

NCIA assemblies: putting the politics back into voluntary action

Report from impromptu NCIA Assembly at Occupy London's Bank of Ideas, 13th December 2011

A discussion to find a new space for voluntary and community action

We started with 18 people, ended up with about 30, of which 8 were NCIA regulars, about 10 were voluntary sector workers who haven't been to assemblies before (youth workers, second tier, community sector) and the rest were Occupy people and other interested people who'd found out about it through Occupy.

We were trying to think about:

- How do we protect our independent, ungoverned space?
- How do we support activism in charities, community groups and public services?
- How do we link activists with charity, community and public service workers?
- How do we put the politics back into voluntary action?

Whole group discussion

Bernard Davies talked about why he thinks the In Defence of Youth Work campaign is important: quality, inclusive youth work practice, led by the young people and based on voluntary participation, is being attacked, and government is attempting to change it into surveillance, pigeonholing and criminalising of young people.

Nazreen Subhan talked about the pressures on her community association in Fitzrovia, which works behind the scenes to try to preserve what is valued about the local area in the face of unsustainable developments by big businesses and fragmentation of the community. They don't take money from government because they want to be independent, but they have so many pressures on them because of the insecure job market etc., that there are limits to the energy people can give as volunteers.

There was discussion about the localism bill and planning zones. Could this be an opportunity for organisations like Nazreen's, or was it all just intended to create more space for business and less for communities? Debate about whether government initiatives like this, which are skewed towards the market, should be exposed/rejected/ignored, or whether it needs to be recognised that (and why) community groups and organisations might want to see if they can use them to help their cause.

This led onto questions around: How do you be a political activist when you're worrying about insecure employment/housing etc? How can we make spaces/discussions that are outside the dominant ideology? Some felt reference always had to be made to the wider, global forces that our local problems all relate to. Others said you need to meet people where they are, maybe not lecture them about capitalism and tell them to 'be political' or try to persuade them of your view, but see what they want in their communities and start there. People will only fight to protect something they see as theirs. The media can be used to link local struggles to global struggles and to link people at local level.

In making links, there was division on the question of whether campaigns should reach out to unexpected allies such as businesses, the right, the countryside lobby, in an attempt to build a broad movement, or whether some interest groups should never be engaged with (do we do outreach to the BNP or the English Defence League?) Consensus seemed to be there should not be engagement with e.g. far right organisations, but there should be open engagement with the issues people face which those organisations capitalise on, i.e. talking to racist young people about their fears.

Division, too, about how to respond when services are cut. Do we run them ourselves in alternative spaces, as BOI is doing? Or if we do that, are we playing into the government's hands? Is that too close to the 'big society' model where people help themselves? By doing things for free that we used to be paid for, are we conniving in the destruction of the welfare state? There were differences of opinion about whether we need a strong state to provide public services, or whether we can only do what's really needed without the state.

How can people in the voluntary sector support the Occupy movement? Suggestions were by publicising the space available at the Bank of Ideas to community groups and sharing expertise.

Small group discussions

1.

- Occupy captures the imagination because it's new.
- Administration costs are kept very low.
- The public doesn't trust charities either – there is a fear of corruption.
- Something to read: The Cancer Stage of Capitalism.
- Need to create more spaces for enquiry and to appeal to a wider range of people.
- Need to pass activist knowledge down generations.
- Mew media: blogs that raise awareness and using numbers to effect: Blottr.

2.

- Make things visible, including difference. Find out what people's issues and fears are and try to respond to them. Counter anger with education.
- Use the media.
- The internet can be an organising tool, but people need to be linked together in real space (e.g. 'communities' – what/where are they?), and then be physically visible, like the camp outside St Paul's.
- Need to work together instead of competing, but it's easier said than done!

3.

- Competition for resources destroys solidarity.
- People are afraid to make a noise.
- Decisions are made in meetings: people don't cut their own jobs.
- Need to find the balance: stay in view, keep doing what you do and make a noise too.

4.

Ways of protecting our independent, ungoverned space:

- Learn to work non-hierarchically.
- Keep occupying! Remember you might see your wins two years down the line.
- Show the reality of the economic system collapsing, voice what hasn't been voiced before.
- Gather info and show the public what is needed. Get back to basic needs – we all need food, security, shelter.
- Demonstrate.
- Make symbolic acts that change the narrative (Occupy, Greenham Common). What are they?

Who are they for? What if they become normalised?

Report from NCIA assembly, Manchester, 12 May 2011

The assembly in Manchester – NCIA's first meeting in the city – attracted about 30 people. We talked about how to get our stories out while we face a bombardment of policy changes, media hype, the scramble for funding and jobs, and the fight for services and power in local communities. We talked about linking with trade unions and anti-cuts groups, experiences of fighting back, and how to get the all-important resources for voluntary action – and we don't just mean money. People who can listen to what's really going on, support each other and speak out are the key to independent action. Read on for a summary of discussions and key points we can act on.

1. Group discussion about resourcing independent action

Main points from our discussions:

Take into account the climate of cuts, recession and political responses:

- It's a very dynamic and fluid world, which will require us to be light on our feet in our responses
- We explored two responses – negotiating compromises and survival within the current resource regimes; separatism and autonomous action.
- There is likely to be an army of pissed off unemployed people – they are a resource as well as needing solidarity and help for personal survival (the Kindling Trust was mentioned here). But beware, in turning the empty notion of the Big Society against itself – we can show what the real Big Society wants to say and be, but it should not result in undermining the redistribution of wealth and public services
- Direct action may have its place – occupying useful buildings or land, seizing assets of community value
- Don't forget legal remedies, particularly in negotiating compromises and acting against cuts (eg. Disability Equality NW)

There are so many different forms of voluntary action and ways to resource it that it's best to reach for stories to illustrate the different situations and options:

- Money and paid staff – paid staff can undermine voluntary action, and money can trap as well as liberate. Reaching for money and paid staff depends on what you want to do and how you want to do it
- Formality and structures – different resources are needed for informal and formal activities, and to service more formal structures BUT some structure is needed to ensure accountability and efficiency
- For some actions, especially campaigning, people are more important than money – but how to engage and keep people in action? Many things can be got in kind – office facilities, venues – or through swapping, bartering or exchanges (I'll do that for you if you do that for me).
- An underground network could be created to move and divert resources around to those who need help, this could be hardware as well as small pots of money or resources on the margins
- Watch out for internal markets between voluntary groups ie charging each other
- Statutory money can work IF it comes with clearly defined terms and conditions which don't interfere with your purpose and how you go about things. You need to know the areas where you are NOT prepared to compromise and the terms/conditions which will undermine your autonomy

- Ensure a diverse resource base – don't depend on one source

What can we do, to help people resource their actions?

- Create opportunities to share stories, different situations, sharing connections and intelligence, what's going on and experiences of what works and what doesn't
- Get the information out about what's happening, research results and evidence to support actions and approaches, stuff that works
- How to navigate and survive commissioning and contracting – bottom lines, evidence of what doesn't work and why it's a bad idea and approach
- Inspiration and stories of struggle – whether successful or not – keep people going
- Expose bad things – investigate specific issues/struggles eg. cuts in advice services, particular fights, how much voluntary sector CEOs are paid

What's the game plan? Survive not prosper OR Survive and thrive? Take your pick!

2. Group discussion about linking with anti-cuts campaigns and trade unions

Experiences of fighting

- Challenging councils using legal challenges around equality duties/equality impact assessments. Some examples of successes in the north west. Find an affected individual who can get legal aid, or an organisation can get the help of the Public Law Project. See the equality and human rights commission website
- It's easier to focus on a concrete thing such as the closure of a library and get people for other campaigns through this, rather than general campaigns against cuts to all services
- With hidden cuts like these you need to tell the stories, get the info out, counter media stories about 'benefit scroungers' etc.
- Use the local media – letters, events, photos. Don't let them manipulate your message
- Social media is not a substitute for real world interaction between people, just a useful back-up
- Need to encourage existing local networks and the organisations which survive to keep track of those who have lost their jobs but are still around wanting to be active and use their skills, and link them with each other. Roles for CVSs? Organisations like FCDL? Organisations with independent money? 'Second tier' support organisations need to re-focus and see anti-cuts activism as a central part of the voluntary sector

Issues with and ideas about unions

- Some unions (Unison) are only concerned with jobs, not opposing cuts on principle. They won't support the voluntary sector against councils

- However Unison will provide money, resources, meeting space, hands off help through a loose affiliation. Ask them, invite them to your meetings
- Unite more active than Unison, especially where there are specialist groups. Need to find the voluntary sector specific branches in your area
- Individual personalities, local and national, are key. PCS union, SERTUC regional groups already know NCIA. Include them in information

Summary: what we can do

- Counter the mass media and send out alternative messages: link with sympathetic media/sympathetic individuals in mainstream media, understand how the mainstream media works (you will never have power), use Youtube etc.
- Organising is worth it for the process, even if you don't win! It keeps us sane, connects us, young people can learn about power and activism
- Use every official and unofficial avenue available in a local area/around an issue. Bring together different groups and alliances. Don't let them divide us!

3. Group discussion about communications and media

We talked about how to have an alternative voice and get our stories out.

Communication includes talking to and listening to neighbours, community groups and campaign groups; independent local media is as important to being heard as the national media.

Telling the truth, connecting with people we know in our communities and having a sense of history keeps us going and sometimes inspires us, but it can be tough-going when we are bombarded with information in our media that there is no alternative to the cuts.

What's getting in the way of local communication?

- Digital divide – change happens through people talking to each other and seeing that information leads to action. It doesn't depend on Facebook and Twitter – many local people don't use them
- Lack of independent outlets for community newspapers – e.g. independent record shops have largely disappeared
- Mood music of local council propaganda – people don't really know what goes on in town halls and how they can influence decisions
- Publication standards set by glossy print publications – the days are gone when people will pick up a photocopied newsletter
- Many local topics are not sexy e.g. housing, even though they affect people's lives so strongly
- Getting info from communities without the same people speaking all the time

What we can do locally

- Local communication training – e.g Salford Star runs training for community groups in how to write a press release, how to speak to the media
- Reflect what's going on – report what people are really saying, what's really going on in town halls. But be a “mirror with a boot” – we have an agenda, we want to change things
- Follow the money – talk about how resources are used
- Local stories often get picked up by national press – don't underestimate this!
- Be optimistic – people aren't stupid; they have stories to tell and local reporting can cause u-turns in local decisions – people will fight for services
- Remember that political education happens through doing, being involved.

What NCIA can do

- Be a national voice, the go-to people for the real story on local action, so-called empowerment, Localism Bill, 'big society' etc.
- Broker access for journalists to people who are willing to speak out (but we struggle with this as many representatives of the voluntary sector still aren't prepared to speak out!)
- Keep sending speakers to events
- Focus our messages, investigate and tell the real stories. E.g. privatisation stories are beginning to get heard
- Harry and hassle national organisations who should be speaking out, E.g. NCVO spokespeople
- Engage in PR battle – get a charity PR company to work for us – they might do it for free as they haven't got enough work and want to look 'big society'; change our name, re-launch (though our complicated name reflects our complicated nature!)

Whole group discussions

Why not many people from the VCS came to the assembly

- Expectation to join in – we asked people to fill in a form saying what they're concerned about before the meeting and we used the word 'politics' in the publicity. These are good things but might put people off if they're used to being more passive or detached
- Bad timing – right now people are crushed under the weight of uncertainty and fear in the voluntary and community sector; they are trying to keep groups and services going and to get funding, and worried about their jobs. But there are lots of people who have lost their jobs and are fighting for services, so keep inviting these people to get involved
- Demoralisation – people are wondering if it will make any difference; are there enough of us
- Too little time – people are focused on their own organisation at community level and don't want to spend resources outside their own group
- Personal versus work – it might be easier to put time into NCIA on a personal level

What next (end session)

Should we have regional NCIA groups? Could work if the impetus was already there in the local area. If anyone wants to talk about this further, please contact Rachael or Melaina on info@independentaction.net.

Report from assembly meeting on 27 January 2011

Around 30 people, including individual activists and people from voluntary and community sector organisations, gathered at the Quaker Meeting House in Sheffield to explore alternative ways to organise ourselves in the face of cuts, hierarchies and the privatisation of our common wealth. There were three speakers followed by workshops.

Speakers

Steve Radford, The Community Union

www.offbeat.karoo.net/community

Steve talked about his experience of setting up a new branch of the Community Union for people working in social care agencies, voluntary organisations or housing associations. It is called The Social & Community Care, Voluntary Sector and Social Housing Workers' Combined Branches. Steve said the voluntary and community sector is a barren place for unions. Only around 15 per cent of workers in the sector are unionised – unions have struggled to prioritise organising in places with only a few workers. To work with the sector, union organisers need to communicate on a personal level and work with management committees that may have no experience of union. This is a challenge as unions are traditionally bureaucratic.

Opportunities he sees for his branch are: working with those organisations that want to be good employers and encouraging them to band together, getting involved in broader campaigns such as the Community Action Network in Hull, learning to work with communities and with intermediaries such as trades councils, and working to keep statutory rights in people's contracts. He can see opportunities to work with rural organisations too.

Susi Miller, Federation for Community Development Learning

www.fcdl.org.uk

Susi talked about FCDL's work to support communities to express themselves politically and find their skills to organise. She started with a reminder about the commitment in community development practice to learning, reflection and making connections between personal experience and wider issues of social justice – a form of political literacy. She talked about visual literacy methods that start with asking questions then can help people find ways to tell their stories. This might lead to drawings or films made with flip cameras, for example. The aim is to help: "people be able to read and name the world and make sense of the causes and connect with others" rather than doing community engagement on the cheap for local authorities.

The visualisations that the assembly came up with when we thought about our current situation were an egg (new potential not yet realised), a closing door (reduced resources) and a gag (silenced voices – speaking not allowed).

Penny Waterhouse, NCIA

legacy.independentaction.net

Penny talked about the need to move towards the society we want to see – which means trade unions taking political action as well as protecting workers rights, collective action that includes individual activists as well as people who work in the sector, and speaking out – by everyone. She talked about her frustrations with the so-called professionalisation of charities and community organisations and how this inhibits people from protecting freedom of citizenship.

She concluded that we need to be better at defending our space from being squeezed by both the state and the private sector and we need to strengthen our understanding of independent action.

Workshop notes

1. Managerialism workshop

Ideas

- Ban 'leadership'
- Fluid/ informal job descriptions – not delineated roles
- Personalisation? Can it be an empowerment model not a consumer model?
- Negotiate contracts – get legal help to negotiate – you know the work, they don't. Get staff to do restructures not managers
- Campaign for holistic model of health
- 'Management' isn't necessarily a bad thing!
- Physical organisation of working space and the effect it has
- Positive mergers/ sharing
- Confidence to negotiate, together with others, coming from your values – which are shared
- Honesty/transparency – if it is a hierarchy admit it. Say where the power is.
- Staying close to the community (or to whatever your identity is)
- Explore and express what your organisation's culture is
- Don't do pretend consultation!
- Local campaigns against big national organisations coming in
- Small is beautiful – find small within big? ◊cross-disciplinary teams/job swapping, collective working
- Look for and publicise good practice

Problems

- Getting commissioners/funders to recognise: holistic work, preventative, innovative, risk-taking
- Getting them not to under-fund
- Loss of unrestricted funding
- Mergers – loss of organisational culture
- How do you combine values with having to project a public campaign?

2. Public Services and Privatisation workshop

- Traditional relationship between voluntary and statutory: origins – very little link! Groups and trade unions prompted state to provide services.
- Then voluntary and community sector filling the gaps providing services more cheaply
- Big society debate – going back philanthropy of the past.
- Grants have virtually disappeared.
- Political action collapsed into “jobs” in the voluntary sector – end of 70s early 80s – Is/ was that a slippery slope?
- Unpaid/ unconstituted voluntary/community groups still the backbone of the sector
- Is it acceptable still to accept government money? Or is it too compromised?
- Analogies with disabled people’s movement and women’s movement. Direct payment= privatisation disabled org. Fighting over crumbs – not a better system than public service provision – business with huge bureaucracy and removing power & control, dressed up as community empowerment.
- The answer? A plurality of approaches? Dialogue with social services or getting together to do it ourselves?
- But communities cannot always do things for themselves.
- The language determines the debate.
- Younger generation in VCS don’t know any different. No alternative vision.
- A diverse sector but it should be based on principles
- Paid professionals – who do they represent? A career driven sector. Bureaucratic class of professionals.
- What to do about it? Organisations going under – who’s going to do anything?
- Local voluntary sector could field candidates for local elections. Create a new platform.
- The VCS introverted world – difficult to mobilise, need a new paradigm.
- E.g. in Sheffield of voluntary organisations backing group threatened with closure
- Easier to fight for someone else than for yourself- more risky-sticking necks out.
- Go back to members & users. e.g. of local campaign- users, local vol. orgs- organised a public meeting.

Community assemblies

- Enthusiasm in communities to get involved in forums /decision-making processes
- Reclaim term “Voluntary sector”. Need principles from which to base a campaign. Restore community faith in the sector. Need to stand by colleagues in public sector. Public sector job losses – replaced by volunteers
- Voluntary sector= a strategy – one of many. The interest – social change (positive!). If voluntary sector no longer engaged in that, no longer worth engaging with as a strategy.

Summary

- Are the voluntary and community sector the right vehicle for social change? Or has it moved too far away from that agenda?
- New strategies! – that allow us to be political.
- Set out principles & challenge government “double speak”

3. Supporting activism workshop

Questions and answers

- Why do people get involved in activism? Humans are much more – our highest selves; Injustice is wrong; Politics keep me sane; Anger is not sustainable – Anger and then organise.
- How can activists sustain themselves and each other? Support from family, friends and others; Deciding where to put energy; Listening to others and coming to events like this; Know that I am not alone; Recognise our lives outside of activism; Establish & build networks; Actions that connect
- What is needed at local level? Beware that career strategies takes us away from what we need to do – Get trade unions to be more involved in community
- Where are the structures to help us at local level? Social movements e.g. women’s and environmental movements

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NCIA assembly: the cuts – how do we respond?

Report from assembly meeting on 26 October 2010

Three speakers talked about their experiences of the cuts in relation to local action, research and mobilisation. This was followed by lively workshop sessions where people talked, argued and figured out what’s going on locally and how to work together. For NCIA the Assembly confirmed that we need to focus on linking people together, supporting activism, forming wider alliances and getting the message out about the real effects of the cuts. And we need to keep on challenging commissioning and the Big Society Show.

Notes from the three speakers

Denise McDowell, GMIAU

Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit (GMIAU) has been in immigration advice for 21 years, for the last 10 of which they have received legal aid money. This was tendered earlier this year and 95% of money available for the Greater Manchester area has gone to one supplier; the remaining 5% to Denise's group and the law centre. This means they have lost 70% of their income and have gone from 5-700 'matter starts' (newly opened cases) a year to 195.

GMIAU mounted a campaign to get the decision reversed, including a demonstration timed to coincide with the Conservative Party conference; trying to get support from Labour MPs (difficult as the tendering of legal aid happened under their government); and an individual letter writing campaign. The Legal Services Commission (LSC) response has been a stonewall 'all bound up with a tendering process' and said they have to stick with this for reasons of 'fairness'.

The situation with legal aid was made worse because the local authority began commissioning advice services jointly with the LSC. This exercise has turned provision upside down with 50% of the advice agencies in Greater Manchester getting the money and 50% getting nothing. There are now closures and takeovers going on.

All of this illustrates the damage that can be done by competition and reliance on market forces. Another effect is to make the agencies involved very wary of campaigning or speaking out and protective of what they have got. The outcome is agencies that are fearful, isolated and vulnerable. There is an urgent need to show that there is another way to organise funding and another way for advice agencies to work together, develop influence and show solidarity.

Ben Robinson, nef

Ben gave the background to nef – 'economics as if people matter' – and said their response to the cuts is being worked through across their different teams as all are relevant in different ways. The finance team has produced a report looking at 'where did our money go?'. The 'valuing what matters' team is focussing on impact and outcome – to help groups be able to demonstrate how truly effective they are in the hope that this will be recognised by funders in their cuts decisions. The 'co-production' team continues to push their line that public services should be provided with rather than to people and redefining the role of the state as 'an enabler'.

Ben works in the co-production team. This focuses especially on health and social care and supports 150 front line practitioners who work in the public and third sector. A sizeable minority are focused on social care issues, but the network members extend across all sectors and are partly defined by their commitment to breaking out of particular service areas and instead working with people as they experience public services.. Again the emphasis is on helping them

demonstrate their effectiveness (e.g. Social Return on Investment). They are also working on showing the value of preventive services in a project for the Cabinet Office.

Alf Filer, Coalition of Resistance

The Coalition of Resistance was set up to promote and support opposition to the cuts. Their starting point is that the new government is just New Labour but more so with no real difference. Their aim is to show that there is a viable alternative to these cuts, e.g. nationalising the banks.

Alf made the following points:

- there is evidence now emerging that the public is opposed to the cuts.
- local coalitions are happening around the country and the Coalition of Resistance wants to form as a national point of co-ordination and solidarity.
- an important line is that this all represents an attack on the welfare state, which despite the media presentation, is well valued by the public.
- their line is not to argue for going back to the past – public services were rightly criticised under Labour. What is needed is not only to hold on to public services but to democratise them.

Notes from the workshops: what do we want to say and do about cuts?

Group 1

- Cuts – no! Not necessary!
- It doesn't matter which party's in power – it's the ideology.
- What can we do?
- Fight! Take the lead from France!
- How to organise?
- Communities!
- Need for ground-level support for local activism (inc. some expertise/money) to provide impetus.
- We need to do it together – but how?

Group 2

NCIA:

- Should it have a position/view on the Big Society?
- Should it articulate an alternative vision based on the years of experience of VCS orgs and individuals criticising the way the public sector interacts with local communities?
- VCS fills in the gaps – it can't replace the public sector.

Oppose the cuts:

- These are not normal circumstances – the scale of the cuts is so enormous.
- Explain the impact and demonstrate this to local communities.

- Research and get the information out there.
- Try to get examples, e.g. every £100 cut from youth services will mean two young people entering the criminal justice system.
- Social enterprises = privatisation. It won't work with the most vulnerable people with complex needs.: you can't make money out of that!
- The government announced 470 million for the Big Society – peanuts compared to the cuts.
- Allow people routes in to campaign – broad based movement. Some orgs/individuals might decide not to publicly oppose the cuts. Don't reject them – give them an opportunity to change their minds.
- Lobby local authorities – commissioning isn't the way forward.

Group 3

What to do re vol sector/union/public sector worker relations:

- Contact local public sector unions.
- Be on picket lines defending workers e.g. fire fighters.
- Local cross-cutting campaigns, e.g. People Before Profit, which can bring together lots of interests: all for one, one for all, no race to the bottom.
- Acknowledge that union's hands are sometimes tied due to bureaucracy/fear of legal challenges, so they can't act quickly. The voluntary sector can initiate actions more promptly.

Generally:

- Resist locally but with some sort of regional/national co-ordination to show the links.
- Make a simple economic point about the cuts not making sense.
- Capping of top salaries in private/statutory/charity/voluntary sector: managerialism part of the problem of how money is used/misused.

Group 4

1. Start with the ideology behind the cuts: understand 'theirs', understand 'ours.' (everyone should have a good quality of life, sharing etc.)

2. What 'we' want to see (our vision of society):

- Welfare state?
- Voluntary v. state provision
- Good people do something, we are responsible for our world.
- Etc..

3. Action:

- Local
- Tactical tips
- Critical cuts – ‘as if people matter’
- Principles
- Pragmatism
- Positive
- No campaigns, yes campaigns.

Group 5

What next?

- Sharing information about local action, protests, campaigns
- Media – influence
- Provide information – Rights! Facts!
- Revisit forms and formats of information
- A revolution!
- Entitlements v. choice: basic principles of entitlement: develop the analysis.
- Solidarity, democracy (in its true sense), equity, autonomy, liberty.

Group 6

- Whom are we appealing to and demonstrating against? Be clearer?
- Timing: is it too soon? When will we know more specifically about the cuts?
- What will the alternatives be? What will really happen when the cuts kick in?
- Historical perspective is needed (i.e. what did happen to the communities affected by previous cuts?)
- Can we find political allies? Some MPs?
- Make better use of ‘consultations’?
- The cuts are going ahead: how to prevent the worst from happening? What can be salvaged (e.g. from pilot projects)?

Notes from the whole group discussions

- Despite the cuts, LA officers are still speaking the same language about commissioning and behaving as if it is business as usual
- Interest in shared action against the cuts across statutory/non-statutory boundaries (with the unions as an obvious possible point of contact).
- One effect of the cuts inside the statutory sector will be to lose the people who have knowledge and experience of the VCS
- Local campaigns are springing up around the country e.g. Bradford People’s Coalition and protest happening e.g. the Stockport meeting which saw off the Big Society Network/DCLG roadshow

- The Big Society rhetoric creates problems for us as (like some New Labour rhetoric before it) in that it often says the things that we aspire to, whilst we know that it will not turn out like that.
- Alliances between trades councils and community interests
- Dealing with competitive and predatory organisations
- Many public sector workers see the voluntary sector as a threat.
- The statutory sector is still looking upwards (central govt targets etc.)
- 'Fairness' is a front – we have to expose this.
- The focus on 'procurement' is stuffing people, trying to force us all to survive in a market. We must oppose procurement and commissioning: poorer quality service provision, lack of equity, quick fixes, profiteering, people endangered.
- Ignite feelings of injustice in local populations.
- Use government rhetoric back at them: commissioning doesn't allow for 'local control,' 'innovation' or 'people power.'
- There's another way apart from self-interest!
- Groups may need to get realistic about the services they can offer.
- How do we deal with 'their' use of 'our' rhetoric?
- And challenge our so-called 'representatives' to say the right thing?
- What's the scope for/value/impact of non-co-operation?
- Pay attention to the impact of the changes on women.
- Speak plainly: use our own language.
- How to avoid being split and divided from each other and from other fellow travellers in the statutory sector?
- Anti-cuts action is not about defending the past but creating something new.
- It's not about opposing all cuts on principle but about quality of life.
- How to manage conflict between us and find the things we can do together.
- Pluralistic action has been seen elsewhere, e.g. G7/G20 protests.
- By-pass the structures to get to the individuals who want to be active: explore the unofficial links between people.
- Gather and share examples of things that work.
- Use the Facebook page
- Focus on actual impacts on people around us.
- Think about offering mentoring arrangements and training opportunities to activists.
- Helping people work together to provide services.
- Encourage trade unions to be more canny about their actions, e.g. selective withdrawal or using grievances.
- Don't wait for the cuts – get cracking now!
- Contracts/funding coming to an end is also cuts

- Don't replicate what others are already doing, e.g. 'The False Economy' – link to it instead.
- Use on-line surveys e.g. Survey Monkey to gather local evidence.
- Local is the key – maybe NCIA could help in a couple of local areas?
- Acknowledge the fear and anxiety people are feeling.
- Get people to join their union.
- Map contacts and connections.
- Find more money to finance this work? Trade unions? Set up a charity? Find and lobby radical funders.

Summary of action for NCIA

- Link people – mapping, website, facebook.
- Support activism – share resources, training, mentoring, 'help line', targeted support to a couple of local areas.
- Form wider alliances – with statutory sector, especially locally, MPs, trade unions, other campaigns?
- Get the message out – show evidence of impact, real effects of cuts, campaign against commissioning, challenge Big Society Show and social enterprise, give a historical perspective, challenge the received interpretations, engage the media, be clear about the ideology.