

National Coalition for Independent Action

Time to fight for independence

Do you feel free to speak out and take action on what matters to you?

Are you worried your organisation is losing sight of what it's there for?

Act with us now to preserve and protect voluntary action

National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) is an alliance of individuals and organisations who believe that our freedom to join with others in independent voluntary and community activities is in danger. This leaflet sets out why we think this is the case and what we can do about it.

Our role and our future are in danger

Whether it's stamp collecting or social reform, the liberty to join together to pursue shared interests, even when these might bring us into conflict with others, is a crucial part of democratic society. For centuries, what we now call the voluntary and community sector (VCS) has been a haven for innovation and community action and a way of holding governments and other powerful interests to account.

CARTOON: MORAG MACINNES



Pressure on the independence of organisations is now extreme as a result of national and local government attempts to use the sector to work for it through the Public Service Delivery Plan.

Some voluntary organisations have added to the problem through their compliance with the plan. The aim of the plan is to 'modernise' public services by contracting them out. The voluntary sector is expected to operate, alongside the private sector, as a delivery vehicle, competing for contracts, meeting government targets and controlled by government-devised performance management systems. These systems can force ways of working, such as rigid hierarchies, that contradict the original ethos of the voluntary sector organisation.

IN PRACTICE Southall Black Sisters

Southall Black Sisters, an organisation providing support to black and Asian women experiencing domestic violence, successfully challenged Ealing Council's decision to withdraw its funding at the High Court. The council had used government guidance on community cohesion to justify removing funding because the group's services were only for some ethnic groups. Lord Justice Moses said: "There is no dichotomy between funding specialist services and cohesion; equality is necessary for cohesion to be achieved." The council withdrew its case and will now review its decision.

Other organisations also reacted angrily to the government's draft Cohesion Guidance for Funders which seemed to imply that supporting ethnic minorities and other 'single groups' was detrimental to cohesion. The government has yet to produce a revised version.

Some VCS organisations have sacrificed control over their own activities. In 2006 the Charity Commission estimated that 60% of charities with an income over £500,000 were delivering public services and one third of these derived 80% or more of their income from these sources. Since then, the pressure has intensified and been extended to smaller, locally-based VCS groups.

"Increasingly in order to survive, voluntary organisations are being forced into doing things they don't particularly want to do, and stopped from doing what they do want to do. The sector is not good at saying 'no.' Usually to do so has serious consequences – losing services to clients, making staff redundant, even closure – but it is a weakness and does mean that it is easy to steadily get pushed off course" (Director's review, Newcastle CVS 2007/8).

In this competitive environment the losers are the historic mainstay of the UK voluntary sector – smaller, service-focused groups, rooted in communities. The modest, demand-led grant programmes they previously used to support their own identified local needs are disappearing. Some organisations are forming themselves into consortia in the hope of winning contracts. Others are shutting down or being taken over. In 2009, the government quango Capacity Builders gave £1,000 each to 900 local agencies for them to look into the feasibility of collaboration and merger.

“Winning contracts will involve winning them off your competitors. If your organisation is one that doesn’t like the idea of competition, it might not be around in 10 years.” (Derek Smith, Action Planning)

Despite government rhetoric about empowerment, onerous conditions are placed on the funding that is available to smaller community groups. Freedom of action is constrained by rigid local strategic priorities, such as Local Area Agreements.

“Team Hackney’s work is driven by the Local Area Agreement and its associated targets. One set of these, known as the Third Sector Indicators, relate to developing the VCS in Hackney...This grant is intended for you to capacity build your network to help you input into the work of Team Hackney...We need you to demonstrate how your cross cutting networks will help Team Hackney deliver its targets.” (Hackney Community Empowerment Network Cross Cutting Network Investment Programme 2008)

We have never seen such a sustained attempt by a government to bring voluntary and community action under its control. It’s not just about money. Even groups who do not rely on funding face enormous challenges negotiating with powerful interests to protect the services they value. It is time for us to fight our corner.

There is never going to be one voice speaking for all; indeed the pluralism of the sector is to be defended and celebrated. The NCIA’s interest is with the whole of voluntary sector activity, from small self-help groups to international charities, because all are – or should be – examples of independent voluntary and community action.

What we can do about it

GET TALKING

It is surprising how little debate there has been in the VCS about these changes. Are there things that you are asked to do at work which offend your values or which you think will damage your organisation or its users? What scope do you have to find more acceptable means? Being directly oppositional will not be possible for everyone, but there are also more subtle ways of using your influence to move things in a different direction.

IN PRACTICE

Emanon Community Project

Emanon has been creating mutual support between local people since 1962. People who benefit are usually elderly, isolated or disabled. The local authority’s intention to change from grant giving to commissioning will have deep implications for the project.

Steve, the Project Coordinator, wants the trustees to understand the dangers and make informed decisions. He writes a paper explaining the background and discusses it at meetings. He arranges a review day with staff, trustees, clients and volunteers which causes them to reflect on their strengths and their need to develop. This helps everyone understand that they have status in the community and quality services, which might be under threat. Steve gets more people involved in the organisation to create a wider spectrum of opinion and seeks funds to employ a Community Involvement Officer who will encourage people to address local issues.

It is not unusual for individuals and groups to find change threatening and to attempt to ignore it, especially if they don’t feel equipped to respond. Leading change in your own agency, or leading a response to change coming from the outside, can be a lonely role. One day an email arrives from a manager at a neighbouring agency, saying she has similar views about external developments and would like to meet. Steve is happy to do this: drawing in support is essential to his work.

ACTION BY YOUR GROUP

You are independent and can decide for yourselves what you want to do, with whom and on what terms. When organisations look at themselves with their independence in mind, they often find how much this has been compromised by agreeing to targets, contracts, a change in management style.

Saying 'no' to funding is an option some groups are taking. But it is also possible to take the money and agree terms that don't compromise your independence. Negotiate hard on the contract, insist on full cost recovery, propose your own monitoring system, resist interference in your operational systems, demand that your relationship with your funder is an equal one.

IN PRACTICE Social Action for Health

Social Action for Health (SAfH) is a long-established community development charity. One of its projects was to run a network of 21 mental health service user groups, funded by Tower Hamlets Social Services. When the organisation took it over, the network was controlled by a few people and had low levels of participation. They started working more inclusively, and after a year the network had become vibrant and powerful.

However the funder started to apply a one size fits all approach to monitoring, based on tick boxes within a timetable for monitoring returns that did not allow users to be party to the information required. Despite SAfH's efforts to broker a solution, the monitoring officers were not prepared to shift. Social Services told SAfH that the support work was going to be tendered out and that they would like them to bid. The tender for the work would not allow bottom-up operation with decisions taken by the users. SAfH felt that bidding for the tender would mean sacrificing their independence and successful ways of working. So they said 'no thank you'.

"Current commissioning of the voluntary sector is often so managerially prescribed that community initiatives are stifled and creativity lost. They need to let go of specifying outputs and let us do what we can do well to achieve the required outcomes." (Elizabeth Bayliss, Director, Social Action for Health)

ACTING TOGETHER

Taking a position and acting on it with others can have a powerful impact. Existing forums and networks, especially at local level, can be the start of successful action. Where networks don't exist, the effort to put something in place can be well rewarded.

IN PRACTICE Hackney Advice Forum

Hackney Advice Forum (HAF) brings together advice groups operating in the area. In 2007, the council announced it was moving from grants for advice work to commissioning and would decide its own strategy for allocating the money. The advice groups thought this would make it more difficult for them to pursue their plans, put them in competition with each other and lead to poorer services for local people. The council said commissioning was non-negotiable.

Not taking 'no' for an answer, the forum drew up its own advice strategy and put this to the council. It mounted a campaign with an open letter to the council and lobbying of the Scrutiny Committee. The forum members raised the issue at other meetings so that others in the voluntary sector knew what it was doing. The council backed off on commissioning and put their advice strategy in the filing cabinet. But not before cutting its grant to the forum!

"We have kept the forum going working as volunteers, and continue to turn our plan into reality. We are just starting our most important project – to train people with minority community languages as advice workers. For us the lesson has been that making sure our services are good enough is our business. If we have our own perspectives and plans it makes it much easier to resist other less suitable plans." (Cathy Murphy, Hackney Advice Forum)

WHO SPEAKS FOR US?

At local level, a key aspect of the work of 'second tier' groups or infrastructure organisations, such as councils for voluntary service, is strengthening and defending independence, both of individual groups and the sector as a whole. Member groups need to link meaningfully with their infrastructure organisation to make sure their views are represented. Infrastructure organisations need to make it clear to

fundors that this representational role is central to their existence and cannot be sacrificed.

At national level, federations, membership organisations and trade associations also have roles in protecting the independence of voluntary action. Effective national agencies will be researching and reporting on threats and damage to the sector. They will speak plainly about what must change. Their programmes of work will reflect their commitment to independence and they will not conspire with policies and practices which threaten it.

IN PRACTICE

Adur Voluntary Action (AVA)

AVA is a small Council for Voluntary Service and volunteer centre in Sussex. Adrian Barritt, Chief Officer, says: "The trustees are independent-minded, free-thinking and locally-rooted — that's why they got involved. They want AVA to promote voluntary and neighbourhood action, volunteering, community life and wellbeing and achieve these things in ways which strengthen self-reliance, independence and sustainability. AVA aims to be at the heart of an active community so it has to be financially and politically autonomous, properly accountable and able to speak out freely.

"AVA membership is free, we encourage local community and voluntary groups and businesses to work together, we buy services locally whenever possible, we support learning opportunities (with the Workers Education Association and others) to help people get involved. We are extending the role of AVA into the arts, economy, environment, learning and leisure.

"AVA uses a community development approach to engage with new people, new ideas, and stimulate new freedoms. We work to support a pluralism of communities and organisations, each with the political freedom openly to express its views. We help groups and networks access local decision making and create real influence. We promote co-operation and resist divisive competitive mechanisms for allocating funding and we are working with NCIA to develop alternatives to commissioning. We speak out for a sense of place and belonging which is rooted in local history and community life and we work to raise awareness of the importance of independent local civil society, and for its collective solidarity."

Top tips for independent action

KNOW WHAT YOU STAND FOR

Decide what you need to do with your users and your community and hold to that; chase the money to do that job only. Be willing to say 'no' — to money, to unsound ideas, to co-option — and be prepared to stand up to the exclusion that may follow.

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT

Tell the truth as you see it, especially to those you think are more powerful than you. If you don't like something, say so and explain why. Argue for what you want, not just against what you don't.

KNOW WHAT YOU'RE UP AGAINST

Pay attention to the exercise of power. Power balances can be changed. Remember that the voluntary/community sector is different from the statutory and private sectors, and this may bring us into conflict at times.

KNOW WHO YOUR FRIENDS ARE

Look to your users, communities, friends and colleagues for inspiration and guidance instead of looking to local or national government for the next set of instructions. If you feel threatened or victimised, look for allies and work together.

We are not an arm of the state. We have our own arms.

CARTOON: MORAG MACINNES



we have our own arms.!

Find out more and join in the action!

If you or your organisation would like to know more about the coalition and get involved, please have a look at our website:

www.independantaction.net (you can sign up to our mailings there) and contact us at indyaction@yahoo.co.uk