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Newsletter No: 15

March 2010

Welcome to newsletter 15 which find us in the lull before the storm. In an attempt to conceal the awful truth about the impact of our indebtedness to the bankers and their bonuses, the Labour Government is pretending that there are good reasons, besides electoral gain, to be coy about the scale of public expenditure cuts that are on their way. Meanwhile the Tories are playing tough guy on the issue but also without being too specific (well not specific at all actually) about how they intend to shred public services. But remember that whoever you vote for, the Government will get in, and shred public services they certainly will do. So all you voluntary agencies now operating under contract to the state, gird up your loins, for you have but months left before the commissioning units wheel out their plans to get more-for-less out of you, and leave you holding the baby..... good luck.

News from the Coalition

New Coalition pamphlet and flyer

We have a new flyer and general pamphlet setting out the Coalition's stall. These are attached as PDF files. Please do print them off and distribute as you like. We have printed copies of both so if you want some, then email us, tell us how many you want, and we'll post them to you.

Defending community action - next Assembly meeting - 25th March

One of the Coalition's priorities for the coming year is to find ways defending and promoting the role and importance of community groups and community action. As we enter the period in which savage cuts are to be made to public spending and services, this part of voluntary action, already marginalised, will find itself under increasing pressure and even less likely to be able to attract support. This is the theme for our next Assembly meeting which will be

in London on the afternoon of 25th March. If you're not already a member of the Assembly but are interested, then email us and we'll tell you more -

info@penancy.co.uk.

The NCIA Compact Challenge - "sector leaders" respond (most of them anyway)

Infuriated by the endorsement of the new Compact by 'sector leaders' (see newsletter 14 for the awful background - <http://www.independentaction.net/?p=4643>), in January we press released an open letter (<http://www.independentaction.net/?p=4813#more-4813>) to the famous five, calling them out.

The replies were interesting, or, in the case of Stephen Bubb, entirely absent. We have engaged and thoughtful replies from Directory of Social Change, Volunteering England and NAVCA. Stuart Etherington at NCVO got the wrong end of the stick and did a 'let's shut this down'-type response. Their replies are on our website and you can see the lot here (<http://www.independentaction.net/?p=5173#more-5173>).

As for Stephen Bubb at ACEVO, perhaps his "Head of Comms, the talented Ms Mckeown" (to use Stephen's own description) failed to pass the letter on to him. However, she did find our botched article in the Times (botched in that we didn't quite actually write it...) which seemed to do the trick and caused Stephen a "deeply irritating day". We don't like to encourage bad behaviour but if you want to see his excoriating attack on us, then you can find it here: http://bloggerbubb.blogspot.com/2010_01_01_archive.html

Shooting ourselves in the foot

Coalition supporter Colin Chalmers gets our award for 'persistence in the cause'. He pointed out to us that if you google NCIA, we don't come up. Oh no, we said, that can't be right, our IT is 'fit for purpose' blah, blah (as you do). But Colin insisted something was wrong, and sure enough, eventually some widget was discovered that was turned OFF. This was an instruction to all search machines to ignore us. Just what a campaign needs! Anyway it's on now, so google us and you'll see.....

Hit the Target, Miss the Point

Around 20 people gathered at Nottingham Trent University at the NCIA "Tyranny or Democracy at Work" event on February 27th - a mix of academics, community groups, voluntary agencies and CVSs. It was a Saturday, cold, grey and wintry. But the room was hot with energy, fury and ideas on how to resist the managerial juggernaut - prescriptive contracts, the target culture, performance management, quality assurance, pre-ordained services and

outcomes and the decline of advocacy, campaigning and innovation. The result - a list of actions, practical and political, which will draw on academic resources to support voluntary sector alternatives to managerialism. We'll put the full story up on our website and report back to you in the next newsletter. But if you want to know more sooner and get involved in this area of our work, then email us on indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

Independent action in health and social care

NCIA has been contacted by a carer and community activist who, despite her extensive experience in battling with the system, tells us of bad treatment by health and social care agencies. She particularly wants to do something about the poor services provided through private agencies which support people at home. <http://www.independentaction.net/?p=5263#more-5263>

We've had our eye on this area for some time. As voluntary agencies take up state contracts, who's out there still to advocate for individuals on poor services and bad treatment, hold services to account and tackle policy in this area? Who do you get help from when your local Age Concern, for example, is now the service provider? So we thought we'd send out a call to our readers to ask: Who do we point people to, who wants to campaign - as carers or otherwise? Who wants to, or is already doing something with others?

If you want to get involved or are already taking action in this area we want to hear from you. Contact us on indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

Making the case

Despite our reputation as the hypercritical 'ultras' of the sector, we are, in fact, always delighted when we come across other organisations making or supporting our case. Indeed, if our so-called sector leaders and representatives did their job properly we might be able to close down the Coalition and have a rather less stressful existence.

So this month we are glad to be able to report a number of moves that seem to indicate some rustling of dissent in the undergrowth.

Unite organises day of lobbying on voluntary sector's 'short-term contract culture'

Trade union Unite, which has 60,000 members in the voluntary sector, has organised a day of political lobbying over the damaging effects of the "short-term contract culture" on voluntary sector staff.

Angela Smith, Minister for the Third Sector, has agreed to host a round-table discussion with the union on 9th March and she will also join representatives from NAVCA and NCVO in addressing a mass meeting of Unite members, who will then be encouraged to lobby their own constituency MPs.

The union will release research showing that short-term public service contracts given to the voluntary sector have increased job insecurity in the sector and contributed to an "excessive and stressful hours culture" among staff struggling to meet tight demands. Falling voluntary income and corporate donations have combined with accelerating local authority cuts and increased competition for contracts to put sector workers under severe stress and threaten the quality of services.

However, the union curiously stops short of condemning this privatisation of public services arguing that what is needed is longer contracts, improved training opportunities and a commitment to making sure terms and conditions were preserved when staff were obliged to transfer between organisations at the end of a contract.

Research report slams the 'contract culture'

The research that Unite has based its action on (see above) appears to be that which comes from the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University ('Government Policy, the Recession and the Voluntary Sector'), although, confusingly, this was commissioned by Unison, not Unite.

The report outlines the impact of government privatisation policies on voluntary sector agencies, adds in the additional pressures that the recession brings and concludes that, together, these forces have created a "harsher managerial approach" and "less concern for staff". Examples given include increases in the use of disciplinary procedures, staff leaving to take unstressed jobs, and increased use of cheaper, unqualified staff. "The combination of the way the competitive market works and the impact of the recession is creating new problems and deepening existing ones for the voluntary sector," concludes the report.

The report does not appear to be on the union's website, but we have got hold of a copy, so if anyone wants one, email us at info@penandy.co.uk and we'll send you it.

'Strong Independent Roots' - NAVCA launches policy positions

NAVCA has started the issue of a series of policy statements, which intend to state NAVCA's position on a range of issues affecting voluntary action and the role of infrastructure organisations in supporting voluntary action. There is an overarching 'campaign document' that sets out the stall: "We see thriving

voluntary action as being independent of the state, yet a key partner of local public bodies able to engage on its own terms. It is important that individual citizens feel free to organise without state intervention, and equally that they are able to come together to exert a strong influence over the decision-making apparatus of local public bodies."

Also now available are the first two, of five, specific papers expanding on the themes. These are: 'Local infrastructure: Leading Voluntary Action' and 'Voluntary Action and Local Democracy'. All these papers are downloadable from NAVCA's website: <http://www.navca.org.uk/publications/roots>

'Serious threat' to independence of advice and advocacy charities, says Baring's report

A new hard-hitting report from the Baring Foundation concludes that the independence of advice and advocacy agencies is under serious threat from Government policies towards this part of the sector. Since 2006, the Foundation has been awarding grants aimed at strengthening the sector's independence. However, the thrust of this programme has been on promoting the importance of the internal 'values' base of voluntary groups and on organisational development as a means of protecting independence.

In contrast, this report identifies the external threats to independence of state co-option and compliance with statutory sector specifications and requirements, seeing increased commissioning and the personalisation of public services as the main dangers. Commissioning poses a "formidable threat to independence" because "it increases the state's control over service providers, silences dissent and reduces the ability of charities to set their own priorities....Organisations are increasingly pressured into adapting to meet the requirements of commissioners, not the needs of the people who use their services". That's it!

The report 'Rights with Meaning' is downloadable from the Foundation's website:<http://www.baringfoundation.org.uk/RightswithMeaning.pdf>

Volunteers will walk away from new vetting and barring scheme

NAVCA has written to the Third Sector minister, Angela Smith, setting out fears that the new vetting and barring scheme, now being introduced, will deter people from volunteering and will be expensive and time-consuming for small voluntary and community groups. The new scheme will effectively extend CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) checks to 9 million people working as volunteers, and will allow rumour, gossip and malicious allegations to be taken into account in deciding whether people are regarded as fit to work with children or vulnerable adults. The scheme was recently the subject of a highly critical Panorama programme. NAVCA's letter warns that the scheme could "curtail the spontaneity and informality that characterises voluntary and community groups"

and that: "Many volunteers will regard the checks as an intrusion into their privacy and be concerned that their past activities will be made public."

However, the letter does not demand the abandonment of the scheme; rather that funding should be made available to help voluntary groups with the costs of the scheme, and guidance should be issued on how trustees, members of self-help groups and people with fleeting but regular contact with beneficiaries will be affected under the scheme.

Given the draconian nature of this scheme and the serious implications for civil liberties, we find this one something of a missed opportunity..... Surely there is a case here for civil disobedience?

DSC calls for more plain speaking

Interesting article from Ben Wittenberg of the Directory of Social Change, in which he argues that one of the effects of getting "closer to Government" is that voluntary organisations begin to adopt jargon and bureaucratic language which disconnects them from the people and communities they serve. Says Ben: "Government's obsession with what voluntary organisations can do for the state has divorced policy makers and some charities from the grassroots activists who make up the majority of civil society, yet those policymakers increasingly make pronouncements and laws on behalf of the communities they alienate. If charitable or voluntary organisations speak in a code that people and communities neither recognise nor understand, they are unaccountable. If they find it easier to speak to each other in this code than the people they are serving, they are irresponsible. And if they justify their activity in the terms and concepts of this code, they are untrustworthy."

You can read the whole piece here: <http://dsc-enews.org.uk/657-3B18-11FBR2-1VNQD-1/c.aspx>

Even NCVO comes out about the 'dangers of public service delivery'

NCVO recently had its annual knees-up and Stuart Etherington took the opportunity to warn charities about the risks of public service delivery. "If done well, contracting means we have a greater influence over what services are provided, and how they are provided," he is expected to say. "But if it's done badly, our sector simply becomes a mechanism for delivering a government agenda." Yep that's about it. The message does seem to be getting through. Now all they need to do is be a bit more purposeful about resisting this. Stuart also urged politicians to respect voluntary organisations for their campaigning as well as their service provision.

Spending cuts will make contracts more restrictive

Warns Cathy Pharoah from the Research Centre for Charitable Giving and

Philanthropy. In an article in Third Sector magazine, she says that the Government is likely to make contracts more restrictive and force charities to rely more on private money for unrestricted funding. But private funders have also been getting more 'programme-oriented' (i.e. having ideas of their own about what they want to fund), so charities will find themselves squeezed between the two. Charities will have to "find new ways to generate income and may even have to abandon some of their activities." Some are now urging private funders to loosen up and commit more money to unrestricted general operating costs.

The madness continues.....

Charity Commission agrees 'to look at' charities running prisons

The Charity Commission has agreed 'to take a closer look' at the role of charities in running prisons after a meeting with NAVCA and the Howard League for Penal Reform, both of whom are opposed to government plans to contract out new prisons to voluntary sector providers.

Last year youth charity Catch 22 and social care charity Turning Point announced that it had entered a £600M deal with Serco (yes, the same Serco that runs Yarl's Wood Detention Centre) to bid to run two prisons. Other voluntary agencies are also interested in getting a slice of this action, but NAVCA and the Howard League believe that involvement in punishment is contrary to the ethos of charity and they want the commission to forbid charities from being involved in running prisons. "This is a big issue of national importance," said Frances Crook from the Howard League, "It is about the principle. It could be that other charities are looking at running prisons, but if you want to run a business, run a business, not a charity."

The Commission spokesperson said: "We will be carrying out some fact-finding in order to gain greater understanding." Watch this space.....

If you want to catch up with the opposition here, check out the Facebook site 'Charities must not run prisons' - it's

here: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=320993503760#!/group.php?gid=175708135461&ref=search&sid=533533225.1902781633..1> or the Howard League's website: <http://www.howardleague.org/>

Brighton Community Base takes on the Tories

Community Base in Brighton, which houses 26 local groups, is in a row with the Tory councillors in the town, who took exception to a billboard advert for the Green Party (even though the poster was attacking the Labour Party). They have now ruled that the billboard doesn't meet planning rules, even though it's been up there for years and earns the charity about £20,000 a year. Colin Chalmers, the Director of Community Base said: "This was a nasty, politically motivated decision that will cause real and unnecessary financial hardship."

Tories plan 'huge' role for sector in service provision

In a completely unsurprising move, the Tories have announced that under their wise governance, voluntary agencies will have a huge role in service provision (they know a bargain when they see one) but they should stop all this campaigning. What was needed was a "vast and powerful" sector, able to deal with problems that the private sector was unwilling, and the state unable, to address. Oliver Letwin, who delivered this message to an NCVO event on campaigning, also said that the Tories "would go beyond the Compact.....which was the product of another era (wow! - Beyond The Compact!). And that they were trying to work out how to "build the capacity not just of large but also of tiny organisations. We need a huge market place of voluntary sector organisations and we need to find ways of replicating things, supporting best practice and increasing access to capital."

DWP £8m volunteer brokerage plan 'will miss target'

Another casualty of misplaced commissioned initiatives is the DWP's Volunteer Brokerage Scheme, which aims to match jobseekers with volunteering placements. It has been announced that it is unlikely to meet its original target of matching 40,000 people with placements in two years. In fact, over the first 6 months, just 4,710 people took up places under the scheme. The scheme has been run by volunteering charities BTCV, CSV, Volunteering England and V.

The Compact Can-Can continues

The happy-clappy Compact machine grinds on. Compact Voice has its annual meeting, a great celebration, by their own account, of all that is so worthy about their work. However, the reality behind the spin is a bit different. First off, Sir Bert Massie, Commissioner for the Compact tried to do a bit of a guilt trip on the voluntary sector, in an effort to whip up some enthusiasm. According to Third Sector magazine, Sir Bert said that "the Compact would be strengthened if voluntary sector bodies publicly promised to follow it. Some public bodies had privately expressed frustrations to him that third sector organisations were keen to criticise public bodies' breaches of the Compact, but would sometimes not keep to their own side of the deal. He suggested that sector umbrella bodies should be among the first to sign up."

Secondly, more disappointment came in his acknowledgement of the poor response to their survey about awareness of the Compact amongst government departments (only 143 replies when they expected at least 325!). So a bit of work to do there.

And then comes news that the Commission for the Compact is going to have to pay accountants Grant Thornton good money to persuade local authorities to use the Compact. Apparently they are going to identify the 'economic and social benefits of applying Compact principles'. According to Third Sector magazine: "The commission wants the public sector to take it more seriously than the old

version and hopes to convince councils that there are financial benefits to adhering to it." Great, that should do it! And it turns out that they paid some other consultants £39,000 to tell them that European funding timetables "do not always adhere to the Compact". Oh dear, now they have got to sort Europeout as well.

No doubt there will be more and more of this, but before we move away from the Compact we need to offer an apology to Voice4Change England. In our last newsletter we said that they had remained silent on the matter of the new improved Compact, but this is not true. We missed an article (18th December) saying that V4CE had expressed themselves "extremely disappointed" by the new Compact. "The refreshed Compact is full of gaps as far as small, BME and equality groups are concerned. We have been ignored and marginalised," they said. Quite right, well done for coming out on it and our apologies for not seeing it.

ACEVO makes 'big offer' to Alistair Darling - cheaper public services

Stephen Bubb, chief executive of ACEVO and a few other charity chief executives have met the Chancellor, Alistair Darling, to convince him, that giving public services to charities could result in "major long-term savings" for the Treasury and provide an alternative to "salami-slice cuts", which could damage both public services and third sector organisations. This followed a letter to Darling, which he ignored until he heard that Stephen and his friends were off to talk to the Tories as well. The letter - from 260 ACEVO members - proposed a summit to discuss how the sector and government could "carry out far-reaching reforms of public services".

And, as an aside, some of you may already have had a chuckle by visiting the blog of Stephen Bubb, the colourful Chief Executive of ACEVO, who never fails to entertain (<http://bloggerbubb.blogspot.com/>). But now his excesses have spawned a parody blog, which is both hilarious and rather difficult to distinguish from the real thing. You can catch it here: <http://boggsblub.blogspot.com/> And, by the way, we've heard a rumour that Stephen is up for a Knighthood, though for services to whom or what is not yet clear. Suggestions on a postcard please.....

Organising, mobilising and keeping-on-keeping-on

Success for first national 'In Defence of Youth Work' conference

Almost 150 people attended the first National *In Defence of Youth Work* conference held in Manchester on February 11th. A second gathering will be held in the late Autumn/early Winter to report back on progress over the next six months.

In Defence of Youth Work exists to "resist the State's effort to transform youth work into an agency of behavioural modification." Participants were keen

to expand activity at local and regional levels, including getting issues affecting young people onto election agendas, taking over the space left by the abandonment of National Youth Week by the National Youthwork Association, building 'stories of practice' to tell the truth about what has been happening to youth work, countering specifically the increased policing and surveillance of young people, and the need to work alongside the unions to oppose cuts in provision, wages and conditions.

More reports (even videos) will be appearing on their website - you can see these here: <http://indefenceofyouthwork.wordpress.com>

All African Women's Group campaigns for family reunion

The Mothers' Campaign of the All African Women's Group has launched a campaign to establish the right to family reunion for anyone who is granted asylum or refugee status. There is an on-line petition here: [online petition](#) which will be handed in as part of a Mother's March and Speakout on Saturday 13th March, assembling in Trafalgar Square at 2pm.

Further information from, and offers of help to, aawg02@googlemail.com or phone 0207 482 2496.

Support for Yarl's Wood Hunger strike

Persistence from the All African Women's Group, Black Women's Rape Action Project and No Borders London has finally resulted in some coverage in the mainstream press about the hunger strike in Yarl's Wood Detention Centre. 84 women began a hunger strike on 4th February demanding their release from detention. At the beginning of March, 19 women are still refusing food. There have been many allegations of violence and mistreatment towards the women from the Centre's staff, and reports that five women picked out as 'ringleaders' were transferred to Holloway Prison. A demonstration in solidarity of these women is due to take place today, 3rd March (6.30-7.30pm). Yarl's Wood is run by private firm Serco, under contract to the government and 'partners' of voluntary agencies Turning Point and Catch 22.

The strikers are being supported by a number of campaign groups - further information

from noborderslondon@riseup.net, aawg02@googlemail.com or bwrap@dircon.co.uk.

Trouble over at CPAG

Trouble has been brewing at national rights agency CPAG for over a year. Last April the majority of staff were issued with letters telling them their job had been deleted. The intention of the Chief Executive and Board of Trustees had apparently been to cut the welfare rights, training and publications functions at CPAG - the work that generates income for CPAG and allows it to be independent of Government or Local Authorities. Staff were told that these functions were no longer the vision of the Board of Trustees and Chief

Executive, although any clarity as to the new vision, other than spending time at No 10 Downing Street, proved elusive. The majority of staff at CPAG have for some time now been very concerned at how close CPAG is to New Labour. Management action and widespread demoralisation has resulted in many staff leaving, or being forced to leave - this has affected all the middle managers. ACAS has been involved and there has been an indicative ballot for industrial action.

However, all may not be lost. The Chief Executive, Kate Green is now leaving as she has been selected as a parliamentary prospective candidate for the Labour Party in Manchester. And a number of new trustees were elected to the Board at the AGM in early December. Watch this space.

Standing up for our local communities and our interests - how best to organise and take action?

Is the title of a Community Action Gathering due to take place on Saturday 27th March, in Nottingham. The invitation is addressed to "all radical, community-orientated local groups and individuals throughout the country and the meeting will aim to share information and experiences, and exchange views as local activists" Workshops are being planned on

- Fighting for the local services and facilities we need
- Our neighbourhoods - improving our streets, our local environment and community spirit
- Decent and affordable housing for all
- Regeneration, gentrification and planning
- Local workplace struggles and issue
- Community centres and social centres
- Interaction with residents and existing residents' groups
- Councils - how should we relate to them?
- How to set up local groups
- Communication techniques and strategies (newsletters, mailing lists, leaflets etc)

Find out more and how to book yourself in by emailing CAG 2010 c/o James <communityactionnetworkuk@googlemail.com>

NW Community Activist Network gets head of steam

NWCAN, the new activist network for the North West, has gone independent and is planning its development. The network aims to help local community activists link up and support one another, and create an effective regional presence to influence policy and practice. They are running a conference on 23rd March in Manchester and any activists in the North West will be welcome. More information from Joe Taylor, at info@nwcan.org or call 01942 700060.

Tackling race inequalities in health and social care - what do the Parties say?

The Afiva Trust is launching its manifesto on race inequality at a free event on the 16th March. Party spokespeople have been invited to explain their agendas on BME health and social care for the forthcoming general election. There will also be workshops on mapping, world class commissioning (eek!), social marketing, holding the NHS to account and the work of the Trust itself.

More information and booking from

here: http://afiyatrust.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=391&Itemid=1

Workshops on empowerment and marginalised communities

Community Development South East (CDSE) and the Federation for Community Development Learning (FCDL) have teamed up to mount a series of workshops aimed at bringing together activists from marginalised communities and community development workers. The aim is to provide opportunities for network and alliance building that will help to influence and improve local practice around 'empowerment' issues. The events will take place on:

Monday 22nd March, 10.00 - 3.30, Reading

Tuesday 23rd March, 12.00 - 3.00, Oxford

Wednesday 24th March, 12.00 - 3.00, Crawley

Thursday, 25th March, 12.00 - 3.00, Sittingbourne

More information from: <http://www.empowerment.cdse.org.uk/>

About this Newsletter

This newsletter is the voice of the NCIA. Views expressed are not necessarily that of everyone involved with NCIA. We aim to issue newsletters regularly to keep you informed of what we and others are doing or saying.

How Can You Participate?

Tell us your news, write articles, sound off with your opinions and feedback but - most important - find ways of taking your own practical action to defend and protect the independence of your work and aspirations.

Talk to us and others via the Coalition website www.independentaction.net or the Coalition email address - indyaction@yahoo.co.uk .

We also welcome offers of help. If you'd like to help make this initiative prosper then please get in touch with us.

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and pasting the address into your browser. Please let us know any technical issues you encounter with this email.