

What do we do about privatisation, cuts & public services?

Here's the latest discussions of the NCIA Planning Group (18.5.10), where we reported on what we're up to and had a special session on voluntary action, public services and cuts and what we do about it.

If you want to be part of these discussions, join the NCIA Assembly by getting in contact with us. The next meeting of the Planning Group is July 2nd, 1-4pm and we'll be talking about the action we're taking to oppose managerialism and private sector ideologies within voluntary organisations.

Update on internal issues

Recruitment to the first staff post of national co-ordinator is now underway. The job has been advertised widely via the networks that we think are most likely to bring people to us. The closing date for applications is 1st June. Assuming we are able to appoint, there will then be a period of induction, handing over and settling in.

At the same time some fundraising is going on to find the resources to expand further. An application to Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust will, if successful, allow us to do more work on linking policy and theory to practice. We are also working on a third aspect concerning effective ways to support Coalition work at local level and the role of local support organisations in this (more on this below).

This internal work is necessary but does take us away from the real work around issues. The move away from voluntary involvement and towards the model of using paid staff was noted, along with the need to protect the inclusive culture that we have built inside the Coalition. We need to keep an eye on this and agree a mechanism to review how things are going.

Overall strategy and approach

For the benefit of newer members and as a backcloth to the rest of the afternoon's discussions, our overall strategy was sketched out:

- ♣ For the next year or so we will focus on the three campaign priorities of challenging the role of voluntary agencies in the privatisation of public services; promoting inclusive styles of management and organisation; and work to promote and support community action.
- ♣ We will do this through core work (general promotion, policy-based work, networking, and building the Coalition) and through project work (focussing on specific themes, issues or areas of work).

Plans for action on 'managerialism'

The workshop in Nottingham at the end of February laid the beginning of a network of people interested in taking action on this issue. This has now been extended and comprises close to 50 people. What we now want to do is begin providing the resources and the focuses to deploy this interest and energy. Things being worked on now include:

- ♣ An NCIA position pamphlet on the issues involved – this is nearly ready
- ♣ The creation of a 'critical research facility' – a means of getting academics working for us to provide evidence and models of successful practice
- ♣ A series of seminars run by Colin Rochester, a number of which will focus on internal management and organisational issues
- ♣ Expanding our capacity to report (on the website and elsewhere) stories of resistance to new managerialist practices
- ♣ Creating the means and the capacity to begin offering 'independence audits' one aspect of which will be assessing internal management styles and arrangements.

At the same time we are forming and developing links with other groups working on these issues and with shared perspectives, for example the public sector unions. We have met with Unison and need to check out Unite (as there are still pockets of voluntary sector workers in that union). There has been a recent Unison report dealing with deteriorating terms and conditions in voluntary sector agencies. We are supporting the 'Just Wage' campaign (see <http://justwage.blogspot.com/>), which argues for a maximum 5:1 ratio of pay differentials. In respect to collecting stories, similar work is being done by 'In Defence of Youthwork' alliance and there are some lessons we could usefully learn from this (especially that it can be hard to get credible material that goes beyond anecdote). A link to 'Changing Minds' was also suggested (see www.changingminds.org/).

It was suggested and agreed that this area of work should be the main topic for the next meeting of the Planning Group (set for Friday 2nd July).

Action for Social Justice

This concerns the work we would like to support at local level, with a focus on groups who are actively working for social change and the kind of support that is needed to help make it happen (i.e. re-visiting the role of second tier organisations). We have made a funding application to City Parochial Foundation and the paper explaining the work is now [on the website](#). The essence of our intended approach is to:

- ♣ Focus the interest on effective ways of bringing back, encouraging and supporting advocacy and campaign work
 - ♣ Identify the kind of second tier support that would truly be helpful to those involved in these activities
- By:
- ♣ building a national interest group to bring together information and intelligence with interested NCIA supporters
 - ♣ and working on 4 local demonstration projects, co-ordinated by local host groups and supported by the Coalition.

A number of useful points were made in the discussion:

- ♣ it is very difficult as a national organisation to work effectively at local level – we have found this out directly via the local advice work we have been doing with AdviceUK. It may be that the most useful role would be that of raising money nationally that could then be spent locally (and the impact evaluated)
- ♣ it was suggested that job creation schemes might be a way of getting at least some resources into the mix
- ♣ there is also the question of community development workers as well as second tier agencies, the problem being that a lot of c.d. workers also do not know how to go about work in this area. We need to avoid seeing second tier support and community development as two quite separate streams of activity
- ♣ there was a request specifically to include issues arising from Preventing Violent Extremism in the project specification, because of the way in which minority groups are being overwhelmed by government policy in this area
- ♣ we need to recognise that we are getting more specific and political about who and what we are interested in – less about defending ‘ungoverned space’ as a whole and more about supporting particular types of activity going on inside that space
- ♣ a strength of the proposal is that it will focus on the forms of support that are effective rather than on the activities we don’t like
- ♣ and another strength will be the national group which can represent an alternative to the (now disintegrating) Capacity Builders approach
- ♣ we should not miss the opportunity for web-based discussions if these can actively help the project along.

Privatisation, public services and the role of voluntary action

Having established this area of work as a priority, we need to get a handle both on the complexity of the issues involved and effective ways in which the Coalition can be active. As a lead-in to the conversation we asked everyone to speak out what was in their mind around this theme and then used this material for an exchange of views, including about the Coalition’s role in this situation. The results look like this:

- ♣ The issues are framed around service cuts but also around other cuts too, to living standards for example
- ♣ What is crucial is resistance to these cuts – including the fact and necessity for opposition, since there is little note of this in the media and elsewhere
- ♣ In our part of the world, this again is the distinctive Coalition contribution – to offer an alternative voice
- ♣ We might now expect some upsurge in social unrest, and this may have positive consequences
- ♣ And we might expect some retaliation from the government/establishment e.g. new legislation against strikes or protest
- ♣ With respect to voluntary action role and involvement, we can’t talk about one sector – issues facing community groups are completely different to those facing the service providers; several people felt we should let the latter sink or swim, they have got themselves into this pickle, let them get out of it, and there were others who did not agree to this
- ♣ Our main interests should be in helping to build alliances that protect and sustain local groups and frontline services
- ♣ In this we should focus on developing our own capacity and supporting each other – and communicating this to others currently outside the Coalition – ‘come and talk to us’
- ♣ The situation may engender a new interest in volunteering, to take the place of paid-for public services – another complication for us to deal with

- ♣ On the other hand the cuts may get rid of some of the more crazy spending (e.g. ID cards) and leave a space for some re-birth
- ♣ The situation leaves room for another complicated debate – the question of user/worker control of services – the socialisation of services – democracy not always being a good thing in these contexts
- ♣ Which cuts to oppose? We need to be tactical in our approach
- ♣ We may find ourselves dealing with voluntary agencies actively conspiring with the government agenda e.g. buying into compulsory work schemes for young people
- ♣ Can we find links with people fighting training and education cuts?
- ♣ What role for the trade unions in all this, what potential for alliances useful to us?
- ♣ Our task is to stick to our core themes of independence and autonomy, outside of the political elites, establishment and particular arguments about what and how much
- ♣ We need to appreciate that different segments of our constituency and the policy and practice angles will be different for each:
 - the ‘third sector’ – the corporates, aka private-sector look-alikes, largely already lost to us
 - - the ‘in-betweenees’ – service providers, supporting communities but based on contracts and statutory money = confused and threatened
 - Community groups – unfunded or just a little bit funded, mostly into ‘respectable’ activities
 - Community activists and direct action – loosely grouped, numbers of individuals and prepared to use ‘non-respectable’ methods
- ♣ The last three of these segments are the legitimate parts of our constituency and we should work to generate mutual support within and between these parts.

What can NCIA offer in this situation?

- ♣ We need to make the political dimensions visible – the role of the state in public services, and in other areas, the role of others in public services, issues of distribution of wealth and questions of fairness, highlighting areas earmarked for privatisation via the voluntary sector, etc.
- ♣ We need to try and be as clear as we can what the Coalition stands for on the issues of public services. This should include a statement of the principles involved (such as democratically controlled, properly accountable, user/community led....) as well as the practise and practical implications (scale considerations, how resources are allocated ...). And we need to provide the evidence to support both our critique and our alternatives.
- ♣ The bottom line question is when and how is it acceptable for voluntary agencies to provide public services? Should some services never be run by the state (e.g. advice)? Some always run by the state (prisons)? Some maybe by the state, maybe by voluntary agencies? What is the state’s continuing role in mediating between different interests, for example, or in deciding on resource allocation?
- ♣ All this thinking and material should be available to people, especially at local level, who are having to make choices about these issues and done in a way that recognises that the operation or applicability of principles can often be shaped by the contingencies of particular circumstances
- ♣ We should continue to encourage de-coupling from local state agendas
- ♣ We should promote integrated local social action and the radical support that such action needs
- ♣ We should highlight the options and choices between functioning as a privatised operator versus the opportunities and shortcomings of trying to work unfunded
- ♣ Testbed areas to try out alternatives (e.g. Brighton?)
- ♣ Continue to provide a home for a broad spectrum of agencies and groups committed to acting independently – from the women’s institute to direct action
- ♣ Help people through the maze of what can be done about money, having it or the lack of it, and how those who

control it will control you

- ♣ Be active in trying to get some version of a compact for community groups/action
- ♣ focus on alliances and take lessons from successful examples like Dagenham, defend Whittington Hospital, London Citizens
- ♣ Try and generate a pool of money that could be used flexibly to support local action, including things like one-to-one support, finding NCIA-friendly consultants willing to offer services and support, etc.

Our next meeting

Will take place on Friday 2nd July 1pm-4.30(ish). Venue to be advised. The main theme for the meeting will be the programme of work around 'managerialism'.