

Campaign Statement: supporting activism

Our campaign on supporting activism is at an early stage. It is based on the following beliefs about why community action is vital to our society and why it is under threat.

Community action – the backbone of voluntary action

The largest segment of voluntary and community action is made up of small unfunded community groups and individuals linked together informally. In 2006/7 NVCO estimated that there were 600,000 'informal civil society organisations' in the UK. There were also 180,000 registered charities, of which 55% had £10,000 or less annual income. About 40,000 of these charities receive money from the state but overall most income is raised privately and independently.

Community action is found in communities of place such as a neighbourhood or village and in communities of interest made up of people who share a common concern or belief. Groups exist for every purpose you can think of – campaigning and social action, faith, self help and support, leisure, culture and education.

Community action makes a unique contribution to a healthy civil society because it can:

- Build relationships between people in communities that help to improve the conditions of life, health and well-being and the environment
- Provide free or low cost activities or services to people who are otherwise unable to get them
- Help people gain new skills and confidence, useful in itself and as a path to further education or employment
- Increase involvement in local democracy and the extent to which people feel able to influence things around them. As part of this, community action has an important role in scrutinising and holding to account the activities of state agencies and powerful interest groups.

Public policy and its impact on community action

Government policy has long attested the role and importance of community action, particularly in relation to policy objectives that are about citizenship and responsibility, civil society, and the poor condition of democracy. Most recently, the government has avowed its interest in devolved decision-making through the localism agenda. However in practice the predominant government interest has been in the 'professionalised' part of the voluntary sector which can bid for contracts to deliver public services.

Where resources have been available for community action these have rarely been given directly to community groups or individuals to support their work. Instead second tier agencies have been financed to work with community groups to 'increase capacity'. This has generally been seen to mean encouraging groups to become more formally organised, improve their 'governance', and tie their activities more closely into the priorities of statutory agencies.

Government interest in community action has been driven by political and ideological perspectives but it has been presented as technocratic and managerial. Unfortunately, second tier groups such as councils for voluntary service have largely accepted the drive to

make community groups and community action 'fit for purpose' rather than supporting groups to remain independent and be rooted in their communities.

The severe cuts to public expenditure that started in 2010 will continue for several years ahead and will result in fewer and poorer quality public services, a decline in living standards and more pressure on communities and community support networks. Although spending cuts will not impinge directly on community groups (as there is little public money there anyway), demand on their services and activities is likely to increase as a result of pressures on the communities they serve.

The NCIA campaign

We see community action as a vital part of voluntary action. We think there is a danger that this already marginalised segment of the wider voluntary sector will remain marginalised. We are particularly concerned about campaigning and social action. The Localism Bill gives no clue as to how this can be supported and the 'big society' is a marketing campaign for privatisation – services that can't make a profit will have to be provided for free. The vested interests of most of the national second tier agencies lie elsewhere but it is important that there are organisations at local and national levels that continue to promote, defend and support community groups and community action. We aim to make sure that this is the case.

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