

Old hands and the new wave of activists

What words of wisdom would you give a new wave of activists who have started to fight cuts across the UK?

NCIA was invited to help with one of the workshops at the [Netroots conference](#) in London on 8 January 2010. Around 35 people came to the session on countering the cuts in your area. Read on to find out what issues activists are grappling with and how we can draw on the wisdom of all people in our communities.

Jim Cranshaw from [Oxford Save our Services](#) said that he feels like a veteran campaigner – their anti-cuts campaign has been going since June 2010 since starting with four friends in a back garden. People in his group welcome people from all walks of life, ask people what they want to do rather than having a fixed campaign agenda, call out for skills, insist on imaginative campaign actions, and offer the use of their communication channels to other groups. He thinks being independent is key to their ability to get things done. They have fun meetings too!

Matt Scott from [Community Sector Coalition](#) (NCIA is a member) talked about the difference between building a movement and displaying it. He reckons militant altruism might be a useful way of going about things. This means listening to people but also embracing energy and anger rather than being afraid of it, such as finding the fighters and backing them. Wading into community groups spouting political theory about the dangers of neo-liberalism is probably a no-no.

Frances Sullivan from NCIA talked about the need to start where people are at – physically to begin with – before using social media. Like the other two speakers, listening to people was a key point in her advice to anti-cuts campaigners, particularly those who want to work with people who don't see themselves as being political. Face-to-face contact with people at their own meetings, as well as showing that cuts campaigners are aware of the negative impact that cuts are likely to have in their own area of interest are essential. For a successful anti-cuts campaign, the whole community needs to be involved but you just have to get started and build it up as you go along.

Campaign ammunition

Be yourself and don't be afraid to ask questions. Some anti-cuts groups were worried about being co-opted – the Socialist Worker Party and nimbyism (why don't we close the library down the road instead of the one in this richer neighbourhood) were both mentioned. Ask outright if you think people in your group have a hidden agenda, or quietly ask the person next to you if this seems OK to them.

Talk about our history and use the details. Learn or re-learn to tell our stories and keep asking why until we drill down to the causes of cuts (a bit of Paulo Freire's advice!). For example over the last 30 years local services have lost funding from businesses – business rates and the penny rate were examples given. This is a piece of missing information in the current anti-cuts campaign. Video interviews with veteran campaigners might be an interesting way to get the point across.

Learn to work with campaigners who aren't activists but don't wade in with a list of things they can do for you. Being concerned about a specific health issue or neighbourhood campaign probably takes up enough of their energy, but you may be able to help them with their campaign as a starting point and take it from there.

Use local networks and support organisations. Some councils for voluntary service may have taken a wrong turn by providing inappropriate support to community groups and they may be reluctant to get involved in anti-cuts campaigning. But they are likely to have databases of local community groups that you can use. And some CVS staff are brilliant so it's worth a go.

Go with the energy and don't get bogged down in bureaucracy. And keep an eye on your independence!

How to keep on keeping on

All this might seem like teaching grandmothers to suck eggs to NCIA folk and we know that instant results are unlikely. But what would you say to people who have just got involved in a local anti-cuts campaign and want to make links with community groups? They might be seasoned campaigners who are relieved to have found some fellow travellers. Or they may have just discovered their political muscles. Let us know if you have any nuggets of wisdom to share – comment below, tweet your advice using #oldhands, or email melaina@independentaction.net and I'll post a round up of your comments.

The Netroots workshop was organised by Nishma Doshi, an activist at **False Economy** – check out their website for analysis of the cuts and to share stories of local campaigns. Email nishma@falseeconomy.org.uk if you'd like to hear more about training and support for activists.