

# National Coalition for Independent Action

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

## Standing up for ourselves

Supporting independent action amongst local advice agencies

### Background

1. In 2009 -10, NCIA worked with local advice services in three areas: to help them identify and pursue their own agendas; and tackle pressures on them and the individuals and communities they work with. This was a joint project with Advice UK. The idea was to provide practical support which could harness the necessary local skills, knowledge and determination to resist the pressures which undermine a forceful and independent advice sector - in particular, to resist the imposition of a CLAC/CLAN. We also wanted to demonstrate the role of second tier support in safeguarding independence.
2. We anticipated that we would:
  - find 4 areas in which to work, where there was a network of sorts in existence and which had demonstrated examples of assertive action
  - find a local host in each of these areas, who shared NCIA/Auk perspectives and had the resources to support the initiative
  - bring together through workshops local advice agencies, including, but not exclusively, Advice UK members
  - work in areas which were facing the imposition of a CLAC/CLAN
  - build collective action amongst advice services in the 4 areas
  - find interest in other areas in the initiative and its aspirations
  - use the collective resources of NCIA and Advice UK to support local action
  - link the work and its lessons into the wider actions being taken by NCIA/Advice UK
  - consider a joint event at the conclusion of the project in order to disseminate lessons.
3. This report sets out what happened and the lessons from this:
  - finding the areas and the people to work with (paras 4-6)
  - in Cardiff/Wales (paras 7-12)
  - in Leicester (paras 13-20)
  - in Gloucestershire (paras 21-31)
  - in Hackney (paras 32-45)
  - joint working between NCIA/AUK (paras 46-54)

- what we learnt from the work (paras 55-68)
- what this means for AUK & NCIA (paras 69-71).

## **What happened – finding the areas & the people**

4. This proved difficult and slow to realise. We started with a long list of NCIA/Advice UK contacts, which we added to and crossed off, as our contact progressed. Responses to our approaches were very often slow or non-existent. Some people understood what we were talking about; others were uncomprehending. In one area, a non-response from our advice contacts in the area (CABx) could only be interpreted as a desire to keep us out of their area, whilst they negotiated a successful tender for a CLAN. Despite repeated efforts, we were not able to get a response from Barking and Dagenham contacts, again agencies facing a CLAC tender.
5. A few people jumped at what we were offering. For some of these, we and they agreed that, given local circumstances and other favourable contacts emerging, it would not be appropriate to include them as one of the four areas. For example, it was decided not to work in Manchester given AUK's presence in the area, although one of our respondents was not happy with the co-opted reactions of some advice agencies there and thought that a NCIA presence would be helpful. It was also decided not to pursue interests in Liverpool, as we had by this time found our 4 areas. However, our contact here wanted to be kept informed of the work.
6. The four areas which finally emerged through this process were:
  - Cardiff/Wales - where action had already been taken to resist a CLAN/CLAC and there was an interest in looking at alternative models
  - Leicester - where we had a strong contact already involved in NCIA work and where advice agencies were already tackling the reality of a CLAC
  - Gloucestershire - where neighbourhood centres in Gloucester City felt their interests were excluded from the County advice network, including in framing the response to a CLAN in the county
  - Hackney - where a CLAC looked like a possibility and the Hackney Advice Forum wished to develop alternative approaches.

## **What happened – in Cardiff**

7. After some setting up, through an AUK member, we met with several advice agencies working in Cardiff and surrounding areas: Shelter, CABx and AUK members. We do not know how reflective this group is of the advice sector in the area. After this initial meeting it was clear that their interests were moving in a different direction and no intensive work was carried out in this area. There was also no obvious host for our work. However, connections with our AUK contact were maintained and some support was provided.
8. At the point of our initial contact, collective action by advice agencies against a CLAN had already resulted in a commission by the Welsh Assembly to look at CLANs in Wales and alternative models. As a result, renewal of existing LSC contracts (on which most of the agencies were dependent) was seen as a priority. The agencies involved decided to concentrate

on a joint bid for LSC contracts in 2010. There was also some interest in creating an advice forum. Their support needs therefore covered:

- joint service provision, working arrangements and contracting
- responding to the Welsh Assembly report on CLANs
- creating an advice forum
- formulating an independent view of a model for advice services in Cardiff/Wales.

9. In response to these needs, we offered to facilitate discussions amongst those intending to make a joint bid, to help them devise joint working arrangements which were workable and honest. This was not taken up. On request, we also provided comments on an initial draft of the Welsh Assembly report.
10. Our suggestion, that they might use the opportunity of a review of the CLAN model, to work on their own alternative models was not pursued by the group, despite an acknowledgement that this would be useful. However, two Cardiff agencies (AUK members) were interested in working with us on a plan for advice services in the City, and creating an advice forum, but did not have the capacity to do this, at the same time as safeguarding their LSC funds. We therefore agreed to keep in touch with these agencies and share any materials/experiences which would be of mutual benefit. So far, this has meant sharing materials from Leicester about the CLAC service and an outline plan for City advice services; and materials from the Hackney Advice Forum.
11. Recent feedback from this area notes that bids were made for legal aid, but this did not involve all agencies, one of whom put in a separate bid in order to safeguard their funds. The results of this will be known in July 2010. It is expected that all agencies will get a contract but this may be at a reduced amount. Joint working through this process has resulted in closer relationships, including one AUK member being invited on the CAB management committee. The Welsh Assembly report has yet to be published. The Cardiff agencies are still interested in working on a City plan for advice services and creating an advice forum.
12. Our lessons from this area are that:
  - assertive action is possible (ie against the CLAN), and across networks and agencies
  - funding is a great driver, divider and distraction - it can bring people together in order to satisfy self-interest; it can lead to exclusion if the needs of particular agencies do not satisfy the group power base; and it can distract from work which is required to create an independent viewpoint and action;
  - creating alternative models or viewpoints requires servicing - the work to challenge the Welsh CLAN was serviced by CAB and Shelter regional officers, not engaged in frontline work. We think it unlikely that a Cardiff City plan for advice services will emerge without support to make it happen;
  - it is difficult to engage people on service or other issues when they are fighting to maintain their individual funding base;
  - the groups we met (from the main advice networks) are only the tip of the advice sector in the area, many of which may not be aligned with a particular network e.g. Women's Aid, a

homelessness project or refugee group. We therefore, only skimmed the surface of hearing from advice services which might have been interested in our initiative.

## **What happened - in Leicester**

13. NCIA already had contacts in Leicester, where - with the CVS - we had prompted some debate with voluntary agencies about independence. This included Leicester Money Advice, which acted as a host for the NCIA/AUK initiative. A CLAC had been set up in the City, and contracted to private providers A4E and Howells solicitors. At the time, there was an attempt by some advice agencies to persuade the LSC to adopt an alternative model, which included a referral network amongst existing agencies. This was not successful and consequently bids were made (again, unsuccessfully) by those with existing legal aid contracts to provide CLAC services. This has led to the closure of the Law Centre, redundancies in other mainstream services and the end of many community advice services.
14. The earlier initiative to bring together advice agencies into a referral network, and the proposal for an alternative to the CLAC, had not been progressed, partly because the servicing of the initiative was affected by the arrival of the CLAC and resulting cuts. However, there was interest in trying again to form an advice network - for mutual support and collective action on common concerns. This interest formed the starting point for our work in the area.
15. Over the period, 5 meetings took place of, what is now called, Action Advice Leicester (AAL). A mailing list was created from those who had participated in the earlier attempts to bring advice services together. Phone contact was made with all these agencies to gauge their interest and their concerns. Of the 14 agencies who expressed initial interest, 5 agencies attended the first meeting. Over the year, the number of agencies involved in the initiative has risen to 13 (with usual attendance of between 5-9 people).
16. Initially, the core group was mostly made up of mainstream white-run agencies (Money Advice, Shelter, Age Concern, a neighbourhood advice service). This is now starting to gain some colour and diversity. Several things have helped. It was decided to rotate meetings around the agencies, particularly those which AAL wished to engage, such as those giving advice to particular ethnic communities or where such populations reside. Members also agreed to "bring a friend or invite a stranger", thus hoping to expand the group. This has led to greater participation by those working with ethnic minority communities. It has also helped to encourage members to speak out tensions that have arisen between agencies, allowing continued participation instead of silent absence. However, it is still true to say, that each meeting has small attendance of the likely constituency, and always a doubt that it won't be viable.
17. The main topics that have been discussed by AAL are:
  - the impact of the CLAC and the poor service provided
  - the recent announcement that A4E will be withdrawing from its contract in 2011
  - the increasing demand for advice, the gaps in provision and the cuts to City-wide and community-based independent services

- the particularly poor provision available for minority ethnic populations and lack of bi-lingual advice provision
- the impact of Council politics and initiatives for advice
- creating better referrals and understandings between agencies, so that clients get the most appropriate service available to them
- the 'personalisation' agenda and what this means for independent advice services
- finding resources to service AAL and its activities.

18. The action taken so far in response to these matters is:

- devising an alternative model for advice services in Leicester and mounting a campaign (particularly by influencing councillors) to stop the Council re-tendering the CLAC in 2011 and put its money instead into a more diverse pattern of networked independent advice services - a working document to this effect now exists, which can be used to prompt debate and develop the plan
- gathering feedback about the impact and quality of CLAC services - there is now a report on this which will be used by AAL as part of its campaign to resist a renewal of a CLAC in Leicester
- gathering information about advice provision in the City and creating a referral network - a questionnaire is currently being circulated, the results of which will inform the anti-CLAC campaign and create better referrals between agencies
- linking with Leicester Voluntary Sector Assembly, to ensure that advice issues are taken into account in discussions within and between the voluntary sector and statutory agencies
- funding - a list of funders for advice services produced for the Gloucestershire agencies has been shared with those in Leicester; individual AAL agencies have been provided with support by other members about likely sources and funding applications
- maintaining AAL - there is now a Statement of Intent for AAL and a job description for a support worker. Funds will be sought for this. Until money can be found, basic servicing is being done by members on a rota basis.
- An autumn conference for Leicester advice services has been discussed as a way to extend AAL involvement and increase the profile for advice.

19. Leicester now has a small, but committed, group of agencies with the beginnings of a campaign and agenda from which to take independent action, but with few resources to make it happen. We wish them well and we are worried that the fragility of support available to them, with the pressures on their services, will make it difficult to progress their aspirations.

20. Our lessons from this area are:

- individuals and advice agencies really want to come together and do something to improve local advice services
- there are ideas, knowledge and stamina to make this happen
- it takes continuous efforts to gain and keep people's interests - action must be relevant to what people face and show benefits to their daily interests

- being able to stand up and have an assertive and alternative model is not easy - the practice has been eroded, the structures for this have been lost and solidarity between agencies has to be rebuilt against the wider culture of competition
- providing direction and sparking debate helps to stimulate an agenda and platform for action
- little will happen without someone available to service meetings, agendas and work arising from discussions
- having a committed home for such activities helps to make things happen
- the interests of those with resources - to meet and do follow-up work (mostly the mainstream/LSC funded agencies) - are likely to dominate discussions and action unless positive action is taken to extend participation and influence to the bulk of advice givers working in smaller, community-based services
- particular attention is needed to engage advice services working predominantly with minority ethnic populations and those provided by multi-purpose agencies.

## **What happened - in Gloucestershire**

21. Gloucestershire already has a county-wide advice network (*GLAN*) which, at the time of our arrival, was responding to the possible setting up of a *CLAN*. The membership and interest of the network was predominantly LSC funded agencies, preparing themselves to tender to run *CLAN* services. In the event, due to local authority disinterest and opposition (wanting to safeguard their own self-determination), the LSC dropped the idea of a *CLAN* in the county at an early stage of our work in this area.
22. The initial responses from our *AUK* contacts were from multi-purpose agencies which provide advice as part of other services. This led to an initial meeting of 4 such Gloucester-based agencies, plus the Gloucester CVS (*GAVCA*). We had hoped that *GAVCA* might provide a home for the work, but in the event, despite personal commitment from the individual involved, they were unable to commit resources to this - arguing that these were already available to the group.
23. Unsurprisingly, the thrust of the discussion centred on the difficulties faced by neighbourhood multi-purpose groups:
  - difficulties in keeping up with demand for their advice, described as complex multi-faceted advocacy and casework
  - difficulties finding funding for their advice function and the damaging effects of current prescriptive funding regimes on community advice
  - feeling isolated, unrecognised and excluded from the county-wide *GLAN* debates
  - distrust of the mainstream advice agencies, whose services were not seen as good enough to warrant referrals.
24. As a result of these initial discussions, it was decided to:
  - focus on the needs and experiences of community-based multi-purpose services within Gloucester City

- create a City network of providers for mutual benefit e.g. referrals, collective voice with policy makers/funders
  - create and promote an independent plan for advice services in the City
  - to make links with GLAN, to ensure that the role and needs of smaller community-based agencies were reflected in their agendas and actions.
25. From this starting point, a further 3 meetings were held of what became the Gloucester Advice Forum (GAF). Much of the work undertaken with the Forum concentrated on servicing meetings, encouraging other City advice agencies to participate - whether or not community-based or multi-purpose - and making links with other forums/initiatives going on across the County. This was done by visiting agencies, maintaining email contact and phone calls. By the end of our time in this area, the engagement had grown from 5 to 10 actively involved agencies working in Gloucester City. However, attendance at meetings remained extremely problematic, due to pressures of running services and from other competing events.
26. Issues raised during this period by GAF were:
- *about advice needs* - of marginalised groups eg. older people and minority ethnic clients, difficulties in referral and places to refer, gaps in provision in rural areas, demands for debt advice and home visiting, the need for casework and advocacy, challenging the statutory policy on advocacy, which excludes people who need interpreters
  - *about managing advice* - managing demand and funding needs, support required by advisers and by managers, tackling operational matters, exploring a local means of measuring quality of advice and service
  - *about the outside world* - advice being reflected in LAAs, promoting advice to policy makers and funders
  - *connecting up* - the needs and role of advice within multi-purpose services, relationships and communications with GLAN, creating networks on advice topics e.g. money advice/benefits, creating a directory of advice services who provide advice as part of their work.
27. Action agreed from these discussions was to:
- provide information about funding for multi-purpose advice services and for joint bids
  - create a referral and feedback network
  - ensure that GLAN take into account the interests of non-LSC funded agencies
  - create a local directory of multi-purpose advice services.
28. An important element of the work was to explore the likely links between GAF and GLAN. And to make connections between other initiatives in the County, City and beyond e.g. two reviews of GLAN, a previous review of advice services in the City and work being done by the advice networks and elsewhere. Attendance at GLAN of GAF members and vice versa was encouraged and the tensions/divergent interests made explicit. There was considerable debate within GAF and GLAN about the best way to integrate these interests. As a result of this an invitation was sent by GLAN to all advice providers to attend a meeting of 'Wider GLAN' early in 2010, where the future role of GLAN could be considered. This meeting was facilitated by independent consultants, and attracted several organisations who had not been attending GLAN for several

years. The facilitators ensured that differences were openly debated, and the smaller and multi-purpose organisations present were reassured when the 'mainstream' agencies admitted that their attention had been too closely focussed on LSC contracts etc, so that they had failed to deal with wider advice issues.

29. As a result of the positive atmosphere of this meeting and continued contact between agencies over the following three months, the GAF organisations came to the conclusion that GLAN is best placed to provide a strategic home for advice across the county - to represent the interests of all advice services, including those of GAF members into its work. The work of GLAN will focus on: training, quality, representation, referrals, meeting advice needs, promoting advice. Funding for a support worker is to be sought.
30. In the light of this, the agencies with whom we worked are now linked into GLAN and, we hope, will be supported through the county forum, where collective action will be based. Practical work identified during our work has not been progressed as yet and will rest now with GLAN. An outstanding question still remains as to the interests and matters which will be reflected through GLAN, given its history of LSC dominated discussions, and its focus on statutory relationships. There is a danger that GLAN may be taken up with process issues of the "capacity building" industry instead of concentrating on action that will benefit clients. We hope that a more balanced agenda might emerge: enforcing and extending rights; creating an independent agenda for campaigning and representation; supporting practitioners and managers in their daily work.
31. Lessons from this area:
  - the work was successful in creating energy, new thinking and connections, and looking outwards for a few, previously isolated, agencies who are now connected to a wider network, which, we hope, has raised the profile of multi-purpose agencies within the county network
  - despite considerable time and effort, few agencies engaged actively in the project although many expressed interest
  - it is very difficult for these agencies to attend meetings and be actively involved in strategic issues and benefit from shared experiences and resources
  - resources available to the larger mainstream agencies (mostly LSC funded) to service collective action, can be made more widely available to a wider group of advice-givers once links between advice services are made
  - there is much distrust between mainstream and multi-purpose agencies
  - collective practical action can only be achieved once trusting relationships have been created; and, to be given priority, collective action must have meaning and benefits for daily advice work
  - to do this, a local person is needed to service and carry out this work.

## What happened - in Hackney



32. Hackney Advice Forum (HAF), with whom NCIA has close links, agreed to participate in the project as a way to support its campaign work to:
- influence local authority spending on advice services and the decisions it takes in providing advice services to Hackney people
  - oppose the development of a CLAC in Hackney
  - devise a model of provision to meet advice needs in the borough and which can be used as a basis for negotiation with the Council, other statutory agencies and funders.
33. The work in Hackney was of a completely different nature to that in Leicester, Gloucestershire or Cardiff/Wales, where the focus was on establishing structures and principles on which to base independent action. HAF, given its longer history, has already such structures and principles and a considerable work plan and array of activities. The work with NCIA/AUK, which is reported here, is on HAF negotiations with the local authority and its work to develop a model for advice services in the borough.
34. HAF is well established and has experience in supporting local advice services, taking successful collective action (in particular, opposing commissioning of the Council's grants budget) and asserting its independence through its own advice strategy for the borough. The work to establish the principles, practice and structures needed for independent action had been put in place over the previous 3 years:
- to organise and caucus independently of the statutory sector
  - to have its own perspectives
  - to argue forcefully for these
  - to pursue these perspectives with or without the help of statutory agencies and funders.
35. The forum meets regularly and pursues work and activities outside of these meetings. It is made up of about 150 agencies which can benefit from HAF activities and are drawn from the diverse profile of advice givers in the borough - from mainstream LSC funded agencies through to community-based services and multi-purpose agencies. From this wider group there is a smaller group of 30 members who can vote; and a strategic/core group who decide on direction and tactics. There is a chair and vice-chair, working according to HAF terms of reference, and supported by a forum development worker who is a local activist with substantial advice and voluntary sector experience.
36. Historically, HAF has had a challenging relationship with the local authority, such that its funding from the Council was withdrawn in 2008; and it was not invited to participate in the CAP - the Community Advice Partnership, a cross-sector forum demanded by HAF and finally agreed by the Council. Despite losing funding, the Forum's work continued, with the forum worker working as a volunteer. The results of the Forum's work on safeguarding grants and resisting commissioning, led to the 2008 Hackney voluntary sector award for having had the greatest influence on local policy.

37. By the time NCIA/AUK work started in 2009, the relationships with the local authority had improved due to a change in council officers and the persistent insistence of HAF, in pursuit of its objectives and practical projects (such as a bilingual advisers training programme and work on quality with its agencies). The authority could no longer ignore such a visible, successful and strategic body. HAF was eventually invited to participate in the CAP, although for a while the authority delayed setting up the body. Small pots of money were stitched together by HAF's host agency to pay for some of the time offered by a new forum support worker.
38. Whilst there was now a vehicle through which negotiations and relationships could be conducted, this was mostly mechanistic and without meaning. Little real consultation took place in the CAP, with decisions presented to the "partnership" by the Council rather than discussed and decided by the group. After initial disinterest voiced by council officers about the CLAC, the CAP was suddenly presented, without consultation, with the appointment of outside consultants to look into joint commissioning.
39. HAF's response to this was to tackle the lead Council officer on various matters, including:
- *the partnership process* - the CAP has been, and still is to a great extent, dominated by local authority power and interests. This was highlighted and challenged e.g. through agenda setting, chairing, representation and membership, decision making. The appointment of a consultancy firm, to explore the values of a CLAC, was challenged in that it was not dealt with as a partnership, with CAP members on the recruitment, or even that such an initiative was needed or agreed;
  - *priorities for spending on advice* - HAF pointed to the absence of advice in the LAA and other strategic documents, which would be used to evaluate grant and other funding bids from advice services. The Council was forced to make a statement about where advice stood in its spending priorities and to confirm its commitment to a grants programme;
  - *the definition of advice* - HAF has continually promoted a wide definition of advice giving and has challenged a narrow specialist view reflected in LSC funding. This has led to a greater understanding by the lead officer of the nature of advice, the necessary diversity of provision, the particular value of community-based advice, the benefits of preventative work, and the dangers of limiting funding to specialist providers;
  - *the CLAC* - an argument has been provided as to why a CLAC is not in the best interests of either Hackney people or the Council itself. In particular, that the Council will lose control over its money and will have less to spend on what it wants to see in place, since most of its money is currently funding non-LSC type work.
40. HAF has been thoughtful about the ways in which it might influence and pursue its own agendas. It has:
- ensured that the face and views of HAF were represented by frontline agencies and individuals, as well as by the forum support worker
  - maintained close contact with lead officer and found ways to make the Council work in this area easier e.g. suggestions about how to make things work better, providing an argued

rationale for why it is not in the interests of the Council to lose control of its own funds to a CLAC agreement

- tackled issues about process as well as content e.g. opposing the CLAC in principle, at the same time as commenting on the flawed process whereby a CLAC was to be considered
  - found allies and support across the voluntary sector and within other forums e.g. the borough-wide liaison group, health and social care forum, the refugee forum
  - ensured that there was a HAF presence and voice at borough strategic meetings and initiatives
  - kept one step ahead and sparked its own momentum on the issues at hand e.g. by organising a conference on joint commissioning.
  - ensured that it kept to its own agendas and practical work, so that it was able to show experience and relevant practice in the field
  - been an expert - "we know what we're talking about, we have the knowledge and connections to make things work and we know more than you, and your consultants about advice needs and the best ways of meeting them"
  - continued to be a presence - HAF has kept on the job in highlighting the implications of Council intentions, the message being "we are not going away so you'll need to deal with us"; the Council can always feel a HAF finger on its collar.
41. In tandem with its relationships with the local authority, HAF has been building its own constituency with a view to creating a debate and view of what is needed in Hackney to ensure rights and services for individuals and communities. The conference will: examine the advice needs of Hackney residents using independent services; update the picture of current provision; promote developments on referrals, quality and training; agree an outline model for advice services in the borough, for future development. Funds are currently being sought for a borough conference in autumn 2010 which will advance, and provide evidence for, the campaign work supported by the NCIA/AUK project. The Council is interested to fund the conference, wishing to make it a joint HAF/Council event. We wait to see whether HAF takes up this offer of partnership or maintains the conference as an independent space for mobilising and caucusing. Tactics is all.
42. The campaign - to resist a CLAC and influence Council spending - continues. HAF has maintained a steady state during the year and things are reported as being "quiet" at the moment. It is said to be easier to reach agreement with the authority. The problem is that "nothing happens" - although this might, in fact, be the best to hope for. The danger seen by HAF is of hurried and damaging decisions made in the future by the Council, hence the need to keep ahead of what is happening. There is no decision yet on a CLAC, and although there is no current debate or action on this matter, it is still sitting in the background. However, the Council now appears to agree with the HAF position and is looking to them to provide evidence to support this position. Discussions about joint commissioning are now taking place outside the confines of the CLAC model as a result of HAF's success in influencing the work and process of the CAP, with priorities fitting to its own agenda - identifying the advice needs in the borough and the role, if any, of joint commissioning; and matters of quality and referrals for advice.

43. For the future, HAF wishes to persuade the Council to avoid a concentration on specialist providers; to ensure an appropriate spread of specialists where they are needed; and to reject a model which provides advice through one provider ie. a CLAC. HAF would want the Council to take a position with the LSC which says, "you're not having our money". It is hoped that the conference will not only provide a model of services for HAF to pursue, but also provide a mandate and direction from which to negotiate.
44. From April 2010 there are no funds for a forum worker. This has yet to stop the Forum's work. As the support worker explained, "we want to see progress on these matters and we believe we can do better. If we don't do anything the Council would be happy. Saying you have no money to make things better won't wash. If you want advice services to run the way you want, then you have to get up and make it happen. There's no other alternative."
45. Lessons from this area are:
- a structure for, and familiarity with, collective action enables advice services to negotiate and pursue their own agendas more easily
  - results take time to appear and may not always be evident or clear-cut - not losing ground may be the best to hope for
  - maintaining one's own work programme provides a solid anchor in a choppy sea
  - it is difficult for a hostile Council to ignore a persistent, visible and expert voice
  - it takes personal as well as professional commitment to keep going in hostile conditions.

### **What happened - joint working between NCIA & AUK**

46. As outlined in our joint proposal, our intention was to work with AUK, at local and national level, with proper regard for other work that NCIA/AUK were doing, to pursue our common interest in safeguarding and nurturing independent advice services. The results of the work were intended to be used by both NCIA and AUK to "push in the same direction", "learn from each other" and "further our objectives".
47. *Joint work locally* - contacts provided by AUK and NCIA were used to find and work with local agencies. However, we were both surprised at how little intelligence and contacts we held about the likely agencies or individuals who might be interested to participate. Initial intentions to work with AUK regional development workers, in the event, proved limited and stretched - with the exception of London. In *Leicester*, the development worker provided helpful background intelligence about the region and other initiatives going on, but did not have the resources to get involved. Fortuitously, an ex-Leicester Law Centre worker and local resident (who also happened to work for AUK) got involved in the project and proved critically important in moving things along and keeping things going. In *Gloucestershire*, helpful local contacts and resources were provided by the regional development worker, as well as involvement in some meetings and discussions. This relationship involved some robust discussion, and at times different viewpoints, about the best strategy to pursue for collective action in the area. In *Hackney*, the relationship already established with the London AUK team, after a problematic beginning, now works very well - where AUK provides support under the direction of local agencies, including participating

in the Community Advice Partnership. Practical involvement by and expertise of AUK in negotiations and discussions with the Council, as well as being a resource to local groups, provides authority and helps to focus on "real things" such as quality, pointing to resources in the field. This stops the Council, and others, from re-inventing the wheel and ensures that independent approaches direct development in the borough. The London arrangement is seen as a good template for relationships between AUK and its members. In *Cardiff/Wales* we did not work jointly with AUK during our limited time here, except to liaise with AUK over their position on the Welsh Assembly initial report.

48. Where there was experience in working with AUK locally, ie. in Hackney, feedback was given about the additional support which would be helpful from AUK: to provide more evidence about the impact and experiences of CLAC/CLANs, as a basis to fight off a local CLAC - what's happening elsewhere, action taken, tactics; and to provide direction and leadership around partnership working and political action, particularly to promote a view that the latter is a legitimate thing to do and the different tactics which might be deployed. Hackney would like to see AUK model nationally the sort of independent action it wishes to see locally. This would bolster confidence in this sort of action locally. Finally, it was suggested that if money is available at national level "spend it on us not you".
49. *Joint work nationally* - there was little of this and, as the work progressed, it became evident that there were different assumptions taken by NCIA and AUK about what we meant by joint work. These differences became apparent during the two meetings arranged to share progress on the project and lessons arising. The differences that appeared, and which have created tensions between us and AUK are:
- we saw the work as strategically important, with potentially significant implications for AUK and NCIA - about how to resist pressures locally, defend advice services, act independently and the role of second tier support in this
  - AUK explained that they saw the project as a small piece of work, with limited implications for its mainstream work
  - AUK considered they had commissioned the work from NCIA, establishing a client/consultant relationship, with their role as project manager and NCIA as provider of services
  - we viewed our relationship as one of equal status, each contributing respective time and resources, and working together in ways that strategically and operationally benefited both organisations.
50. We expected a dialogue and exchange which brought together other parts of AUK and its work with an interest in local action and the role of second tier support. We expected to be in touch, and approached routinely, by staff active in campaigning on independence, particularly around CLAC/CLANs. Or at the very least to have a forum in which this discussion could take place, as envisaged in our joint proposal. Our early suggestion to some AUK regional development staff, to be able to share our mutual experiences in working at local level and the issues this raised, was viewed enthusiastically since such an opportunity was rare. However, AUK centrally did not regard this as a good use of their time.

51. We are not aware of any attempt by AUK to promote the project or even inform their members about it, despite our suggestion that this be done through the AUK website. Indeed, our own promotional work for the project - through our newsletter - was criticised by AUK as an illegitimate means of promoting NCIA.
52. We are disappointed, confused and frustrated by these differences, which were such as to make us feel that there has been no serious interest in real joint working between us. Indeed some of the exchanges left us feeling that we were being kept as far away from AUK as possible.
53. An exception to this, and which illustrates the sort of relationship we were hoping for, concerned a complaint, or even warning, made by Citizens Advice to AUK, about working with NCIA. This was dealt with in a co-operative and comradely way, and provided a practical demonstration of our mutual interests.
54. Our opening, and continuing position, is that the future for independent advice work is immensely threatening. Indeed, much has already been lost - both in terms of advice services that function without interference from statutory agencies, and in terms of the poverty of perspectives amongst many now working in the sector. It is vital that political and campaigning action is galvanised and supported if we are to protect the independence of advice work and the dwindling number of agencies providing it. In particular, that those with common cause can work together to oppose these threats. We think that this kind of action has most effect when done at local level. The lessons from this project, whilst of small scale, throw important light on this difficult task. We think that AUK has missed an opportunity by effectively deciding to absent itself from the work of the project. We also think that NCIA has missed out on an opportunity to work creatively and effectively with AUK, as a major membership-based national organisation, with much potential to influence the advice scene.

## **What we learnt**

### ***About local independent action by advice services***

55. We started with the proposition: that if advice agencies have the courage and see the worth in resisting together the things they don't like - and which disadvantage their clients and communities - they would be in a better position to take action, create better alternatives and improve things for people they work with. Is this what we see, after a year on the job?
56. In all the areas, including Cardiff/Wales, people we had contact with were eager, though cautious, to work together and find ways to tackle the things they didn't like. At the same time, they were unsure and tentative on how to go about this and what the alternatives might be to the pressures they faced. Direction, servicing and facilitation were required to assist local skills, knowledge and creativity to emerge.
57. In Gloucestershire and Leicester, the work concentrated on developing courage, purpose and structures for collective action. In *Gloucestershire*, the result of the work has been to link

previously isolated agencies into an existing forum for collective action, and with a clearer sense of their interests and contributions. How these relationships develop will be critical in whether they can move onto practical action together. In *Leicester*, there was no such existing forum and we think this might be an advantage, since the groups which came together did not have to negotiate with an existing structure and could create their own ways of working and intentions. It starts as an integrated group. We hope it continues as this.

58. The next stage of development in both areas will be telling: can GLAN and AAL create an effective mechanism and set of relationships for independent action which leads to social change and justice? This will depend on their drive to focus on benefits for clients and communities, rather than benefits for particular organisations; whether members can express and negotiate differences as well as common cause; and whether they can find the resources to service their activities and build their relationships.
59. In Hackney, the work to establish structures, relationships and joint activities was well advanced, as was their experiences of practical action to progress their agendas. This meant that our work in this area could focus on the political action required to resist damaging statutory initiatives and to devise better alternatives. In the event, more attention was paid to tackling the incompetence and unsatisfactory responses of the Council, than in designing a more effective approach for advice services in the borough. This raises the question of how best to use independent action when resources are scarce: to service clients and communities; to service our own agendas; or to service those with power and money?
60. It is probably true to say that in all three areas, and in Cardiff/Wales, any advances we have seen have been to structures and relationships between advice services, rather than improvements to any action taken to address the quality of life for local people. And it is also true that it takes time to undo the damage so far caused to assertive social action at local level. We have a long way to go, to regenerate the skills and courage necessary to combat the passivity of professionalism. We think that advice services, and other forms of voluntary action, must focus on the object of the exercise - tackling injustice, poverty and exclusion - and less on organisational interests, collective or otherwise. Collective action is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Joint initiatives to improve referrals or bilingual advice or to tackle matters such as debt, homelessness or immigration are more likely to assist local communities than are attendance at unproductive strategic meetings with an incompetent and disinterested local authority.
61. One of our areas of interest was to resist CLAC/CLANs and encourage alternative models of provision. Opposition to CLAC/CLANs was evident in two areas (Hackney and Cardiff/Wales), with tactics based on a professional dialogue with the authorities. This has proved successful so far, in keeping CLAC/CLANs at bay. A third area (Gloucestershire) successfully avoided a CLAN because of assertive local authorities. In Leicester, opposition to the CLAC and a real opportunity to demand an alternative model, has provided a rallying call and might result in a campaign around which agencies might find common cause. We also expect that individual interests of LSC funded agencies might lead to division and fracture of the current consensus. This experience shows how allies, enemies, tactics and results are contingent on local

circumstances. Tactics need to be embedded in and decided by those on the ground, inspired and encouraged by stories from elsewhere.

62. We concentrated our time and efforts in three areas. However, we did find others who were interested in the initiative and its aspirations; and who told us their stories of struggle and frustration, including with co-opted colleagues in other advice services. There is a potential pool of activists who, given support, would want to do in their area what we have done in Leicester, Gloucester and Hackney.

***About second tier support - locally and nationally***

63. *Independent action and the role of local advice networks and forums* - We found it difficult to find 4 areas in which to work, where there was a network of sorts in existence, which had demonstrated examples of assertive action and where there was a host to provide a home and sustainability for the work. Apart from HAF, all the contacts we started with - or who responded to us - were of individual agencies not networks. This is despite the existence of many established advice forums known to AUK. Is this because existing forums/networks are not doing, interested in or see their role as engaged in the sort of action we were hoping to encourage? Is it because Auk itself does not regard this sort of action as appropriate to advice forums? We have noted that the HAF story is not included alongside the stories of other advice forums on AUK's website. This is a most puzzling omission, especially since Auk specifically commissioned a pamphlet describing the HAF experience. Outside of HAF, why did we not use existing structures for collective action?
64. *Being in touch* - we were surprised and alarmed at the poor connections and intelligence about what happens at local level, nationally and locally. AUK sees this due to resource shortages and a structural issue. Outside of London, historically, AUK has not had robust and informed relationships with its members nor the resources to make this happen. We do not see how AUK can do its job without such connections and believe that this must be the highest priority for the organisation. At local level, except in Hackney, the poor level of contact and knowledge of advice services was evident to all concerned, with all areas deciding to set this right.
65. *A campaign mindset* - creating alternative views to that of the State and funders, and finding the courage to progress these, proved slow and difficult. So much critical thinking and acting has been lost and must be rebuilt. Much more work is needed to create understandings of structural differences between the State and voluntary action, the structures and methods for collective action, and the campaign issues and demands which will serve local communities. The role of second tier action is to provide practical support in this and to model their own plans and behaviour to what is required locally: manifestos; organising; practicing what you preach; and finding the resources to make it happen.
66. *Facilitating action* - change, to advice services and for communities, will not happen without support. We did not find ourselves running workshops as we expected, but instead helped to bring people together to find their own interests and solutions. This meant working across networks. We found considerable distrust between agencies and a two-tier pattern of



relationships: mainstream, usually LSC-funded agencies; and multi-purpose community-based advice services, with little money for advice. Making this distrust and divergent interests visible was critical as a first step in establishing trusting relationships. Dissent not only protects democracy, but can help to build the conditions for effective collective action. As expected we found that the blinding light of funding could influence these relationships, divide and distract people from the action that was required to improve local provision. We also found a two-tier approach to communication and influence - who talked to whom about what. Managers talk to managers and advisers talk to advisers. Such a division is not a healthy state of play and reflects the increasing managerialism of voluntary agencies. It leads to matters of process and strategy being de-coupled from the real work of enforcing and extending rights. Finally, time is required to bring people together and establish trusting relationships as well as common agendas, let alone take action on them. These things can only be done by local people with local connections and knowledge.

67. *Managing without money* - the work we did was done with very little money and vast contributions of personal unpaid time and services in kind, such as venues - at local level as well as by NCIA workers. It shows how much can be done with very little. The reason for involvement was the hope for something better and the commitment to make it happen. Not for payment.
68. What we need is a new approach to second tier support activity which:
- avows explicit commitment to the pursuit of social change and justice - in other words second tier work is itself seen as an act of solidarity with frontline groups
  - gains authenticity with local activists, and
  - works in ways that are content-driven and directly support local people - through community and voluntary action - to press for the changes that they seek.

### **What this means for Advice UK and NCIA?**

69. As a basis for discussion and debate, we have outlined some areas and questions which AUK and NCIA need to consider, as a result of this work.
70. *NCIA:*
- A statement on rights and advice work - NCIA is developing a series of statements about areas which we see as critical in independent action: the current state of play; what we want to see instead; and how to make this happen. We intend to include in this series a statement about rights and advice, which will draw on the findings of this work and which can be used by people wanting to organise and take action;
  - Supporting local campaigns for social justice - we are in the early stage of finding ways to support action locally which will directly benefit communities and re-design second tier support. We will draw on our experiences in this work to inform this. Information about this work can be found on our website [http://www.independentaction.net/?page\\_id=6573](http://www.independentaction.net/?page_id=6573)

- Joint working - we assumed certain understandings and expectations between ourselves and AUK which, on reflection, it would have been better to have spoken out before we entered into our joint arrangements. We are now much better placed to know the factors which we would want to explore with any future partners or allies;
- Disseminating the lessons - we will be exploring the lessons from this work, and action that follows, with NCIA supporters, most likely through the NCIA Assembly.

71. *Advice UK:*

- How do the lessons from this work reflect on the current work and campaigns carried out by AUK, and its deployment of resources ?
- How can AUK systematically build up a bank of intelligence about its membership, in particular those wishing to take action locally to protect independent action?
- How can AUK help its members to organise, create alternative approaches and have the confidence and skills to progress these? In particular, we view the provision of local network support as being the highest priority for AUK funds and action to protect independence.
- To what extent does AUK practice what it preaches on independent action? What messages does it give to its members about assertive action and what is most important for clients and communities?
- How will AUK use the materials and lessons arising from the work - will the experiences and the lessons be disseminated and broadcast? Will there be an attempt to spark a debate? Will there be any changes in the ways in which AUK views that part of its role concerned with protecting and extending the independence of advice provision?

**NCIA**  
**2 June 2010**