

## **Minutes of UK Social Centres Gathering**

Bradford 1 in 12 Club, 27 January 2007

The second UK wide gathering of social centres was held at the famous 1 in 12 Club in Bradford on the 27 January 2007.

### **PLENARY 1.**

1 in 12 Club introduction: Welcome to everyone – we wanted to host it because we are struggling with volunteers and it was an opportunity to get some energy back in and to help us to discuss solve our problems.

Housekeeping:

Alessio: agenda was proposed by a few of us from Leeds, Bradford, London; no one has spoke against it. We want to open up by talking about what kind of network we want to build; we have a network of places but no real foundation for it; so we want to air these discussions about the politics of building a network – the political character. The workshops are to come out of the plenary. The afternoon session is to build on the morning and talk about the thematic priorities that we are working on, specific struggles. Some of us in London have produced this survey – some of the spaces are out of date and so we wanted to update this and also add some more details about what these spaces are like in terms of numbers and campaigns etc. The skills database was suggested at a previous gathering; a directory of skills for social centres that people can call on; for new places; contact people to get that information.

Q: Is the idea of the survey to get feedback now?

A: Yes, but the skills can be done at a later date. These are mainly for social centres.

Go round:

Man from Age Concern

Ben, Rampart: 3<sup>rd</sup> year in May; first bit of harassment from local authorities over fire and safety

Alice, Cowley Club, opened new building out back; doubled space plus debt; there were loads

Ellie, Dave, Antony, Richard, Lou, Paul, Stuart: Common Place

Ben, Kebele, going up; just celebrated 11 years; paid off mortgage;

Gerry, Liverpool social centre, brand new

Alice, Reading, not got on yet

Chris

Kiko, Seba, Hackney, Dalston Theatre; for a year trying to cut off dependency to society around us; we are now 8-9, doubled; evicted September, now got new place round corner; resisting occupation as an alternative to the society of work and city we reject; difficult experience for many places; we are now in new place, not managing to open place; full on discussion – who are we, what do we want to do, do we really believe it is possible to organise ourselves;

Mark, LARC; usual problems of holding central space going; up and down; LRT has recently squatted some land nearby to turn it into a community garden, creating alternatives to the city and madness around us.

Mick, Eleanor, Basement; computer group now running Linux- system; one computer is the brain, the others are just terminals so you can use old hardware; 6 people; fallen out with the person we share the space with; few rodent issues, we can't use rat poison, animal rights tensions; trying to move away from café being main source of revenue, closed down some of the opening time; less of a café, more of a social centre; logistics group has been opened up, challenge of wingnuts;

Dan, Basement; bookshop, getting bigger, library is growing, now a librarian

Patrick, Sumac; 6 years; lots of activities; lots more capacity and potential; fave place for network gathering

Amy, Cardiff: not really got a social centre; has been a history; didn't squat a space in the end; energy dropped down but it has recently picked up; railway arches offer, we might take it

Catherine; 1in12club; got amazing building but challenge is to get old and new members to use it not just for a pub;

James, 1in12; trying to get the library updated and useful for accessible – once a month open it up; we've been here so long, institution now, elements hard to get through; old school are a bit set in their ways, strength and weakness; worn out, good having your own building

John, Dave: Autonomous Centre Edinburgh (ACE), got grant from SCN, looking better, food cooperative, become really exciting space

Michellin: Forest in Edinburgh; structure overall; huge number of volunteers, trying to collective this is difficult; active working groups; politics wise, come back a lot this year; political group doing film and events night; hacklab active; linux geeks trying to get indymedia; café is constant revenue

Mike, Bristol now Manchester; interested in getting to know more

Simon, member of 1in12 dominoes team

Ben, Birmingham, used to have a social centre, kind of

Alex, Nursery and Cottage, Birmingham; targeted local authority buildings, very political, they were selling off our buildings; lots of it was co-opted by people for their own lifestyle ends;

some of kind of split, two groups; attempt to get a new social centre to restrict membership to people

Alessio, London; involved in the Vortex, former jazz club, stoke Newington; 20 years; was a community hub; campaign since 2002 to keep it open; 70-80 people defended place yesterday in eviction attempt; very good, popular, well received; lots of activists and anarchists and swp in the area; a lot of locals getting involved seeing it as their space; 75-85 at last meeting; broad base of opinions, reactionary views but interesting process of interaction; likely to be turned into a starbucks, 40 people at the anti-starbucks meeting; leaflets going round' a campaigning place; no real events yet but; there is a jazz working group, got people from Crass involved.

Polly, Sam, Norwich: don't have a social centre

Carl, Steve, Matt, Liverpool

Other spaces:

A new space has been opened in Dublin, centre; strong group, going really well;

Glasgow, Unity Office, Refugee Union space;

Lost and Found space in Manchester from November, new sound system alliance, massive party, 6-7 rig party got busted and they have become radicalised, they want to do Defy ID stuff;

Alessio:

The idea was to move away from local issues and to look at the network; it seems to be just paper-based; how does a network fulfil our aims; how does a network relate to anti-capitalist struggles and anarchist struggles.

Mick: previous meetings came up with strategies: (1) collective tours: Rossport film; (2) shared exhibitions

Alessio: that is to do with syndicating stuff around cities

Paul: technical solutions have been proposed; social centres list is being used at all, 150 people subscribed; I'm kind of interested in something political above and beyond our own bricks and mortar; maybe there isn't a desire for that

Ben: a resource for all social centres are the people who come to the space and those on the mailing lists; so how can our mailing lists be useful shared for campaign; e.g. regular mailout of events – a shared piece of all newsletters

Ben, Kebele: we've got so much on day to day, we find it quite hard to engage in a network although we see the value of it, but we don't see the need to manufacture it if it is not needed; perhaps the list shows that we don't feel the need to use it; people involved in Kebele do lots of different things so to make that a macro level thing is very difficult;

Alice: 'make sure you don't commit to anything on behalf of the Cowley Club'; there is feeling that if a network emerges, we want to be in it; but we also don't want to commit; we are bogged down in all of the day to day issues of running the space, the contradictions, struggling with;

Alex, Birm: there are things that are common to all of us, surely there are things around that we can work together on; what it comes down to is why do a social centre in the first place – what is the aim? Is there anything we can mutually help each other;

Lou: been reflecting on the importance of SCs to wider gathering e.g. climate camp, neighbourhoods; would these have happened without social centres; they are vital to communications; again with the G8, so it is vital to have a communication network;

Patrick: it is interesting we use social centre as a term: we all seem to share what this means – a common ground exists; do we need to formalise that? There are lots of other networking opportunities, so no need to have too many meetings like these.

Alessio: we do have shared interests and experiences; where don't we have the capacity by ourselves, we need a network; we could promote social centres as the base mobilising centres e.g. people say we wish we had a social centre to help with things: climate camp, G8, no borders; these structures and groups are emerging; let's look 4 years down the line, to see what kind of structures we want in place so that when something does kick off, social movements emerge, social centres can help; we are communicating 1000s of peoples at any one times

Mick: we can have an interactive chart of what networks and issues we are involved in; that there are core members and groups that keep it running it; the core of people running them are apolitical almost – they are running spaces for others to use; so basement has become this apolitical space that political organisations use; it has been helpful in being accessible; but weird as well. So how can we be useful? (1) Communication – (2) Politicise the social centre and social centreise the political – get those putting on events to take more ownership of the space

Mark, LARC: we got into this for politics, but we find ourselves in an administrative role, doing thankless things, energy loss; what practical things can we do – a zine, a website; etc but what makes these things grow is the core groups / campaigns that drive them

Lou: second all that, but think it's important to talk about volunteering; but also to create networks around the café's, subject specific;

Ben: we do have a network, not just on paper; so we do need to use it when we need it; let's get that infrastructure sorted; no need for an actual formal statement because very hard to get that and it isn't needed;

Amy: the network can inspire and help us, just by sharing experiences; once or twice a year, it is nice and useful to have these conversations;

Alice: there is some paid people in some social centres, it is a debate; it would be good to have a write up of that decision; to explain, a case in point, to inform the debate on it;

Ben: this all fits into the website: forums, resources, different clubs constitutions etc. people can then have a centralised space to work together;

Paul: all this logistical stuff is important, but I also think we have a responsibility to tackle the big issues collectively as a network; everything place that a social centre is involved in is changing – fighting gentrification; shouldn't we be taking that on;

Lou: key tension is between energy that takes to run it; and running events and campaigns

Mick: yes, gentrification is important to all of us; but could the Basement campaign on this as a whole? Can a group here decide things and take things back to the basement? Would it radicalise people?

Alessio: social centres reader is a good start to informing these debates; maybe this network is about raising the profile of social centres; lets start at a very basic level: (1) make social centres public: who we are, what we offer

Amy: how do you do that nationally? Most of this will be done locally?

Alessio: a shared leaflet that we could do

Eleanor: people don't know about these other spaces, we assume it;

Patrick: having a map of places like that on each notice board, with other events going on elsewhere, would help to promote;

Alice: the little pamphlet is helpful for this; but other things are taken for granted and assumed: like we are all volunteers but we are not rich; how to guides etc; we need to communicate even better;

(from) Forest: we don't explain about the cheap café; also, using the forest as an international hub of people coming and going around Europe.

Lou: paper-based stuff is very important, less emphasis on websites

Ben: (1) a reciprocal agreement on membership between centres; (2) Mutual aid to help open up other spaces, a box of things that are always needed – social centres seed fund, provide revenue generation and credit for cash flow crises.

Patrick: we should talk to Radical Routes about loan stock before reinventing the wheel

Alessio summary:

1. Communication: website (map – laminated for each space)
2. Zine / booklet
3. Syndication of tours;
4. Info / shared skills on different aspects of running the place;
5. Visibility of social centres generally: the idea of them

## 6. Setting up news spaces: fundraising and resources

### **Web - e-communication**

- email lists
- website
- virtual communication

### **Syndication (café)**

- tours: speakers, exhibition
- shared events
- paper publications: distribution / info points

### **Visibility (downstairs)**

- common leaflet
- poster
- zine / booklet

### **Supporting new spaces and existing ones:**

- finance
- resources
- solidarity / eviction spaces
- database of skills
- surveys – what do you HAVE – bars, photocopiers - RESOURCES

## **PLENARY 2. Feedback from groups**

### **1. Visibility working group**

- a. Social centre magazine – Paul's proposal – been taken forward – social centres are being asked for contributions
- b. Leaflet - text 150 words which was written at gathering. The text is as follows:

#### **FRONTPAGE**

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#### **WHAT ARE SOCIAL CENTRES?**

Social Centres are self-managed spaces either owned, occupied or leased which take many different forms. Social Centres are a means whereby people can come together to create, conspire, communicate and offer a collective challenge against capitalism.

The idea of Social Centres is not only to occupy social space but to create a critical visible presence in the community where people can engage in radical ideas and events.

Social Centres offer a sense of community and solidarity, affordable food and entertainment, a non-commercial place to relax, talk, meet people or find information on political campaigns, issues and actions.

## BACKPAGE

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### NETWORK:

The UK Social Centre Network is a network of independent social and community centres in the United Kingdom whose aim is to link up "the growing number of autonomous spaces to share resources, ideas and information". The network draws a very clear distinction between the many independent social and community centres around the country on one side and the state or large NGO sponsored community centres on the other. Despite there being a tradition of social spaces in occupied buildings (also known as squatting), the recent upsurge in (legal) social centres has come about in the last five years. List of current UK social centres, either squatted or legal:

<--List of Social Centres -- Plus map -->

Similar text could also be the basis for a poster for display at Centres on bookstalls etc.

c. Poster - alicia and others to make a brief for design of posters

d. Beer mat

## 2. Syndication/tours

make better use of existing e list

need knowledge of our counter parts – direct communication would be good – PROPOSAL for a direct communication between individuals.

Send round common publicity of events.

We have made a list of emails of people

**Paul** to send round address labels to social centres list

Ben from Brighton will be contact point for getting together a list of people to contact for lists

## 3. Supporting new social centres and existing ones

**Proposal** to gather case studies of how social centres deal with issues including:

Finding buildings

Pros/cons of renting etc

Getting started – membership  
Vision statements  
Money/funding/incomes  
Organizing structures  
Decision making  
Maintenance  
Payment of volunteers  
Conflict resolution/self policing  
Legal structures

Need for a seedcorn money pot for new groups – and emergencies for existing groups

#### **4. Web working group**

- what will people use the site for
- the website is currently Drupal based
- rather than try to reproduce other things, we have sought to bring in what exists
- Ben: a mistake possibly
- We could add a social centre tick box to Indymedia
- Debate about duplication and redefining / moderating feeds
- We have a calendar but again there is duplication worries here
- Ben: idea – to have multiple front ends with single database for certain things
- Need for a multiple search engine for individual calendars
- Need to talk to local websites about how they work and feed information to enable the central site to suck in and out info without duplication
- Need therefore to create a special search engine: Ben mentioned Google Coops; are there open source versions? There are
- Drupal calendar not going to work
- So can we ask social centres to adopt a calendar system that is searchable etc, but that is updated and already exists
- Who is it for: (1) existing activists – it is useful because social centres are to support local and national politics
- Events: have this calendar for shared events of use to all of us; and major political actions; have a section that helps users get to different social centre's events and news and explain this;
- Talk to Yossarian about new calendar system – can it be flexible to accommodate us?
- Need to survey social centres and their websites on needs and functionality
- Invite people into social centre development list
- Audit of what is out there, what people want
- Who's up for putting work in?
- Rampart people were up for it
- Survey: develop a survey system

Email list:

- should we open it up more to the list?
- Announce and discussion list?
- Give emails to the admin – ben from rampart

not wanting to duplicate effort – how to maintain new stuff. It would need to be automatic so as to not make new work.

What is website for – to find out for local info or just general stuff

Events calendars – big point – don't want to develop anything new as this would duplicate work.

There is now a website hosted by mick.

Website - Is it for social centres or the wider public

On website the 'uk social centre network' page on wikipedia is a click through on the spaces link on the website

[www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk](http://www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk)

It also has a feed through from free spaces newswire on indymedia.

There is a list for those developing the website which is:

<http://.scweb-dev.lists.riseup.uk>

Social centres general riseup list is now public

<http://socialcentrenetwork.lists.riseup.net>

you can sign up.

## **POLITICAL PROJECT FEEDBACK**

### **No Borders working group**

What is No Borders?

A network of grassroots groups taking direct action

Eleanor: Manchester No Borders group: did exist for a while; lots of sounding off and not real action; we did a spoof newspaper; individual campaigns; Brides without Borders has been taken on by those who directly concerned; free esol classes, food and coffee etc; work quite closely with NCADC; Leeds **Minibus**

Patrick: No Borders and Defy ID natural allies because the database will be keeping us in and keeping them out; ID card will combine both roles; overlay map of existing national ID centres;

Got a very strong independent refugee forum on welfare

Birmingham: were doing a weekly picket; voucher system being rolled out across more people; West Midlands anti-deportation network; fed it into anti-racism; when we had events there it did shake up the centre; hard to get some refugees involved because it was squatted.

Cowley Club: migrant English project, free lessons and food etc; great for finding out if people are at risk; re set up nb group quite recently; started targeting the woman who decides on asylum seeker health treatment because she is racist; legal advice etc and finding advice; new Gatwick detention centres being planned on the runway; radical pop ed project around racism, borders, migration, looking for people to get involved; not enormous

Alessio: no borders London set up an office in the square for 6 months, first time we had done this; fundraising; office has moved to LARC; along with Medical Justice Foundation who provide medical reports for refugees tortured in their countries; staffed mainly by detainees released through; February 10<sup>th</sup> at Harmondsworth, trying to mobilize

Kebele: very limited experience of dealing with asylum seekers and refugees; did speak to refugee action a while ago about it; are quite considerable barriers – accessibility, no smoking, drinking on certain days; put refugees up at Kebele; but want to do more

Stuart: big rant about the problems

Alessio: massive burnout; we have a detainee support network; a lot of people have got tags; we have separated it off from No Borders; meetings are about the big-style

February 10<sup>th</sup>

1 May – solely on Migration; justice for cleaners, TGWU;

March 10<sup>th</sup> – Glasgow – larger campaigns and see how social centres can assist

Make social centres support centres for migrants

Alice: a lot of sense to divide things up; very important that we carry on with the welfarist function; it gives us legitimacy; enable social centres to become solidarity spaces.

Alex: migrants tend themselves to be nationalistic or focused around their issues; they don't get on;

Alessio: to create a mobilization network around Harmondsworth etc.

Alice: practical space: lack of written materials; films to be shown;

Mick: has done a video podcast – new films;

Alessio: local speaking tours of social centres with no borders groups; put out on the list that social centres network exists, supports migrant struggles, and wants to propose this tour

Alex: why are migrants and social centres linked? What is it about the excluded? etc

Mick: they are the perfect place to organise anti-deportation campaigns.

Alice: Newcastle gathering – ask them to do it

Alessio: why not get a text on this together for March?

Alice: we want to get a no borders zine;

Mick: no border.org website

Resources

Hate Mail

Frassanito network

WEBSITE – have a separate section on website for each issues: no borders; etc

Alice: wants to see a mapped out strategy for when to get involved and how;

Alessio says: London detainee network

Mick: CDROM how to run a cam

Proposals

Joint speakers tour;

Events – Feb 10<sup>th</sup>; March 10<sup>th</sup>; March 31<sup>st</sup>; May 1<sup>st</sup>

Help people to set up a social centre themselves, squat accommodation;

Coventry has a housing coop mainly for migrants

Whole area is very very hard work – prone to burn out

Propose Social Centres / Migrant Struggles workshop at the Glasgow gathering

English speaking service: Brighton to share info how to do this.

Tour:

Mick to take on a DVD of films;

Stuart to contact some possible speakers;

NCADC and CAN

Strategic speakers

Films, talks, organizing

Social centres to finance the tour; want them to get involved in the organization and ownership;

Proposed

## **Climate**

pipeline; Amy – we need people to come down; Mark B – musical extravaganza, a show; main point, a contact for eco people in each centre; Monster Bike workshop; internal energy audits; we need to be aware of our own climate issues, and share knowledge, skills and funding; how can the network be used; low carbon building trust – 50% grants for solar project;

Can this network make contact with land-based rural housing coops and autonomous developments; eco villages; low impact developments – create links;

Make each theme a visible part of the space – use social centres to make up the neighbourhoods; climate camp video tour

## **GENTRIFICATION**

To help to facilitate local support; people have experience of direct action

Housing – massive new movements in Spain and France

You can get blagged funding from youth precarity housing, cooperatives etc –

## **Political strategies**

- talks and film showing on any issues
- Edinburgh Waterfront film; ACE wants to become a resource centre for community struggles

The whole network idea breaks down when collectives become caretakers of buildings.

Mick – Open City; link to website

## **FINAL PLENARY**

Survey Mark 2

could include the skills

Alessio to do V2 of social centres survey: this to include

1. Details of contact person for events at each SC
2. Getting info for survey of how social centres deal with problems
3. developing websites

Website could also be used for this;

## Decisions

### 1. Visibility

Draft text has already gone out on the list; one month deadline; 10,000; Alice / Amy to coordinate designer brief? Alessio to the printers; possible UHC etc;

Quotes for a poster, not as urgent

Zine – 2 month feedback; 6 month deadline – paul to circulate proposal

Beer mat

Postcard – look into

### 2. Web

[www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk](http://www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk)

Stu to redirect web-page; put announcement out and people can become login; want feedback on design and input;

Mick to write a summary about what to do when online;

### 3. Support

Using the survey, social centres should write something about different experiences;

How do you run your social centre;

Each social centre to do a benefit

### 4. Syndication

Contact details to go out

Survey Group

Info to be used for anarchist article; and then a brochure.

E-list – use social centres list for announcements

Date of next gathering: **July** – need to get a SC to propose to hold it.

Let's all commit to one benefit per social centre; recognise we had money and try to help others to do it

Proposal – to raise £1000 start up fund; decisions to be made at the next gathering.