

The Future of Advice: Reclaiming the Agenda

WHERE HAVE WE BEEN? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

The role of the voluntary and community sector

- The existence of the voluntary and community sector in the UK is a largely unique and precious commodity. It has the history and the future potential to pioneer social and political action, to challenge oppression and authority, to build a better society.
- Though not always radical, a key characteristic of the sector is its independence – of the State, of government, of private and vested interests.
- The work of the voluntary sector is part of the political process of society.

The role of the advice sector

- Advice services occupy a special position within the voluntary sector. This is because its work focuses explicitly on rights and responsibilities, and because it offers practical help and solidarity to people on the receiving end of those commanding various seats of power.
- The advice sector is in a unique position to combat unfairness, injustice and abuse and to obtain redress.
- This role is not neutral or impartial. By definition, it is on the side of its client or community; and it represents these interests against other interests.
- Most important in this context is the power of the State and the relationship between the citizen and the State.
- And the responsibility that comes out of that is to take action – confrontational action when needed – at a level that goes beyond the individual.
- The debate about the future of the advice sector is therefore directly connected with our perspectives about citizenship, democracy, rights, human rights and about collective action.
- This work cannot be done from a position of dependence or from the forging of a 'partnership' with the State. From the State's perspective, partnerships are a tactical device; they should be for us too.
- To do all this successfully and with integrity, demands a zealous regard to independence. This is the bedrock – independence, the commitment to use this independence, and the willingness and courage to stand out and stand up are the hallmarks of a vibrant advice sector. Without these things there really is no point to it.

The context currently

- For three decades the independence of the voluntary sector has been progressively eroded. Grants-to-contracts, CCT/Best Value, performance management frameworks, the 'third way' ideology and the confidence trick of 'partnership'.
- This is a challenge to our liberty and to the nature of civil society.
- At the same time, this is paralleled by increasing centralisation, little interest in redistributive action, a commitment to private sector solutions, little progress in narrowing inequality gaps and a warm appreciation of volunteer-based services.
- Closer to home in the advice sector we are seeing:
 - A fragmentation of rights and the profile of service access and delivery;
 - More interest in citizens' responsibilities than in citizens' rights;
 - A developing Statutory role in direct I/A provision;
 - A desire to reduce expenditure on legal services;
 - An interest in cheaper n-f-p I/A services.
- And not just close to home, but *in* the home, we are seeing:
 - The use of Quality Assurance as a way to standardise service provision and hammer local advice provision into the required shape;
 - Progressive moves to create an inspection regime controlling operational procedures *and* the context of advice interventions;
 - The use of the CLSPs as an additional tactical device to bring advice agencies under control.
- The likely consequences of these changes for I/A services are:
 - Pressure to establish more formal and professionalised services – more 'legal, less 'community';
 - An increasingly fragmented pattern of private/public services, combining commercial interests with statutory responsibilities;
 - An increase in the need for independent I/A, especially for more intensive casework and advocacy to enforce rights;
 - Further pressure on funding for I/A services, particularly in the face of statutory I/A initiatives.
- Together, all this adds up to a fundamental threat to the values and principles on which the independent advice sector has been built. This threat will only be fought off if there is a commitment to do so and if there is an effective co-ordinated response across and between the networks – directly involving practitioners and member agencies.