

National Coalition for Independent Action

Celebrating voluntary & community action to change and challenge the world around us

Newsletter No: 2

May 2007

Welcome to the newsletter of the National Coalition for Independent Action. We celebrate the power of voluntary and community action to change and challenge the world around us. You can see Newsletter No. 1, and learn more about us by visiting our website - www.independentaction.net

What's the Coalition up to?

Resistance to 'Commissioning' approaches

We want to hear from those of you concerned with statutory sector moves to 'commission' voluntary sector services, either by forcing organisations to bid for their own work or through tenders to provide public services that are being privatised. We are getting many stories from around the country about poor practice (sometimes appalling practice), about predatory voluntary agencies moving in, and about the de-stabilising effects of forced competition in an area and the uncertainties associated, with staff retention for example. What strategies exist to resist, to protect independence and to avoid the damaging potential and actual effects? We've already got three agencies wanting to work on this with us. Are there any more out there? You can find more information and a brief project proposal on our website, here:

<http://www.independentaction.net/sayno>

Please email indyaction@yahoo.com if you're interested in participating or knowing more.

The Coalition in the News

Matt Scott, a member of our planning group, has had a fine piece about our work published in New Start magazine. It's been reproduced on a Lewisham councillor's blog and elsewhere on the net.

If you want to read it, we've posted it on our website. And let us have your comments please through the discussion forum -

<http://www.independentaction.net/forums/threads.cfm?forumid=716C16B6-9E0D-0678-C61D4DF864651BD5>

How are people feeling about their independence? One way of getting started

Though people all over the country seem to be crying into their beer about the threats to their

independence, the other message we're getting is that people are confused about where to start in doing anything about it. Our answer is that you have to start by talking to the people around you who are also affected, to get specific about what is going on in your own local area or your area of work. This will tell you about the specific problems faced by groups, who's willing to do something and what the answers might be. We're aiming to pilot ways of doing this at local level. This will involve systematically:

- gathering information from groups and agencies individually;
- investigating the current plans of the local statutory sector;
- checking out whether the VCS second tier agencies are helping or hindering; and then
- convening and facilitating discussion, solutions and action amongst those willing to mobilise around the issues that have emerged.

We're hoping that work of this sort can soon begin in Hackney in London and we're talking to people in Middlesborough about a similar approach. If people in other areas would like to talk about 'getting started', get in touch please via indyaction@yahoo.co.uk.

Hook up with the 1990 Trust

We've had very positive exchanges with the 1990 Trust, the vigorous and radical campaigning organisation for human rights and race equality. We're exploring ways in which we can support and build on each other's work, including plans for a conference next winter to broadcast threats to independent action, the ways in which black and minority groups are particularly badly affected and strategies for fighting back. To get a flavour of the Trust's work, check out their massive and excellent website www.blink.org.uk

CDX come on board

CDX – the Community Development Exchange – is the latest organisation to join us in the Coalition. They'll be working with us on a winter conference, talking to the national agencies about what is being done at this level (see below), auditing independence in the community development world and generally promoting the Coalition.

What are the national agencies up to?

Over the last few months we've been contacted by many of the national VCS agencies expressing interest in the Coalition. These have included Directory of Social Change, NCVO, NAVCA, BASSAC, The Evaluation Trust, Urban Forum, Advice UK, even ACEVO. With so much interest in the need to protect the sector's independence you might think that the Coalition is already redundant. We intend to test this out by convening a meeting for relevant national agencies to find out where they stand on the issues we care about, what they are already doing about them and whether we're on the same side of the barricade.

The website gets 'populated'

Our website is now live and, though far from finished, is steadily building material about the Coalition and its work. Please visit there, use the opportunity to 'sign up' to the Coalition and get involved in the discussion forums. We would also welcome feedback from you on the site and its contents. You can find it at www.independentaction.net

We're skint !

At the moment everything within the Coalition is being done by volunteers and we have no money whatsoever. This can't go on! The landscape is vast, the issues big and complex and the need for action urgent and massive. We have got to get some money to pay for our work. So we've started to talk to possible funders about supporting aspects of the Coalition's programme, with encouraging first responses. Of course we can't receive money unless we are a recognisable organisation. And so we are registering ourselves as a Community Interest Company. We hope this will provide the kind of flexible, non-bureaucratic form of governance we need to function effectively and transparently. If any of you out there have had bad experiences of running a CIC, tell us if you think we should avoid it like the plague.

If any of you want to send us money that would be great, though we're not holding our breath. Or if you know of trusts or other sources of dosh that you think might be worth pursuing, please tell us via indyaction@yahoo.co.uk.

Independent Action – who's busy?

Strangers into Citizens

A campaign by the [Citizen Organising Foundation](http://www.citizenorganisingfoundation.org) (COF), an alliance of faith and community organizations across London and in Birmingham. They had events in London and Birmingham on May 7. <http://www.strangersintocitizens.org.uk/index.html>

Scotland Organises

A group of voluntary sector people and academics in Scotland are working on independence and community development issues. They are calling the effort: *Audit Of Democratic Practice: Learning For Democracy*. They plan their next meeting Thursday June 7th between 2pm-5pm at Moray House School of Education. Not sure where that is but to find out and get more information email Jim Crowther at jim.crowther@ed.ac.uk.

You can read several of their documents, including a research paper and newsletter in the Scotland thread of the Voice forum on the [website](#).

Critically Chatting 4: Youth, Community Work And Beyond

Youth and community workers are coming together via the Critically Chatting Collective. This sounds like it's up our street – here's an extract from their circular:

"Neither young people nor folk in the community are objects to be managed. Youth and community workers ought not to be the obedient servants of management, unquestioningly doing as they are told. Personal, social and political dilemmas, surely the very stuff of a youth and community work worth its name, cannot be resolved by the diktat of today's management with its absurd agenda of prescribed outcomes – the very antithesis of a truly democratic, critical and creative dialogue between everyone involved and effected."

Their next meetings are on the theme of **Subverting Management: From Above and Below**. They will be held in London on Wednesday, 6th June, in London (11.00-4.00) and in Wigan on Thursday, 7th June (7.30-10.00).

Further information from:

Malcolm Ball (re London) at malcolm.ball@lewisham.gov.uk or on 07957198308; and Megan Astley (re Wigan) at meganbobastley@btinternet.com or on 01942708694.

Or check their website <http://critically-chatting.0catch.com/topic/index.html>

As they neatly say in their blurb – *“To do nothing but grumble and not act – that is throwing one’s life away”!*

Advice agencies get organised in Hackney

Independent advice agencies in Hackney, London have told the local authority that they do not support the Council’s plans to move to commissioning advice services and have drawn up their own strategy for developing these vital services in the area. In response to this pressure the Council has agreed to postpone commissioning until 2009 and to set up a working group so that these strategic issues can be properly discussed with the advice sector. More information from Andy Benson at info@penandy.co.uk.

New Face of Protest

The era of May Day being marked with running battles on the streets of London appears to be over. The new face of street protest in Britain features blank placards, disco dancing in suits and ties, and Mr Pig. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6611695.stm>

Brightonpalestine.org

It looks like the UK HQ of Carmel-Agrexco, the half-Israeli state-owned company which makes its loot importing most of its goods from illegal West Bank Settlements, is all set to become an occupied territory of its own following the latest legal development in the attempted clampdown on protest there. The cases against three protesters from London and Brighton, arrested after locking on at the Agrexco distribution centre as part of a Valentine’s blockade in February have now been dropped by theMet Police. This website was set up in April 2006 by people from Brighton who were visiting Palestine. <http://brightonpalestine.org/>

Jury acquittal of the Oxford Two

On the 22 May, a jury at Bristol Crown Court, unanimously found the Oxford peace activists Philip Pritchard and Toby Olditch not guilty of conspiring to cause criminal damage at RAF Fairford in 2003, when they tried to safely disable US B52s heading for bombing missions in Iraq. The court heard the two men acted to prevent damage to life and property in Iraq, and the perpetration of war crimes by the aggressors.

You can get the full story from the Oxford Support Group website – www.b52two.org or send your congratulations to Toby Olditch and Phil Pritchard by emailing inspiraction2003@yahoo.co.uk

Direct Action Against Poverty

A new London-based grouping of advice workers and others who have come together to re-assert the role of direct action in fighting oppression and injustice in the way public services treat

people. Regular meetings in central London. More information from londondaap@yahoo.co.uk

Launch of the Small Charities Coalition

News this week of the launch of the Small Charities Coalition. The Coalition says that it aims to "level the playing field" between large and small organisations by promoting small charities to the public, government and businesses and by providing access to support and resources. A small charity is defined as one with an income of £1m or less per year and where no member of staff is paid more than £50,000 a year – seems pretty big to us. We've written to them to ask about their politics and perspectives and find out if we're pushing in the same direction. You can ask them yourself by emailing Patrick Cox at admin@malecancer.net.

Where to get help in taking action

Small Organisations Offered Bursaries To Meet With MPs

Not sure this is a very good idea (talking to MPs often seems just like encouraging their bad behaviour) but NCVO is offering funds for people to attend party conferences. <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/whatwedo/?id=4946>

Upcoming Events

'Sustainability – How Well is London Doing?'

4th June 2007, 6pm – 7.30pm, City Hall, Committee Room 5 on Lower Floor

London Civic Forum is celebrating London Sustainability Weeks 2007 by hosting a debate called "Sustainability – How Well is London Doing?", offering Londoners the chance to discover what progress is being made to make London a greener, safer, fairer, more sustainable city. To book a place contact Melanie Hamilton on 020 8709 9771 or email melanie@londoncivicforum.org.uk.

'Futures for civil society - Ideas, Implications and Actions.'

July 17 in London

A Joint conference from NCVO and Carnegie UK Trust, to discuss possible futures for civil society and identify what actions to take to diminish possible future threats and take advantage of emerging opportunities. <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/events/latest/?id=4312>. Part of an 18-month inquiry by Carnegie on the future of civil society in Ireland and UK.

http://democracy.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/civil_society. Costs a lot (£170) but you do get a drinks reception on the evening before (Wow!) Sounds like a chance to hobnob with some quite important people!!

'Whose Rules Rule?'

30th June in Leeds

Annual conference of the World Development Movement has the theme this year of exploring activism by celebrating and learning from global justice campaigns. The conference will feature keynote speakers giving their own perspectives on activism and inter-active sessions led by

experienced campaigners and activists. More information and booking arrangements on the WDM website/events <http://www.wdm.org.uk/news/events/wrr07/index.htm>

Writings, musings and resources

Policy and Research Perusal

From CDX <http://www.cdx.org.uk/>. This bulletin will bring you edited highlights of policy and research work relevant to community development, along with various observations and ramblings. To get on the list email Beth at beth@cdx.org.uk. Here's a typical item:

"The Baring Foundation is reporting on its funding programme which aims to promote and strengthen independence in the sector - <http://www.baringfoundation.org.uk/>. They currently have an article in Third Sector magazine arguing that VCS organisations need to improve their skills in advocacy and negotiation, and spend more time thinking about their values to ensure that values are the basis on which decisions are made about projects and funding."

Stand and Deliver

The Charity Commission's new report: 'Stand and Deliver: The Future for Charities Delivering Public Services has raised a few hackles in Government and amongst the charity big boys. For it says that the greatest threat facing charities today is the threat to independence. You can download the report at <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/Library/publications/pdfs/RS15text.pdf>

And you can see how the different responses shake down by going to the Governance website: <http://www.charitygovernance.co.uk/news/charitynewsalert/issue18/public.asp>

Finance Hub Releases Funding Guide

Don't look for a critical perspective here but the Finance Hub has published a slimmed-down version of its guide to financial sustainability for voluntary and community organisations. This is now available to download from its website. <http://www.financehub.org.uk/?Resources>

Frontline Hopscotch

NAVCA recently conducted a survey to assess the impact of current local authority commissioning practices on voluntary and community sector services for children and young people. <http://www.navca.org.uk/news/hopscotch.htm>. This shows that funding to VCS agencies in this area of provision is being cut and that preventative services are the hardest hit. If you would like more information about this work, contact Kate Housden, NAVCA Improving Local Partnerships Manager at kate.housden@navca.org.uk or phone on 0114 289 3962.

"Future of Commissioning: Leadership Challenges" (sic)

If you want to see what our masters and their third sector pals have in mind for us have a look at this lot. This material is taken from an ACEVO workshop held on 26 April 2007. There was another one apparently on the 15th May. Below are the Powerpoint (what else?) presentations from the speakers for your edification.

Ben Jupp http://www.acevo.org.uk/downloads/upload/smallorgs_BenJupp.ppt

David Royce <http://www.acevo.org.uk/downloads/upload/DavidRoyce.ppt>
Ged Taylor <http://www.acevo.org.uk/downloads/upload/GedTaylor.ppt>
Peter Wilkinson <http://www.acevo.org.uk/downloads/upload/PeterWilkinson.ppt>
Richard Gutch <http://www.acevo.org.uk/downloads/upload/RichardGutch.ppt>

Common themes on commissioning the VCS in selected local authorities in Greater London

A new report from London Councils which seems to indicate what we already know – that commissioning practice is a mess. We haven't digested the report yet but the author Simon Tanner's strapline is "inspirational research for policy delivery" so that sounds fantastic doesn't it?

You can download the report from <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/doc.asp?doc=20082>

State of the Sector 2007

A new report on the state of the sector from nfpsynergy makes interesting reading. The survey reports what their respondents feel are the big issues facing the sector, what government initiatives have had an impact, how well (well badly actually) are the ChangeUp hubs and second tier agencies doing, as well as a lot of tosh about 'brands' and some other stuff. You can download the report at:

<http://www.nfpsynergy.net/downloads/The%20State%20of%20the%20Third%20Sector%202007.pdf>

Charities Must Retain Their Political Purpose

Article by Helena Kennedy, chair of the Advisory Group on Campaigning and the Voluntary Sector. March 14: <http://society.guardian.co.uk/voluntary/story/0,,2032718,00.html>

This was in response to the report of the Charity Commission: Campaigning and Political Activities by Charities:

<http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/publications/cc9.asp>

And our Helena was at it again in last week's Guardian making much the same arguments for the value of campaigning activity: <http://society.guardian.co.uk/voluntary/story/0,,2085490,00.html>

Regional Campaign Forums

Capacitybuilders is to support the work of the Sheila McKechnie Foundation in setting up regional forums across England to increase networking, skills sharing and peer information exchange for voluntary sector campaigners.

<http://www.charityfinance.co.uk/charitynewsletter/issue26/capacitybuilders.asp>

UK: Racism and the State 2007

Leading black and anti-racist activists, campaigners and scholars come together to chart the new terrain of state racism in the UK. On 16 September 2006, the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) held a unique conference in London on 'Racism, Liberty and the War on Terror', attended by over 250 participants, including human rights activists, community workers, lawyers, students, radical academics and solidarity groups. The April 2007 edition of the IRR journal Race & Class features extracts from the pioneering conference - www.irr.org.uk

Meanwhile..... Secret plans to turn staff into police informers

The Times reports that the Home Office is working up secret plans to force (via a new statutory duty) council workers, charity staff and doctors to inform the Police if they think someone **could** commit a violent crime. Danger signs used to identify an individual as a potential perpetrator might include a violent family background, heavy drinking or mental health problems. Apparently they haven't yet worked out what should be done with the people thus informed on, since they won't have had to actually commit a violent crime. Well probably bang them up anyway - better safe than sorry eh? Read the article at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article1816772.ece>

Third Sector Bulletin

This bulletin comes out several times a week with news of happenings in the voluntary sector. We'll highlight some of the things relevant to NCIA here, and provide the links, but you can sign up for the emailed bulletin yourself here: <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/bulletins/>

Here are a few relevant items, mostly not very good news. Third Sector removes articles after a time, so the links may stop working:

The Blair Legacy: Good For The Sector, Less So For Beneficiaries

Tony Blair's premiership has helped "champion" charities, but has been "disappointing" for some of the causes they support, charities told Third Sector Online.

<http://ecm.hbpl.co.uk/re?!=evv5cil4500u9111a>

Sector Expects Dazzling Start To A Brown Regime

Political analysts are predicting an "eye-catching announcement" for the third sector if, as is expected, Gordon Brown takes over as Prime Minister in the next few months.

<http://ecm.hbpl.co.uk/re?!=evv5cil4500u9111b>

'You Don't Get Anywhere Being Polite,' Clark Scolds Charities

Shadow charities minister Greg Clark has accused the sector of failing to stand up to the Government over controversial issues. <http://ecm.hbpl.co.uk/re?!=evv4h8l4500u91119>

Public Benefit for Poor 'Mis-stated'

The Charity Commission's consultation on public benefit by charities mis-states the law on people on low incomes. <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/News/DailyBulletin/648066/Public-benefit-poor-mis-stated/ACC43953CFCD00A007EC8348AFB1F41B/>

Charities Could Be Losing Millions In Unlawful Bank Charges

Charities should follow the lead of individual consumers by challenging their banks to reclaim unlawful banking charges, the Charities Aid Foundation has said.

<http://ecm.hbpl.co.uk/re?!=evuwa7l4500u91113>

Survey To Investigate Sector Monitoring Practice

Charities Evaluation Services is conducting an online survey to take stock of how the sector is responding to the increasing demands of funders and commissioners to demonstrate their effectiveness and value for money. Survey open until June 1, responders are entered in a drawing. <http://ecm.hbpl.co.uk/re?!=evuwa7l4500u91117>

Why (and What Is) this Newsletter?

This newsletter is the voice of the planning group of NCIA. We aim to issue newsletters regularly to keep you informed of what we and others are doing or saying. We send out a newsletter whenever we've got sufficient material and when one of us has the time to get it together. We will also issue Action Alerts as pressing news and opportunities for action arise. We will err on the side of inclusiveness, adding people willy-nilly to our mailing list—and of course giving every opportunity to unsubscribe.

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. Our website has forums for debate and for making connections. There is a space to offer and to ask for help in taking independent action.

Please try to communicate with us via the website or the accompanying email address there - indyaction@yahoo.co.uk as this eases our administrative burden.

We are all volunteers here and we welcome more offers of help. If you'd like to help make this initiative prosper then please get in touch with us.

Unsubscribe

If you wish to unsubscribe to this newsletter, please email indyaction@yahoo.co.uk and put 'unsubscribe' in the subject line

Note on Links

Often website links will not work properly on browsers other than Internet Explorer, and links on this email may appear or act funny in your programmes. You can always get to sites by cutting and pasting the address into your browser. Please let us know any technical issues you encounter with this email.