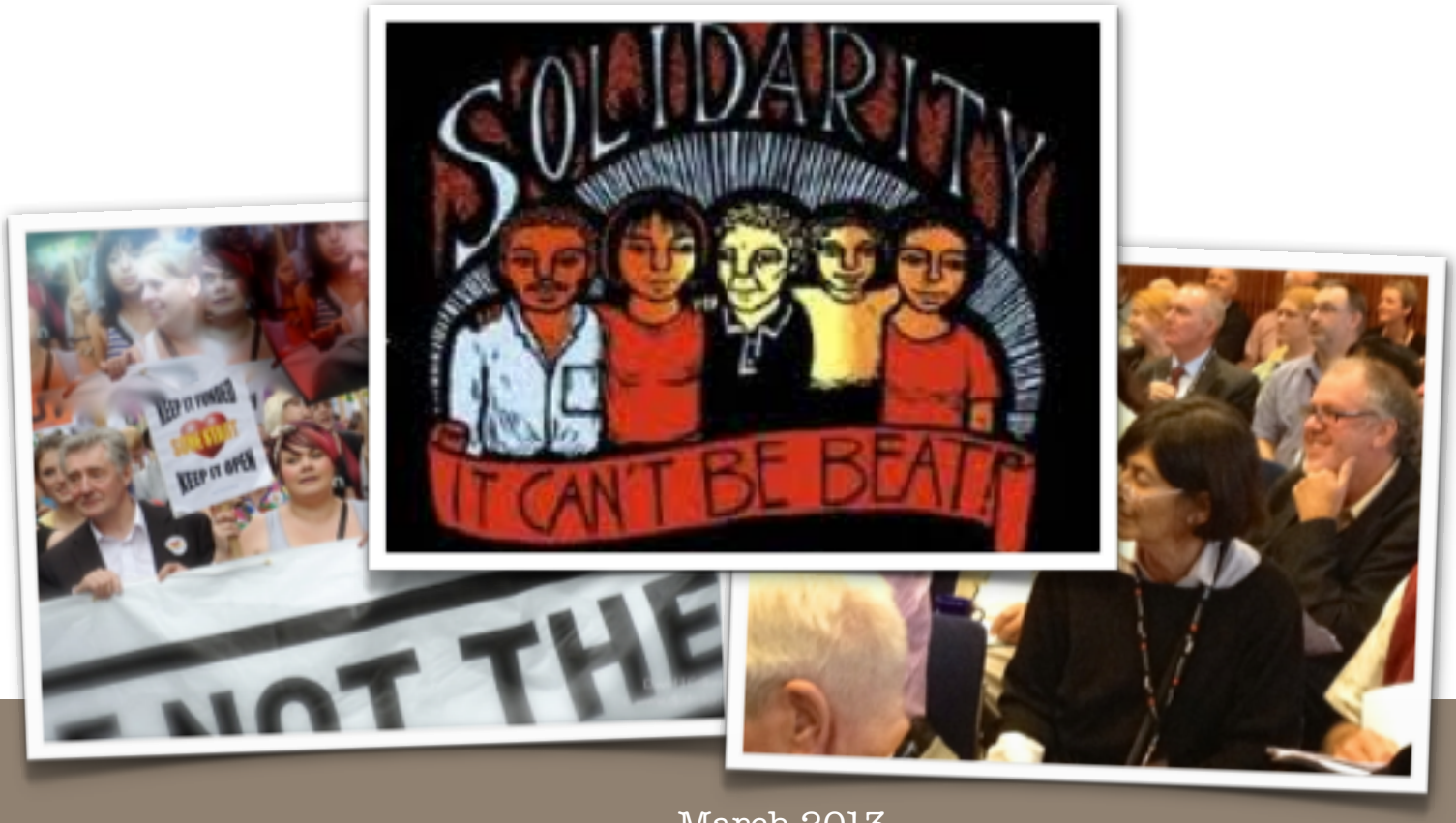
National Coalition for Independent Action

DISSENT protects democracy

Here We Stand

Inquiry into Local Activism & Dissent



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FINAL REPORT

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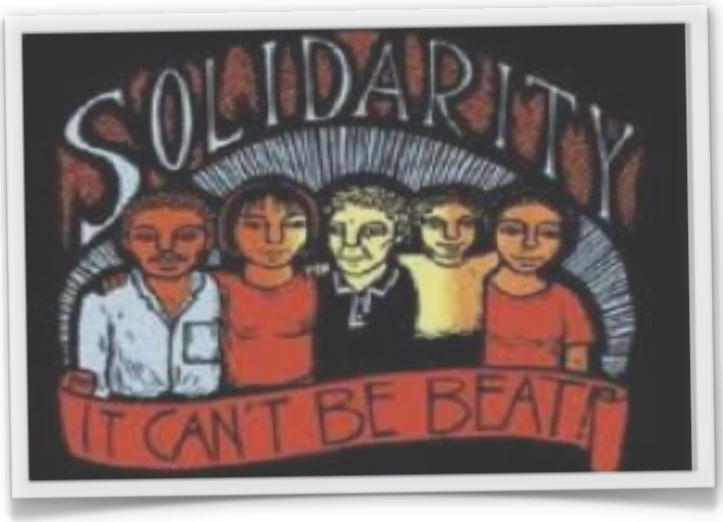
Where does resistance and alternatives to injustice lie?

Where are the homes for such action?



Here We Stand

Inquiry into Local Activism & Dissent

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An Inquiry into Local Activism & Dissent

Key Findings

The NCIA Inquiry into local activism and dissent took place over the summer and autumn of 2012. The abundance of material and insight generated by the Inquiry findings underline the richness of the topic, and the hunger from activists to exert an active democratic and egalitarian influence. The Inquiry found rising anger and motivation for action, amidst despair about the extent and impact of cuts and erosion to rights, entitlement, opportunities and services. In this context, the role of dissenting activist was widely seen as critical to collective health and well being.

Stories of activism were gathered from 76 examples across England and Scotland. The Inquiry methodology was informed by a radical intent which consciously incorporated 'emancipatory praxis'. Discussions took place in a spirit of reciprocity, in order to prompt mutual collaboration, challenge and insights. The findings were considered by 30 people engaged in activism, some of whom had contributed to the Inquiry. The Inquiry provides a narrative of local activism, not for quantitative analysis, but to highlight key themes, questions and pointers to practical actions taken in pursuit of social justice.

The Inquiry asked two questions:

- Where can resistance and alternatives to injustice be found?
- Where are the homes for such action?

The impact of the political and theoretical context to activism was considered. In particular, the effect of neo liberalism and how this has marginalised the goals of economic and social justice, with voluntary action increasingly shaped around the needs of the market. The activist's willingness to adopt a radical political economy - a narrative of why things are as they are, to have an analysis of power rather than an obeisance before it - has served them well, and should be instructive to all.

Activism & Dissent

An expanding world of local activism, through both agitation and collaboration, was discovered: safeguarding public services and fighting off privatisation; enforcing and extending rights of individuals and communities; providing community services and protecting the natural world; offering conviviality and solidarity. Examples illustrate the nature of social action - the predominance of unpaid activism and informal self-organising networks, the contributions that can be made by

professionalised voluntary agencies and the role played by virtual relationships. People - as individuals, groups or networks - tackling concrete problems affecting them and their neighbours, what one person called "social justice in practice".

Local social action is often fragmented, fragile and small scale. However, small scale actions by individuals coming together is the backbone and reality of resistance; the task now being to join together the myriad of homes springing up for such actions.

There was an absence of professionalised voluntary agencies involved in local struggles. However, there were examples of individual workers within such voluntary organisations doing their best to keep the integrity of their relationship with clients and local people. Established umbrella groups were uneasy or ambivalent about the landscape and found themselves captured by funding regimes

A common thread amongst those taking action was the willingness to think critically, confront and challenge authority and follow their own paths. Some openly challenged injustice (active dissent), some subverted from within the system (subversive dissent), others dissent through self-reliance, and some (mostly professionalised voluntary agencies) were trying to decide whether or not to be dissidents (potential dissent). Not everyone followed a conflictual approach and, rather, sought to express their dissent through collaboration.

Active dissenters do not need their 'capacity' built, they generally have or can find the "know how" and contacts they need. Time and people are the main tools of the activists' trade. Money does not prompt activism, but is a major factor in silencing it. Small amounts of money can make a big difference. There are few sources of financial support for dissenting activism. Social media sits at the heart of much contemporary activism: as virtual homes for dissent, providing support and solidarity, to gain contacts and intelligence; to get the message out, and for organising.

Homes for activism

Organising for social action is not a 'back office' to activism and dissent, but part of the action itself. A home for activism, and the ideology on which this is based, makes activism and dissent possible: combined numbers and hands for the work; a power base from which to spread and press for demands; solidarity and encouragement; sharing and finding resources and skills. The principles which underpin such arrangements reveal the politics and power relationships within the endeavour.

Activists reach for the approach that suits them, ideologically and personally. The overwhelming picture is of homes based on self-organising alliances built

on personal and ideological relationships of mutual benefit. These alliances were driven by individuals rather than organisations. Those suited to active dissent and challenge, mutual aid and informal relationships, will gravitate to self-organising alliances. Those more suited to collaborative activism within a prescriptive institutional framework, will work well with Citizens UK. Community development agencies may offer either approach, dependent on the political preferences of that agency and individual development workers. Subversives, acting from within, had few allies in their immediate working environment and are often isolated without a home. The role of unions, to draw together disparate activists and dissenters, is growing.

There is little evidence that local voluntary representative bodies offer a home for dissent and activism though some were participants in local alliances. This is despite their explicit role, and indeed sometimes charitable constitutions, which commits their interest to the needs of marginalised and oppressed populations. These agencies have resources, connections and knowledge of the local area. But their allegiances appear to rest with their funders, in particular the local authority, and they follow this lead and know very little about, dissent and activism.

Lessons for social change

As the Inquiry progressed it became clear that dissent sits at the heart of civil, and uncivil, society's role. Dissent - or at least the willingness to engage in some form of dissent - is required to meet community needs and redress imbalances of power and resources. Dissent is needed when consensus, collaboration and negotiation has failed and where the stakes are high for individuals and communities. Activism without the capacity for dissent will not have sufficient force. Without this capacity, the democratic role of voluntary action (or civil society) is fundamentally undermined. This is already the case for many voluntary and community services co-opted by funding regimes and marketisation. The role of the dissenting activist, of whatever form or style, has now become critical for our collective health and wellbeing.

Dissent can, and should be encouraged. Active dissenters need solidarity and practical help. Subversives, acting within the system, need to find each other, and other activists. Taken together, the force of subversives and a positive change in the narratives created by other dissidents, may well press those with potential for activism to step down from the fence.

The apparent growth in homes for activism, in particular self-organising alliances, alliances of alliances and the increasing role of trade unions, will hopefully encourage and nourish dissenting voices. It is not clear whether more local voluntary and community groups – and most important, their local representative bodies – will join this rising movement.

Practical action identified by activists include: to move beyond mere criticism of the status quo and devise alternative manifestos to rally around; to create connections and alliances within and across common causes; to recognise

and nurture the importance of personal relationships; to find forms of media, outside the mainstream, with which to broadcast demands for social justice and challenge the status quo; to replace the language of mendacity with the language of morality; to get on and be out there; and to keep questioning and exploring the big questions for which there are as yet no answers.

Introduction

National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) is an alliance of individuals and groups who have come together to assert the right of people to act collectively and independently from Government and other powerful political, business and financial interests. We exist to safeguard the role of voluntary and community action as a self-determining force, which acts to check and redress imbalances of personal and structural influence and power. NCIA supports such action by individuals or groups where it is designed for social justice, equality and solidarity. We assert the right to dissent, as part of a healthy democratic society. If ever there is a time for the democratic force of independent voluntary action, now is it.

1.1 NCIA is particularly interested in local action where the results can make a material difference to daily life, what some people call activism. Fighting for justice and equality, protecting or changing the system, responding to local needs, is hard and frustrating. People engaged in this struggle organise themselves, and reach for practical help and solidarity, in different ways, to carry out the gruelling business of change.

1.2 We wanted to know more about the different forms of activism for social justice which might be springing up locally, especially in the current circumstances; and the different models of radical support - the “back office” for activism. To hear from people how they go about changing the world locally, or safeguarding what is important to them. To know how we might encourage more of it, be part of it, and what, if anything, might be wanted from us. And to make connections for future relationships, alliances and actions.

1.3 The evidence gathered in this report, and what we conclude, is influenced by our politics. We try to be transparent in this, and encourage others to do the same. Our Inquiry is exploratory. The results will inform what we do next and, we hope, prompt a debate amongst ourselves and others.

1.4 We were joined in the Inquiry by the Community Audit and Evaluation Centre of Manchester Metropolitan University. The Centre is part of the “Taking Part? Capacity Building Cluster” an ESRC funded research cluster to develop research and a critical mass around active citizenship and the exercise of community power and voluntary action. The NCIA research was one of the last funded by the 5 year CBC and was selected by MMU to complement more in-depth work that had been carried out with particular groups, e.g Refugees and Asylum Seekers, and women, and which had explored the impact of our changing social, economic and political environment on community and voluntary organisations and active citizenship/volunteering. This included research into 215 small community groups in the North West of England. 85 of these groups worked with disadvantaged groups such as disabled people, and of these, 80% said they expected demand for their services to increase (as compared to 68% for all respondents). 78% of all respondents said they had

been affected by Local Authority cuts in funding, and as a result 51% said it was likely that their group would close within the next three years. The likelihood of closure is evident across differing types of groups including co-ops and social enterprises. To complement these findings, which had drawn out what groups were doing to improve their 'resilience', MMU was keen to find out what steps individuals and groups were engaged in, to challenge their changing environments.

Definitions, Methodology and Approach

Research questions and definitions

The Inquiry was undertaken to answer essentially political questions: where does resistance and alternatives to injustice lie; and where are the homes for such action? Thus there were two interests: to make visible local voluntary action which is designed to safeguard, challenge or change the status quo; and to uncover the arrangements which provide homes for this sort of action.

2.1 Local voluntary action consists of a very wide range of activities:

- direct service provision to meet local needs;
- individual advocacy: ensuring the right services/support gets to beneficiaries and sorting out individual problems through negotiation with authorities and services;
- political advocacy: challenging and influencing authorities on their practices/ decisions in order to change or safeguard the status quo, policies or practices;
- direct action: action by individuals and communities to voice their concerns and press their demands directly;
- conviviality: the simple enjoyment of being with others living in the same area or sharing a common interest;
- supporting voluntary action through: funding; brokering relationships; providing intelligence and contacts; servicing or sparking collective action and mutual aid.

Activism to safeguard, challenge and change the status quo

2.2 For the purposes of this Inquiry, we were interested in voluntary action designed to safeguard equitable arrangements, or to challenge and change public policies or practices, spending decisions or commercial practices that unfairly disadvantage people, perpetuate inequality and discrimination, or fragment and undermine communities. Our interests, therefore, lie in political advocacy; in direct action; in individual advocacy if it aims to change the root

causes which create individual problems; and in support which provides for challenge and change. We were also interested in voluntary or community services and in conviviality if the primary aim of the activity is to change unfair and unequal practices or to safeguard equitable arrangements.

2.3 We were interested in action by community groups, individuals, informal networks and by service-providing voluntary organisations which address material pressures faced by local people. The examples we looked for were groups pressing for affordable housing or against punitive homelessness policies; for improvements in home care; rights and services for particular groups such as, asylum seekers, carers, children, women, older people, those with disabilities or affected by racial discrimination; or other actions taken to resist damaging policies and practices such as planning intentions, health and job cuts and assert more equitable responses.

Homes for activism

2.4 The Inquiry wished to identify the forms of support available to local activism. To answer the question: what is the back office required for local change and collective action. Models and approaches already known to NCIA included:

- mutual aid and informal networks, including online communities
- formal structures, like Councils for Voluntary Services (CVSs)
- community development agencies
- anti-cuts groups
- trades union/community alliances
- community organisers.

2.5 Research previously carried out by NCIA[1] indicates that the following characteristics are important factors in creating the conditions to provide effective homes for activism. The Inquiry took these factors into account in searching and examining available support:

- practical involvement in addressing material issues affecting local people, including the resources to service such involvement and the offering of resources for those taking action;
- providing chances for people to come together, share knowledge, take collective action on local issues and act directly on decision-makers;
- an understanding of how the local state and other powerful interests operate and the approaches required to change power relationships and decision-making;

[1] NCIA. (2011) Supporting Local Activism for Social Change Justice: a case study in Hackney. Unpublished report, NCIA research.

- a commitment to working cooperatively with others involved in local struggles, and to challenge competitive and divisive relationships;

- a willingness to have a dissenting and critical voice in the interests of community needs;

- siding explicitly with local people on local issues, even if at the expense of being unpopular with authorities.

Methodology and Approach

2.6 The Inquiry was carried out by Penny Waterhouse, a director of NCIA, and Matthew Scott, a director of the Community Sector Coalition, who contributed methodological and theoretical insights. Activists were interviewed and connections followed: by phone, face-to-face, through email and other written contributions, drawing on information NCIA already held (including previous discussions with individuals) and by desk research. Over the summer and early autumn of 2012, information was gathered together from 54 personal contacts and a further 22 examples from desk research. Stories of activism came from across the UK, including: Birmingham; Gloucestershire; London; Sussex; Leeds; Nottingham; East Anglia; Manchester; Leicester; South West; North East; and Scotland.

2.7 People and groups were approached who were known to be, or might be, engaged in local activism, or had a role in support of activism. The contacts made were as much part of Inquiry findings, as a function of the methodology. Contacts were selected through purposive sampling, to include geographical spread, a wide range of issues affecting local people and different communities of interest. Sampling was combined with 'snowballing': making contact with those already known who then provided further contacts to move on to. The starting point was the action people were taking locally to tackle material community pressures, rather than a particular programme or approach. Initiatives, such as community development, capacity building or community organising were pursued only when actively engaged in resolving concrete issues affecting local people.

2.8 The interviews used a semi-structured approach, which covered the following topics.

- an exchange of practical actions being taken (i.e. information was offered about NCIA's relevant work);

- a sharing of views, information and political perspectives about the material issues and ways of organising;

- an exploration of common cause, mutual aid, solidarity and support;

- the difficulties of organising, effecting change and safeguarding community interests;

- the links and other resources activists used or sought.

2.9 The introduction to the interview, which explained the purpose of the contact and the Inquiry, remained the same for all interviews but thereafter discussions were open and free ranging, with respondents leading the discussion. Some interviews took 15 minutes, some 2 hours and each interview raised different themes, questions and issues, pertinent to the person being interviewed. Evidence was also drawn from material already held by NCIA, through previous work and through discussions with, or material provided by, individuals and groups and through desk research. See Appendix 1 for the full list of contacts.

2.10 The central research method used by the Inquiry was the semi-structured interview. This ethnographic tool is informed by a radical intent which consciously incorporates emancipatory praxis. The unhelpful dualism inspired by positivism, which equated social sciences with natural sciences and hence of rival assertions of the value of qualitative and quantitative debates, has long been superseded by an awareness of the value of the researcher active within the research field[2]. The research methods used in this research benefited greatly from an awareness of the illusory nature of absolute objectivity and standardisation[3]. Instead of empty objects to fill with facts we had people as partners and experts[4].

2.11 With the use of qualitative methods, in this instance of semi-structured interviewing, there was a special need for reflexivity to ensure that the inevitable subjectivity, which is entailed by using this method, is carefully managed[5]. The researcher's standpoint was never hidden but likewise openness to alternative viewpoints was enabled by ensuring a focus on open questions to allow the spontaneous opening up of content[6]. The interview allowed for an interpersonal rhythm[7] which, in contrast to a linear approach, enabled the interviewee to weave their own story into the interview.

2.12 Underlying the semi-structured interview research method was an emancipatory and radical intent, which is informed by a critical tradition[8] which asserts that human emancipation is served by a critical analysis of the status quo. Emancipatory research therefore starts from a model that locates the problem from within society and the way it is organised to exclude marginal

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[2] Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers,* 2nd edition. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.

[3] Hammersley, M. Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography Principles in Practice,* 2nd edition. London, Routledge

[4] Bhaskar, R. (1989) *Reclaiming Reality.* London, Verso

[5] Alcock, P. Scott, D. (2005) *'Close work': Doing qualitative research in the Voluntary Sector.* West Malling, Charities Aid Foundation

[6] Hall, D. Hall, I. (1996) *Practical Social Research: project work in the community.* Basingstoke, MacMillan

[7] Fetterman, D. (1998) Ethnography, 2nd edition. London, Sage.

[8] Bentz, V. Shapiro, J. (1998) *Mindful Inquiry in Social Research.* London, Sage

voices[9]. The radical intent of the research methods were also informed by the work of Paulo Freire[10] whose transformative and humanistic vision seeks social change based on dialogic principles and praxis and continues to be an inspirational model of emancipation[11]. The interviews used reflective observations situated in the field and took place in a spirit of reciprocity and praxis, to open up liberating dialogic action. Ideological and personal positions were made visible during discussions in order to prompt mutual collaboration, challenge and insights. The research which results develops a narrative of local activism, not for quantitative analysis, but to highlight key themes, questions and pointers to practical actions for social justice.

2.13 The draft findings from the Inquiry were fed back to a meeting of 30 people engaged in activism, some of whom had contributed to the Inquiry. The discussions from this meeting have been incorporated into the final report, in particular the lessons arising for future actions.

The Political & Theoretical Context

We live in a period of global and national crises – of financial collapse, of cuts to public services, of the privatisation of our common wealth and marketisation of our lives together. There is rising popular anger and action in the UK, and elsewhere, against these trends. It is this situation which prompted the timing of the NCIA/MMU Inquiry.

3.1 As part of public service privatisation, many voluntary services are now working under contract to the state and increasingly to corporate private agencies, like Serco, A4E and G4S[12]. Many representational bodies of voluntary action are either actively colluding with this circumstance or, through their silence, acquiesce to the situation.[13] Competition rules relationships in this world. Many voluntary services, as supine contractors, now sit apart from community groups, many of which are becoming unpaid micro-services as part of the Big Society agenda to shift responsibilities away from the State.[14] Campaigners - often individuals in loose alliances - and those directly affected by cuts and austerity, are left to confront the causes of community hardship

[9] Barnes, C. & Mercer, G. (eds) (1997) *Doing Disability Research.* Leeds, The Disability Press.

[10] Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* London, Penguin

[11] Ledwith, M. (1997) *Participating in Transformation.* Birmingham, Venture Press

[12] As under the Work Programme; also Northern Refugee Council contract with SERCO as another example

[13] http://www.independentaction.net/2012/12/04/anger-grows-as-sector-leaders-ingratiate-themselves-with-the-government-open-letter-says-not-in-our-name (Accessed 21st December 2012)

[14] New Economics Foundation. (2012) New Austerity and the Big Society. http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/the-big-society-and-the-new-austerity (Accessed 21st December 2012).

and societal upheaval, as co-opted voluntary and community groups remain silent or distracted from their real purpose.[15]

> *"(The voluntary sector) has developed largely on an unplanned basis. Social policy planning must therefore recognise this, and also recognise the limitations inherent in it. In the future greater political and policy focus on the role and structure of the sector will undoubtedly lead to its closer incorporation into social and economic planning, as is revealed by the new policy support for public service delivery in the sector... (A)t the same time planners must recognise that complete control over voluntary activity never could – or should – be achieved. Voluntary sector organisations will always seek out, and challenge, the gaps and contradictions in state welfare policy; and this capacity for innovation cannot be suppressed" (Alcock, 2008, 166)[16]*

3.2 Pete Alcock's benign interpretation of recent government policy with regard to voluntary action runs counter to the activist experience and the emerging nature of voluntary activities. His proposition appears to be that the government 'plan', whilst it might occasionally seek 'complete control' of the VCS (voluntary and community sectors), it 'never could' triumph over the independent spirit of the sector because voluntary organisations would never allow that to happen. Hence government interest in the sector can be seen as a force for good and, if it is not, it will be rejected. All remains right in the world.

3.3 The experience of activists asserts that the opposite is true: the VCS has miserably capitulated its role of 'challenge'. Its capacity for identifying state 'contradictions' is 'suppressed'; the pursuit of contracts has led to enervation and self censorship. In contrast, the energy and vocal force of activism remains as an example of what the wider VCS has lost. The following section examines two related theoretical propositions – a critical account of VCS political economy followed by the contribution made by activists to social theory and social policy. As noted by Defillipis, Fisher and Shragge (2010)[17], critical analysis and political education are vital in establishing grassroots-led social change. Without a wider vision, VCS activity is fated to collude or be reactive to dominant political trends, notably to neoliberalism with its rebalancing of responsibilities onto citizens and reduced capacity to make demands on the state for social justice and greater regulation of the market.

A critical account of VCS political economy

3.4 The interplay of politics and economics, in particular the impact of neoliberal ideology and Third Way palliatives, has had a dramatic impact on the VCS. The size of the not-for-profit sector in Britain, estimated by the number of active charities, grew by more than 70% from 1991 to 2004 (NCVO 2007, The UK Civil Society Almanac). Throughout the entire New Labour era the amount

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[15] TUC NCIA. (2012) *Outsourcing and Austerity: civil society and the coalition government.* Conference report, TUC NCIA

[16] Alcock, P. (2008) *Social Policy in Britain.* Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan

[17] DeFillips, J. Fisher, R. & Shragge, E. (2010) *Contesting Community.* New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London, Rutgers University Press

of funding rose by staggering amounts; money following ideology. The distaste for Big State interventions led to greater roles for both the private and voluntary sectors; however the underlying inspiration was the market and its norms, not the charitable and occasionally radically egalitarian impulses of the VCS.

3.5 Traditional areas of welfare became 'social' or 'quasi markets'[18] where the voluntary sector was just another contractor, adding value most often due to its comparative cost advantage (it was a cheap option). In order to prove its partnership credentials and be contract-ready, in the local government argot of our times, the VCS mimicked a culture and set of operating practices that had hitherto been alien to its tradition[19] – those of competition over collaboration. The controlling surveillance of new public management[20] and corporatism[21] took hold; the assertion of 'brand' over grassroots reputation predominated.

3.6 In the midst of the 'funding bonanza' of the noughties, there were signs that the sector had both replicated wider social inequity and also in large measure wasted valuable funds. In 2007, government reported[22] that at a time when government funding of the third sector had doubled, small and medium sized charities had got smaller and poorer (Treasury Cabinet Office, 2007, 10, paragraph 1.15). At a time when the VCS had more money than ever before, most charities got less money[23]. This was only possible because a very small number of large groups monopolised the funding[24], which is exactly what happened, with obvious similarities, with the growth of plutocracy elsewhere in the financial sector[25].

3.7 The decline of small and medium sized charities is a clear example of the failure of trickle-down economics as well as the venality of VCS organisations only notionally committed to social change. This was the decade when the leaders of national VCS groups who prospered most simultaneously embraced structural inequality – which is to say, they grew in size and wealth as a consequence of money not being passed down to the wider sector[26]. With regard to failure to deliver change – the examples are legion. The NVCO/ACEVO VCS leadership centre in Henley[27] at one end of the corporate

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[18] Le Grand, J. Bartlett, W. (1993) *Quasi-Markets and Social Policy.* Houndsmills, MacMillan

[19] Scott, M. (2010) Critical reflections on a decade of third sector modernisation: another sector is possible. *Local Economy,* 25, 5-6, pp. 367-372

[20] Massey, A Pyper, R (2005) Public Management and Modernisation in Britain. Basingstoke: Plagrave MacMillan

[21] Cockburne, C. (1977) *The Local State.* London: Pluto Press

[22] Treasury Cabinet Office. (2007) *The Future Role of the 3rd Sector in Economic and Social Regeneration,* Norwich, The Stationery Office.

[23] Unseen, Unequal, Untapped, Unleashed (2010) Community Sector Coalition

[24] National Survey of Third Sector Organisations 2009, Office for the Third Sector

[25] Ferguson, C. (2010) *Inside Job.* Hollywood, California, USA, Sony Pictures Classics

[26] Cabinet Office (2010) *Supporting a Stronger Civil Society.* London, Office for Civil Society

[27] http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/Management/article/892867/Mediation-could-solved-Third-Sector-Leadership-Centre-row/?HAYILC=RELATED (Accessed 19 December 2012).

spectrum where the inability of two large national bodies to work together, led to the failure of an entire tranche of Capacity Builders funding, that was supposed to benefit support providers at the local level.

3.8 The failure of the ChangeUp programme on the other hand, led the National Audit Office to conclude that after millions were spent, the programme had 'no strategic impact' whatsoever, "ChangeUp funding was dispersed through around twenty different regional and local programmes. Although partial assessments show benefits from some of these programmes there is no clear, independent evidence of overall strategic impact. The NAO was therefore not able to reach a conclusion on the value for money of ChangeUp'[28] In summary: a few got very rich, most got poorer and many programmes failed to deliver.

3.9 After the money had gone austerity Britain revealed a third sector, renamed under the Coalition government as the civil society sector, lacking in resilience and vulnerable to cuts. New Labour's third sector modernisation, with its focus on getting groups 'contract ready' to deliver public services, now paved the way for extremely large companies – SERCO, CAPITA, G4S – which profited from new and emerging markets as a consequence of the evisceration of the local state. Rather than VCS groups benefiting from a smaller state, it was these companies that completed the logic of both communitarian and market moralists. At the same time, the Big Society, finally dropped from the government lexicon (November 2012) was relaunched five times in under 2 years, as the government failed to communicate a progressive Conservative vision in the face of widespread scepticism[29] even within its own party[30].

3.10 A final consequence of the prevailing political economy of our times was not only to socially re-engineer the sector, even to re-name it, from voluntary sector to third sector to civil society, but also to consistently misrepresent what the VCS consists of. Rather than being made up of charities seeking contracts to deliver public services, the majority of groups are associations, concerned with issues of support, conviviality and solidarity. In 2008 DCLG estimated that 9 out of 10 groups were small associations, largely operating without funding and largely resourced by volunteers[31]. But this observation did not re-direct policy, which persistently focused on the exceptions to the rule: larger professionalised groups with money.

3.11 At the same time NCVO knowingly re-labelled community associations as 'micro social enterprises'[32], in a bid to bring the market orthodoxy into hitherto untouched territory, demonstrating its failure to grasp that the reason these groups remained small community associations was precisely to avoid such dogmas. It is in this heartland – the world of informal community action by

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[28] Cabinet Office (2010) *Supporting a Stronger Civil Society.* P13 London, Office for Civil Society

[29] Hunter, D. J (2011) Is the Big Society a Big Con? *Journal of Public Health,* vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 13-14.

[30] Scott, M. (2011) Reflections on the Big Society. *Community Development Journal*, 46,1 132-137

[31] DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government). (2007) *Third Sector Strategy for Communities and Local Government.* London, DCLG

[32] NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations). (2008) *The Civil Society Almanac.* NCVO, London

associations that activism most often presides. Unfunded community groups have nothing to lose, they cannot be bought or sold; they aim for a different kind of success.[33]

3.12 The starkness of current economic contraction, sharpened by political commitments to scale back the welfare state to US levels of provision, reveal long standing realities within the VCS. Having embraced third sector modernisation the VCS, particularly voluntary/community services, has yet to appreciate the place at which it has arrived[34]. Struggling to hold onto principle and purpose, floundering for survival of funds, it indulges in special pleading about the squeezed middle[35]. In contrast, given the intended wholesale privatisation of the public sector and hitherto sacred areas of welfare, the activist is clear about what needs to be done[36] and usually has a route map and an analysis of how to do it[37].

The activist contribution to social theory and social policy

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." Gramsci - (2007)[38]

3.13 In the context of one of the biggest economic upheavals ever witnessed we are daily reminded of what Gramsci terms 'morbid symptoms', of a rottenness at the heart of things. And yet with regard to activism, the wider VCS and social policy, it may be that signs of a new and better world can be discerned. In this instance the activist's willingness to adopt a radical political economy, a narrative of why things are as they are, to have an analysis of power rather than an obeisance before it, has served them well, and should be instructive to all.

3.14 With regard to activism for social justice, ten areas are offered as a commentary on areas that form a future radical research agenda as well as show the power and role of activism. These areas are fertile ground for new research as well as having revolutionary potential in their own right, signalling, in the words of the World Social Forum, that 'another world is possible' along with the necessity to recognise those with the skills to bring it, ever more into being.

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[33] Davidson, E. Packham, C. (2012) *Surviving, Thriving or Dying. Resilience of small community groups in the North West of England.* Didsbury, Manchester, Community Audit and Evaluation Centre, CAFC

[34] Scott, M. (2012) The role of community development in the modernising local government agenda, with specific reference to the local democratic deficit. PhD thesis, Goldsmiths College, University of London

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- A weathervane indicating the relative health of civil society.
- An embodiment of Freirean dialogic action[39] – of the ability to break cultures of silence, speak truth to power and establish genuinely liberating relationships.
- A disruption and resistance of unconscious reproduction of market / state ideology. We are involved in 'ideas' - either passively reproducing them or thinking and acting critically to transform social structures and relations of power. The activist as critic offers an opportunity to develop alternative and liberating counter hegemony.
- A practical articulation and analysis of the micro and macro operations of power.
- An educative function whereby citizens learn through struggle and a celebration of human creativity in generating alternatives to imposed solutions from above.
- A central contribution to deeper democratic practice which privileges both associational and monitory forms of democracy as distinct from more distant representative forms[40].
- A reassertion of practical radical egalitarianism and assertion of a rights-based discourse against the grain of contemporary New Right, neoliberal and mainstream communitarian hegemony.
- An enabling of difference over homogeneity; enabling the recognition of new claims and subaltern voices, from ethnicity, gender, different ability c.f. dis-ability, environmental justice etc.
- An active practice of de-commodification of social goods and processes – restoring civic values over private market ones.

3.15 The abundance of material and insight generated by the Inquiry findings in this report underline the richness of the topic, and the hunger from activists to exert an active democratic[41] and egalitarian influence. The theoretical background readily available from a wider community development and related social policy literature demonstrates that theory and practice do not have to be estranged, but can walk hand in hand. Furthermore that the radical potential of praxis, of reflection and action, make this a necessity for purposive change[42].

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Findings of the Inquiry
Who and What: the actions being taken

The activism discovered during the Inquiry reflects the diversity of local voluntary action: individual activists and self-help groups; local campaign groups working alongside national agencies; umbrella groups and networks working locally and nationally; professionalised voluntary services; neighbourhood community groups; research and policy groups. The activities and interests at local level are wide-ranging: safeguarding public services; enforcing and extending rights of individuals and communities; providing community services and protecting the natural world; offering conviviality and solidarity; through both agitation and collaboration[43].

4.1 Issues tackled covered:

- the privatisation of NHS and other public services, including wholesale outsourcing of council services;
- cuts to public services and entitlements: benefit rights affecting disabled people and carers; libraries; playgrounds; social care; advice and legal services; and restrictions being made through the workfare programmes and ATOS medical assessments;
- discrimination and inequalities affecting women; black and minority ethnic populations; those with disability and carers;
- improvements to local services and meeting community needs around: mental health and other health services; domestic violence; older people; refugees and migrants; council finances; children, young people and their families; kinship carers; housing and homelessness; benefit agencies; job centres and employment opportunities; policing; and playgroups;
- environmental issues and local facilities: recycling and waste; planning applications; traffic management and pavements; parking facilities; parks and urban trees; the preservation of woodlands, rivers and wildlife; station hours; plastic bags; self growing of foods;
- damaging effects of the 2012 Olympic games: the removal of ground to air missiles; freedom of movement in the areas of the Olympic games; and policing of local populations;
- funding and survival of voluntary agencies and community activities.

4.2 The examples below give a flavour of the actions being taken at local level, and, where known, of the profile of those taking part and arrangements for organising. These examples illustrate the nature of social action, the

[43] see Appendix 1: Key Informants

predominance of unpaid activism and informal self-organising networks, the contributions that can be made by professionalised voluntary agencies and the role played by virtual relationships.

4.3 **Stroud against the cuts**, an alliance between local people, unions, health staff, voluntary groups, councillors and members of some political parties (labour, green, socialist). The campaign has successfully fought off the privatisation of Gloucestershire NHS Community Services, overturning a decision made by the local PCT to outsource services to a "social enterprise" in what would have been the largest such transfer in the UK.

4.4 **Southwark People's Republic** is a source of local information and small, but growing, network of local people active on various issues, including the environment and planning in the area. They put the council under pressure to release information on council decision-making and pass this information on, alert residents to cuts, privatisation and other damaging policies affecting local people and explain who is doing what to resist these. And when they can, they get practically involved in campaigns and activities, like creating an alternative traffic map to make a case for better traffic management, to promote cycling and, to explore with NCIA the idea of a national Localism Watch project. There is a small group of people who do the work and service a regular newsletter, which along with social media and electronic contacts, is the main form of communication. There are no premises and no funding to resource the initiative.

4.5 **Don't cut us out, West Sussex**, is fighting against the decision by their County Council to cut £31 million from the social care budget for disabled people and older people, while at the same time increasing council reserves. The campaign has challenged this decision through a judicial review, petitions and demonstrations, gathered and used evidence of consequences, lobbied politicians and charities for support and used the media, including social media, to get the message across. The action is on-going and is run by an alliance of professional carers, social workers, carers and disabled people, church leaders and health care practitioners. All work on an unpaid basis. Donations have funded a judicial review.

4.6 **Nottingham Eco-Action** started to supply cotton bags so people don't use plastic, with help from a local business and as part of the Global Action Plan international network to "involve everyday people in creating solutions to environmental problems". The local initiative is run by a small group of residents and friends with professional backgrounds and environmental interests. Since this start, they have a yearly "veggie out", share excess allotment produce, come together with other local residents who produce their own food and teamed up with local businesses and the local community centre as a basis for further connections, including providing a base for the initiative. Despite funding being available from the local authority, and offered by Veolia, the project has decided to be self-financing to maintain independence.

4.7 **Leicester StopWatch** is part of the national StopWatch campaign, and brings together individuals and groups concerned about the impact of stop and search by police, particularly for young black men who are disproportionately

affected. Those involved are predominantly from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The campaign has recently been active to raise awareness of the implications of the election of Police Commissioners and the extent to which candidates take account of discriminatory stop and search practices.

4.8 **London Coalition Against Poverty** consists of several self-organised mutual aid groups active in a number of London boroughs, where local people affected by housing and benefit problems come together to resolve individual problems and tackle root causes. Members reflect the demography of the local areas and of those claiming benefits. LCAP is active with national campaigns such as Disabled People Against the Cuts, and Boycott Workfare. Servicing is based on a co-operative model, with tasks and decisions shared on collective principles.

4.9 **Leek roundabout** is a campaign run by local residents and politicians in Leek, Staffordshire, fighting the decision by the County Council to bulldoze an historic roundabout and memorial as a result of a Sainsbury supermarket development in the town. The first round has been lost, but the residents say they have long memories which will come back to haunt the County Council councillors.

4.10 **CarerWatch** is part of an extensive virtual and face-to-face network of disability rights activists, active at local, regional and national level. This group, and others, campaign against the cuts to disability and invalidity rights and benefits, social care and health provision, poor services and the current practices of medical assessment (by ATOS). CarerWatch is a virtual network and was initiated, and is now serviced, by a small number of women with care responsibilities and experience. The campaign is unfunded.

4.11 **National Community Activist Network** is a virtual self-organising network of people who identify with community activism and seek others with similar interests. Most contact is for discussion and reflection on issues of interest. There is some joint action between members. Groups have formed around housing, equalities, heating, money and within geographical areas. The initiative is serviced by a small number of unpaid members. Seed funding was initially provided by a regional funder, but there is no ongoing funding for the network.

4.12 **No Borders** is a self-organising network of 12 local groups of people fighting against immigration controls, detention and deportation – including trying to persuade Barnados to stop working for G4S in a detention prison near Gatwick. No Borders is a network, not an organisation "an idea, a political position, an anti-capitalist movement, putting our politics into practice, striving to organise without hierarchies or leaders".[44]

4.13 **Shoreditch Citizens** is part of Citizens UK which describes itself as "the home of community organising in Britain".[45] Shoreditch Citizens has tackled,

[44] http://noborders.org.uk/aboutnoborders (Accessed 21st December 2012).

[45] http://www.citizensuk.org/about/ Accessed 21st December 2012).

amongst other things, housing conditions and wage levels. This has seen more money put into housing repairs by Hackney Housing; and more local employers increasing their wages to that of the Living Wage (higher than the minimum wage). The approach rests on community leaders who are trained according to a specific programme and analysis of power and change. Membership is for institutions only. Funding supports activities, with the national body staffed by paid professionals, interns and volunteers.

4.14 **Manchester Action on Community Care**, is a large professionally based agency, acting as the local infrastructure body for voluntary and community groups; and working directly with local communities. Their mental health work supports small groups of mental health users who challenge and seek to change the policies and practices that don't work; and in this work MACC has also joined with residents to bring back into use a local park;

4.15 **South West Foundation** supports small community groups across the region to take action on matters affecting local people. This includes around 60 older people's forums which have been active on local concerns: to extend station opening hours, get dangerous pavements mended, put pressure on the council to do better on parking, pensions, services for younger people and hospital closures. The Foundation is a regional funder with a small number of professional staff, providing small grants to local community groups and working according to community development principles;

4.16 **Starter Pack** is a recycling/homelessness and employment project in Glasgow, holding onto its principles and working practices against the pressures from funders to behave like a social enterprise. The agency has paid professional staff, volunteers and creates job opportunities for local people and service users.

The landscape of local activism

The picture painted by many contacts is a world of increasing activism, as challenge and collaboration. There is also political and personal despair, and fear, about the extent and impact of cuts and erosion to rights, entitlement, opportunities and services. It is difficult to be hopeful, in good part because there are few places which offer a home for challenge, for safeguarding and to create alternatives to what is currently on offer.

4.17 The part played by local authorities is increasingly seen as oppressive and controlling, described by some as "control freaks" and "dictatorial" (BME group, local mental health worker). This control is said to permeate the formal structures for voluntary action, "local networks are council creatures with no critical analysis, coherence or purpose of their own" (women's rights activist). A local community hub was seen as acting as "a hand of the beast" (BME group). One person said they were proud to be alienated from their local council and "free from thought constraint" (a local race equality group). Another (a local eco-action group) said there were too many strings in working

with the council “we’re wise to that”. A worker in a large city infrastructure agency, said there were few allies amongst council officers as they had “culled free thinkers”.

4.18 At the same time, people talked of rising local frustration, anger and motivation for action as “there is so much at stake”. “There are people out there who don’t accept their fate or the arguments around austerity and privatisation” (race equality research agency). It is a world of action and energy which is rarely glimpsed through the mainstream media, or by outsiders. People - as individuals, groups or networks - tackling concrete problems affecting them and their neighbours, what one person from Hackney Unite called “social justice in practice”.

4.19 Social action locally was sometimes described by those involved, and observers, as fragmented: fragile and small scale, with small numbers of people at its heart. Alliances are often made up of individuals not groups. They are based on informal links and with some members fighting for their own entitlements, as well as for ideological beliefs and community needs. There is an emphasis on mutual aid, self help, self sufficiency, shifting alliances and cooperation. The exception to this is Citizens UK, which places emphasis on leadership and where alliances are with institutions and actions are of some scale. This apparently fragmented picture of alliances prompt some to worry about the limited impact of social action, the exclusivity of each part and who might get left out of club-like enterprises.

4.20 Several people talked about the class mix as being overly middle class and, with the demise of unions and the Labour Movement, there being few homes for working class interests. It is not possible to comment adequately on this claim, as insufficient material was gathered – particularly on the class profile of those closely involved in social action and of any local issues which are not tackled and the community interests without a voice. However, many of the actions taken clearly speak to the interests and pressures of local populations, with several examples of union involvement. And there is a view that small scale actions by individuals coming together in common cause is the backbone and reality of resistance; the task being to join together the myriad of homes springing up for such actions (Inquiry feedback meeting 30.11.12).

4.21 Whatever the nature of local action, many people talked about the benefits obtained, not only the concrete results from activism (stopping closures, detention of asylum seekers or privatisation of local services) but also benefits from experience in organising. “The main result is the experience you get by being involved” (anti-cuts campaign). “We’ve made lots of community links and spin offs” (environmental project). “Skills and knowledge have been increased, there is more confidence to do this sort of thing which can be passed onto friends, acquaintances in the community, and the action can be repeated, to campaign again another day” (Olympic community legal advisers).

Forms of Activism - to each their own way

4.22 There is much consensus, of the current situation in the UK and the need for action. However, there are different responses of what to do and how to do it, depending on: personal, organisational or political interests; and preferences for organising together. One person noted that, in the current situation of flux, all approaches were needed "challenge inside and outside the state" and "in and against the third sector".

4.23 Language can show the different ways people see things. Some people talked about the need to "protest", "struggle", "stand up and be counted", about "cuts" and the need for "mutual aid and self-organising" and "solidarity". Others talked about "government reforms", "development support", "leaders", "capacity building", "exploring", "listening", "volunteers" and "being somewhere behind the barricades, not at the front". As one person summed it up, "we talk about love, they talk about business plans" (homelessness project). The political "hijacking" of words and notions for purposes contrary to actual meanings was noted, such as fairness, community organising, partnership, big society. At the Inquiry feedback meeting this was seen as "the language of mendacity" which needed to be replaced by "the language of morality".

Activism as challenge

4.24 A women's rights activist explained that "activism is being prepared for dissent if things aren't sorted through consensus or rational argument. Activism involves struggle, to fight the State, even if there is no prospect of change. Activism requires us to go beyond services, the individual or your group. Activism is not a sticking plaster". This was a common description of activism by those with a political and ideological stance, acting from the outside, "we have an antagonistic relationship with authorities but increasingly they work with us to avoid conflict" (London network active on benefits and housing). Another talked about the need to distinguish between action by and for individuals, and that by and for collective interests against the State (Community Sector Coalition). A disability rights activist explained to me how she had become more political, through personal experiences, "I'm more influenced by sentiment. Others around me are more political. But the behaviour of ATOS is shocking (the government agency which assesses medical conditions for benefit entitlement). They took our site down when we simply told the truth."

Activism as collaboration

4.25 Not everyone follows a conflictual approach. For example, whilst Citizens UK act on the basis of a structural power analysis, they work alongside and from within institutions as a means to influence change. Provision of community-based services and local facilities, as a part of public services, was seen by some as a form of activism within a collaborative relationship with the State. "We're community active, not politically active. But we would provide a platform for activists. I don't see this as my job, but agree the state needs to be taken to task, as we are substituting for public services. But we are all part of a whole. It's good that people are fighting from different sides" (a rural

community centre). “There are different ways to fight, you get further with accommodation and compromise” (city community centre for families). “I get more done now than I have ever done by fighting. I agree we need fighters, but what I do opens the door to action” (recycling and homelessness project).

Sole traders and collective action

4.26 Most of the examples of social action involved, and reached for, collective action: joining with others who shared a common cause and organising together, in whatever way suited the enterprise and those involved. However, there were several examples of individuals and groups with a preference for autonomy: to act on their own rather than to join with others. This is not to say that these activists are competitive, rather that they prefer to “go it alone”. It is difficult to know from Inquiry discussions whether this is because of circumstance: that there are no other allies or there is not a practice of collective action. Or perhaps, these are individuals or groups who have an antipathy to collective action. Sole traders included a worker in an advice service objecting to the terms of their funder’s contract; the director of an arts project for people with disabilities, who uncovered residential abuse and tried to raise it with the responsible council; a community development worker in a housing association, struggling to get her agency to listen to tenant voices; a community group objecting to the funding regime forced upon them.

Dissent and Dissenters

A common thread amongst those taking action is the willingness to think critically, confront and challenge authority and follow their own path. Some openly challenge injustice, some subvert and some dissent through self-reliance. Others are trying to decide whether or not to be dissidents, of whatever form.

Active Dissent

4.27 The Inquiry found active dissent (the campaigners) – people willing to put their heads above the parapet and be visible in their challenge, whether acting through collaborative relationships or not. “We’re not afraid to ask, to hassle”, “we’re annoying and persistent, bugging the council”, “we don’t take no for an answer”, “I’m self driven and insistent”. Such dissent did not come from a professional duty, but from a personal concern, outrage or experience. Indeed, several people noted the absence of professionalised agencies in local struggles, “the mainstream voluntary organisations have sold out and don’t campaign. They are too professionalised and self-interested” (welfare policy activist). In contrast, people directly affected by material pressures and wrong doing are at the heart of challenge: focused, practical and highly effective. This was particularly evident amongst disability rights campaigners, but also on other issues, such as efforts to remove ground-to-air missiles from local estates during the Olympics, enforcing housing and benefit rights, halting the privatisation of local health services, safeguarding local woodlands. Unusually, In Defence of Youth Work, is an example of a fight by professional

youth workers against bureaucratic youth work professional practices which give little help or hand control to young people. Much of active dissent is also aimed at protecting existing rights, approaches and resources, which led one person to note that much dissent was "defensive campaigning – to keep or stop something. We also need campaigning FOR something" (housing activist).

Subversive Dissent

4.28 There were numerous examples, mostly from within voluntary services and policy/research agencies, of subversive dissent (the professionals): individuals and agencies attempting to force change from within the system, a herd of Trojan Horses. The activism of these individuals and groups is constrained by controlling funding regimes and/or by the stance of their managerially co-opted agencies. Much of this activism is collaborative, for example local groups in dialogue with statutory authorities in order to influence decision-making on their funding. There were some cases of individuals within their workplace taking a challenging stance with management and on social issues affecting clients.

4.29 Examples include a research and consultancy group working with health authorities on equality and race, limited in their activism by the terms of their contracts, but determined to provide evidence for more active dissenters. Or a refugee group which tried to influence other local groups to take a stand on cuts and to join together for solidarity and protection. There were examples of individual workers within co-opted voluntary agencies doing their best to keep the integrity of their relationship with clients and local people. "Increasingly our management and trustees are out of kilter with frontline staff. We're acting below the radar and trying to mitigate damage and put the family back in the driving seat. While no stranger to anger I find myself looking for joined up co- produced solutions and think there is real scope to get better services for the most vulnerable who are not currently well served, and never were, even when resources were at their highest" (mental health worker). Another example is a community development agency that negotiates hard, 'plays the game' and hopes to defend communities through extending power, mutual aid and influencing local strategic bodies.

4.30 Subversive dissidents are often torn between surviving and playing the game, whilst at the same time keeping to their agendas and needing to change the system they have become part of: "we've all become a part of the state infrastructure and got distracted from the bigger questions. But people are becoming angry and desperate. Workers within organisations are speaking out. This is where the future is. For the time being, we do what we can to hold on to what is left" (race equality agency).

Dissent and self-reliance

4.31 There are also groups that turn their back on active or subversive dissent and move towards greater self-reliance (the self-helpers). Some become self-reliant on principle, as a form of non-conformist dissent, such as the Windsor Diggers who have set up camp on disused land to live in the way they wish. A

community centre in Scotland, describes itself as a “social enterprise” and puts value on self-reliance in principle, “we’re free. We’ve achieved a lot with no funding. Nobody is watching us. There is a lot of fear. We’re all frightened, but you have to be willing to take a step out to go further”.

4.32 Others create self-reliance out of necessity in order to cling on to their principles: they have lost their funding, don’t want to play the game (even if it worked), and want to stick to their core purpose. An early example is the Muslim Women’s Helpline, which several years ago decided to reject restrictive funding contracts and instead reduced their activities in order to retain their self-determination. A more recent example comes from the Stanningley and Swinnow Live at Home Scheme for older people, which decided not to tender for their work, or join with others in joint tenders, but to cut back on their activities in return for self-reliance.

Potential Dissent

4.33 The Inquiry also identified potential dissenters (the un-decided)**.** These were predominantly professionalised voluntary services, often with a human rights focus (advice agencies, minority rights), and formal umbrella groups. Some from this group had a clear critique of the impact of austerity and government policies, and the need to speak out, but were hampered by fears for their funding and of being excluded from a seat at the establishment table. Others, particularly established umbrella groups, were simply uneasy or ambivalent about the landscape around them and were motivated to start talking about this.

4.34 These groups find themselves captured by funding regimes, the constraints of their own structures, staffing levels, resources, membership and contract requirements - “translating belief into action is difficult, we have the beliefs but not the energy. There is too much influence of institutions and an obsession with leadership and leadership programmes” (human rights group). “Many of us are disillusioned with contracts, nightmare applications, just the dregs or lose to private firms” (race equality agency). Several regional umbrella groups talked about “exploring” or “looking at” the issues, or wanting to “start the debate” or were “ready for new thinking”. It is too soon to know whether or not this will lead to any form of activism, dissenting or not. There were also a few examples of people running very small volunteer neighbourhood-based services, where increasing demand and the shrinking of already slender resources, might well spark angry non-dissenters into active dissent.

Tools of the Trade

Activists build their own capacity. The tools in their toolkit are values and principles, use of the law, people and time, knowledge, connections and social media, and small amounts of money.

Ideology

4.35 Active and some subversive dissenters talk about the place of ideology to underpin and drive activism for social justice, and the need for a home with political analysis: "knowing how you want the world to work, as well as how it currently does", "who has power over what", to share a common cause of "public and shared, not private ownership", where there is democratic decision-making and a search for alternatives"(anti-privatisation campaigner). Several people mentioned the loss of previous homes: the unions, the labour movement and political parties. "There is no ideology to bind and guide our actions, nor home for action" (race equality group).

The law

4.36 People engaged in active dissent see the law as an important tool: to challenge, to reveal and to avoid fudging what is really going on (which is seen as a ploy of the establishment). People talked about "a detailed examination of legal powers and legislation" which offered "clarity and increased morale and control" (stop and search campaign). Understanding the difference between policy and law, in order to exploit and extend the use of discretion and to force accountability and public scrutiny (NHS cuts). There were examples of training for activists in legal rights (freedom of movement Olympic observers).

Knowledge and contacts

4.37 In all the discussions, it was apparent that active dissenters generally have the "know how" and contacts they need, or can find what they need. They do not need their 'capacity' built. People talked about having influential and powerful advocates with clout, to make a noise and to expose. They had expertise themselves, or had access to this through personal connections and internet relationships, including sympathetic lawyers, planners, graphic designers, journalists or strategically placed insiders. As one person said, "activists already have their own links and knowledge" (regional agency).

Spreading the word

4.38 Much effort is focused on getting the message across and creating pressure. This was a big issue for active and subversive dissidents. Some groups concentrated on collecting evidence, through research and policy or technical comment, as ammunition for activists. Social media sits at the heart of much contemporary activism: as virtual homes for dissent, providing support and

solidarity, to gain contacts and intelligence; to get the message out, and for organising. The most common media was through blogs, websites, youtube, email, facebook and twitter. The disability movement has especially created a sophisticated virtual, and face-to-face, network of connections, “the internet opens up a massive world for information, networking and support. It’s the way to build up numbers, get media contacts, coordinate direct action and get quick responses” (disability rights activist).

Resources

4.39 Money does not prompt activism, but is a major factor in silencing it. Active dissenters are not paid to be activists, nor are they motivated by money. Indeed, some active dissenters were against taking money (particularly statutory money) in principle, “we’re not looking for money or to take orders from others” (local network), “we don’t take state money on principle, partly to maintain independence and also to prevent us from being corrupted or influenced by government agendas” (homelessness agency).

4.40 Subversive and potential dissenters are usually paid workers whose interest in activism is in spite of payment, “nobody funds the sort of work I do – working with active dissenters” (mental health worker). As noted above, fears of losing funding or position prevent this group of dissenters from taking unfettered action.

4.41 Small amounts of money can, however, make a big difference and are required for meeting rooms, office space, leaflets, legal fees, etc. It is difficult to find sources of money for these sorts of facilities. Charges made by local community hubs were said to be too high. Some groups could raise their own money through donations or find free facilities through their contacts. A few funders were mentioned as sympathetic to more critical and edgy work (Barings Foundation, Tudor Trust, Barnwood Trust and some unions). But there were said to be few sources of financial support for dissenting activism, “we’ve tried to get a bit of money for premises and photocopying but were turned down” (direct action benefits and housing group), “someone needs to give funders something to think about – are they fit to fund us? We need an independent thinking funders’ forum” (a regional funding/community development agency).

4.42 Time and people is the biggest limit, not money. Some people mentioned help in kind, “we don’t want money, we need help in kind and to create relationships, to find out what we can do for each other” (environmental project).

The homes of activism: organising, alliances and support

The Inquiry searched for the homes of activism: where do people get support for dissent and activism; what structures offer this support; what works and what stops collective action?

The politics of organising

4.43 Acting together is not straight forward. People pointed to differences that can divide and cause conflict: ideological differences, particularly between the applications of pragmatism and principles; class, cultural and generational divisions; personal temperaments; leadership roles; stereotypes and hegemonies. One anti-cuts campaigner said she had learnt how important it is to “find your tribe” and know the nature of strengths and limitations of different partners “understand how they work, their interests. Look for people with a political interest wider than their membership”.

4.44 Given the range of interests and focus, it was said to be difficult to mobilise across campaigns in order to stitch together a wider common cause for greater impact (welfare reform activist). However, there was an interest in building cross-cutting alliances beyond a particular cause. Disability and race equality activists mentioned the importance of breaking down sectarian boundaries and building relationships with activists who don’t have disabilities or with white activists who share an equalities perspective. The effort and time it takes to connect up can make the difference to success and to stamina.

4.45 Another key factor in success is finding a good fit between the individual and the ideological and social principles that lie behind organising. People choose alliances that suit their personal and political preferences. For some, the principles of mutual aid, informal and self-determining alliances and democratic collective working, are paramount. There is no time for notions of leadership in this model of mutual aid, “it is unacceptable to be organised by anybody. People should organise amongst themselves” (London Coalition Against Poverty), “no one can claim to speak for "No Borders" as a whole” (network of immigration and asylum activists), “workers act as facilitators of agreed action not as instigators or leaders. The action belongs to all participants” (Newham Monitoring Project).

4.46 Others are more comfortable with organising arrangements which depend on leadership, a uniform analysis and approach, a framework of rules and procedures, backed up by training and instruction, as illustrated in Citizens UK, Locality and the Young Foundation community organising programmes. “Citizens is determined and successful, acknowledging the leaders in all of us and the importance of human relationships. It can create critical mass and influence. As for Locality community organising, it’s early days yet, taking small steps and giving local people a sense of agency”. (community organiser)

No Homes

4.47 Where groups or individuals are visibly active on a specific cause, in challenge or in collaboration, their homes for activism are also visible. However, subversive dissenters, with no rallying call or visible identity, were more likely to say they could either find no allies (for example, an individual working within an hostile work place in a voluntary organisation), or got support from a small inside circle of close colleagues or friends (for example, a local agency with few external links). Subversives feel isolated and vulnerable. Some individuals find their homes outside their workplaces and alongside active dissenters. Some subversive groups are building alliances with each other, for safety in numbers and for caucusing. This was particularly evident amongst local voluntary services forced into consortia as part of contract tendering processes. In such cases, common principles and concerns can become a rallying call for activism and dissent – although examples also show how such consortia can become a home for division and internal conflict (for example, a consortia for local advocacy services, and for youth services).

4.48 Self-reliant dissenters were less likely to be networked, seek collective action or have extensive links for support. Homes for self-reliance were not evident and those involved were likely to be sole traders or seek support from within a close circle. (for example, an older people's service, a community centre, a recycling/homelessness project).

4.49 There appears to be some exploration in home building for activism by potential dissidents who play a strategic role locally. This takes the form of discussion and debate (for example, a local CRE and a voluntary development agency bringing local services together to consider funding cuts).

Self-organising alliances

4.50 The overwhelming picture from those engaged in active dissent is of homes based on self-organising inclusive alliances built on personal and political relationships of mutual benefit. Allies – those who share a common cause and/ or outcome - are to be found from amongst local people, individuals directly affected, unions, public sector workers and professionals, local politicians, national campaigning bodies and networks, and cross-borough alliances. Indeed from anywhere and anyone who can align themselves to the cause and expected outcomes. Allies may come from across the social and political spectrum and from surprising places. For example, attempts to outsource all activities of Cornwall County Council were thwarted successfully by councillors who challenged their cabinet's decision and ousted their leader.

4 .51 It is a picture of individuals coming together, not, in the main, institutions or organisations. The connections are often a network of activities, with different parts engaged in different contributions around a common cause. Social media and other electronic means, and personal relationships, are the glue that binds such alliances. The alliances are focused on concrete action and outcomes.

They bring with them increased solidarity in the face of any intimidation or exhaustion.

4.52 This process of networking and diverse actions within a common cause appears to be on the increase, evident throughout the period of the Inquiry and on-going at the time of writing. What started with networks and alliances of individuals, appears now to be moving into a new stage of 'alliances of alliances'. For example, Defend Council Housing is hoping to bring together the growing number of campaigns opposing attacks on tenants and benefits at a 'summit' event in early 2013.

National community organising programmes

4.53 There are a number of centrally driven community organising programmes, working according to laid down protocols, designed to spark and support activism and social change by local people. The most well known are Citizens UK and Locality, although there are less well known examples, such as that run by the Young Foundation.

4.54 It is clear that Citizens UK provides a home for activism which does tackle injustice. Indeed, it describes itself as "the national home of community organising" and can point to tangible results in tackling concrete problems (e.g. the Living Wage campaign) by influencing large institutions and engaging large numbers in activism. It provides a home for active dissent within collaborative relationships.[46] The principles for organising deployed by Citizens UK drew comment from some Inquiry contacts with experience of Citizens UK. Described as "the real thing" - tackling material issues on some scale with institutional engagement - it was also seen as "rigid and doctrinaire", "faith-based and top down" with a "strong centralised hand", an emphasis on leadership with mostly outsiders as local organisers and with "no role for individuals or small groups" (community organiser, housing activist). It is said to have "questionable alliances with the likes of Macdonalds/G4S etc"[47]. Likened to the Locality programme, the approach avoids alliances with other local groups or campaigns, and expects others to "come join us" (community organiser, housing activist).

4.55 In contrast, Locality does not provide such any such home. The stories of Locality community organising, involve 'active listening' rather than active dissent, the main consequence of which is to lead communities to take responsibility for their environment and local services.[48] On the Locality website, there was one example of action to safeguard a local bus route and this was achieved through collaborative activism. A Locality organiser explained that it was early days yet and it would take some time before local people would find their own power and could organise together on important matters. A small, but successful step was to say hello to a neighbour, given the

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[46] http://www.citizensuk.org/ (Accessed 21st December 2012).

[47] http://www.redpepper.org.uk/community-organising-a-new-part-of-the-union/

(Accessed 21st December 2012).

[48] http://www.cocollaborative.org.uk/stories?page=5 (Accessed 21st December 2012)

isolation of some communities. Other people, with direct experience of the Locality programme, described it as "dictatorial and secretive" (a local host for community organisers) and exclusive "they stopped local community groups from getting involved" (regional funder). **"**Community organising is in danger of being hijacked as a concept by Big Society and the Locality contract. They will organise compliance not resistance" (London Coalition Against Poverty).

4.56 It will be interesting to see what happens to people "empowered" by Locality organisers, where they discover that collaborative relationships, and taking over statutory responsibilities, will not tackle root causes of inequality and poverty. In the meantime, Locality provides a home for community self-reliance, which colludes with government Big Society politics to dismantle and privatise public services and to shift state responsibilities to volunteers and communities.

4.57 None of the local activists contacted as part of the Inquiry, who were not part of Locality and Citizens UK, mentioned these programmes as a means of support or form of organising for their actions.

Unions

4.58 The role of unions figured repeatedly – as a home for action, as a partner in action, as a funder, as a source of influence and connections. Both Unison and Unite have new initiatives to join with community activists and groups, for mutual benefits. The feedback about the union role is mixed. Some people said that there was no sign of union activity in their area, or that this consisted of demonstrations but "no coherent campaigning" or relationship building (South West England and a London borough). For some anti-privatisation and anti-cuts campaigns, and some local networks, union involvement is integral and critical to their activities (eg Barnet, Gloucestershire, Sheffield, Hackney).[49] Some worries have been expressed of union domination, undermining common cause alliances, and that "community unionism may also lack a political ideology, or more specifically an ideology of Labour premised on oppositional politics"[50]. The arrangements for the Unite new community membership would appear to make it difficult for such members to campaign against the Labour Party.

4.59 At the Inquiry feedback meeting, the role of unions – as a home for activism, dissent and alternative manifestos – was viewed as potentially critical to build alliances of alliances and critical mass, to challenge the current narrative and avoid the marginalisation of small actions. However, there were doubts expressed about realising this potential, given the way that unions are organised and operate (labour dominated and bureaucratic). One participant described the ambition to involve the unions as "the triumph of hope over experience".

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[49] See also TUC (2010) Swords of Justice and Civic Pillars

[50] http://www.redpepper.org.uk/community-organising-a-new-part-of-the-union/ (Accessed 21st December 2012)

Voluntary and community groups

4.60 As active dissenters take the strain, where are the local community and voluntary groups which espouse social justice and might provide a home for resistance? The involvement of voluntary and community groups, as a home for activism, is mixed. Some anti-cuts/privatisation campaigns are said to involve such groups (Barnet Alliance and West Sussex Don't Cut Us Out) but they do not appear to play a strategic or organising role. Elsewhere there appears to be an absence of local voluntary groups participating in active dissent. Although subversive and potential dissenters are highly represented amongst these groups, the groups themselves do not provide homes for such dissidents. One anti-cuts activist said they had few links with such groups who had "no attitude to fight back". In another area a local activist found that voluntary groups "aren't willing to push the system". Other activists noted that mainstream charities have "sold out", "stall in taking action" and are now acting as "predators" after public sector jobs or the funding of small local groups (disability activists, youth work campaigner). One activist said that unions now offer a home for "concrete collective action…..to organise around issues rather than through charities, which are more like a service where you're a customer"[51]. The Community Sector Coalition noted an "uneasy relationships between voluntary/community groups and activism".

4.61 Given the strategic and representative role that local voluntary umbrella groups, such as Councils for Voluntary Services (CVS), have, the Inquiry was interested to find such a body providing a local home for dissent and activism. Virtually none were uncovered which visibly align themselves or support local activists and dissent. The two exceptions are, Adur Voluntary Action, which has a considered approach to activism[52], and Newcastle CVS which gathers evidence about the impact of cuts on voluntary action and presents this critically.[53] But most considered during the Inquiry have made their way only as far as potential dissenters at best; at worst, others are colluding with the pressures, policies, perspectives and ideologies that are hegemonic in the current and emerging landscape.

4.62 A housing activist explained the reasons for this picture, "borough-wide umbrella groups are a very good example of co-option from when they took their place around the Local Strategic Partnership table, back in 2001/2. That's why you've not been able to identify one interested in active dissent". One local campaigner said their CVS had provided them with contacts for their campaign. But otherwise, feedback on these agencies was critical: for their passive relationships with statutory bodies, their self-interest and in their collusion with privatisation through contracting and the Localism Act.

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[51] http://www.redpepper.org.uk/community-organising-a-new-part-of-the-union/ (Accessed 21st December 2012)

[52]http://www.adurva.org/downloads.htm (Accessed 21st December 2012)

[53]http://www.independentaction.net/2012/07/28/value-what-we-do/#more-9287 (Accessed 21st December 2012).

4.63 One local infrastructure body was described as the “hand of the beast” and “part of the state infrastructure” (local race equality group). A regional funder explained that the local CVSs “had been diverted into capacity building and turned into something for government, not for communities” and that the one CVS active on community issues had closed with money problems. A local rights worker explained that their CVS – despite being their representative at a council meeting on commissioning local community services - would not divulge to its members the outcome of these discussions or decisions as the local authority had said these were “confidential”. One CVS, in conjunction with Urban Forum and Locality, provided briefings for local voluntary groups on the Localism Act, described as “funding opportunities for groups interested in running public services, assets and influencing development”.[54]

4.64 Local infrastructure bodies, particularly CVSs, are not seen as relevant to the practical struggle for justice and equality, let alone provide a home for this. “They are only useful for organisational capacity building, to make us fit for commissioning. They did lobby on cuts to agencies, but not on cuts affecting the local population. In my area, there aren’t other alternative networks for community action. Be self-sufficient or fold is the message. But we should place demands on the CVS, say what we want from them” (environmental group). The chief executive of the national umbrella for CVSs (NAVCA) explained it was not the role of CVSs to campaign or resist cuts but to “deal with the realities. We won’t be on the front of the barricades, but somewhere behind.”[55]

Community development

4.65 The contribution of community development was raised by some informants. Community development agencies and practitioners – particularly those with a radical and dissenting perspective themselves – put weight on this approach as an important tool to tackle injustice and support local community action. There were three examples uncovered which illustrated this approach and the potential for local community development agencies to provide a home for activism (a mental health project, an agency working on health issues and a regional funder). A notable example was a regional funder/community development agency that used such an approach as a means towards an end (to tackle domestic violence, mental health services, older people’s issues), by facilitating networking, peer support, and providing resources in cash, knowledge, skills, and people.

4.66 These examples mostly engaged in collaborative activism and subversive dissent. In one such agency, there was frustration with this approach as a means for social change, “when we come back to the community they get angry at us, because they feel they have been used, they expressed their views and nothing happened” (health worker).

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[54] http://urbanforum051212.eventbrite.com/?ebtv=C (Accessed 21st December 2012)

[55] Camden CVS event 25.9.12

Conclusions on dissent and activism

The Inquiry was undertaken to answer the questions: where does resistance and the struggle for justice lie; and where are the homes for such action? There were two interests: to make visible local voluntary action which is designed to safeguard, challenge or change the status quo; to uncover the arrangements which provide homes for this sort of action.

5.1 The findings show that resistance, brought to bear on wide-ranging community interests, comes in many different forms and styles: active and subversive dissenters; dissent through self-sufficiency; by consensus and conflict; by insiders and outsiders. The Inquiry came across activists from across the political spectrum: liberal, libertarian, anarchist, socialist and one nation conservatives, whether of Labour or Tory leanings. Some are motivated by politics and ideology, some by faith and beliefs, and some by personal experiences. Some mix more or less easily together in common cause. Others seek out their own 'tribe'. But all wished the same end: to make the world they are in a better place. And why not? Voluntary action, and concern for social justice, is as diverse as those involved.

Encouraging dissent

5.2 As the Inquiry progressed it became clearer that dissent sits at the heart of civil, and uncivil, society's role: dissent is busy and growing in all its forms. If power is never given but taken, dissent - or at least the willingness to engage in some form of dissent - is required to meet community needs and redress imbalances of power and resources. Dissent is particularly required when consensus, collaboration and negotiation has failed and where the stakes are high for individuals and communities. Activism, without the capacity for dissent, will not have full force. Without this capacity, the democratic role of voluntary action (or civil society) – to challenge injustice and powerful interests and to push for alternatives - is fundamentally undermined. This has already come to pass for many voluntary and community services co-opted by funding regimes and marketisation. The role of the dissenting activist, of whatever form or style, has now become critical for our collective health and wellbeing.

5.3 The findings of the Inquiry raise numerous questions: what links and common cause can be made across different forms of dissent? How can we give solidarity and practical help to those we decide to join with? Will potential dissidents come out or remain on the fence? How can subversive dissidents be supported? Which homes will work best to build resistance and alternatives? Are voluntary service agencies a lost cause as a home for activism?

Encouraging active dissent

5.4 Active dissenters do not need capacity building. They create their own homes and own connections and are prepared for dissent. So what help do they need

from anyone? Well, they are tired, under great pressure and often have to run to stay still. Small amounts of money would make a big difference. More people to join their cause would help. In particular, more organisations and groups, like the unions and voluntary/community groups and their representatives, to offer solidarity and practical help. Active dissenters usually work around single issues but need better chances to join up with others. The building of alliances of alliances is beginning to happen. And most importantly, active dissenters are so busy resisting destructive policies that there is little time to create and promote alternatives for the long term. This is the time for additional hands, like NCIA, to add their contribution to building alternative manifestos, as well as resisting injustice.

A home for subversives

5.5 Subversive dissenters are individuals and groups, compromised either within their agency or as an agency. Many already play a pivotal role in dissent, acting bravely below the radar. They do what they can within these constraints, to resist and negotiate. Subversives, particularly individuals, may inhabit any number of places: voluntary services, community groups, umbrella groups, public services, the professions and private businesses. Their dissent is muted and mostly takes place in privacy or is shared as part of conviviality (the pub, canteens). They are vulnerable in their workplace, or in the wider world. There is no evident home, common cause or form of organising or caucusing for subversives. But there is much potential for activism by helping these dissidents find each other, and other activists. They can be an important insider resource, for those acting from outside.

5.6 There is evidence that some individual subversives find their homes as active dissenters; and that some subversive groups, are building alliances with other such groups. Unions also play a role in providing a home for individuals to come together in or across workplaces. Naming this form of dissent, and the sources of homes for common cause, may help to make it visible and facilitate connections.

Questions about self-reliance

5.7 Is self-sufficiency an answer to our local and national problems? Immediate survival may require this form of dissent: we will look after ourselves. Refugee communities have for years had to face this option through necessity. Community groups, with little resources, have done the same for generations. Voluntary services that remain insistent on their own non-collusion will join them. And new forms of activism and social change may appear as a result.

5.8 But self-reliance is a two-edged sword and may well create un-intended consequences. Is self-reliance right (encouraging control and community action) or wrong (abrogating the proper role of the state)? Does self-reliance compound the atomisation of our community lives and will our lives be poorer as a result? Can self reliant groups and individuals retain their autonomy, join with other dissenting voices and avoid collusion with Big Society? And is a home for self-reliant dissent an oxymoron? Is it possible to find common cause between self reliant groups and others pushing for social justice? Those

forced into self-reliance through necessity will be all too ready to join with others, given the opportunity. Others may seek connections and common cause, in order to continue or consolidate their self-reliance.

5.9 We need to watch and connect with this group of dissenters so we can understand its growth and the impact on social justice and community wellbeing.

Where's the potential?

5.10 The critical concern and focus for many potential dissenters is their funding relationships and the influence of the dominant establishment narratives. Debates are now starting on these narratives and how to respond, which could send them in different directions, or in no direction at all. Given a home and encouragement, those with dissenting ideologies where the stakes are high (e.g. those working within human rights and equalities) are likely to move towards subversion or active dissent. Those who agree in part with current narratives (privatisation, a greater role for voluntary services, cuts to entitlements, a small state) are likely to remain silent or continue to collude (passively or actively) in the face of the tidal shifts going on. As will those who see their roles as primarily professional and who are dependent on existing power structures. However, the force of subversives, and a positive change in the narratives created by other dissidents, may well press those with potential for activism to step down from the fence. When there is no more money, jobs or seats at the table of power on which to cling, there will be less reason to keep silent.

Current homes for resistance and alternatives

5.11 The Inquiry found homes for activism and dissent: self-organising alliances; Citizens UK community organising; and local community development agencies. These homes have many of the characteristics found in NCIA's previous research into support for local activism in Hackney (see paragraph 2.6). Citizens UK is particularly effective in working towards alternatives to injustice and mobilising large numbers of activists.

5.12 Locality community organising does not offer such a home. Their work does not appear to be rooted in the need to safeguard, challenge or change the status quo for social justice. Instead they focus on fostering community self-reliance, largely in line with Big Society politics, with as yet, no visible challenge to the reality of service cuts and austerity bearing down on these communities. However, the benefits of Locality organising – conviviality, individual agency and collective action – may bear fruits in the future, for resistance and dissident action for social justice.

5.13 Activists reach for the approach that suits them, ideologically and personally. Those suited to active dissent and challenge, mutual aid and informal relationships, will gravitate to self-organising alliances. Those more suited to collaborative activism within a prescriptive institutional framework, will work well with Citizens UK. Community development agencies may offer either

approach, dependent on the political preferences of that agency and individual development workers.

5.14 Findings from the Inquiry show that organising for social action is not a "back office" to activism and dissent, but part of the action itself. It is not a question of support for activists, more a question of joining with activists. A home for activism, and the ideology on which this is based, makes activism and dissent possible: combined numbers and hands for the work; a power base from which to spread and press for demands; solidarity and encouragement; sharing and finding resources and skills.

5.15 The principles which underpin such arrangements reveal the politics and power relationships within the endeavour. There is a world of difference between the spontaneously arising self-determining alliances of individuals (and increasingly of groups), built on mutual aid and informal relationships and where democratic control, collective decision-making and equal participation is highly valued; and that of the national community organising programmes, based on hierarchical relationships of professional and "qualified" local organisers bent on creating leadership in the community according to a protocol.

5.16 There is no doubt that organising principles are important to those involved in activism. Heated arguments about the means of organising can occur amongst activists and observers. Divisions can appear about the "right" way to organise and the relative merits between different approaches.[56] These differences, and consequent tensions, have been described well by Eileen Conn as between the "horizontal peer system" of community relationships, and the "vertical hierarchical system" of institutional life.[57] The task is to find ways to accommodate and learn from our differences in organising; and to focus on the change and critical mass that can be found in the totality of different approaches, which can achieve alternatives to injustice and inequality.

Future homes for activism

5.17 The union initiatives, to build relationships with community activists, have promise in creating homes for mobilising and resistance. The picture so far, is that many active dissenters have already found their way to unions, although this is patchy across the country. There is real potential for union/subversive dissident alliances. And for achieving alliances across class and race; and between public and voluntary sectors. Extending union interests beyond the workplace allows for alliances on community interests which would otherwise be missed. For example, around wider rights and entitlements, e.g. disability rights. However, there are tensions to be unpicked: union/labour/public

[56] Community organising or mobilising opposition to cuts. John Diamond NatCAN update 28.9.12. See also discussions in the NatCAN community development group http://nationalcan.ning.com/group/community-development (Accessed on 21st December 2012).

[57] Conn, E. (2011) *Community Engagement in the Social Eco-System Dance.* Birmingham, TSRC. http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=K8%2BrbdUTghQ%3D&tabid=827 (Accessed on 21st December 2012).

services allegiances, which may compromise some community alliances; clash of practices, priorities and cultures; distrust from some community activists of such an establishment player; and general ignorance between the worlds of union and community action. But this is a path to be explored, if we are to create critical mass and find alternatives to the current landscape.

5.18 There was little evidence that voluntary groups offer a home for dissent and activism , though some are participants in local alliances. This is despite their explicit role, and indeed sometimes charitable constitutions, which commits their interest to the needs of marginalised and oppressed populations and places them alongside them. This is a shocking situation and shows the deep extent of fear and co-option amongst many local voluntary services.

5.19 The role of local representative bodies, some of which figure amongst potential dissenters, is particularly stark. These agencies have resources, connections and knowledge of the local area. But their allegiances appear to rest with their funders, in particular the local authority, and they follow this lead. They do not see their role in, and know very little about, dissent and activism. The role they might provide offers much potential: providing information about local campaigns; connecting subversives; encouraging potential dissenters to have a voice; sharing intelligence and connections; servicing networks and alliances; offering resources, financial and practical.

5.20 The vacuum created at local level, as voluntary bodies and their representatives act as agents of the State or promoters of the private sector, is now being filled by the growth of alternative local networks that take their lead from community action and dissenting residents (Hackney Unite, People Against Profit, People's Republic of Southwark).

Here we stand together : what can we learn from the Inquiry?

Activists and dissenters don't need to be told what to do. They already do what matters to them. And they take decisions which make sense to their cause. This section is not to make recommendations from our findings, but to reflect on the lessons that might be taken. For this, 30 people active in campaigns, community groups and unions argued and debated the results of the Inquiry and the responses to make. Ideas for action, locally and nationally, were shared.

Alternative manifestos

6.1 The time has come to get beyond dissent and to join with others in devising ideological and practical alternatives; as well as continuing to name and shame what we don't like. This includes creating and spreading alternative

narratives to the current dominant messages around us, for example of money and marketisation. We can share alternative manifestos and examples which are beginning to spring up. We can use our efforts to find common understandings across different interests and find rallying points for joint action. To increase our collective political literacy, we can share and debate the politics and stories that have created these manifestos. Our actions show our politics.

Concrete action rallying points

6.2 We need to concentrate on, and name, practical actions which directly address material community pressures**,** and around which we can rally, organise and make connections. These will vary according to what affects us as individuals or communities of interest. The point is to decide the specific issues for social justice on which to join with others to campaign or act.

Make connections

6.3 Small groups and individuals affected by community pressures are the backbone and reality of resistance – we can put effort into making connections between groups and individuals which are located in concrete actions. We are all affected by the loss of our public services and common wealth. We can talk to each other and share our stories, with those most affected by cuts and austerity, and with those of all classes, race, age, gender and background. We can draw together our own worlds of active dissenters, subversives and self-reliant dissenters. We can make connections with radicals outside our immediate world, where ever or whoever they are. We can give confidence to, and encourage the undecided to join us, particularly where they are strategically placed such as local umbrella groups. Finding the self-interests of particular groups, especially economic self-interest, can be a powerful driver for activism. The benefits and dangers of self-reliance are to be watched, and those individuals and groups forced into self-reliance can be supported and welcomed into collective action. And we can try to build relationships with unions.

Alliances and homes

6.4 We need lots of homes to work for social and economic justice. We need to spot the nodes where self-interests might best join up. Our efforts will create broad alignments across all types of dissidents; and between homes for activism which share a common cause and political analysis, whether inside or outside the system. Alliances between public sector workers and others can be made. We need to find and make connections with subversive dissidents so they can have a more forceful voice and to reduce their isolation. This includes members of representative bodies, to push for more accountability from the agency which speaks for them. We will do what we can to sustain each other and to share our resources with other dissenters: money, intelligence, evidence, connections. We can see if we can find funders willing to give small amounts of money to activists and their cause. And we can learn from each about how to change the system and what prevents successful

struggles: mobilising, organising, resisting and creating new alternatives and politics.

Personal relationships

6.5 Personal relationships are what underpin activism and change. Differences and dilemmas can be understood and accommodated more easily through personal relationships. Time and care in building relationships give dividends in the short and longer term.

The media

6.6 Social and other media is being used successfully to broadcast demands for social justice and to challenge the status quo. We can document and share what is going on, good and bad. Finding our own way to spread alternative messages is crucial, as mainstream media is not a successful route for manifestos and stories which challenge those put across by the establishment.

Language

6.7 We need to be alert to the danger of words which obscure and hide the truth of what we see and say. We can reach for plain and honest vocabulary to express our ideas and relationships. We can find new language to express our politics and beliefs. And we can replace the language of mendacity with the language of morality. Whether in alliances with others, or as an individual, we can speak plainly of what we think, feel and see.

Get on and be out there!

6.8 Be out there and be visible, to make the changes. Action and changes happen in and outside rooms.

Keep questioning and exploring

6.9 We were also left with many big questions hanging. Can unions become again a home for resistance and alternatives? Where is the Left and is it any longer relevant to see the Left as a rallying call, or is this divisive? Are voluntary services now too compromised by funding to speak out for people affected by cuts and austerity? How can we support each other in our different struggles and acknowledge our differences too?

Appendix 1: Key informants

Personal contributions from and about:

- The Aspire Trust
- BRAP
- Camden CVS
- Carerwatch
- Centre for Welfare Reform
- Citizens UK community organiser
- Community Development Exchange
- Community Sector Coalition
- Derman
- East London Olympic anti-missiles campaign
- Eco-Action Nottingham
- Federation of Community Development and Learning
- Glasgow Starter Packs
- Greenhouse project
- Hackney Council for Voluntary Services
- Hackney Migrant Centre
- Hackney playgrounds and youth services
- Hackney Unite
- Housing Justice
- In Defence of Youth Work
- Ipswitch Suffolk CRE
- Ivy Street Community Centre
- John Morris, housing activist
- Joy of Sound
- Kinship care campaigning
- Leicester StopWatch
- Locality community organiser
- London Coalition Against Poverty
- Manchester Action on Community Care
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Middlesborough Voluntary Development Agency
- National Community Activists Network
- Newcastle Council for Voluntary Services
- Newham Monitoring Project
- North Devon CVS
- North East Women's Network
- North London Action for Homeless People
- People's Republic of Southwark
- Planning law and the Localism Act/agenda
- Race Equality Foundation
- Runnymede project
- Simon Community
- Social Action for Health
- South West Foundation
- Stanningley Swinnow Live at Home scheme

- Stroud against the cuts
- Unison Community Organising
- Urban Forum
- Voluntary Sector North West, BME network
- Wandsworth against the cuts
- Welfare Rights Advice service
- West Sussex Don't cut us out
- Woodland Trust
- Woodwatch

Desk research

- Barnet Alliance
- Black Triangle
- Boycott Workfare
- Citizens UK
- Crossroads Women's Centre
- Defend Council Housing
- Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC)
- Disabled People's Direct Action Network (DAN)
- Furness Against the Cuts
- Hardest Hit Coalition
- Housing Emergency/Defend Council Housing
- Locality community organising
- Leek roundabout campaign
- National Deaf Children's Society
- No borders
- Oxford Save our Services
- People Before Profit
- Pinkham Way Alliance
- Unite community organising
- Windsor Diggers
- Winvisible
- Young Foundation

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