

Advice services

STANDING UP FOR OURSELVES

- Fed up with crumbs from the table & false partnerships?
- Frustrated by the bad behaviour of your Council?
- Want to share your tips for how you won the day?
- Want to know how to get your way?

NCIA and Advice UK have combined forces to work with local advice & community groups who want to act together to enforce individual and community rights.

Read on and get involved.....

ADVICEUK (www.adviceuk.org.uk) is a charity supporting community organisations that give free advice to members of the public. It is the largest network of independent advice agencies in the United Kingdom. AdviceUK sees an independent voluntary sector and availability of independent advice, free from State control and interference, as a measure of liberty, democracy and an enlightened State.

NCIA (legacy.independentaction.net) is an alliance of organisations and individuals who have come together to protect the independence of the voluntary and community sector (VCS); and to resist the growing threat by powerful interests of our right to determine our own agendas, policies and practices.

Both of us believe that the Rights Movement in particular, must be structurally independent from the State and able to act outside the establishment, given the nature of its work.

What do we mean by Independent Action? We mean the freedom and the means by which advice and community groups decide for themselves, in conjunction with their users and communities, what are their interests, aspirations, priorities and ways of working. It is on the basis of these decisions – as independent organisations – that engagement with the outside world takes place. Such engagement will not always go smoothly or secure consensus or agreement. Where the pursuit of divergent interests or active dissent is required, our self-determination is truly tested.

The current government strategy is to co-opt our independence to serve their own agendas – through funding, commissioning and contractual conditions. Competition for contracts stops us working together co-operatively. Contractual conditions stop us following our clients' needs. There are gaps in provision. Access is uneven. People in need of independent advice are the ultimate losers. Civil liberties and human rights are at stake.

In the face of all this, local advice groups struggle to resist the pressures by the Legal Services Commission (LSC), local authority commissioning plans, cuts in expenditure, and private sector entryism. Local areas face particular difficulty where the LSC is actively pushing for Community Legal Advice Centres (CLACs) and Community Legal Advice Networks (CLANs). AdviceUK and NCIA are already working with local advice agencies and networks in various parts of the country, taking action to oppose the threats to their independence and their access to funding.

What to do about it? STAND UP FOR OURSELVES! AdviceUK and NCIA can help local advice and community groups to stand together and push for their own agendas. We want to work with, or build, a network of advice-giving groups to fight against the effect on their clients of oppressive political, financial and bureaucratic practices. We will work together to develop methods of resistance which have been effective in defending these rights over the years. We have the resources to work in 4 areas and can offer your area:

- **Finding out what's going on** – we can find out whether people are worried about their ability to support their clients and local communities, or want to resist the establishment of a CLAC or a CLAN, or the switch from grant aid to commissioning. We can collect information about what is going on in your area: what are the main pressures you are faced with; what stops groups getting what their clients/communities need; is there an advice network and how good is it in pushing for community interests; where is all the money going for advice services; is the Council pushing for a CLAC/CLAN?
- **Getting people together** – we can help to bring people together, to discuss the pressures and issues faced by advice/community groups and to see if there is energy to do something together.
- **Agreeing collective action** – if those involved want to take action together we can help build campaign plans and other ways to tackle pressures. This might be through a series of workshops, practical training to demonstrate various tactics to achieve success, information or speakers about what has happened in other areas
- **Taking action** – we can offer some time in helping people progress their plans and will try to put people in touch with other sources of support.

Would you be keen to meet other advice agencies to discuss these issues together, to decide on a plan of action to protect your services and ensure that all the advice service users in your area get the help they want?

If this is the case, we would like to meet with you, initially to hear your thoughts on these matters, and to probe the depths of the concern about the direction of travel for advice services in your area.

REMEMBER, YOU ARE NOT ALONE and IT CAN BE DONE!

Several areas have taken effective action already.

For instance, in Cornwall, the County Council have told the Legal Services Commission that they do not want a CLAN in their county, and are working with the county's voluntary groups to develop the best scheme for giving and funding advice. And Hackney Council has been forced by the local advice network to back down from commissioning and keep a grants programme for amounts up to £50,000. **Joint action, especially, has produced many gains for communities.** If you want to know more or want to work with us, [contact us on indyaction@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:indyaction@yahoo.co.uk)