

National Coalition for Independent Action

It's about power, stupid

NCIA – where next? Penny's thoughts about the future...

NCIA's money runs out in July 2012. The directors' group has decided that NCIA should continue, if it can raise more money; and, that if NCIA continues, it needs to do things differently. The trustees of the Tudor Trust, NCIA's main funder, say they welcome another application from us.

This is my take on a possible future for NCIA over the next 2/3 years and the questions that arise from this. I've based it on discussions of NCIA directors and have tried to anticipate the questions we need to sort out for an application to Tudor. The paper will be put to the NCIA Planning and Directors Group on May 24th as part of discussions about the future. The results of this will inform the application to Tudor.

Where next - critical questions to take into account

- ?what is likely to face us all over the next 2/3 years?
- ?what do we want to see from the voluntary/community action world in response to this?
- ? what have we learnt from our past 5 years and what's the point of NCIA now?
- ?where do we want to get to by the end of this period?
- ? what practical work and priorities will be required from us?
- ? how will we need to work with others, to have most impact?
- ?what internal working arrangements/resources does NCIA require for this period?
- ? should we plan now for our demise after another 2/3 years?

The story so far – what NCIA has done and how it's done it

NCIA started out as an enquiry by a few people into the co-opted state of voluntary action, how others saw the picture and what might be done. A critique, a constituency and a focus emerged. Over time, NCIA perspectives have become clearer, better known and more focused, given the changing landscape: anti-privatisation; managerialism; and support for community action. Our messages, especially through NCIA publications, have found us more allies. We have struggled to combine a "think tank" function with a "mobilising" aspiration.

Initially we have operated with a combination of unpaid time and a small amount of money to run core activities and do small bits of work. We then got more money and used it to create a national co-ordinator job [eventually full time] and to pay Andy for 8 days a month of his time.

We now have the chance of more money and need to decide how to use this and whether to change our model of operating – in particular, to decide whether or not to retain a central post and for what tasks.

Where now?

NCIA now enters a new stage. The future landscape is uncertain and confusing, likely to be volatile, with shifting issues and concerns. Things are bad and getting worse, but this could change very quickly, both negatively and positively.

Our current focus is likely to hold fast: on the one hand, resisting privatisation of public services through the private sector and professionalised voluntary agencies; and on the other, supporting local activism and promoting alternatives to a privatised civil society. And, throughout this, to be visible about the politics and ideologies of ourselves and others.

We also need to agree what the particular NCIA role will be in this; the extent to which our ways of working will help us achieve what we want and to know what is going on out there, so we can speak with credibility.

There is a need to take stock, to refresh and reflect on the picture and our analysis. Not as an academic exercise, but to ensure that NCIA knows why it exists and finds its most effective place along with others.

I am still of the view that the NCIA messages and focus are not to be found elsewhere or with such articulation. I am also of the view that our main purpose now is build a bridge between NCIA and those closest to us, and to create a synthesis from this. The aim would be, by the end of the next 2/3 years, to close NCIA, leaving enough of what we stand for within other initiatives and in other places.

In this, we have a balance to walk: to create and be part of debate, action and alliances; whilst also having our own viewpoints and agendas. To do this we need to be light on our feet and to build networks and networking; to have our own viewpoints and have ways to make these known; and be interested in how the world looks to others who share some or all of our concerns.

The future focus – are we a campaign, a think tank or a movement?

What are the critical issues we will work on? **Anti-privatisation** is currently seen as a high, if not *the* priority. What will this work entail? Privatisation and the co-option of the professionalised service sector – through **commissioning** and **managerialism** - is a major threat to independent action. Along with this, we have found ourselves promoting and defending **public services**, provided by public sector agencies. And we need to consider where **community action** sits within our priorities, and the wider **democratic role** of voluntary endeavour.

Should we drop a focus on activism and the community sector in favour of a focus on privatisation and voluntary services? Perhaps work on community action should only be through other groups, rather than in our own name? But might we then find that NCIA's original purpose (protecting the democratic and constitutional role of voluntary action) is lost to another purpose (protecting public services). What an irony, if we end by focussing on statutory services!

A relevant question in this is "Who is our client" in our work over the next stage? Who, or what, are we working for? Do we care to protect professionalised voluntary services? Is our main interest in dissent and acting as a check/balance to the powerful interests that are creating the damage? What position do we take in respect to "in and against the state"? In

other words, there are large numbers of people who are involved in both voluntary and statutory agencies caught up in cooption, but don't like it and want support to know how to lessen the compromises implied.

Once we have decided on our focus, do we approach the issues as a campaign, a think tank or as a movement, mobilising alongside others? What's our most effective contribution, given the issues and outcomes we're looking for and the resources we are likely to command? Are publications a more lasting legacy than events?

We need to be clear about the key pieces of project work required to progress our priorities e.g. commissioning; managerialism; supporting activism; building a supporters' database; maintaining our website. And how we want to make the work happen - e.g. by appointing a central staff post, by extending our Alliances-fund model, through freelance work or through contributions to work already being done by other groups.

The future way of working

How we do things will be as, if not more, important as **what** we do. **Externally**, we want to put more time into working with and through others; being in touch, creating debate and exchange (by reviving the Assembly and Planning Groups or other methods); and being more proactive in engaging with others, e.g. through workshops such as those run by IDYW or through the Alliances-fund model. We need to be more successful at engaging with the frontline.

Internally, should we move from a hub-spoke structure to one based on the process of networking, project work and mutual aid? We do need a larger group of NCIA directors, with diverse points of view and experiences, hopefully drawn from people involved in our alliances, and who can carry out practical tasks as well as guide the work. One suggestion is to use our resources to create an operational budget to carry out particular projects and to move away from staff employment.

These working options raise questions for us:

- What rationale is there for changing our current model of operating
- Is it possible to do without a core resource – to stitch things together and carry out basic servicing tasks?
- If we only have 'projects', will NCIA and its messages become fragmented and unsupported?
- Will we lose our own messages and force if we focus on those of others?
- How do we use our position and resources to help others get what they want?
- How do we engage with practitioners and activists directly? How do we provide local groups with a platform?
- If we are unable to join with others to do NCIA work, does this mean that we don't do it at all?
- Is it realistic to expect NCIA directors to do practical work?
- Do we resurrect the Planning Group and Assembly or find other models to connect
- How do we want to present to which bit of the outside world? Awkward, collaborative, ready to listen, polemical, angry, neutral...?
- How do we build in continuous reflection and learning over the next few years?

The end of one journey and beginning of many others

An initiative, such as NCIA, is time-limited. It has its time and place. My view is that the next 2/3 years should be a process of endings and new beginnings - through alliance building and folding NCIA perspectives into other streams of activity. We need to identify the groups and initiatives that are close to NCIA positions and concerns, developing new and building on existing relationships which will address the damage to both the voluntary and the public sector. To approach these alliances by asking 'How can NCIA be helpful to you in developing your responses to this damage?' We will ask not what they can do for us, but what we can do for them. Where relevant we will emphasise the local impacts of damage and the local responses of value, as it is at local level that much positive change can happen.

Building alliances, politically and practically, has been an ongoing process over the last 5 years but will now be a means in itself, as well as a means towards ending NCIA as a separate initiative. The NCIA events planned over the next few months are the start of this process. If we are unsuccessful in building alliances, then we will know it is time to stop.

Penny Waterhouse, NCIA v2 14.5.12