

NCIA Inquiry into the future of voluntary services

Working Paper 7

Homes for local radical action

**The position and role of local umbrella
groups**

Penny Waterhouse

June 2014

info@independentaction.net

NCIA Inquiry into the future of voluntary services

WORKING PAPER 7

Homes for local radical action

The position and role of local umbrella groups

Foreword

This paper has been produced as part of the NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services. The Inquiry is specifically concerned with those voluntary organisations that deliver *services* in local communities, especially those that accept state money for these activities. These are the groups that have been particularly affected by successive New Labour and Coalition Government policies regarding the relationship between the voluntary and statutory sectors, and attitudes and intentions towards the future of public services. In this and other papers we refer to these as Voluntary Services Groups or VSGs.

It has long been NCIA's contention that the co-optive nature of these relationships has been damaging to the principles and practise of independent voluntary action. The nature and scale of the Coalition Government's political project – ideologically driven - to degrade rights, entitlements and social protections, and to privatise public services that cannot be abolished is now laid bare. This has created new imperatives for VSGs to remind themselves of their commitment to social justice and to position themselves so that they can once again be seen as champions of positive social, economic and environmental development.

Our Inquiry is a wide ranging attempt to document the failure of VSGs, and the so-called 'leadership' organisations that purport to represent them, to resist these shackles on their freedom of thought and action. But it is also an attempt to seek out the green shoots of a renaissance that will allow voluntary agencies to assert their independence and reconnect with the struggle for equality, social justice, enfranchisement and sustainability.

This paper is one of a number that has been produced through the Inquiry and is concerned with the activities and role played by *local* umbrella groups to safeguard and participate in radical and independent action as part of local civil society; and to ensure the proper role of voluntary services within this. In particular, we focus on local Councils for Voluntary Services (CVSs) given their potential and comparative resources as a home for collective radical action; and as a source of resistance to privatisation, cuts to public services and the future of voluntary services.

For more information on the NCIA Inquiry please visit our website – www.independentaction.net.

1. Introduction: our starting point

Inequality and poverty in the UK is increasing, driven by policies which cut social rights and privatise public services – be it through private or voluntary services. The damaging impact of these policies is felt by individuals and by whole communities. Charities and voluntary services exist to support and defend the interests of their beneficiaries. So, one would assume, that these groups – and the bodies that represent them – would be at the forefront of the fight against these changes. This paper focuses on what is being done at local level by umbrella groups engaged in community action through voluntary services; and what is needed to offer a local home for radical action. The role taken by national umbrella bodies is described in NCIA Inquiry Working Paper no. 1¹.

The paper is based on material gathered over the last 8 years, as part of NCIA activities and contacts, as well as recent desk research. The paper draws on the NCIA Inquiry into Dissent and Local Activism “Here We Stand” published in March 2013². This answered two questions: where do resistance and alternatives to injustice lie; and where are the local homes for such action. Information is also drawn from discussions with 28 CVSs from across England, which culminated in an event organised by NCIA and London Voluntary Services Council in September 2013.

The conclusions of ‘Here We Stand’ and this paper are well known to NCIA readers: despite attempts by some to resist, established umbrella groups, such as CVSs (Councils for Voluntary Services), have been sucked into Government agendas and do not usually offer a radical home for local action. Collective action for local resistance and alternatives lies elsewhere, within informal alliances of mutual aid, campaign groups, trades unions and between individuals angered and directly affected by austerity and other punitive policies.

The drive to create a market for public and voluntary services, by both New Labour and the current Coalition government, has now become the dominant ideology and practice. Individual workers within CVS-type groups have been overwhelmed by the weight of these market juggernauts and have seen many of their managers either yield to or conspire with these forces, with few able to articulate an alternative.

The current situation, and the historic failure to prevent it, is deeply distressing to many working in these umbrella groups; and also to those involved with NCIA, who have backgrounds in voluntary services and umbrella groups. There are CVS workers, and their members, who wish for a local home from which to find, and fight for, alternatives to market ideologies. The draft of this report was informed by some of these people. One comment by a CVS reader was particularly striking: that in reading the report she felt responsible for the failures described and this made her feel defensive and bad about herself. So it is important to say, before you read, that this report points to the real culprits: the ideologies, structures and practices of neo-liberalism which is tearing apart our common wealth and common just causes with each other. There are many people with the skills, experience and motivation to create an alternative to this destruction. Our job is to find each other and create our own inspirational spaces for debate and action. It will not be

¹ Lis Pritchard. The position and role of national infrastructure bodies concerning the cuts to, and privatisation of, public services. NCIA Inquiry Working Paper 1 April 2014

² <http://www.independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Final-NCIA-final-with-contacts.pdf>

done for us. No one will pay us to do it. It will depend on our own independent thinking and doing.

2. Voluntary services: what's the problem?

For generations voluntary organisations have provided services for individuals, families and communities. As part of the formation of the welfare state many voluntary agencies re-positioned themselves as places from which to stretch the frontiers of state provision through innovation, and to provide informed policy and political critique of the shortcomings of that provision. It was not until the New Labour years that the idea of voluntary services as an arms-length delivery vehicle for state policy and services took hold. Central to the state's ability to give this practical expression was the decision to move the funding relationship from grants to contracts. An inevitable consequence of this shift was the creation of new markets and the procurement and commissioning regimes needed to operate these markets. The conditions thus created by New Labour are now being vigorously exploited by the Coalition Government to harness voluntary agencies as direct replacements for state services.

These policies have had a significant impact on voluntary services. The post-war complementary role of voluntary services - to spot gaps in community needs, test out new ways of meeting these and ensure they are made available more widely and particularly by the State – has been eroded and replaced by one of sub-contractor to the state or private sector. In tandem to this, their democratic role has faded: to act as a check and balance to the state and other powerful interests; and to provide an ungoverned space for citizens and residents to come together, outside of state control and the pressure of markets. As Dexter Whitfield writes:

*“A degree of collusion with the state has emerged in that participation in markets and procurement exercises means that the financial viability of VSGs is directly linked to winning contracts. Therefore, they are unlikely to challenge government policy except to maintain and/or increase the scale of services subject to procurement.... VSGs as contractors are likely to be circumspect in organising or participating in alliances opposed to government policies affecting the sector. They will inevitably want to maintain their reputation as a ‘partnership’ contractor”.*³

The force of entering the welfare market, increasingly as ‘bid candy’, has had disastrous consequences for VSGs and their ability to respond to community needs. Privatisation and cooption into the market is driving down the conditions of staff working in voluntary services, diminishing their role in advocacy and jeopardising the safety of people using such services.

A report by UNISON in 2013⁴ documents the experiences of front line staff working in voluntary and community services and found a dismal and dangerous picture for both staff and clients. 72% of people working with children reported that children were “slipping through the safety net”, 43% said they had less time to work with each child and 15% said that they did not have enough time to monitor children and follow up concerns of neglect

³ Dexter Whitfield. The ideological context p12, Inquiry Working Paper 4, May 2014

⁴ Community & voluntary services in the age of austerity. UNISON 2013

and abuse. 38% of staff working in advocacy groups reported that their managers were prioritising services on contract to public bodies over campaigning and advocacy. 9% of staff said they were on zero hours contracts and there were reports of bullying from managers.

In the new order, local voluntary services are ousted by private firms, corporate charities and 'preferred providers' and are left with complex work, marginalised and under-funded. The atmosphere is one of fear, uncertainty and hostile, competitive relationships.

The dilemma for voluntary agencies of participating or not in this redefinition of their role is compounded by the fact that (apart from differences of nuance) there is broad cross-party support for the outsourcing of public services to private or voluntary contractors. The narrative that is projected is that there is only one show in town (certainly in England). This is, of course, not true – trustees and voluntary services managers can make choices about what they are, or are not, prepared to do within their own independent organisations.

Clearly there has been and remains an important role for VSGs in providing services. However, this independent and complementary role, has been lost in the scramble for contracts and organisational sustainability, with little to show for the effort as contracts are largely won by large private multi-national corporates. We now face a picture where, despite some efforts to buck the trend, the driving forces on VSGs are: cuts, competition, business practices, procurement, control and sub-contracting; and mergers to create primes and 'preferred providers' in place of a diverse local ecology.

3. Collective local responses

In 1978, in its discussion of local intermediary bodies, the Wolfenden Committee looking into the future of voluntary organisations, referred to two different, and contrasting, ideologies which might underpin collective action locally: unitary and pluralistic. The former assumes consensus and common interests, rational planning and administrative solutions, and with a focus on welfare provision; the intermediary role one of "co-ordinator", "broker or umpire". In contrast, pluralism assumes "different and often competing interests" with voluntary action encompassing a wide range of activities beyond welfare services. Here, the role includes facilitating joint action as part of shifting alliances, being a critic of the local authority and having no claim to be "the sole voice of the voluntary movement".⁵

Nearly 40 years on, this framework still holds firm as a description of how local voluntary action might be organised collectively. 'Here We Stand'⁶ paints a picture of local activists coming together in informal networks and groups based on pluralist, non-hierarchical and shifting relationships designed to tackle specific material community pressures or activities. Much of this is based on mutual aid rather than welfare provision, backed up with little or no money. Some are openly dissenting, some challenge through collaboration, some through subversion and others through self-reliance. Many now are occupied with opposing the privatisation of, and cuts to, public services and entitlements and the shrinking of publically owned spaces; challenging local authority decisions; and obtain their legitimacy through shared values and principles. The notion of an intermediary function is mostly

⁵ Colin Rochester (2013). Rediscovering Voluntary Action: the beat of a different drum. P40-41

⁶ <http://www.independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Final-NCIA-final-with-contacts.pdf>

absent, as those who support the action are also part of it. In the main, such organising lies outside the world of VSGs, where there are often few connections into this world.

In contrast, local voluntary services are connected to each other through structures based on unitary ideologies. Relationships are forged for professional and managerial “best practice” and for organisational sustainability. The structures and power relationships reflect State agendas and interests. This does not mean that there are not individuals and groups within these structures who work valiantly to maintain a pluralist ideology in their own work and personal relationships. However, the power and operation of the system and its processes are designed otherwise: to ensure consensus and alignment with a dominant paradigm. There are few connections into the local networks of resistance, to act as an antidote and brake to the power exercised by the State-run structures.

At the heart of this, is the local Council for Voluntary Services (CVS), these days routinely re-named Voluntary Action. This re-branding is ironic, coming at a time when CVS themselves, as well as their members, are increasingly acting as sub-contractors to the State, or private sector, with little of their own choices remaining, and where the ‘action’ is determined by prescriptive contracts. Over time, such bodies have moved from being described as ‘umbrella groups’ suggesting spread and shelter; to ‘second tier agencies’ indicative of distance and hierarchy; to the current ‘infrastructure bodies’, which can only remind one of concrete and large - often failing - transport systems! This externally imposed definition, neglects community development or mutual aid models and defines the nature of activities as a commercial-type service, rather than a shared undertaking based on values and trust.

In this paper, we have not covered regional umbrella groups or Rural Community Councils (RCCs), a network of 38 county wide umbrella groups. This is due partly because our interest is in local and neighbourhood voluntary action which can make a real difference to local people; and partly because of time available for this paper. However, our experience of such groups is that they are likely to operate in a similar way to that of CVSs, both in the variation between them and in their structural role in acting as a mechanism for state agendas.

4. CVSs and other similar local bodies

What is a CVS?

According to NAVCA, the national umbrella group for CVSs:

“there are around 250 geographically based infrastructure organisations that provide the full range of services traditionally delivered by Councils for Voluntary Service. There are a larger number of organisations (perhaps 750 organisations) that deliver some or all of the services or that could be considered as local infrastructure. In terms of engagement it is difficult to quantify and again depends on definitions. We estimate that our membership has a reach of about 160,000 organisations.”⁷

Layered over this picture are a myriad of special interest local forums and networks which act to coordinate service areas, such as for older people, BME groups, refugees, children,

⁷ Peter Horner, NAVCA. Voluntary Sector Studies Network 10.4.14

families and younger people, health and social care. Many such networks are often connected to, supported by, or are part of a local CVS; as are local volunteer centres, which have increasingly merged with CVSs. The picture is further complicated by the emergence of private and other agencies under contract to local authorities to provide CVS-type activities.

Whatever the definitional complexities, the CVS-type body, its members and associated forums, are in a pivotal position locally to act directly on, as well as mobilise across, a spectrum of interests and pressures; and, through this, to be a radical force regarding concrete community pressures and aspirations. Collectively, CVSs could choose to act as a powerful social movement with strong roots into local communities.

What is a CVS - really?

NAVCA describes the CVS job as the provision of *“support services to other voluntary and community organisations at a local level”*. The emphasis is on service provision, charitable objectives, equality, diversity, collaboration and partnership.⁸ But as Adrian Barratt, from Adur Voluntary Action, has noted in his critique of CVSs *“the question is not ‘what services do you deliver?’ but ‘what are you – really?’”*⁹

This is where we tell the story of decline. This section is depressing, so be warned. However, the section after that tells the story of what has survived the damage and from which to build.

Nearly ten years ago New Labour embarked on a process, through CVSs and like bodies, designed to prepare voluntary services for public service delivery and the welfare market; and to capture the power of local communities through ‘empowerment’ programmes. Thus was born the capacity building industry. A very large amount of money was spent: an estimated £350M and £400M in Change Up and BASIS alone, two of the major funding programmes.¹⁰ These funding programmes, which acted as the carrot to entice CVSs and others into such a fundamental change, were supported by local ‘strategic partnerships’, with byzantine names such as the ‘Collaborative Transformation Board’. Here, CVSs and other local networks and agencies, sat alongside local authority, health bodies and the private sector in the hope of influencing local decisions on services, policy, practice and money. Whilst some partnerships were productive, most did not give voluntary bodies voting rights, nor much influence over agendas in order to express community issues and perspectives. Alongside money and ‘partnerships’ was the Compact, designed to lay out the rules of engagement. This entire infrastructure soaked up time, resources and energy. Participating voluntary groups such as CVSs, confusing policy access with policy influence, became distracted from the fact that outside the room, markets were being created, ambitious technocrats replaced local democracy, and power was leaking away from the heart of voluntary action and local communities. Increasingly, the local structures and agendas for collective voluntary action belonged to the state, not to voluntary groups or services.

⁸ <http://www.navca.org.uk/about/membership/member>

⁹ <http://nationalcan.ning.com/group/ncia/page/the-urgent-relevance-of-ncia-to-cvss>

¹⁰ Rob Macmillan (2013). Demand-led capacity building, the Big Lottery Fund and market-making in third sector support services. Voluntary Sector Review. Vol 9.no4. p385-94

Despite these efforts, the Change Up programme was deemed a failure in its own terms¹¹, and led the National Audit Office to conclude that, after millions were spent, the programme had “no strategic impact” whatsoever. However, the main thrust of these drivers was to turn CVSs into a launch pad for VSGs as sub-contractors in a welfare market; and become themselves subject to financial and political controls.

“Change Up focused much of their attention and resources on the part of their work.....designed to make them (voluntary organisations) better able to secure and implement local authority contracts for the delivery of services”¹²

CVS support consisted of building organisational capacity to compete for public contracts, as grants disappeared and procurement and commissioning dominated. Training events covered the new Localism Act, explaining the “funding opportunities for groups interested in running public services” (West Devon CVS).

In the fight for their own survival and position, some CVSs compete for direct service contracts, as well as for local infrastructure contracts, thus becoming competitors with their own members and each other and subject to the terms of local authority infrastructure contracts. As austerity and cuts to local voluntary groups bit, community-based networks (such as Community Empowerment Networks) became absorbed into CVSs or closed down. Trust, mutual aid, self-determination, collective action and advocacy for communities were casualties. A CVS trustee, looking back over these years, noted recently that:

“Mission-drift is inadequate to describe the diminution of ‘voice’ from our sector to the power-brokers!”

In an unusually sharp comment, Rob Macmillan from the Third Sector Research Centre notes that CVSs, and other local umbrella groups, are not innocent victims in this process:

“The principles surrounding a market for infrastructure support servicesand a supporting architecture is being constructed.....local infrastructure organisations are absolutely integral to these unfolding developments through their decisions, strategies and wider role in shaping and influencing debate. Marketisation does not just happen to them”¹³.

An ex-CVS manager noted in 2012:

“within the CVS movement, many individual CVSs stepped up to the plate [of the Change Up programme].....but for many CVSs this latest demand constituted a further assault on the principles of independence, community-focus and self regulation which lay close to the historical heart of the CVS movement.... I started to wonder myself about how far our debating power with government had been compromised by our run of state finance and the growth of contractual relationships. The very ethos the Labour government admired – based on a creative form of self-

¹¹ Change Up evaluation BMG Research, Data Services Guidestar et al. December 2009; Cabinet Office (2010) Supporting a Stronger Civil Society, p13; National Audit Office 2009

¹² Colin Rochester op cit p120

¹³ Rob Macmillan (2013). Demand-led capacity building, the Big Lottery Fund and market-making in third sector support services. Voluntary Sector Review. Vol 9.no4. p385-94

regulation and genuine social values - started to appear out of kilter with a streamlined, professional, regionalised agenda and the CVS movement began to look tired, uncertain and even quaint."¹⁴

Recent and current government policies for infrastructure continue and extend marketisation and control through 'demand-led' models, private sector involvement and contracting¹⁵. Funding regimes and political intent continue to drive the shape and activities of CVSs, some for better but mostly for worse. A sign of the times is spoken out in a proposal for infrastructure support by Leicester City Council which stresses that *"applicants should be active, collaborative and constructive co-workers with City Council"*.¹⁶

The pressure to be a 'co-worker', and 'contractual agent' of the local authority, places CVSs in an uncomfortable and compromised position:

*"Infrastructure bodies and their lead representatives have therefore had to tread an uneasy tightrope to avoid - on the one hand - being seen by the community as an arm of the state, and on the other, as a one-stop shop for councils to 'sign up the sector'..... While some CVSs - to their credit - have the capacity and profile to retain their independence.... this is not always so.... there has been a tendency to tone down their opposition to commissioning processes."*¹⁷

One CEO of a CVS commented on this tension:

*"The council is the main funder of the CVS, which sees its role to provide evidence of what is happening to local people. There are mixed views of this locally: that what is being reported by the CVS is too political; while others say the CVS is too close to the council."*¹⁸

And again, this time from the Third Sector Research Centre:

*"Financial pressures had also heightened issues of independence, reinforcing questions of the ability and willingness of leaders to speak out on issues that were in opposition to dominant policy discourse if their organisation was in receipt of statutory funding. Anxieties over being 'frozen out' and losing funding led to leaders, particularly at a local level, adopting a cautious approach."*¹⁹

The external forces for privatisation, and control through contracts, have resulted in many CVSs becoming, in all but name, an agent of the local authority – described by a local group as *"a hand of the beast"*²⁰ – which pursues national agendas of outsourcing in public

¹⁴ Sharon Clancy. ARVAC Bulletin. Issue 119. November 2012

¹⁵ Rob Macmillan op cit

¹⁶ Revised post-consultation support model http://consultations.leicester.gov.uk/corporate-resources-and-support/vcs/consult_view

¹⁷ Laird Ryan. Outsourcing and the voluntary sector. Working paper 5 pp20-21. NCIA Inquiry into the future of voluntary services. May 2014

¹⁸ <http://www.independentaction.net/2013/11/04/what-does-a-cvs-stand-for-and-who-with/>

¹⁹ Who's speaking for whom? Exploring issues of third sector leadership, leverage and legitimacy p.15 TSRC April 2014

²⁰ Here We Stand p32 NCIA March 2013

services, despite the emerging evidence that this will not benefit local VSGs. As one CVS noted:

“nothing would be left of their local voluntary sector as larger commercialised, regional and national charities were winning most contracts and replacing smaller local projects.”²¹

And another commented:

“The council wants to encourage small groups to deliver local services but it is not working in practice, indeed it is getting worse.”²²

This position is now an open secret and cause of much frustration amongst CVSs themselves, leading one CEO to comment:

“The CVS is adrift from the grassroots and they tend to be silent around issues such as welfare reform....There isn't that voice. We have been seduced. The more fundamental questions aren't being asked.”²³

A CVS with a long history of community action finds that its previous productive council relationship:

“...has now been replaced by a different regime(of) ambitious politicians wanting to control the VCS and not accepting dissent. The CVS....now only supports service delivery...networks are gone, so the CVS is no longer connected to the community....councillors and officers are censoring CVS newsletters. In this context it is difficult to influence the council at political levels or for the CVS to support local campaigns.”²⁴

And a worker from a rural CVS commented:

“The CVS is not resisting harmful changes and supporting communities under pressure.”²⁵

What is a CVS – really? The good news

The impact and extent of marketisation is now recognised by many CVSs and other similar bodies. It is increasingly self-evident, and evidenced by other NCIA Inquiry papers, that VSGs are not, nor will be, winners in the outsourcing of public services; and the damage of austerity, cuts and privatisation is visible. The exclusion of CVSs from real influence locally, though variable depending on local circumstances, is causing frustration and some

²¹ The State of the Voluntary Sector. Does size matter? Paper 1 p13; Ursula Murray and Linda Milbourne. NCIA Inquiry into the future of voluntary services. Working paper 9 June 2014

²² <http://www.independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Cuts-austerity-role-of-CVSs-Sept-13th-2013-notes.doc>

²³ <http://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2013/oct/23/community-social-capital-voluntary-groups>

²⁴ <http://www.independentaction.net/2013/11/04/what-does-a-cvs-stand-for-and-who-with/>

²⁵ ibid

opposition to the current regimes, in particular to cuts to voluntary groups, the damage of commissioning and losing out on contracts.

There are also examples, to cause reflection and hope, which show CVSs doing their best to sit close to local people and do what voluntary action does best: act as a check and balance to powerful interests and complement, rather than replace, mainstream public services.

In *Harrow*, ex-employees of a CVS, closed down by the council as they privatised and took control of CVS activities, have set up a co-operative and continue to support community groups and activism. In *Adur, West Sussex* a successful action with the local council held on to real localism and prevented the merger of local CVSs into one county-wide agency with few community links, leaving Adur Voluntary Action able to continue building relationships with local people and anti-cuts campaigns. *Newcastle* and *Derby* CVSs continue to record and bear witness to the impact of benefit and other cuts on local people and groups. In *Tower Hamlets* the CVS is building a 'bottom up' structure of direct representation and diverse voices, joining with the local volunteer centre in a co-operative rather than competitive bid for money. *Manchester Community Central* is busy helping mental health service users and groups to devise and debate an alternative model to that of 'one size fits all' commissioning, having successfully halted the tendering out of mental health voluntary services (for the moment!). *Volunteer Cornwall* has taken on the Commons Public Accounts Committee, with a letter of complaint documenting the takeover of local services by large corporations focused on "profit not people". *Newham* umbrella groups have come together to see how they can use their joint efforts to campaign on local issues. *London Voluntary Services Council* joined with other London-wide groups for a "Family Friendly London", to influence the political parties standing in the 2014 local elections. Nearly 100 CVSs and other local infrastructure groups have signed up to the Keep Volunteering Voluntary campaign²⁶, refusing to be part of forced labour and benefit sanctions embedded in the new 'Help to Work' programme.

There will be other examples. More broadly, there are also attempts by some local authorities and commissioners to safeguard a diverse and local sector. And there are signs that CVS members are, in some part successfully, making demands on NAVCA, their own national body, to take a more visible stand against austerity and marketisation.

What is needed now is a means to spread and safeguard the radical spirit of CVSs that remains; and to organise and mobilise – locally and nationally - the dissatisfaction, opposing voices and the alternatives to our current politics.

Professor John Diamond, writing in October 2012, noted the impact of funding regimes and government privatisation programmes on local CVSs, calling for a re-politicisation of CVSs:

"As the sector has chased funding or being chased by public agenciesthe ethos of many CVS type organisations have changed and they reflect the values and requirements of funders and commissioners.... In the 1980s in many cities the local CVS was a hub for a range of campaigning groups and advocacy projects.... a consequence of the period from 1997 – 2010 is that the sector has become (almost) deskilled politically.... There will be more significant changes to come. And an

²⁶ www.kvv.org.uk

important consequence of these changes will be the attempt to marginalise the campaigning and political work of infrastructure organisations. We need to defend this work and we need to organise if we are to keep together the skills and memory of the sector as the next wave of cuts affects us all.”²⁷

What stops a CVS social movement?

If there is so much dissatisfaction, why do we not hear or see more widespread concerted resistance? There appears to be a cocktail of ingredients, which prevent CVS from joining together and with others to regain and re-shape their roles.

There is a complaint of diminishing resources:

“at a time of cuts, when infrastructure has been hit very hard it is also difficult for us to be able to provide the services and do the work that we want to do.”

There is fear:

“fear of losing funding; fear of being shot down if they raise their head above the parapet; fear of losing jobs and fear of the political arena.”

There is the rise of a managerial class, distant from local communities and intent on technocracy:

“they have management degrees and are captured by market thinking. The trustees are all CEOs or the equivalent.”

There is an absence of new thinking, critical mass, organising and persistence:

“the requirement is for new thinking, new cultures, new language. The first step is for enough people and groups to grasp the bankruptcy of the old, and beyond that....it's a long haul.”

There are divisions between people and no structures from which to take on the hard graft of change:

*“working together is bloody difficult. We need structures and at least some rules of engagement”.*²⁸

None of the national umbrella bodies have explicitly or publicly criticised the privatisation agenda nor offered a political critique or alternative which might support local resistance and safeguarding.²⁹ Indeed, NAVCA has encouraged its members to attend “master classes

²⁷ <http://www.communitypoliticsforchange.org/cuts-closures-and-decline-is-this-what-we-meant-by-transforming-local-infrastructure/>

²⁸ <http://nationalcan.ning.com/group/ncia/forum/topics/why-aren-t-cvss-a-local-home-for-activism-and-dissent> ; also personal conversations with people working in CVSs.

²⁹ Lis Pritchard May 2014

in winning public sector contracts” in partnership with, amongst others, SERCO.³⁰ NCIA is aware of concerns amongst local CVSs about this approach, in particular that the NAVCA Commission on the Future of Local Infrastructure does not address the question of marketisation, which fundamentally affects the future of infrastructure bodies. Some CVSs are also quizzical about the Commission as a process which places deliberation of their own collective destiny and perspectives in the hands of others. A respondent to the TSRC research commented:

“I think there has been a failure of leadership for people to do what’s right and what’s brave and courageous, and stand up for our ultimate beneficiaries, because of fear of political alienation, the impact on physical resources.”³¹

The question of sympathetic structures, and perspectives, from and on which to base radical collective action is critical. The NCIA Inquiry into Local Dissent and Activism found that:

“there is little evidence that local voluntary representative bodies offer a home for dissent and activism though some were participants in local alliances..... These agencies have resources, connections and knowledge of the local area.....butknow very little about, dissent and activism.”³²

With the cooption by the local state of the structures for local debate and organising, there are fewer spaces for associational life, and even fewer signs of new spaces being created. The spaces that are being created, by local activists, are rarely occupied by voluntary services and CVS-like bodies.

Resources, courage, new ideas and a space to connect, debate and act, may be some of the factors which influence an appetite for collective action. What is rarely raised in the CVS debate is the effect of personal and organisational politics. Ideology sits at the heart of action: how we see the world and what motivates and inspires us to action. The weight of professionalism and the market has hidden the ideologies which underpin the neo-liberal project, and silenced alternatives to this. Actions in the market place are seen to be based on technocratic rational planning, with choices based on ‘best practice’, efficiency and effectiveness. What lies behind this smokescreen is: competition, the assumed superiority of unfettered markets, minimum regulation to maximise profit; cheap labour; individual needs over collective responsibility, and a reconfigured state to commercialise and outsource services and which can *“relinquish moral obligations.”³³*

What sits behind the decisions and choices made by CVSs, the individuals as well as the organisations, is as important as the external drivers which led to these choices.

“Values and ideology underpin both the recent responses of large charities and small voluntary organisations, and those of commissioners and local authority

³⁰ <http://library.constantcontact.com/download/get/file/1102230246316-1432/Masterclass+email+for+circulation+-+Feb+2013.pdf>

³¹ TSRC Working paper 121 p11 May 2014

³² Here We Stand p3. NCIA March 2013

³³ Dexter Whitfield p2. NCIA working paper no. 5. May 2014

politicians.....it is ultimately their values and motivations that need to be understood.”³⁴

An ‘intelligent’ commissioner commented *“politics, as well as resources, still matter.”³⁵*

5. There is another way

The attempts by CVSs, and other similar local bodies, to hold to ‘business as usual’ in ‘partnership’ with funders and local authorities has not, nor will it, stop the juggernauts rolling over social protections, public and voluntary services. In most cases, a ‘seat at the table’ has not shown itself effective in de-railing the push for markets, or invigorating community action. Not only are the crumbs from the table disappearing - for many voluntary and community services the table itself has disappeared.

So is there another table around which to gather? What can be done to consider, in a particular area, where the homes for radical action are or might be? What can be done together, across such local homes?

Get talking

CVS-type groups consist of people, with views, fears, desires and frustrations and with a personal life, as well as professional and political lives. Many of these people are already asking themselves and each other fundamental questions of what they are up to, changes they want to see and to what end. Some may agree with privatisation and the growth of a welfare market. Some may disagree and want to take steps, or are already active, to prevent austerity and markets. Some may not be interested either way.

“There are different internal views about the role of the CVS. Some staff think a CVS should stand alongside community activists; others think its role is to build relations with, and educate, the council and not take sides.”³⁶

The task is to surface the politics and opinions. Most of these discussions are happening informally and under the radar. Some will take place at work, some outside work. Some discussions will be with colleagues and some with people in other networks or groups in the area. Such debate may face obstacles within the workplace, or be encouraged. But talking and connecting is a pre-requisite to change.

What’s the point of a CVS?

Adrian Barritt of Adur Voluntary Action provides a good starting point for debate:

*“What **is** your CVS? Surely, a CVS is much more than its services? Why not describe a CVS as “part of the local community” rather than a service that someone is commissioned to deliver? Why not stress an ethos of mutualism, local self reliance*

³⁴ Murray and Milbourne. Part 1 p18 NCIA working paper no. 9. June 2014

³⁵ Murray and Milbourne. Part 2, p20 NCIA working paper no 10. June 2014

³⁶ <http://www.independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Cuts-austerity-role-of-CVSs-Sept-13th-2013-notes.doc>

and co-operation, rather than delivery of training to “skill up” the local sector in the “right ways”..... And where might this leave the CVS movement itself? Arguably, in a far stronger position than the current street performer at the far end of the government table, desperately trying to choose the right act..... the CVS (as) a means, not an end in itself, promises a more interesting future. A stronger control of the future is there for the asking, by stepping out of the mould, taking a fresh and fundamental look at the locality, and if necessary reinventing the wheel. The more conversations, the quicker the snowball can grow.”³⁷

The acknowledgement, that an organisation is a means, not an end in itself, leads to other fundamental questions. What ends and what changes will a particular CVS push for? What positions will a CVS take on community pressures, and encourage its members to take? What does the local CVS stand for, who will they stand with and against, in a practical concrete way, and which goes beyond vague statements about ‘social justice’, ‘equality’ and ‘diversity.’ What conversations are needed within the CVS and with trustees, about the consequences of taking government money to enable them and/or their members to participate in, and legitimise the privatisation of public services and creation of the welfare market. Which services are appropriate for a voluntary agency to offer, and which not? And is the organisational form and culture of the CVS, created through the decades and now as part of a welfare market, fit for the radical action needed? As one worker in a CVS commented:

*“The old way of organisational capacity building, fundraising and governance is not suitable to create positive change and resist the negatives. Why do people set up organisations? To make a change. It is the change that CVSs need to support in the future.....to support a different type of organisation and actions”.*³⁸

Such changes which CVSs might support would include:

- to oppose privatisation of public services, whether into the private or voluntary sectors;
- to act with local campaigners to stop the sell-off of public space and facilities;
- to challenge the allocation of social housing on basis of ‘community contributions’ such as volunteering, and to retain allocation on basis of housing need;
- to boycott tenders which place community groups in competition with each other and to push for real alliances not competitive consortia;
- to oppose the sub-contracting of voluntary groups to private companies which have unethical practices;
- to lay down other conditions under which a voluntary service would not accept a contract;
- to work for change with individuals as well as with groups and networks;
- to move resources from governance/organisational development to work that directly leads to material improvements for local people.

³⁷ <http://nationalcan.ning.com/group/ncia/page/the-urgent-relevance-of-ncia-to-cvss>

³⁸ <http://www.independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Cuts-austerity-role-of-CVSs-Sept-13th-2013-notes.doc>

What's the work to be done locally?

A CVS – or other such local initiative - will, and some already do, have a lively and exciting future when debate goes beyond money, resources, contracting and how best to implement the latest council policies:

- Joining with local campaigners and learning with them about the tactics of change and dissent;
- Challenging public service contracts going to private profit making companies, often with a dire record on humanitarian, efficiency and financial probity;
- Creating mechanisms for individuals and groups to directly represent their interests with those in power;
- Facilitating debate and options for whistle blowers and disaffected volunteers and staff, affected by poor working conditions and unsafe practices in voluntary services;
- Sharing intelligence, connections and resources, such as a room for meetings or use of the photocopying machine;
- Encouraging potential dissenters to have a voice and a space for connecting with others who want to see change;
- Building relationships and supporting small community-based services, in particular those working alongside those disproportionately affected by inequality such as black and minority ethnic populations and people with disabilities;
- Seeking ways in which community action and services can survive through mutual aid and reciprocity, in a non-marketised space.

What's the work to be done across local areas?

Across areas, and at a national level, there is a new way to discover relationships and joint endeavours. Lis Pritchard notes:

“If all voluntary sector agencies signed up to the living wage and refused to work in partnership with private sector organisations unless they did the same, most if not all of the .. privatisation programmes would be severely undermined.”

And here is Lis again...

“members of umbrella bodies unhappy with the approach their representative body is taking could also put pressure on those bodies to review and justify the work that are doing. They have the sanction of cancelling their membership and could perhaps use this sanction in a more coordinated way”.³⁹

Making it happen – organising not organisations

The nature of how radical action is organised, is inextricably linked with the nature of the action and the politics and preferences of those involved. *Here We Stand* concluded that:

³⁹ Lis Pritchard. The position and role of national infrastructure bodies concerning the cuts to, and privatisation of, public services. p7-8. NCIA Inquiry working paper 1 April 2014

“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.”⁴⁰

Colin Rochester notes that *“we should be less - not more – interested in organisations as they become more like bureaucratic forms...”* and argues for associational life as the ideal organisational type for voluntary action.⁴¹ Not only is associational life the ideal type, and reflective of real voluntary action, it is also the numerically predominant form. This does not mean that other forms of organising cannot contribute to radical action. Only that associational life is the life force of such action.

Pragmatically, there is unlikely to be money, or much money, to take on radical organising. Increasingly there is not money to continue with current CVS-like umbrella roles, so there is less to lose and changes are a-coming anyway. The size of CVS bodies is already reducing and this trend will continue. There will be more unpaid work done by community activists within informal alliances, and less by paid professionals within organisations under contract. The question is how to use and share the little money available for community benefit; how to use and share other non-monetary resources; and how best to organise for different activities.

There are already signs of such local networks⁴², examples of which have been documented by NCIA in *Here We Stand*.⁴³ Many of these arrangements are similar in form to NCIA. Small amounts of money; the main assets being non-monetary; networks not organisations; driven by activists and forming a bridge between professionals, campaigners and communities; mutual aid not services; informal, shifting and spreading; not dependent on any one home, but linked through alliances which create shared places to bring together people tackling different concrete issues.

This is already the organisational form from which radical local action is being taken, and is likely to be the future. There is little governance or organisational development work going on here, as a project in itself – the bread and butter of CVS current work. Questions of resourcing, accountability, decision-making, work distribution and ethics are dealt with as part of the action, as a means to an end. Such organising looks much like the hybrid and ambiguous world of Rochester’s typology, where the personal world of family, friends and neighbours meets that of associational community life with, on occasion, some bureaucratic features.⁴⁴

Voluntary action starts with a small number of individuals coming together to tackle something that unites and speaks to their heart. This is where the CVS movement finds itself: needing individuals to start the hard graft of change. They will find many friends and allies waiting for them.

⁴⁰ Here We Stand *ibid* para 5.16

⁴¹ Colin Rochester *ibid* p235-7

⁴² <http://ourtottenham.wordpress.com/about/>

⁴³ Here We Stand, *ibid* paras 4.50-4.52

⁴⁴ Colin Rochester *ibid* Table 16.1. A sector typology p236

The author



I am a director and co-convenor of NCIA. I have spent my adult life involved in voluntary action locally and nationally. After being harassed off benefits as a single parent, I became a rights worker and campaigner. I was involved in the implementation of Housing Benefits in the 1980s. Seeing the mess of this, I thought I could do it better than my local Council. So I took a job running housing benefits in a London borough, where I learnt how things worked from the inside. I learnt more as an insider when I took a job as a manager in London Voluntary Services Council. That was enough of insider dealing for me, and since 1990 I have worked as a freelancer – paid and unpaid - with voluntary, community and activist groups.

In 2006, increasingly concerned about erosion of the independence, plurality and diversity of voluntary action, I set up with Andy Benson, the National Coalition for Independent Action.

penny@independentaction.net