

National Coalition for Independent Action

Celebrating voluntary & community action to change and challenge the world around us

Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services Notes of a launch consultation meeting 10th May 2013

This meeting was held to launch the NCI Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services and to seek feedback on the scope and methodology to be adopted for this project. Draft terms of reference had been circulated before the meeting. A list of participants is included as an appendix.

The meeting began with an explanation of the background to the Inquiry and what we hoped we would gain by. In our work over recent years we have observed an increasing de-coupling of 'professionalised' voluntary agencies that provide services to individuals and communities (often with state funding), from the rest – activists and community groups. Pressures on voluntary services agencies to act as contractors to state or private sector commissioners are now common and extreme, demanding and receiving the acquiescence of the voluntary organisations involved. This now creates 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 of this sort 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?

The meeting began with three short presentations to illustrate the circumstances and the dilemmas now facing voluntary services groups.

Elizabeth Bayliss from Social Action for Health

The charitable, non-statutory, non-governmental, third arm, non-profit, community, voluntary, social enterprise, independent sector, providers, delivery agents, contractors....

So what distinguishes the voluntary and community sector from the private sector?

- Profits/surplus/reserves/deficits – is it the amount of money/level of managerial skill?
- Ownership – shareholders/stakeholders/managers and staff/community of participants or users/local community?
- Governance – Companies House/Charity Commission/T rustees/Board of Directors/Management Committee?
- Accountability – commissioners/users/local people/members?
- Probity – auditors/participants?
- Value base – being of use to people in need/providing a service/promoting social justice?

We live in hard times, not for want of things but for want of hope, for want of knowing which way to head.

At an international level, the world economy is in a state of churn with a very few large non accountable corporations (like JP Morgan and Goldman Sachs) picking up the goods as national economies collapse – Greece, Portugal, Spain, Britain, all close to melt down.

The government, whatever colour – is opening the doors to these hunters, selling the country's assets off, not even to the highest bidder. Gordon Brown sold the country's gold at rock bottom prices – Brown's Bottom, it's called. The government coffers are empty, printing money and calling it qualitative easing, reducing the value of each pound.

The state – protector of the people? Regulator of the people more like; certainly not regulator of the banks and the banksters. At national and state level, the sense is that the role of the state is to control, impose rules, tax.

What does that say about the role of the voluntary sector if voluntary agencies are agents of the state? Whither the sector in this context?

Under the hand of the contract culture, actions become value-free so voluntary agencies agree to give personal details of their participants to statutory bodies, so voluntary agencies do not allow people with a lived experience of mental ill health to volunteer in a mental health charity because the CRB marks their card.

What have we got to say as a sector about the continuing over representation of black men in the mental health system? What does it mean in terms of social policy? Whither the voluntary sector? Cheap service provider or defender of the people?

The welfare state is in a poor state now with the NHS in confusion and the benefits system being dismantled. Are we going to help it on its way?

It's a matter of luck as to whether you get a good doctor, good care. If you have English and no money, it feels random, fortune cookie entitlements! Do we help people learn to read the fortune cookies or do we counsel people after they are given one that says, help me, I am a prisoner in a fortune cookie factory?

The voluntary sector is of course a many splendid thing:

- Big charities have their investment portfolios and the staff of small charities often work for free:
- Housing associations talk about their customers now;
- The community sector is being culled and competition between the rest is fierce.

I have some questions, of myself as well as you here:

- Are we representative of the people? If not, who is?
- Who is mandated by their community – anyone?
- When people are frightened of running public events because of health and safety rules, whither our democracy?

Times are getting harder, people are fearful and fear paralyses; things are breaking down so opportunities are opening up. How do we hold this tension?

Where does 'managerialism' fit here? Professionalism is defined by Foucault as the exclusive control of knowledge – are we holding onto knowledge that is not rightly ours?

I know from my work that people are hungry for community, for a sense of belonging, community however that is defined. I see people coming together, trying to make community and even open communities, without knowing how. They are inventing as they go. Going back to the basics of what it feels like – does this feel good? Is a new morality emerging?

What I see in the organisation I run is that people never tire of social relationships, they are who we are, building social capital is a natural human urge, networks, connections are what make us tick. We are like ants, we are all one, across the world.

I would say that mutuality is what is emerging – you do this for me, I will do that for you. Not anything to do with the state, but between people in relationship with each, exercising honest self interest, locally and internationally.

What I see is a questioning, a loosening, people are hungry for their own direct experience of the world. Now this raises very exciting potentialities for community organisations! Let's look into our communities, not always up to the state. It's much more interesting down here!

Kevin Nunan, CVS worker, speaking in a personal capacity

One of my early experiences in the voluntary sector taught me much – especially that we often fail to be explicit about what we mean. That experience was a piece of action research that looked at supporting small organisations. Many stakeholders were round the table, from frontline, to umbrella bodies, and funders. Everyone seemed to want to go about it in a different way and eventually we had to sit down and plot out what everyone wanted. It boiled down to the old split – the smaller voluntary organisations wanted a *systemic* approach, user led, empowering. The larger organisations and funders wanted a *compliance* based approach – essentially they wanted the groups trained to an external standard. Seeing it in black and white was a shock. Both sides stood their ground.

My assumption is that the 'radical social action' you refer to here is the "bottom up" approach. And there are still many in the sector who hold those values dear. Thirty years on the disability activists' slogan is still 'nothing about us without us'. But unfortunately the opponents of that approach are many and are often the ones with power. And sadly the top-down "compliance to a standard" approach is now so ingrained that many who have only ever worked in larger organisations, funders and the public sector (especially the public sector) consider this to be the only legitimate approach.

The trend can be clearly seen in the lottery (NLCB as it was, Big as it is now). In the '90s the lottery was an evangelist for "user involvement". Considered by some to be a little woolly, but radical by the standards of large, influential funders. A decade later and the BASIS grants were clearly in thrall to 'managerialism' with elaborate, numbers based monitoring systems. Finally BIG has jumped the shark and is applying the neoliberal solution to empowerment – just give them the money and let them decide for themselves (Big Assist).

Radical social action may still be possible, but we must first remind people what radical social action means and then remind funders and the public sector - especially the public sector, that the top-down approach, that prioritizes compliance to standards, acts against empowerment and promotes paternalism and dependency.

Bernard Davies from 42nd Street

Given the pressures on voluntary services, and compliances required, can voluntary services still qualify as radical social action? In present circumstances no single one-dimensional answer to such a challenging question seems to me to be possible. It poses too many dilemmas, throws up too many contradictions, suggests too many nuances of position. I have therefore chosen to deal with it through a brief if, I fear, over-simplified case study. This is drawn from my ten-plus years as a trustee of an organisation - 42nd Street – which was set up in 1980 as a resource for young people under stress. All the information and analysis on which the case study draws is already

in the public domain - in the reports of two modest reviews of the organisation published in 1999-2000 and in 2012.¹

In key respects, 42nd Street fits NCI's definition of the key target group for its Inquiry. It is a voluntary organisation. It provides services, employs staff and adopts 'professional' identities ('Chief Executive', 'counsellor', 'youth worker'). And, in striving to sustain its 'radical' aspirations, it has had to adjust increasingly to comply with a contract culture.

The organisation is based in Manchester city centre, works across four local authority areas and has an annual turnover of around £1M. Explicitly describing itself as 'value-driven', it would explain its commitment to radical social action by, for example, pointing to its development, since it was founded, of a social model of mental health. It thus sees structural as well as individual explanations as at the heart of the problems faced by the young people who use it. It supports them in seeking collective as well as personal responses to these problems by offering a menu of opportunities: counselling, youth work, arts activities, group work, campaigning as well as informal forms of support at times and in places they choose. Users of the service have for many years been involved in staff selection. Four are now full members of the Trustee Board. Each year a group contributes to the training of social workers.

Rereading the 2000 report provides a sharp reminder that the present predicament of organisations like 42nd Street is far from new – as two quotes illustrate:

... the state is seeking to entice voluntary organisations into a closer and closer embrace...

How (may) values ... be sustained within services for young people at a time when pressures are more often about issues of contract compliance and conformity to externally determined funding objectives?

Today those pressures are more intense. For organisations like 42nd Street one way in which they show up is in the much more limited scope it has to define priorities which arise directly out of its own cumulative practice experience. In 1990's, for example, prompted by concerns arising from its practice, it carried out a (funded) piece of ground-breaking research² which contributed to new understandings of why young people self-harm and which (also with funding) led to pioneering new ways of responding. Today by contrast, though its records show that many of young people using its services are likely to be unemployed, no dedicated sources of funding for responding to this on its own terms are available other than the Work Programme – on which 42nd Street took an early and carefully thought-out decision to avoid.

Other key features of its practice are also under pressure - such as its track-record over many years of working with highly vulnerable young people using a wide range of formal and informal approaches. Increasingly funder pressure is requiring that young people's involvement is addressed through eight or twelve sessions using approaches such as brief solution focused therapy and Cognitive behaviour therapy. 'Throughput' is a consistent theme in all contracts.

So – how is 42nd Street responding? First it is important to say that searching debates are taking place within and throughout the organisation. Some of this is captured by quotation from one long-serving trustee who during the latest review expressed some discomfort at the possibility that *some level of complicity (was occurring) with 'deficit' models (of young people) and psychologising of social problems in a market place.*

¹ *StreetCred?* (1980) and *StreetCred2?* (2012), available from 42nd Street, 87-91 Great Ancoats St, Manchester, M4 5AG. 0161 228 7321

² Helen Spandler, *Who's Hurting Who?* (1996), available from 42nd Street.

Far from giving up on its radical values, however, 42nd Street response to funders has been to continue to reassert them and where necessary conduct the struggle for them very directly. After a small sub-group of trustees carried out a modest investigation, for example, the Board decided not to bid for money from a multi-national drugs company with a questionable record in developing world even though it was offering funding for precisely the kind of capital project 42nd Street had been hoping to develop for some time.

For their part, managers talk passionately about *negotiating hard* with commissioners – resisting the pressures to short-termism by, for example, winning an agreement to six week to eight month review periods which allow for the option for some young people staying involved for longer. They have also successfully argued back when funding for work with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender was threatened and have explicitly argued the case for 42nd Street's style and approach by pointing out that *the NHS can't do therapy in McDonalds like we do*. Internally, consultation and indeed shared decision-making involving young people as well as staff remains deeply embedded in the organisational culture, on key issues ranging from the design of a new state-of-the-art building to piloting new monitoring procedures. And all underpinned by a high level of awareness of the bottom line: in the Chief Executive's words:

Our independence is kept ... by always going back to the question: 'Who's to be served'

Reviewing these struggles for the organisation in 2013 also helped clarify what such 'independence' has increasingly come to mean in the new political and financial environment. I went into this second review thinking of it simply as a fixed state of being: something that, in the words of one manager, *in the end exists in its culture and values*. I came out of it, however, thinking of it within this increasingly hostile environment as more of a process. In particular, for an organisation with any pretension to acting radically, independence is now a process of constant negotiation and re-negotiation, to be undertaken clear-sightedly and explicitly above some very firmly drawn bottom lines and, if self-chosen 'missions' are to be held and fulfilled, requiring highly creative responses.

This may not be an approach which the NCIA paper launching the Inquiry refers to as 'confrontational'. I would claim, however, that it is today crucial to any struggle to stay 'radical'

What are the critical areas for the Inquiry to address?

In small groups, participants were asked to discuss the state of the voluntary services world and to bring back to the plenary what they thought were the critical areas for the Inquiry to explore. The issues that came back (reordered into a few categories) were as follows:

Our aspirations

- To identify what is valuable and distinctive about voluntary sector involvement in service provision; what distinguishes this from the likes of G4S?
- To set out what we want as well as what we don't like. To identify what is or could be the role of voluntary services agendas and the community sector, but without harking back to a rose-tinted past
- Change the narrative away from the enterprise/merger/growth/corporate/managerial /contract culture paradigm and substitute our own more positive way of seeing ourselves
- Recognise the role of values and how being driven by values can keep you on the right side of the line
- It's not all just about needs and services to meet them; people and communities can make things happen for themselves and through collective action, support and solidarity
- Link organisational independence with the advocacy/campaigning role – this is a test of independence
- Sort out some new criteria for who qualifies as 'radical voluntary action' and who doesn't
- See community development as integral to the debate, for example in supporting smaller groups to get funding and keep their integrity; where are the CVSs in this?
- What is needed is neighbourhood level organising rather than area based level e.g. CVS

- The need for continual internal discussion on the bottom lines, checking the direction of travel – are we OK? Can we justify what we're doing?
- Find ways to 'press the pause button' to give space to turn competition into collaboration
- Don't lose the celebration of diversity and what's in and what's out
- Personalisation needs to be included – both the benefits and the perils
- We need to wean the sector off the deficit model
- The sector is not good at presenting need, supply and demand etc in terms that make sense to us and to the commissioners – we have to get better at this

Our allies

- Remember the role of trades unions, co-ops and others who stand for alternative ways of doing things; is a legitimate local 'mutual' model feasible?
- new alliances are needed including connections with public sector workers; hold the truth that the 'state' is not necessarily the enemy – it is still possible to be 'in and against the state'
- Focus on the potential to find allies amongst the 'in-between' agencies – those that do have staff, a professional identity and runs services but who hold onto their purpose and their values
- Examine how community activists can connect with voluntary services
- Look for the different language and actions of those who are outside the hegemony (e.g. look at Wales)
- Appeal to people who don't see themselves as either activists OR service providers but who are relevant to this debate
- Local CVSs may not have resources but may still have influence – they should be allies
- Pay attention to the role of trustees as custodians of the organisations ethos and integrity
- Recognise the need for shifting alliances and compromises, manifestos often divide rather than bring people together
- There is a role for infrastructure in all this and at national level but what has happened to them all – including now NAVCA which seems intent on promoting privatisation with the private sector
- Remember when in a minority to look for the alliances, they may come from unlikely places if you listen hard
- Address the generation gap. Many in these agencies don't understand or know where they stand on the political issues involved
- Don't miss out the voices of those on the frontline of service provision – they are vital for information and intelligence about what is really happening on the ground; they are often also very frustrated
- Look for and champion the good funders
- Don't forget that there are people in the Cabinet Office, for example, who would agree with much of this discussion – how to get to them? And the same at local level, commissioners stuck in a downward spiral

The pressures of privatisation, commissioning, marketisation, austerity and the neo-liberal establishment

- Include examples of how to successfully fight 'marketisation', including collective action in consortia, networks, etc.
- Challenge the dishonesty of the 'regulators' i.e. those, like the Care Quality Commission, local commissioners, etc. who are supposed to be protecting the people or improving public services but are actually promoting government agendas, working to a 'deficit model' and establishing neo-liberal assumptions as 'normal'
- Include the role of the predatory corporate charities and their impact on local services and organisations
- Look at the role and function of Community Interest Companies
- Clock that the pressure on agencies to merge/grow, not be controversial etc. are not only coming from the statutory sector but also from trusts, foundations and private sector funders
- Tackle the 'purity of motive' issue – i.e. that people argue in favour of contracting restrictions etc. that this is worth it because they can still 'do some good'. What is the impact of creeping compromise? Where and when do you draw the line?
- Expose the issue of 'representation' – who says they represent whom and by what mandate?

- Tackle the pressure on agencies of top down performance indicators etc. – how can voluntary agencies tell it how it is and honestly when the system encourages lies and obfuscation?
- The space between earning a living and being an activist is being squeezed - it's now much harder to be an activist
- Remember the morality here – people should care where the money comes from, it's not value free. This path leads to Serco. Personal accountability gets lost
- Challenge the 'level playing field' and 'fairness' arguments, these can lead no-where; behind this is the wider truth that 'we don't want to do it this way'
- Have to draw a line sometimes or you will not be protecting something that may no longer be worthy of that
- Policy statements and delivery on the ground is often quite different. Many times local action by commissioners etc is justified by reference to national policy but can be dysfunctional in these terms
- The choices coming up will be exist altogether or stay in the game either complicitly, or as subversives

Issues around scope and methodology for the Inquiry

We then took some discussion on the ways in which the Inquiry should be conducted and over what timescale:

- The methodology should flow from a clear definition of who we are interested in – what do we mean by 'providing services'? Is the need for funding and staff core, for example?
- We should include those like CVSs who are supposed to be safeguarding 'true' or 'proper' voluntary services
- We need to incorporate the impact of the corporates
- But what about the small groups – many community groups don't provide 'services' (aka professional services) but do provide activities which in turn may link people into services
- Some argued that this needs to be part of the methodology and could be incorporated via small workshops
- The methodology needs to allow us to say something about the privatisation/outsourcing of public services and the role of the voluntary sector in this – acknowledging the need to defend public services without defending poor public services
- In terms of an audience for the results, the end product should be directed towards those who can affect the 'ecology of civil society' – specifically to get away from the idea that there are people in need for whom services have to be provided to something about us all doing things together – this is what has freshness and is where the radicalism lies
- The Inquiry needs to cope with the confusion that exists within many local worthy agencies who are caught between seeing the task within their communities and the compromises involved in making a response
- This is an essential part of our audience and with the aim of giving some leadership (another way is possible), courage and hope
- The methodology needs to incorporate upfront activism – Occupy etc. – this is inter-generational, active and busy, creates new approaches and has the potential to link insiders and outsiders
- bOLDr project may have something to offer on the inter-generational front
- And the aim should be to bring the above back together with those who focus on services, as seen as money to do a specific task (which encourages the move away from 'community ecology' and activism
- Look at Wales and perspectives from the statutory sector here
- Look at the Barnswood Trust
- Look at pilot schemes, re bottom up approaches to services and e.g.s of these being hammered - work being done via Centre for Welfare Reform
- Clock the difference between finance and funding – start up businesses, use of promissory notes etc.
- How are we going to talk to and incorporate views of service users?
- Ensure that there is a balance between the experiences of those who have opted in and those who go for an alternative
- Use students as a resource
- Do some mapping of the voluntary sector – we are groping towards a typology of the voluntary sector here
- Ensure that ethical issues are addressed

Appendix

**Launch of NCIA Inquiry into Voluntary Services: May 10th 2013
Participants List**

Adrian Barritt	Adur Voluntary Action/NCIA
Alastair Murray	Housing Justice
Andy Benson	NCIA
Ari Henry	People's Republic of Southwark
Bernard Davies	NCIA
Bob Rhodes	Lives Through Friends
Carl Allen	Individual activist
Chris Todd	Barking & Dagenham Council for Voluntary Services
Corinna Lotz	World to Win
David Boyle	Writer
Dorothy Newton	Individual activist
Elizabeth Bayliss	Social Action for Health
Frances Sullivan	NCIA
Gethyn Williams	Urban Forum
James Holland	Individual activist
Janice Marks	Federation of Community Development & Learning
Jenny Bourne	Institute for Race Relations
Kevin Nunan	Voluntary Action Camden
Liliana Dmitrovic	People's Republic of Southwark
Linda Milbourne	Academic
Linda Robinson	Harrow Agenda 21 Environmental Forum
Matt Scott	Community Sector Coalition
Nick Davies	Children England
Penny Waterhouse	NCIA
Rebecca Clarkson	Hackney Council for Voluntary Services
Ruth Cohen	NCIA
Selma Atun	Derman
Simon Watson	Unison
Steve Lancashire	Individual activist
Tim Brogan	London Voluntary Services Council
Ursula Murray	Academic
Vibeka Mair	Civil Society