

NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services

Briefing for position paper on volunteer-based services of community groups.

Introduction

As part of the NCIA inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services, we are intending to publish a series of position papers to explore key issues and stimulate the debate. This paper presents an outline brief for one such key issue – the role of community groups, their current state and future. This paper is a draft and we will welcome comments and suggestions that would improve it.

In drawing together and presenting the material necessary for this paper, we are looking for academics, researchers, practitioners and activists to help us with the task – offering evidence, case studies and the thinking we need to move towards a coherent position and narrative on the issues involved.

More information about the Inquiry and its scope can be found here -

<http://www.independentaction.net/2013/07/01/inquiry-into-voluntary-services-full-briefing-now-uploaded/>

Background and context

The NCIA Inquiry focus is on professionalised voluntary services. It is these services which are targeted as a replacement for, or alternative to, state services, and co-opted through contracts. This is not the case with services provided by community groups, where the scale of activity and organisational arrangements predominantly set them outside procurement and commissioning regimes. However, it would be a mistake and omission to ignore such services.

The bulk of voluntary action is carried out by small, local, volunteer-led and based community groups. These groups have little or no money and few other resources. They depend on a small number of local people, often neighbours and friends, who have come together to meet a visible need and to offer solidarity, mutual aid and conviviality. They can act to connect neighbours, or particular residents. They, as well as their beneficiaries, are often invisible and isolated, their activities sometimes described as “under the radar”. They tackle individual and community pressures in relation to domestic violence, poverty, health and social care, disability, immigration and asylum, local amenities, leisure and conviviality activities, the situation of younger and older people. They will often be in contact with people who do not or cannot access more mainstream support services. A large part of their role is to create bonds between people, what is sometimes called “social capital”. Some argue that this form of voluntary action is the key to building a more

holistic and successful network of social support and protection, able to augment and complement that available from more formally organised public services¹.

With the dismantling of public services, rights and entitlements, the pressure on these groups – to support and respond to community needs and relationships – is increasing as their resources to respond diminish. Small amounts of money, usually in the form of grants, can make a big difference to the viability and sustainability of these services. But even these grants are getting sucked up into contracts. And yet, many of these groups appear untouched by the co-option and managerialism of the larger professionalised voluntary services. More of these community groups have managed, through their exclusion from funding programmes and a ‘seat at the table’, to keep to their purpose and stand with communities. An examination of the future role of voluntary action in the provision of services to individuals and communities needs to have regard to this form of provision.

The purpose of the piece of work & areas for attention

The purpose of this position paper is to:

- test out our initial picture of the role and current state of community groups by providing a broad overview to show the contributions made by community groups to local services, civil society and likely direction of travel;
- and to indicate the potential, actual or future, offered by community groups to provide services which complement, not replace, public services; and to play their part more generally in mutual aid, independent voluntary action and a healthy civil (and uncivil) society.

Drawing on academic and research material, Government policy and statements, and the writings and views of informed commentators, the position paper will provide:

- A description of the role of community groups and their contributions to service provision and communities, the scale, nature and organising of activities, and likely trajectory;
- The extent to which community group services are affected by cuts to public services, rights and entitlements, contracting, privatisation, competition, ‘managerialism’ and top-down regimes of compliance;
- The nature of the relationships [including with activists, professional voluntary services and local umbrella groups], the resources and connections which sustain or undermine community groups;
- A brief sketch of the policy environment and ideologies which bear on the work and activities of community groups;
- An assessment of the impact on these groups of professionalised, larger scale VSGs moving into contracted services;
- The extent to which community groups do, or might, act as a radical force for social justice and equality; influence the shape of local services and policy; and the likely factors which will hinder/assist their radical action, including the role of community development and asset based approaches;
- Pointers to further follow up work that may be required within the terms of the Inquiry, such as gathering information from key respondents;
- What do we do about it? Ideas and suggestions about appropriate radical responses to the environment described.

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¹ See for example, Much More to Life than Services by Bob Rhodes,
<http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/by-date/much-more-to-life-than-services.html>