumptions?
- What is the potential to re-claim legitimate forms of enterprise based on social purpose and inclusive participation, such as workers co-operatives?
- What has been the impact on the capacity, independence and viability of voluntary services of public sector commissioning and procurement strategies, including the loss of grant programmes, voluntary sector re-commissioning, issues of scale, performance management approaches, payment-by-results contracts, lead agency/subcontracting, mergers and so-called consortium working?
- What impact has the Localism Act and the broader localism agenda had on the provision of public services and the activities of voluntary services agencies?
- What proper role *does* the voluntary sector have in the provision of public services; what should voluntary agencies *not* provide? How can voluntary services agencies reclaim a legitimate role in supporting local communities through the provision of services and which does not undermine rights, entitlements, social and legal protections and the struggle for equality and social justice? How might these services be funded?
- What is the role and capacity of voluntary services agencies in engaging in critical commentary, campaigning and outright dissent? What is the actual and potential relationship between service providers and 'outsider' campaign groups and the scope for effective alliances between voluntary services agencies and activists pressing for radical change?
- What is the contribution of voluntary services agencies to the vibrancy of community life outside of service provision?
- What is the role and impact of corporate national and regional charities in influencing the profile of local services and the direction of travel?
- What is the role and impact of private trusts and foundations in influencing the profile of local services and the direction of travel?
- How has the position of second and third tier sector 'representative' organisations (both at local and national level) to the issues involved affected the direction of travel? Where are the collective representative homes for radical voluntary services?
- How effectively do the regulation and arrangements for formal accountability of charities and social enterprises protect a legitimate role for voluntary services agencies?

Timescale and methodology

The Inquiry began with an open consultation meeting on 10th May, [notes](#) of which are available on our website. The Inquiry will gather and assemble evidence during the rest of 2013 and we hope that

this will result in a final report and associated action in the early part of 2014. Regular reports of progress will be posted on this website, in our newsletter and via a specific Inquiry mailing list.

The Inquiry will not be conducted as a 'value-free' activity. Ideological and personal positions will be made visible during discussions in order to prompt mutual collaboration, challenge and insight.

Our methodology will be iterative and formative, shaped and re-shaped as it goes but will include the following elements:

- Desk research to assemble and incorporate material already held by NCIA;
- Desk research to assemble relevant information held by other organisations;
- Focussed work on specific topics where we see a need for new research or thinking;
- Advertising an open invitation to groups and individuals to tell us of their views and experiences;
- Proactively seeking out key informants (using purposive sampling) to interview, using semi-structured questionnaires to enable systematic analysis;
- One or more meetings to report interim findings and allow others to influence and re-frame the Inquiry as appropriate.

We are keen to hear from people with views and experiences to offer on the themes of the Inquiry. If you would like to participate or receive updates on this work then please get in touch with Andy Benson, who is co-ordinating this work – andy@independentaction.net or 0208 800 7509.