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Election (not so) Special

Having been underwhelmed by the election campaign, we are now asked to be excited about the Tory/Lib Dem coalition. Given all the fuss that was made about the numbers, we were left wondering why the Tories and New Labour hadn't got it together instead, as their collected policies leave little room to insert a Rizla paper between them - they're a natural coalition! But what we have apparently is the centre Right with the progressive Left with poor old New Labour left as piggy-in-the-middle.

Our new Minister has been announced - Nick Hurd (Eton and Oxford). He has already been quoted as saying he "would welcome cross-party agreement about the needto open up the delivery of public services to the voluntary sector." So there you go.....

Readers of this newsletter will already know that I tend to hold the position that 'whoever you vote for, the government gets in'. I feel especially vindicated this time around. But whether you agree with this sentiment or not, the reality for the health of voluntary action was likely to be much the same whoever got in. And this I predict will be the case. We will continue to see outsourcing of public services to voluntary agencies, at the same time as increasing financial pressure on those already delivering them with the whole public service edifice continuing to fragment. We hope to see more and more people turning away from this unhealthy relationship with the apparatus of the state and arguing the case for a more respectful one. We will continue to see authentic social and community action marginalised by the establishment, if not actively discouraged or attacked. We hope to see an upsurge in community action as people realise the injustice of the recession that is about to be visited upon them.

News from the Coalition

Come and work with us

Many of you will already know that we are recruiting to our first post of National Co-ordinator. The closing date for applications is the 1st June. You can find job description and other details on our website here: <http://www.independentaction.net/?p=5603#more-5603>

The problem with commissioning

Our research work with Adur Voluntary Action is now complete. We interviewed 16 voluntary agencies in West Sussex to ask them about their experiences with commissioning over the last 2-3 years. The results will make your hair stand on end - a litany of confusion, incompetence, double dealing and unbelievable wasting of people's time. As Adrian Barritt from Adur Voluntary Action said: "This research sounds a warning bell for the future of local voluntary action and civil society. We urge people to listen to the evidence, to challenge policies that are destroying our sense of place and community, and to develop creative alternatives." The summary report is attached to this newsletter and is on our website http://www.independentaction.net/?page_id=6223.

The full report will be on the site shortly as a downloadable document. Please do have a look at this material, it's shocking.

Social justice and the support needed

Part of our frustration in recent times has been how little there is to show for the millions of public money that has been put into national and local second tier groups. And how little actual action for social justice appears to have been supported by all this capacity building and empowerment. Well this gravy train is coming to an end, much of it only having a year to run, with cuts via the cuddly ConLib 'partnership' maybe even bringing this forward. So we think that now might be a good time to have a go at setting out what we think grassroots groups really need to help them get the results they want, and therefore what the second tier support groups ought to be doing, where the job is truly to support struggles for social justice. A paper on this is going to our Planning Group on the 18th May, after which it will be available on the website. Anyone who is interested to know more or be involved in this work, please get in touch at indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

Community sector – notes from NCIA Assembly

The Coalition Assembly meeting at the end of March focussed on supporting community groups and community action. Useful discussion of the issues and how they are panning out in the current environment and pointers to what the Coalition could and should be doing about this - developing better links with community activists, rehabilitating 'political action' as a respectable activity, and offering support and solidarity. Copies of the notes are on our website http://www.independentaction.net/?page_id=6333

Managerialism

After our inspiring event in Nottingham earlier this year, we're now on track to take on the full weight of managerialism and private sector ideologies that have infiltrated voluntary action. We're building a network and resources to provide support, ideas and joint action for those tackling the beast. We have plans for a continued dialogue between academics and practitioners. Out of all this, we hope to create and reinforce alternative models to manage independent action. You'll find out what we're up to on our website. Come and join us!http://www.independentaction.net/?page_id=5873

Organising, mobilising and keeping-on-keeping-on

Youth work activists set out their stall

The national network of youth work activists - In Defence of Youth Work - has set out its stall in a recent statement 'What We Stand For'. The central complaint is that:

"Youth Work, in common with other educational and welfare state services, is today showing the impact of three decades of intrusive Thatcherite and New Labour management aimed at controlling workers' day-to-day practice more and more tightly. Paradoxically this has been underpinned by a 'market' ideology which has 'freed' the economy and powerful financial institutions of virtually all state controls. The result is that Youth Work is being forced to abandon its distinctive commitment to young people. It can all too easily accept the State's terms, to side with the State's agenda. Profound changes are taking place, which should be resisted."

The statement sets out the cornerstones of "emancipatory and democratic Youth Work", why these values and principles are under attack, and avows a commitment to work closely with others fighting the same corner. The campaign appeals to anyone who supports this stance to get involved at local, regional and national levels. You can read the whole of the statement [here](http://www.indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk/wordpress/?p=544) and to keep abreast of developments, check out the rest of the web site at <http://indefenceofyouthwork.wordpress.com>.

London activists looking for volunteers

The vigorous London Coalition Against Poverty (www.lcap.org.uk) is looking for people who can help out in their office. The office is an important contact point for people to get in touch with housing and unemployed groups and for campaigning and case work.

An office shift can be anything from an hour to six hours, to suit the people involved, so absolutely anyone can volunteer. You can claim back lunch and transport expenses and children are welcome (plus lots of arts-and-crafts

materials to keep them busy). Training and induction provided. If you're interested in getting stuck into some proper activism you can contact LCAP at londoncoalitionagainstopoverty@gmail.com or call 0207 247 6101.

NE Women's Network fights closure of services for women

The NE Women's Network, part of the national 'Why Women?' campaign, is calling for action on the threats to funding and closure being faced by women's organisations in the North East. The network has over 200 women's organisations on its database, responding to health issues, violence against women, gender equality issues, education, training and economic disadvantage. Research in 2009 found that the N.E had the lowest number of women's organisations and they were most likely to be facing closure. Another survey later the same year found that 42% of these groups had lost funding in the previous 12 months and were providing fewer services and places. The NE Women's Network is calling for policy makers and funders to "acknowledge the systematic disadvantage women face because of gendered inequality and publicly recognise the essential services and expertise the women's sector provides".

You can find out more at <http://www.newwomens.net/>

'Just Wage' launched to fight differentials

A new campaign has been launched to fight the trend to pay scandalously high salaries to chief executives and senior managers. Called 'Just Wage' the aim is to get groups to abide by a maximum 5:1 ratio in the spread from highest to lowest paid person, so for example, if the Chief Executive is paid £100,000, the cleaner should be paid no less than £20,000 pro rata. You can sign up for the campaign here <http://justwage.blogspot.com/>

There is also useful information about the issues around income gaps and ratios from these folks: www.onesociety.org.uk and www.equalitytrust.org.uk.

The Coalition is keen to support this initiative as it connects with our own work on resisting damaging management styles in the voluntary sector - see http://www.independentaction.net/?page_id=5873

Campaign launched to end indefinite detention

We have all at some time experienced the frustration of being trapped in the incomprehensible and irrational workings of a governmental bureaucracy. Most of us can rant about it and get on with our lives. But migrants who fall foul of the UK Border Agency can find themselves literally trapped in detention for years, without time limit. They are held in prison conditions while the UKBA attempts to deport them - but many cannot be deported, and find themselves detained indefinitely. Some cannot be deported because their country of origin

is too dangerous. Others are refused travel documents by their Embassy. Some even win their cases, yet wait inside while the UKBA pursues endlessly adjourned appeals.

London Detainee Support Group has launched the "Detained Lives" campaign to end indefinite immigration detention. Detainees and ex-detainees are leading the campaign by taking the step of talking in public about the effect of indefinite detention on their lives. Detainees are telling their stories and campaigning for their release on the campaign website. The campaign is holding roadshows around the country in different communities and organisations whose members are affected by detention and the wider government policy of excluding unwanted migrants. Ex-detainees, released after years in detention, discuss their experiences - and how solidarity can oppose the marginalisation that culminates in indefinite detention.

More information on the campaign, or if you would be interested in hosting a Detained Lives roadshow, see www.detainedlives.org.

Social Media – a Lifeline for Voluntary Action?

Here are some thoughts from FREdome:

"Working in the voluntary and community sector, along with most other sister organisations, we at the FREdome Visionary Trust can trace virtually all our challenges back to two (not altogether unrelated) perennial issues: Funding and Publicity. We are finding that Social Media (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc) seem to hold the key to cracking both.

Firstly, for publicity, we used a methodical mixture of blogging, tweeting and befriending relevant social media groups to secure the top public vote and youth category in an international competition for our short film www.tinyurl.com/FREdome60secs. Our short video message was played to world leaders at Copenhagen and screened in UK Parliament. As a result, we are now pressing for a full debate in the All Party Parliamentary Climate Change Group. Watch this space.....

Having found Social Media such a powerful tool, we are now turning our attention to utilising it for fundraising. With the days of philanthropy largely behind us, until recently, there have really only been two alternatives to fundraising: (a) Applications to grant-making trusts, which are time-consuming, complex, have to fit funders' own objectives, take months to process and the answer is still 97% likely to be NO! (b) Becoming a social enterprise - but you probably don't want to charge the people you are seeking to help, and you are probably not (nor want to be) skilled at business! But now there's (c) using Social Media to cluster local businesses around your cause. The business benefits are opportunities to make oblique introductions by inviting their target markets to your Social Media group and then showcasing their wares by sponsoring you

financially or in kind. The benefits to you are funds/free resources. The benefits to your community, are - well - your raison d'être!

Find out more from Greg Peachey 0845 225 3005 / 07900 221347
/ greg@FREdome.org "

Harrow Law Centre bucks the trend

Whilst law centres are closing at the rate of one a week as result of disasterous funding policies of the now-defunct Legal Services Commission, plucky folk in Harrow are bucking the trend by opening a NEW law centre. The centre has been open for business since 12th April, initially for two days a week, though it is hoped to extend this as soon as possible.

Probably too late for this newsletter, but the centre is hoping to raise some money via the London Legal Support Trust sponsored walk on 17th May. Mind you if you're quick, you can probably still give them a boost by clicking on www.justgiving.com/Harrow-Law-Centre

NAVCA sharpens up its language

Local CVSs recently got a circular from Kevin Curley, Chief Executive of their national membership body telling them that they are going to abandon some of the terminology that has been knocking around the voluntary sector for the last few years. No longer will we hear talk of 'local infrastructure organisations' (conjures up "pictures of men digging holes with drills") but we will get 'local support and development organisations' instead.

Maybe more significant, the term 'third sector' is also heading for the bin, to be replaced by 'voluntary and community action'. Over here at the Coalition we have never accepted that the government should have been able to 'rebrand' us as the third sector and we have always rejected the term in our own writings. So jolly good, so far. Can they now do something about using some meaningful alternatives to partnership working, quality assurance, capacity building, empowerment and best practice?

Making the case

Community groups are the key, says Community Sector Coalition

Unleashing the Potential, a new report from the Community Sector Coalition, argues that government funding should be focused more on helping local community groups to grow from the bottom up rather than on implementing top-down formulas. The report calls for a new funding settlement between the new government and the sector that would recognise the scale of grass-roots organisations. It says focusing on public service delivery is irrelevant to most voluntary organisations, whose needs are largely ignored.

"At national and local level, significant decisions are made, supposedly for all, that do not involve or connect with any organisations below a certain size or profile," the report says. "Most community groups are left out of this decision-making process due to a lack of voice and representation. There is a huge policy gap regarding the community sector."

The report concludes "What cannot be allowed to continue is the structural inequality that puts distance between rich and poor, large and small in the sector, a feature of recent years." You can have a schoofy here <http://www.communitysectorcoalition.org.uk/downloads/pdf/Unleashing%20the%20Potential.pdf>

And in responding to the arrival of the new government, Matt Scott, director of the Coalition said: "If the Tories' Big Society plan is going to work, the Government needs to prove it is not just code for 'Big Cuts'. The overwhelming cynicism from politicians and commentators across the political spectrum threatens the project before it has even begun. What we need are the details to match the words."

BASSAC says local authorities are stifling the 'lobby for change'

A survey of 50 members of BASSAC, the umbrella body for settlements and social action centres, has concluded that closer joint working between community groups and local authorities and councillors is stifling groups' ability to lobby for change.

Sarah Joy, Bassac's research and information officer, told BASSAC's Manchester conference that that community groups often found themselves working inside the parameters of the local authority's rules and processes in order to effect change, and that this had stifled the "natural radicalism of the sector" and BASSAC's chief executive Ben Hughes said: "Our research showed that the community sector has been doing increasingly well at securing contracts to deliver services. However, its capacity to agitate and lobby for change when things are difficult has been severely corroded in recent years."

Can't find the report on their website but if you want to know more then email Sarah at sarah@bassac.org.uk.

Few would dispute that we live in an unequal and unjust world, but what causes this inequality to persist?

Danny Dorling, Professor of Human Geography at the University of Sheffield, claims that, as the five social evils identified by Beveridge are gradually being

eradicated, they are being replaced by five new tenets of injustice - elitism, exclusion, prejudice, greed and despair.

Who is most harmed by these injustices and why, and what happens to those who most benefit? How can we muster the collective will to eradicate these damaging beliefs and behaviours and achieve a happier, more just society?

Powerful black manifesto targets new government

A radical and comprehensive black manifesto has been launched by thirty or so equality groups working together. *The Black Manifesto - the Price of Inequality*, together with the supporting website provides pretty well everything you need to know about the damage caused by inequality and what is needed to put it right. You can check out this mass of useful information here www.raceequalitypolicy.co.uk

Carnegie's Commission cops out

For the last four years the Carnegie UK Trust has been running a Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society. Now it has published its report *Making Good Society*, which tackles subjects ranging from the economic crisis to climate change and the decentralisation of power and concludes that "voluntary sector organisations must position themselves at the heart of society if the aim of a more equitable social environment is to be achieved". Civil society, it says, must be "bolder in asserting what it can contribute to reshaping finance, tackling climate change and regenerating democracy, and bolder in using its power, assets and influence".

But the report itself comes under criticism from activist network A World to Win for not being bold enough. Though the issues might be the right ones, Carnegie's approach is essentially reformist - for example that civil society can help create "stable, responsible and transparent financial activity" by "strengthening its capacity to influence financial institutions and regulators through building its own specialist institutions that have the knowledge and authority to challenge conventional financial thinking." Not so, says World to Win - "Modern capitalist state structures.... are about ruling over people, (with) a partisan commitment to vested interests such as high finance and corporate power and a "freedom" so circumscribed that anything meaningful will certainly get you on to a more-or-less secret database." Civil society groups should resist being drawn into reforming defunct institutions that will simply erode their independence. Instead they should be part of the movement to "transform and democratise the state itself".

You can get the Carnegie report here http://democracy.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/civil_society/publications/making

[good society](http://www.aworldtowin.net/blog/keeping-out-of-hands-of-state.html) and World to Win's commentary here <http://www.aworldtowin.net/blog/keeping-out-of-hands-of-state.html>

The madness continues.....

ACEVO lines up for NHS breakup

The Bubbists over at ACEVO scored a pre-election victory on the question of 'preferred providers' for health services. Briefly the history here is that ACEVO objected to the fact that ex-Health Secretary Andy Burnham had indicated that the NHS was the 'preferred provider' of this public service, because this indicated that 'the playing field was not level' and discriminated against private and voluntary sectors agencies wanting to get in on the act. Pressure was mounted and to ACEVO's delight new guidance was issued that omitted this telling phrase. Stephen Bubb, Chief Executive of ACEVO was quoted as saying: "This guidance is the final nail in the coffin of the preferred provider policy, which has been well and truly neutered. It sends out a totally clear message to NHS commissioners: do not treat the NHS as preferred provider, but rather treat all sectors equally." Sounds like this might position Stephen and his pals quite well for dealing with our new 'strong and stable government.

Writing on the wall for the independence of CABs?

Dave Harker, Chief Executive of Citizens Advice (CitA), previously the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, is to leave after 13 years in the job. Gillian Guy has been announced as his replacement. Formerly a local authority chief executive, Guy has more recently been known as the boss over at Victim Support, where she presided over the merger of the previously federated 77 separate Victim Support organisations into one nationally-controlled body. Many close to CitA have been fearing the same fate. For example, recently CitA tried to force through a requirement that when individual bureau appoint a director, they had to gain the approval of CitA before confirming the appointment.

Guy's press statement said: "This is a particularly exciting time to be joining, given the challenges and opportunities Citizens Advice is facing, and I look forward to being a part of its strong and dynamic future." Wonder if CAB clients feel quite so upbeat, given the redundancies, low wages and ill-health that they can face. Creeping corporatisation is alive and well.

Meanwhile trouble brews over at Age UK

Similar concerns are running rife over at the new national body formed from the merger of Age Concern and Help the Aged. The new body - Age UK - is now trying to recreate the previous federation of 332 local Age Concerns under its new banner. But there have been some subtle, and some not so subtle, changes in the deal. Age Concerns have been invited to sign 'brand partnership agreements' on condition they first sign wide-ranging confidentiality agreements. They are also being asked to pass information about their

beneficiaries to the national body and cede control of their websites. Apparently only 29 Age Concerns have signed up so far. "The fear is that we end up with this national juggernaut of an organisation competing against us," said one Age Concern manager, who asked not to be named. "But if we sign this agreement, we are worried we will lose independence."

This month's 'That Takes The Biscuit' award goes to....

ACEVO's "Meet the Changemakers"

ACEVO's latest glossy offers top tips for effective engagement, packed with 48 pages of advice for all those 'sector leaders' that we are so tired of hearing about. Want to join them? Well here are some of their secret weapons:

"As leaders of a modern and professional third sector we should strive to present ourselves as organised...."

"It is important as leaders to stay closely connected to our own organisations"

"Gather people around you..."

"Every good leader needs a stock of effective questions"

"The first step to clarity is to recognise what you really want to achieve"

"Effective communication is critical for leaders"

Wow!

What next for 'Total Place'?

The change in government casts a shadow over the future of one of New Labour's last 'transformational' initiatives - 'Total Place'. This project was intended to test a new approach to designing and delivering public services that revolves around communities in geographical places. The pilot, run in 13 pilot areas across England included a look at the role of voluntary and community organisations in the delivery of public services. A project report [Total Place: A whole area approach to public services](#) was published before the election by the Treasury and the Department for Communities and Local Government. The key to the initiative was to look at ways of identifying and then pooling public expenditure within an area "to fit around the needs of communities cutting out waste and duplication, while protecting and improving frontline services."

Seems like the word 'cutting' may have been the crucial one and even more likely now. As Systems Thinking consultant John Seddon has said of the project: "...the truth is coming out about Total Place. As I warned, this cost-counting

exercise will be used as the basis for Treasury decisions about funding public services. As all systems thinkers know, a focus on costs teaches you nothing and knowing how to focus on value drives out costs you never would have 'seen' doing Total Place. Total Place has been a con-trick."

Clobberings, clones, cuts and closures

Asylum and refugee information centre to close?

London's City University has signalled its intention to withdraw support to the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR), in the next four months, laying off all the staff. ICAR is unique in providing objective information about asylum to the media, government, academics and students, NGOs and refugee community organisations. This encourages understanding and dialogue in an area beset with hysteria that fuels racism and xenophobia.

Interestingly, the ICAR website (www.icar.org.uk) makes no mention of these cuts but you can find out the latest situation by contacting icar@city.ac.uk, or 020 7040 4596.

Groundbreaking Sheffield Youth Work binned

A petition with over 1000 signatures from young people and supporters across the city, along with letters of support from local and regional organisations, was recently presented to Sheffield City Council, in an attempt to reverse the Council's decision to cut the funding to the Children and Young People's Empowerment Project. This work - over nine years - established a national reputation for Chilypep, the group behind it, which, amongst other things, developed the first ever City Wide Youth Council in Sheffield. The Council's decision to take the work 'in house' has left Chilypep incredibly vulnerable, and has flown in the face of widespread condemnation by partner organisations, individual supporters and most importantly, young people themselves, who desperately want the Youth Council structure to remain independent of local authority control.

Three staff have already been made redundant and there is less than a month to go before most of the remaining staff will be lost. Without further funding the whole organisation could be wound up by the end of the year with the loss of 20 jobs in total. Applications to charitable trusts and alternative funders have up to now been unsuccessful, as the increased demand on shrinking funding available to the VCF sector and the move from grants to contracts makes it so much harder for organisations like Chilypep to secure core funding.

Kevin Curley puts the case for mergers

Speaking in a personal capacity, NAVCA Chief Executive Kevin Curley has put the case for second tier groups to merge in the interests of efficiency - at local, regional and national levels. Pointing to the pressures on funding, that will

inevitably now increase, and the divisive impact of competitive tendering, Curley concludes that more sense will be made of the scene if catchment areas are expanded and support organisations become more integrated. He reckons that a minimum of £150,000 core funding is needed in unitary areas and £250,000 in counties and that these levels of funding are no longer realistic; hence the suggestion that district level agencies should merge into a county-wide organisation and, at the same time, other support projects, like volunteer centres or community accountancy projects, should combine. He also asserts that, as local budgets shrink, the days of separate support and development charities for black groups, youth groups and disability groups must be numbered. These views will not go down well with second tier support agencies fighting for recognition of the value of doing things locally, nor those who see their specialist knowledge as vital to their role in helping develop and support voluntary action.

Kevin also feels that the national scene is overcrowded and reveals that he has opened discussion with NCVO, Volunteering England, ACRE and Urban Forum about the potential for merger or collaboration should the necessity arise.

'Racism' blamed for decline in funding for ethnic minority charities

A survey from the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations (could do with a snappier title!) has found that 45% of 173 black and minority ethnic groups surveyed have suffered cuts by local authority and other funders since the recession began. Of the charities that have had cuts, more than four out of 10 have incomes of less than £10,000 a year, according to the report. 39% have suffered cuts from local councils alone, and the remainder have had funding withdrawn by councils, government departments and grant-making trusts. This, the report asserts in its foreword, is a consequence of racism - "Cemvo's study of the BME sector shows a sector not just under pressure but under attack."

Hashmukh Pankhania, chief executive of Cemvo, said: "That nearly half of all BME charities are now struggling is a scandal. BME charities should be benefiting from increased funding in 2010, not facing cuts that will marginalise them and limit further the inadequate help already on offer."

Unfortunately the CEMVO website is full of broken links so we've been unable to actually find the report. You might have better luck - <http://www.emf-cemvo.co.uk/>

What's in a word?

Many will know that the 'Charities must not run Prisons' group (<http://www.facebook.com/?f=0&start=0&sk=messages#!/group.php?gid=175708135461&v=wall&ref=search>) has been trying to persuade the Charity Commission to

take a line on the plans of Turning Point and others to team up with private sector security companies to run planned new prisons.....

One supporter had a look at Webster's dictionary which provides some useful guidance on the subject:

Charity: " a love of one's fellow human beings, an act of goodwill or affection; the feeling of goodwill; benevolence, kindness or leniency in judging others"

Prison: "a place where persons are confined in a building, usually with cells, where convicted criminals, especially those serving longer sentences, are confined, such a place for holding accused persons who are awaiting, or on, trial"

That seems pretty clear.....

Salford community committees bullied over Salford Star

Salford Council's attempts to close down the community paper, the Salford Star, recently took a new twist. The Star applied for funding to three of the city's eight 'community committees', each supposed to be 'empowered' with their own budget, devolved from the council tax, to fund local projects which benefit the community. But the committees were forbidden by Council officers to fund the Star on the grounds that the paper "is overtly political in nature", "does not take a balanced view" and that it "tends to criticise authority, in particular singling out Salford Council and individual councillors". Funding this kind of dissent is apparently in breach of the Local Government Act, they reckon.

The Star has vigorously refuted all of Salford Council's claims, arguing that the magazine is totally independent, is not aligned to any political party, and never tells anyone how to vote.

"The magazine does have an agenda - to give the community a voice and to hold public bodies up to account..... We would argue that this is something worth striving for, and that the concept of empowerment is included in many Council documents".

Apparently Sue Lightup, the Council officer who issued the warning to the committees, has the important responsibility within her job description of *"helping more people to get involved in decision making at a local level"*. Nice one.

You can check the Star on-line at www.salfordstar.com

Westminster Council cuts the funding and says stuff the partnership

Tory-controlled Westminster Council has decided to cut £500,000 from the voluntary sector grants budget, allegedly breaching the Compact in the process. Voluntary Action Westminster (VAW) has 'reported' the Council to the Compact Advocacy Project for this breach of the accord and Compact Voice has expressed 'deep concern' about the decision. This is unlikely to cause any loss of sleep inside the Council, who more-or-less simultaneously voted to boot voluntary sector representatives off the decision making for the strategic partnership. In this latter move the statutory bodies reduced the voting members of the LSP from 20 to five, all five being public bodies.

Representatives from VAW, Paddington Development Trust and Westminster Community Network walked out when it was decided charities would get only non-voting advisory roles on the board. Bernard Collier, chief executive of VAW, said the council did not appear to value the voice of the voluntary sector. "They're saying 'we're in charge and you do as we say', which seems to fly in the face of what all the national parties are saying about working in partnership with the voluntary sector," he said.

Voluntary Action Manchester goes down the chute

A neat bit of footwork in Manchester sees Voluntary Action Manchester (VAM) wound up and replaced by a new organisation called 'Third Sector Essentials'. The shift was brought on by a row with the European Commission who demanded repayment of £138,000 of 2002 ESF funding that could not be accounted for. Since VAM didn't have the dosh, it closed down instead, transferring all the other existing contracts and staff to the new organisation. And the bright boys and girls at VAW have taken the opportunity to move up a step and enter the wonderful world of social enterprise. Third Sector Essentials is set up as a community interest company rather than charity and announces its intention to be confined to Manchester no longer, but to bid for contracts outside the area. Thus a new national predator is born? Actually their new website (<http://www.thirdsectoressentials.org/>) has rather a naïve feel to it, despite all the buzz words about being dynamic, innovative and vital.

Hackney manouverings – laugh or cry?

Recent developments in the Hackney area of London illustrate well the kind of tug-of-war that goes on between things that put a smile on your face and things that make you bury your hands in it instead.

On the positive side, a broad alliance of community and activist groups have come together to mount a day of events to celebrate community action. 'Celebrate Hackney', scheduled for June 5th, is organised by Hackney Unites to provide an opportunity for local communities to come together, discuss and debate issues of concern, make new friends and have some fun. The event has been greeted with such enthusiasm from so many corners of the area that the organisers have had to hire additional space to accommodate it. There will be

workshops to discuss voluntary action, the political issues of the moment, stalls, stuff for kids, lots of fine food, films and performances. More information from <http://www.hackneyunites.org.uk/>

On the down side, the cuts have started, most savagely with local nursery provision. Whilst Jules Pipe, the re-elected New Labour Mayor has been boasting that "Investment in services for Hackney residents is at the heart of spending plans for the coming financial year - at no extra cost to the tax payer", community nurseries have been told that, with immediate effect, they will be having cuts in their budget of up to 60%. This means cuts of £40 to £50,000, which will lead to the serious threat of nursery closures, and hardship and distress for parents, workers and children. In a cynical attempt to avoid responsibility Mayor Pipe initially denied all knowledge of the cuts saying that they were the work of the Learning Trust, the 'independent' organisation that the Council set up to run educational services. The campaign against the cuts is being co-ordinated by Friends of Hackney Nurseries who you can contact here FHN@live.co.uk

And to add a note of irony to the scene, Hackney Council for Voluntary Services doesn't seem to be directly involved in either the celebration or the fight against the cuts. What are they up to? Well, they are a bit busy drawing up a 'Third Sector Strategy for Hackney'. Well more accurately they are helping the local strategic partnership ('Team Hackney') to draw up the strategy, for "this Strategy will be ultimately owned by Team Hackney who make strategic decisions about the provision of local resources..... The strategy will need to take a long-term view, setting out a 10-year vision for the third sector, including voluntary organisations and community groups, in Hackney." Well that assumes there will be a 'third sector' in 10 years time. Don't know where to start with this one....

Dame Suzi says large charities could be on 'a financial cliff edge'

In another statement of the blindingly obvious, Chair of the Charity Commission, Dame Suzi Leather, has warned that large charities heavily reliant on public sector funding must take measures to avoid finding themselves on a "financial cliff edge".

"There is a real concern that charities that receive money from the public purse to fund their work could find themselves at a financial cliff edge in March 2011," Leather said. "Optimism is very important, but it must be matched by a recognition of the reality of the financial situation. We want trustees to channel their formidable energy into doing all they can to protect the valuable work of their charities."

A recent commission survey shows that funding from the public sector is the most important income stream for 24 per cent of charities with annual incomes of more than £100,000. Leather said these charities should try to diversify their income streams, collaborate to reduce costs and take steps to increase their chances of winning local contracts. The last bit of advice seems a bit off-key as it was taking all these contracts that got the poor dears into this mess in the first place.

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