

# Let's talk about...

## People, Places, Money and Photocopiers

National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) is an alliance of individuals and organizations who believe that we need to unite in independent voluntary and community action.

We want to start a conversation about how we can resource independence, especially actions which go against, or are unpopular with the status quo. The point of this leaflet is to get that conversation going – to spark debate and ideas; and to lay down the underpinning principles and requirements for resourcing voluntary and community activities. This is where we're starting from and it will change as the conversation builds. Let's talk!

### Democracy and independent voluntary action

Voluntary services are but one element of voluntary association, which has historically played a critical part in our democratic structures. The particular democratic role played through voluntary action is to:

- act as a check and balance to the state and other powerful interests
- spot gaps in community needs, test out new ways of meeting these and ensure these are made available more widely and particularly by the state
- provide an ungoverned space for citizens and residents to come together – outside of state control and the pressure of markets – to enjoy each others company and join in activities, whether simple conviviality, leisure, solidarity and assistance, personal or social change.

All this needs to be resourced – by money, by facilities and most of all, by people. Money for this role is increasingly only available to deliver government agendas – In the main, to privatise public services through commissioning and contracting and through large organisations, whether private or charitable. Other sources of money – through trust funds, corporate funds or individual donations – have become secondary to the growth in state funding of voluntary services and bear some of the hallmarks of the same co-option.

The bulk of voluntary and community activities carry on with little money and depend on how people choose to use their unpaid time and energies. Whatever the political colour, government public relations exercises of “empowerment” and “big society” do not come with real resources, exposing the disinterest in true voluntary action and independence. The message is “you're on your own” not “we're in it together”.

This combination – state cooption of voluntary services and marginalising true voluntary action – undermines the critical democratic role of voluntary association. Here, NCIA explains what is going on, how people are tackling this, and what is needed for our ungoverned space to survive and thrive.

## What's going on?

Current funding regimes undermine the democratic and particular value of voluntary activities.

- £ **Voluntary services are not public services** – but are in danger of becoming just that. Funding is concentrated on service provision. Contracts and commissioning mean that groups are doing the bidding of funders. Smaller agencies are losing out to larger. Funding is driven by favouritism and fashion. Most of the money is being used for state purposes, not for us as free-willed citizens and residents.
- £ **Poor performance of funders** – statutory funders in particular, but also other funders, can be unresponsive, ignorant, incompetent, mistrustful and exert their power destructively. Micro-management and managerialism have taken the place of respect and discretion.
- £ **Limited horizons** – most funding, and resources, are short term, unreliable and unsustainable. It is difficult to get core costs to support the work. Project funding is the name of the game, even if this misrepresents the activities carried out.
- £ **Uneven distribution** – the consequence of current practices is that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The divide between the big and the small increases. Those in the club get more and those excluded get less. Fear and competition – of losing out or being kept out – underpins relationships.
- £ **The invisible economy** – the majority of those engaged in voluntary activities are left out in the cold, especially those working with minorities and on unpopular causes or with inconvenient messages.
- £ **A little goes a long way** – but in most cases, it is people not money that's required and a little money or material assistance (eg space to meet, photocopiers and travel expenses) goes a long way. But the pressure on communities means it is difficult finding and keeping unpaid participants in voluntary action, there are not enough of them and resources are needed to support unpaid contributions. Community assets, such as buildings, are being gobbled up in municipal sales. Those with little have even less to share with each other.
- £ **Subservient role of second tiers** – so who's representing our interests here? Most representatives of voluntary agencies, national and local, are too compromised to speak out. They themselves depend on the money-makers, they may be competing for the same funds as their members, and they have forgotten which table they are supposed to sit at.

But is everyone in dire straits? What examples can we give of people who aren't?

- Who's not struggling or affected by resource problems?
- Good funders – what should we say about this?
- Advice, information and support to get money and find resources – examples of how this makes a difference and what kind of support makes a difference, what is a waste of time
- examples of people power/actions that has involved lots of, or at least enough, people
- Old fashioned fundraising techniques that are still working as ways of financing independent action and how/why?
- New/non-traditional/other ways of resourcing that are working for people?
- other reasons to be cheerful?

## Surviving and thriving - how people are tackling it

It's a dynamic and fluid world out there. We need to be light on our feet, taking into account the climate of cuts, recession and political responses – whether this is survival within the current resource regimes, living outside these or creating something entirely new. Voluntary activities come in different shapes, sizes and situations. Here, we tell the stories of the different situations people are in and how they are tackling them.

- whose stories?
- and about what?

## So, what's needed in the future – principles and manifestos

Call us crazy, but what we think is needed for our ungoverned space to survive and thrive is state funding for voluntary action with new terms to protect the democratic role of such activities, a role for second tiers to negotiate funding relationships and a priority to make development support available for local groups. So here's a miscellany of possible principles, responses and demands for funding and resourcing of voluntary action. **If not these, then what?**

- £ The state should fund & encourage funding of voluntary action – it's our money and should be used to safeguard and nurture ungoverned space as part of our democratic health
- £ The resources available, particularly money and material assets such as buildings and community spaces, should be re-distributed in order to reflect the diversity of roles played by voluntary action
- £ A new contract, between the state and the people is required to rebalance the basis of who's in charge of the money to support voluntary action, who gets the money and the terms and conditions which will protect the democratic role of such activities.
- £ The contract will have protections against withdrawal or refusal of funds in circumstances where a group takes action against its funder or other associated parties. It will be expected that funded agencies will bite the hand that feeds it, where needed.
- £ Public money will not be used to pay voluntary agencies to deliver mainstream public services; or for activities which create a conflict of interest in carrying out a democratic role.
- £ National & local second tier bodies to re-negotiate the assumptions and arrangements behind funding relationships
- £ Grants and grant officers to be provided, not contracts and commissioners
- £ Diversity in sources – ensure a diverse resource base and don't depend on one source
- £ Meanness, unhelpful behaviour, lying and back stabbing between voluntary agencies will invite penalties and exposure
- £ Our message to funders: core costs, diversity ratios ie to redistribute and rebalance current allocations, provide volunteer/activists support, advice/info to help people to get resources, simple and non-bureaucratic systems
- £ Priority to make development support available for local groups
- £ Be smaller if that's what it takes to hold onto your independence
- £ Learn to live on less, draw on mutual aid, share and borrow, resources in kind as well as in cash
- £ Negotiate funding without fear, learn to say no and bite the hand that feeds you, if needed

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