

National Coalition for Independent Action

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

Fighting for Our Rights How well equipped are we?

We - the public - face draconian cuts in public expenditure which will, if unopposed, affect all of us, wealthy or not, as inequality increases and public amenities and services crumble. We - as neighbours, friends, families, community activists, voluntary agencies and public sector workers - face increasing demands to offer aid and solidarity to each other against public service cuts. We - as individuals - will do what we do best: make our own decisions about the action we will take, alone or together.

Protecting our common wealth will depend on how well we can join together - especially in our local neighbourhoods - to resist the cuts and support those most affected. Critical in this, will be to act and speak independently from the State and other powerful interests - interests which have led to global and national economic collapse. To do this, we will need all the collective resources we can get our hands on: time, goodwill, co-operation, knowledge, skill and determination.

During 2009-10, NCIA had contact with local voluntary and community groups in four areas, to test how easy it is to take collective action on local issues; and to see how a national network could help in this. We started with the proposition: that if local groups 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 and with local people.

The groups we worked with provide information, advice and advocacy to those facing financial and other pressures in their lives. The impact of cuts will increase the work of such groups: to fight for the rights of individuals; to join with others to prevent cuts to local services and facilities. So, how well equipped are these groups and the national network to do this job?

What we found that will help us fight for our rights:

- **Tap into the energy** - many people are eager to work together, with or without money, to tackle the pressures on local people and their own ability to respond to these and find alternatives to damaging policies and practices - whether directed at local people or at groups working in communities

- **Make a home for courage and challenge** - where there is a home for joint action - a history, structure and resources - and courage to speak out, this had led to success in preventing cuts to advice services or harmful models of advice giving; and in creating services of benefit to local people
- **Reach out** - a wide gathering of local interests builds solidarity and strength, by sharing resources, knowledge, ideas, contacts and energy
- **Find common cause and make differences visible** - honesty about different interests and viewpoints offers the chance of finding common cause, and makes clear the limits of joint action. In this way, conflict or misunderstandings can be dealt with
- **Be clever tactically** - a wide base for action, with diverse interests, allows for varied tactics to influence public service decisions, from inside and outside the bodies taking such decisions. Some groups are better placed, or more inclined, to influence through professional dialogue within a "partnership" approach; whilst others are more interested to create pressure from outside using robust and plain language. A tactical appreciation of different and combined approaches works well.

What gets in the way:

- **Money** - funding is a great driver, divider and distraction. It can bring people together, but it can also lead to exclusion and can distract people from the work required to create independent viewpoints and take action on matters directly affecting local people eg housing policies, benefit problems, health and education, racism and discrimination
- **Competition** - the culture of competition for contracts has created caution, and sometimes distrust, division and fear, which can get in the way of working together and creates isolation
- **The fear of political action** - some groups have lost the practice, skills - and sometimes, inclination - to visibly oppose what they don't like, form alternative demands and pursue these assertively together.
- **Divided we fall** - despite having common interests, it was usual to find alienation and poor links between larger, better resourced groups (often white-run agencies working at borough level) and those with slender resources (neighbourhood based, single issue or black-run groups). It is now managers who negotiate, or not, with the powerful. The voice of those working directly with local people is often silent. And the voice of local people nowhere to be heard. The managerial class now speaks for local people.

NCIA was disappointed in the response of Advice UK which, as the advice network with the largest membership of independent advice givers, is critically placed to support local action. The role of national umbrella groups is to act in solidarity with their local members; to promote a campaign mindset and provide practical support in this. And to model national plans and behaviour to what is required locally: manifestos; organising; practicing what you preach; and finding the resources to make it happen. Instead we saw a failure of national action:

- **Poor local links** - there is little knowledge of what's going on locally or about the particular circumstances of individual groups. We do not see how a national network can do its job without such connections

- **Little practical help on the ground** - despite several millions of Lottery money given to the national advice networks, little of this has found its way, through hands-on practical help, to build robust and challenging collective action at local level
- **Whose side are they on?** the bulk of national effort is on doing the bidding of government agendas and keeping on the side of the powerful. Political action is corrupted by professional codes of conduct. The role model presented at national level is to keep quiet, or speak the language of bureaucrats, competitive working relationships with other national networks, and certainly not to rock the boat. If replicated locally, this is not a good recipe for resistance or for social change and justice.

NCIA stands for robust and, where necessary, dissenting independent action: against measures which undermine the health of our society; and for alternatives which allow communities to get what they need for themselves. NCIA hopes that the current economic crises will galvanise and focus local action; and shame national umbrella groups to take a stand and provide practical help at local level. Opposition to the cuts, and to the dismantling of our hard won welfare state, is mounting. Demands for an alternative response to the destruction caused by irresponsible banks can be heard. In the current climate, we have a choice in how we use our voluntary action: to keep our heads down, hoping we can hold onto the little we have; or to allow the energy of outrage to take us beyond self-interest and give us courage to act together.

Our work with local agencies shows that:

- 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 our own agendas 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.

Our success will depend on whether:

- we can create effective structures and nourishing relationships locally, from which to take action
- we can focus on benefits for clients and communities, rather than benefits for particular organisations
- we can go beyond our limited connections and build links with all those affected
- we can find the resources to service our local action and build our relationships
- we can express ourselves personally, politically and professionally
- we can express and negotiate differences as well as common cause
- we can stand up to those with power and money
- we can stand for as long as it takes.

The full report on this work is available at <http://www.independentaction.net/ncia-leaflets-and-research/>