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Bumper edition this one, but then there's a lot going on. So take it, as Sir Stephen Bubb might say, 'sip by sip, like a fine Pinot Grigio'.....

Whose side are you on?

We are now but three weeks away from the beginning of the new financial year. Many cuts to voluntary agencies and to public services have already been made, but this is as nothing to the slaughter that is about to arrive. Sector 'leaders' are now on the same page with criticising the cuts, though this masks the dissonance between the position of the Bubbists (don't cut the sector or there will be no-one left to deliver public services), the likes of NAVCA (this is wrecking long standing local community relationships) and, say, the Community Sector Coalition (this is doing immense damage to people and communities and placing intolerable strain on community groups). Though this is a caricatured picture, there is truth in it.

The good news is that there actually is, at last, some spoken opposition to what is happening from these kinds of organisation. The even better news is that popular opposition is growing, as detailed in this newsletter. People around the country and from very different political viewpoints are taking active steps to register their disapproval and stick a spanner in the works of Coalition Government plans. Our reading of the general public's mood is that they don't want the welfare state to be closed down, with the remnants farmed out to Stephen Bubb's corporate pals (private or voluntary, what's the difference?); they don't want to see their, and their neighbour's, living standards slashed, their communities fragmented; they don't want the obscene farce of banker's bonuses, and the rest of it, to continue unchallenged. People are taking sides.

Well we think that organisations need to take sides too. It's easy for us, of course. We don't take state money; we don't trust politicians (trust = honesty, reliability and competence, remember); we didn't like the New Labour project

for voluntary action and we don't like this lot's approach either.

For those of you who have done the professional thing, especially where it has involved taking state money, the choices are more tricky. But you got yourselves into this position, so you need to get yourselves out of it. Rachael Maskell, from Unite, writing in this week's Third Sector (8th March) says "the sector is too scared to bite the hand that feeds it", the very message we have been peddling for the last four years. It's time to stop obfuscating. It's time to take sides.

The issue - and dilemma - is neatly illustrated by the £15 million government 'community organisers contract', awarded to 'Locality', no doubt in part, because they were seen as an organisation used to working inside state-set parameters and able to 'deliver' within the kind of performance management framework that has been used to co-opt and constrain voluntary action. Locality says they intend to 'wrest the contract away from government' and work in a non-party political way. Fine, but will they work in a political way? The name 'Locality' was chosen for their new organisation deliberately so as to be "politically neutral", and with the strapline "ambitious for local change". This, it was felt, would be the way to "build a strong brand". What we want to know is whether their ambition for local change includes volunteers replacing statutory services, conspiring with the dismantling of the welfare state, seeing long standing voluntary agencies being put out of business, and watching thousands upon thousands of people dispossessed of services and support? It's time to take sides Locality. If you are prepared to do this, then you might get some help from us.

News from the Coalition

Rethinking Voluntary Action – our seminar series

The seminar series on 'rethinking voluntary action' that we have been running jointly with Roehampton University has now come to an end. Based around papers presented by Colin Rochester, this series of six meetings has thrown up a mass of material - and lively discussion - about the historical roots of voluntary action, about typologies to describe these different forms of association and ways in which contemporary social, economic and political forces are reshaping assumptions about 'what' and 'why'.

The next step for Colin is to turn all this into a book, which we hope will emerge from the ether (well his computer actually) in the not-too-distant future. In the meantime, we hope over the next few months to produce some short articles illustrating the themes and arguments involved.

If you'd like copies of the papers and notes produced by Colin please email the

office and they can be sent to you -info@independentaction.net.

NCIA Assembly news

The last Assembly meeting took place in Sheffield on the 27th January, at which we talked to each other about alternative ways to organise ourselves in the face of the cuts, the pressures of hierarchical and oppressive ways of working, and the gathering pace of public service privatisation. Notes of the meeting can be found on the website

here: www.independentaction.net/?page_id=6333.

The next Assembly meeting will be in Manchester on the afternoon of Thursday May 12th in central Manchester. We may be able to pay travel expenses from other parts of the country - just get in touch. This meeting will have an open format, without speakers, to allow the people there to talk about current concerns and activities.

If you want to come along, it would help if you could let the office know and if there are particular issues or themes that you would like to include. You can download a booking form

here: http://www.independentaction.net/?page_id=2993 Or email Melaina (melaina@independentaction.net) or Rachael (rachael@independentaction.net) or phone 020 8536 3828, and they can pick up the discussion from there on.

Localism in action? Not unless we challenge the commissioning culture

This month we publish two new case studies which show how small community organisations are still expected to comply with tendering, targets and performance management requirements that ignore their local knowledge and disrespect their independence. The case studies show how independent action has been undermined in youth work and how people on the frontline are striving to uphold their values.

[Localism in action? A case study of a small community project's experience of a local authority's tendering process](#) (2011), shows how bidding for a contract to run a local estate's youth provision put an unnecessary strain on a small community organisation and contributed to delaying the project by 12 months.

[Short-term funding to meet external targets](#) (2011) sets out a youth work project's experience of accepting funding to work with young people in 'hotspots' for crime and anti-social behaviour and how they tried to evaluate their work in terms of what worked and what didn't, instead of ticking boxes for the youth service.

We welcome your own comments and

experiences: <http://www.independentaction.net/?p=8068>

More on commissioning – West Sussex follow up

A year ago we published a damning indictment of commissioning practices in West Sussex - see http://www.independentaction.net/?page_id=6223 for the awful story. Now we are going back to ask the 16 groups that we interviewed, if they have survived or indeed, prospered, since we last talked to them. Results in the next newsletter....

Brave new speak

Calling for a social media volunteer to help us with our brave new speak wiki!

We're on a mission to rescue the language of voluntary action from manipulative and misleading PR campaigns ('big society' anyone?). Have a look at the [Brave new speak wiki](#) created by Adrian Barritt from Adur Voluntary Action.

Contact melaina@independentaction.net if you have ideas and a bit of time to help to promote this critical vocabulary of voluntary action through social media

Organising, mobilising, and keeping on keeping on

Along with the tender and tentative signs of spring, now starting to show, comes mounting evidence of resistance to the awful catastrophe that is being visited upon us by our (not) elected government. Here is a selection of the kind of fightback plans and actions that are being taken around the country.....

The Big one – All together for Public Services – TUC Day of Action – 26th March – London

NCIA urges all who care about the dismantling of the welfare state, the attack on living standards, and the increased polarisation between have and have nots, to make your way to London on the 26th March. Here is a chance to show our opposition to the actions of a government without a mandate and our solidarity with those who are committed to resist. Assemble at 11am at Victoria Embankment, from where the demonstration will make its way to Hyde Park.

Wandsworth against the cuts – a cameo of a national struggle

Wandsworth Councillors, in South West London, the Tory flagship borough of the 1980's, are again redistributing wealth - in the direction of the rich. Whilst handing over £13 million pounds to middle class parents to create a free school, they have threatened to close York Gardens Library and Community Centre which serves one of the boroughs most deprived estates, just one mile down the road, to save tens of thousands of pounds. One hundred and fifteen people attended consultation meetings at the library and about the same demonstrated against the cuts outside the Town Hall.

Unfortunately, but possibly understandably, a users group, faced with the prospect of losing their resource, are agreeing to look at taking over the management of the library and community centre. A representative from the library users group has said, very clearly, that they do not subscribe to the government's concept of the 'Big Society' but they are prepared to do what they, as a community, have always done and club together to get the resources they need. The community may not like the label 'Big Society' but the council is already calling the project their Big Society Pilot Project, and talking of 'renewed interest in the Wandsworth library portfolio' by private sector operators.

In the meantime the Bolingbroke Academy free school will cost tax payers a further £6 million a year in subsidies from central government. Falconbrook Primary School, near York Gardens Library, will not be a feeder school for the new academy in spite of its proximity.

Wandsworth Against Cuts (WAC) objects to any cuts, especially given that the council have £105 million in undesignated reserves and one of the lowest rates of council tax in the country. WAC will continue to resist cuts and privatisation.

Call for social care change delay in West Sussex

West Sussex County Council's (WSCC) decision to cut social care for thousands of residents should be delayed, a select committee has said. The council plans to stop providing social care to adults with moderate needs (currently about 4,500 people) in order to focus on those with substantial or critical needs. It said more emphasis was being placed on preventative measures. But a select committee said the changes should be delayed until these services were commissioned and properly funded.

The proposed change would save about £2.2m in 2011-12 and about £4.3m the following year, the council said. Local charities and the public sector union, Unison, have said they have serious concerns about the impact of withdrawing support from such vulnerable people.

The Community Development world fights back

In a series of initiatives, Community development workers and activists are organising to reassert the value of community development as "the challenging, innovative and liberating process that involves and supports individuals and communities to address their needs and fulfil their aspirations."

A new Campaign for Real Community Development was launched in Reading on

March 7th. Supported by NCIA, Community Development Exchange, and the Federation for Community Development Learning, the campaign says "It is time for Community Development to both rediscover and re-assert its critical, independent stance and embody its values of equality, co-operation and social justice." More information and papers from the event from John Stevens at equal.voices@ntlworld.com (023 9235 6936).

This momentum will be accelerated by two more upcoming events. The Community Development Network London will be hosting a meeting on Monday 28 March 2011, (9.00am - 1.00pm) at Directory of Social Change, 24 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2DP. The organisers say: "These days everyone wants their own merry band of community organisers, but if you want to connect with others in the world of real community development and independent action rather than the latest corporate initiative or 'big society' nonsense, come along on the 28th. For more information and to book a place e-mail: matt@communitysectorcoalition.org.uk.

Meanwhile the following day, Tuesday, 29th March (10.30 - 3.45) Communities North West and NW Together We Can are holding a regional conference at the Gujarat Centre in Preston. Guest speaker will be Margaret Ledwith, Emeritus Professor of Community Development and Social Justice at the University of Cumbria. There will also be workshops and roundtable discussions "to share your experiences of resistance and renewal, and to think about what action we can take to secure the future for independent community action and community development in the NW. Register your interest in advance with Hilda Reidy at info@communitynw.org.uk. or further information from Alison Gilchrist at alison@alisongilchrist.co.uk.

DSC says boo to localism plans

Jay Kennedy, Head of Policy at the Directory of Social Change offers [a light-hearted sketch](#) on community empowerment and the proposed Right to Challenge in the Localism Bill, as well as a more considered analysis in [an article for the Guardian](#).

Foot stamping on debt advice services gets a result

The Department for Business Innovation & Skills and HM Treasury has bowed to pressure from Citizens Advice, AdviceUK and other national advice networks and announced a temporary reprieve for their face-to-face debt advice project. This will allow the withdrawal of redundancy notices and continuation of the scheme for a further year. Total funding worth £27 million is being made available over the next financial year. There is, however, no u-turn yet from the Government to rule most debt advice out of scope under the Legal Aid scheme.

Community Union looks for new members

The Community Union - Social & Community Care, Voluntary Sector and Housing Workers' Combined Branches is the specialist trade union organisation for all those working in Social Care agencies, voluntary organisations or Housing Associations. The union is currently organising across the Yorkshire & Humberside and Greater Manchester/Lancashire regions. The regional organiser Steve Radford would be pleased to hear from anyone working in the sector wanting to organise against cuts and to defend jobs and services. He can be contacted at 41 Belvoir Street, Hull, E Yorks HU5 3LP (01482 474131) or via at communityunion@offbeat.karoo.co.uk.

Direct action protests snap at the heels of the axemen (and women)

Around the country protesters have been demonstrating, shaming, occupying and generally unsettling councillors who have been setting cuts budgets and showing pathetically little resistance to their government marching orders.

In **Leeds**, about 50 protesters occupied the council chamber disrupting a meeting deciding the fate of local public services. Councillors in **Cambridge** had to dodge two cuts protesters' blockades to enter the budget-setting meeting. Police hovered in the wings and pounced to arrest three protesters for 'breach of the peace' after they shouted from the gallery. All three were let go as soon as the threat of them speaking their mind at a public meeting was over. Next was **Southampton** City Council's turn. After a well-attended rally outside, a group of protesters, thought to be council workers, evaded security and got into the building.

Meanwhile, councillors at **Hammersmith and Fulham** pushed ahead with their plans to evict the Afghan Council and 30 other community groups from their premises at Palingswick House, so that it can be sold to become the controversial West London Free School. There was some egg on the Council's face when it became clear that the group said to be able to help the Afghan Council with its future - the Southern Afghan Club - was in fact a dog appreciation society, probably supported by the parents who want to send their children to the free school.

In parallel with this lot, a storm of protest, that has brought unlikely alliances of reds under the bed and Tory ladies, has broken out over council plans to dump the libraries. The widespread appreciation that libraries encourage universal education and literacy, are good economically for society and can also serve as community hub, public space, creche and more, to those without access to alternatives, has brought a lot of people out on the street. February 5th saw a national day of action against the mass closures and huge numbers of people

came out in even the smallest of towns. Most of the day's actions mirrored the work of borrowers in **Stony Stafford**, back in January when the library that holds more than 16,000 books was cleared of its stock in just a few days after a Facebook campaign called for local people to go in and take their maximum allowance. Many libraries had visits from local writers and poets, including in **Gloucestershire**, where a battalion of seven 'Flying Authors' were jetting round the libraries of the county. **Sheffield** had a mass Shhh!-in at their city library attended by over 200 people. After a group exclamation of 'Shhh!' and three cheers for their library, people went and took out their allowance of 15 books each, leaving the shelves looking decidedly bare and the floor filled with people sitting down for an impromptu read-in. **Milborne Port** library in Somerset was infiltrated by a phantom 'book snatcher' who went around grabbing books from reading people's hands, replacing it with signs saying things like 'illiteracy', 'poor life chances', and 'social isolation'. People took to the streets in **Scotland** and **Cambridge**.

See <http://publiclibrariesnews.blogspot.com/> for a map of libraries under threat from council cuts and local campaign in your area.

'I love Big Society' (not) posters appear in London

Nice bit of agitprop against the BSS has been spotted in London - you can have a look here: <http://www.communitysectorcoalition.org.uk/news-events/latest-news/i-love-bs-posters-appearing-around-london>

Campaign for a Fair Society launched

Disability activists worried about government cuts to services for disabled people have started the Campaign for a Fair Society. Launched by a full page ad in The Times, the organisers say "The Campaign wants power and control to shift from government to citizens, families and communities. But we don't want the government's 'Big Society' if that means a loss of basic human rights and unfair cuts focused on the most vulnerable. We want a fair society. You can catch up with them and sign up here: www.campaignforafairsociety.com/

London Councils given a flea in their ear

London Councils plans to slash £10m from its £26.4m grants scheme have been stopped by the High Court, having been satisfied that the consultation process involved has been flawed and there was a failure to meet statutory equality duties. London Councils were ordered to re-run the consultation process with full equality impact assessments.

'Our Society' forum seems to be getting the hits

A new online forum, 'Our Society', has been set up "to connect people who are genuinely concerned to move power into communities and who help others to

improve their shared lives and environment" seems to have generated a lot of traffic in a short time. If discussion is your thing, there could be worse places to start. You can have a look and sign up here: <http://oursociety.org.uk/page/our-purpose>

Or for something more, shall we say, political....

If Our Society suffers from a surfeit of process over content, then stir your loins with a peek at NetworkX, for a dose of in-your-face, no-nonsense outright resistance - <http://networkxuk.wordpress.com/>

The Big Society Show – should we laugh or cry?

February was not a good month for the government, in its attempt to convince us that the Big Society is a serious policy initiative aimed at mending our "broken society". A small avalanche of criticism and unfortunate happenings brought rapid and unconvincing responses from ministers, including a 'relaunch' of the idea from David Cameron himself. Francis Maude was wheeled out as a heavyweight proponent of the new neighbourliness that is coming down our way, but had to admit under questioning that, no, he doesn't do any volunteer work himself. And the winsome Nick Hurd seemed to be everywhere at the same time, refuting the apparently ridiculous idea that the Big Society was, in fact, a front for massive public expenditure cuts and privatisation. Does this mean the charade is beginning to crumble? Well yes and no. Here we have a look at the shenanigans

Lest we forget (the issues, that is)

The spin and obfuscation that surrounds the Big Society Show is now so intense that within two shakes of a donkey's tale no-one knows what anyone else is talking about. So we begin with an offering from the blog 'itsmotherswork', (have a look here <http://itsmotherswork.posterous.com/>) a neatly incisive take on the government spin. What's wrong with the big society concept? Well how about this:

- 1) It fails to recognise local democratic accountability and structures
- 2) It shows no understanding of how the existing voluntary sector is funded, supported and intertwined with local government
- 3) It overlooks local government's capacity and intelligence as a commissioner, supporter and enabler of local activism
- 4) It pretends that geographical communities are homogenous with shared needs and interests whereas they are in fact fragmented into smaller groups with needs and interests in conflict
- 5) For this reason, it privileges the 'wants' and 'demands' of the already well-

resourced, aggressive, organised or time-rich over those whose need may be greater but whose capacity for activism is less

6) It enshrines a Victorian model of philanthropy which will enable those with time and money to decide which causes are 'deserving'

7) It enables a framework of public discourse in which vital public services can disappear and that's OK because "if you'd really wanted them you'd have got together and saved them"

8) It insults professionals whose jobs big society advocates don't understand by implying that they are easy and can be done by others without skills or training

9) It legitimises public sector redundancies when clearly the roles and responsibilities are not 'redundant', big society advocates just want people to work for nothing while cheerfully destabilising families and individuals who work for a living, not a hobby

10) It is accompanied by cuts which will savage the infrastructure for local voluntarism where it is effective

And for a bonus point:

*) It is rooted in a sense of (already privileged) entitlement and has no basis in social justice.

Nat Wei finds that all this volunteering doesn't pay the bills

Government Big Society favourite Baron Wei has found that the volunteering for the government has left him in debt. To get back to paying the bills, he has decided to reduce his voluntary commitment from three days a week to two. Apparently used to earning more than £100,000 a year, he is now in debt as a result of his income plummeting to virtually zero. Leaving aside that £100k would last the rest of us a year or two, Wei's predicament neatly highlights the irony that has not been lost on the rest of us - depending on volunteers to do vital things (like run public services) is inherently unstable and unpredictable; it can be given and taken away.

You can read the story here <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/lifestyle/article-23920428-how-my-top-government-job-left-me-almost-penniless-and-unable-to-support-my-family.do>

Liverpool Council shows cold shoulder

Liverpool City Council has pulled out of the Liverpool Big Society pilot. One of four 'Vanguard pilots', the Council had found itself 'volunteered' for participation as a result of manoeuvrings by Merseyside TV promoter Phil Redmond, who thought that the whole idea was fab. The plan was, according to David Cameron's launch speech last July, to get community groups running post offices, libraries, and transport services. The Council has now woken up, however, and in a letter to Cameron the leader of the Council, Joe Ashton, complains of the loss of £100m of Area Based Grants and says: "How can the city council support the

big society and its aim to help communities do more for themselves when we will have to cut the lifeline to hundreds of these vital and worthwhile groups?" You can catch the debate here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-12357450>

Elizabeth Hoodless slams cuts impact on big society

In a feisty retirement salvo, Elizabeth Hoodless, outgoing director of CSV, the UK's largest volunteering charity, said that the government cuts are in danger of "destroying" the country's volunteer army and that the prime minister has overestimated the amount of responsibility that volunteers would be prepared to take on.

In an interview on Radio 4's Today programme she said: "The cuts that are being imposed on local government and the health service are taking place now, so a lot of very worthwhile programmes.. are now under threat of closure because local authorities have to make immediate cuts. It's about one hand not appreciating what the other hand is doing, and not making the decisions in a timely fashion."

In an earlier interview with the Times, she said: " "Once you close a library, there is nowhere for a volunteer to help. Few people want to be responsible for the library."

You can cop her comments

here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/feb/07/cuts-undermining-big-society-charity-chief>

80% of councils unclear what the big society is

The suits, in the form of establishment consultants Deloitte, have been out and about asking local authorities what they think about the big society and the localism agenda. This reveals that 80% of councils reckon they have not yet made any progress. Many claim they are faced with Whitehall "intransigence" and resistance to the plans and that there is "no common understanding" across government about what the big society actually is. "Given the magnitude of localism as an initiative, there is now an urgent need to build understanding of the challenges around localism, and address systemic dislocation between central and local government," the report concludes.

PS - in a chilling managerial note that is entirely consistent with the report's authors, at one point there is a reference to "councils who manage multi-cultural communities". This is reminiscent of a comment from a spokeswoman from the Government Office for London who famously remarked at a Newham conference, "At GOL we really value the voluntary sector because it can deliver communities"

Unions warn the big society fantasy is becoming a nightmare

In a seminar ("A future for civil society") jointly hosted by NAVCA and the TUC

on the 8th February, Unison's General Secretary Dave Prentis, declared The Big Society "is a big con," The idea is being used as "a smokescreen to cut public services" and that "the voluntary sector is being devastated by the withdrawal of grants, slashing of contracts and the latest VAT increase".

Unite's Len McCluskey, joined the fray by claiming that the extent of damage equates to a 40 per cent, or £5bn public sector funding cut to the sector. "The coalition needs to urgently review the funding of the sector in the light of mass devastation of essential services to some of the most marginalised people in our society," he said, adding: "The electorate were conned into the Big Society mirage."

You can read more

here:http://www.civilsociety.co.uk/finance/news/content/8265/unions_warn_big_society_fantasy_is_becoming_a_nightmare

In an Alice-in-Wonderland twist, the union bosses failed to spot that one of the reasons that our voluntary sector 'leaders' are up in arms about the cuts is that the sector will be in a poorer position to bid for and take over privatised public services - the services that are largely run by their members. And both NAVCA and NCVO who shared the platform at this event are actively involved in supporting voluntary agencies doing just that. As our correspondent says: "I attended the TUC event last week and it was all fairly bland stuff - with NAVCA, Community Links, NCVO and others all saying that the cuts were damaging and closing down services, but saying little or nothing about the fact that voluntary organisations are actively involved in the privatisation process and the fragmentation of public services among a patchwork of unaccountable sub-contractors." Funny old world!

The government hits back

The centre piece of the government's response to the wheels coming off their big idea was Cameron's re-launch. The main speech, shirt sleeves and all, was delivered to a 'live' audience (we are assured) on the 10th February (see <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2011/02/pms-speech-on-big-society-60563>). Here Cameron asserts the principles of people taking more responsibility, devolving power to local councils and to local people, "opening up" public services and encouraging more philanthropy, charitable giving and volunteering. And he rejects the accusation that the big society is a cover for cuts.

This speech contains lots of cuddly visionary stuff, but a more explicit explanation of the plan they have for us was contained in a speech a week later, trailing the white paper on 'decentralising' public services (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/8337239/How-we-will-release-the-grip->

[of-state-control.html#disqus_thread](#)).

For here Cameron says: "...I would argue that our plans to devolve power from Whitehall, and to modernise public services, are more significant aspects of our Big Society agenda than the work we're doing to boost social action..... it is a vital part of our mission to dismantle Big Government and build the Big Society in its place..... The grip of state control will be released and power will be placed in people's hands..... We will create a new presumption that public services should be open to a range of providers competing to offer a better service.

There you have it.

Maude says it's not all about money

Francis Maude has been helping to keep the spin going. Wheeled out specifically as the big gun to see off Elizabeth Hoodless and writing in The Times newspaper, Maude said: "Building the big society is not about pouring taxpayers' money into the voluntary sector. What we are doing is supporting a new culture where everyone gets involved and society stops relying on the state to provide all the answers. I believe too much time is spent asking the taxpayer to prop up traditional organisations, rather than innovating and finding new ways to inspire people."

Many people may be forgiven for being confused as to whether the government sees the voluntary sector as a vital component in a flourishing and vibrant civil society or as carping pen-pushers trying to defend their jobs-for-life.

You can see part of what Maude says

here: <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/News/MostRead/1053626/Francis-Maude-denies-spending-cuts-undermining-big-society/> but if you want to read the rest you'll have to give the Times a £1....

Leicestershire Council lines up to take over from Liverpool

Meanwhile, one would like to see the email traffic from No 10 that resulted in Tory-led Leicestershire Council asking David Cameron to designate the council as one of the government's big society vanguard projects, thus taking Liverpool's place. The council says it has budgets worth £850,000 for communities and volunteering.

In a letter to the Prime Minister, Council leader David Parsons says the council has spent nearly £2m on a programme to "build social capital" in the county over the past five years. It says the council wants to ensure that "everyone has opportunities to influence decisions that affect them" and that local people can "shape and deliver" public services. Nice one.

And now the Public Administration Select Committee is on the case

In the middle of furore over big society aims and ideology, the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) announced an inquiry on the flagship policy. In reality this might help to save their bacon as the Chair of the inquiry, Bernard Jenkin MP, has said: "The Prime Minister's project has faced a barrage of criticism in recent weeks. We will be looking to separate the inevitable hostility to spending cuts from the positive elements of the Big Society policy." Just what the government would want, one surmises.

The inquiry will begin its deliberations by calling for evidence on "a definition of what the 'Big Society' is or should be". Clearly, this one will run and run. You can check on the rest of their interests

here: <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/public-administration/Big%20Society%20I%20and%20Q%20paper.pdf>.

Been there, done that, got the t-shirt

Freelancer Alison Gilchrist has blown a raspberry at the big society by producing a t-shirt bearing the message 'Does my society look BIG in this?' The cost is £15 including postage but discounts are available for groups buying in bulk. You can have a look (and order)

here <http://www.alisongilchrist.co.uk/8.html>

The madness continues.....

Community Revolution entrusted to 'Locality'

The issue that has, by far and away, put the national gossips in a tizzy has been the award of the £15M community organisers contract to Locality, the pseudo-business 'quango' formed by the merger of BASSAC and the Development Trust Association. Expected by all (including them) to go to the Citizens Organising Foundation (who has at least been DOING community organising), the decision has caused the sector's blogs to glow red hot.

Discussion is full of the challenges, the excitement, the contradictions and the dichotomies as the 500 'Senior' paid Community Organisers and 4,500 'Mid-level' unpaid Community Organisers will be unleashed on 'needy communities', as the BBC described it. Bold talk of Alinsky and Freire and 'wresting the programme away from the government'. Jess Steele, the programme's director had to admit to having to borrow a copy of Freire's main text from her mum (a noted activist in the homelessness field), who had a copy from the 70s, but she's clearly up to speed now.

In an embarrassing gaff, it became public that Locality had invited Ian Duncan-Smith's Centre for Social Justice to be a partner in their bid for the dosh - an offer declined by the Centre. A Locality spokeswoman said she was unable to provide details of the help that was requested but that it was linked to "learning, policy development or training". Nothing to do with contacts then.

To their credit, Locality has published the bid they made and Jess has set up a blog to tell us all how they are getting on. You can catch that and download the bid here: <http://jesssteele.wordpress.com/2011/02/27/community-organisers-programme-manager's-blog/> . If you want to see what Matt Scott at the Community Sector Coalition thinks about it all, have a click on this: <http://www.cscdirector.blogspot.com/>. Lastly a critical discussion of the equalities aspects of community organising has been produced by Sue Robson and Jayne Mills ('Does Community Organising Empower or Oppress?') You can download it here: http://api.ning.com/files/-EXDrc2eG5joYjIN5w50vmoSPdlSTI4b2tiTwUCqOPf6YU0c*h6V0pM*1uLJNLA1zz1fJ9aLUtzuX2*t4EjxYA6vLieO0Fgk/PDFCCDX63CO2.pdf

This is certainly one of the most intriguing developments of the moment and has offered up the prospect of some very weird bed fellows. Alinsky was a technician so pretty well anyone could reach for him as a mentor. Freire was a true visionary and a revolutionary. But he's dead now. At the moment Locality looks about as revolutionary as a packet of digestives. Let's hope that doesn't turn out to be the case.

This month's 'That Takes The Biscuit' award goes to Tony Burton, Dan Moxon & Richard Caulfield

This month's award is shared between the three people (all of whom ought to know) at session 12 at the 'The Big Society in the North' conference on the 15th March. The award is for 'The Big Society in the North' and it will apparently:

"... identify how to ensure volunteers successfully supply statutory services within your area."
Ambitious or what?

Westminster Council bid to outlaw charity

In a re-run of a failed 2007 policy move, Westminster Council have opened a four week consultation on a new byelaw which will fine people in the Victoria area if they "lie down or sleep in any public place", "deposit bedding" or distribute free food and drink. This byelaw will affect the 1,600 people it is estimated sleep rough in Westminster each year, many of whom bed down in the Victoria area. Voluntary groups hand out food in the Victoria area; these groups

will be facing the possibility of being fined for their charity if the ban goes ahead.

There is something fundamentally evil about the idea that giving food to a hungry person should be against the law. Alison Gelder, Director of Housing Justice, said in a statement: "While we completely understand the problems experienced by residents in this area, this byelaw, which is an attack on civil and religious freedoms, is a completely over the top response. It also cuts across the successful work that Housing Justice and others are doing to reduce both rough sleeping and the need for food distribution on the streets." The consultation period runs until the 25th of March.

More information from Ellie Schling (Soup Run Support Worker) - 0781 859 6772 e.schling@housingjustice.org.uk

Stoke CVS starts 'taking a cut'

Stoke-on-Trent's council for voluntary service has begun charging charities a proportion of the grants and contracts they win with its support. The CVS, called VAST is one of the new breed of local support agencies ("Our key aim is to advance and promote the professional development of the Voluntary and Community Sectors (VCS) now known as Big Society. From our dedicated Board of Trustees to our front line team, we have the skills and experience to help VCO's compete and prosper in the 21st Century marketplace")

Voluntary groups are now charged between two and 10 per cent of the administration budget that is allocated to them under grants and contracts from local authorities and grant-making trusts if a bid is successful.

Public law support on the skids

Funding for the programme that gives free training and advocacy to charities on public law is due to end in November, despite a 50% increase in demand for its services over the previous year. The [Empowering the Voluntary Sector](#) initiative helps organisations challenge decisions by public bodies, such as spending cuts made without consultation. It is a joint scheme between NCVO, the Compact Advocacy programme, NAVCA and the Public Law Project. Alternative funding is being sought.

Housing associations "perfect examples of grassroots organisations"

In a stunning giveaway statement of ignorance, Decentralisation Minister Greg Clark has said that housing associations will have an increasingly prominent role in helping local people to take control of their neighbourhoods. In a speech to the National Housing Federation, Greg said that: "associations were a perfect

example of the type of grass roots organisations who show that the principles of local control can take root in deprived areas as well as well-heeled ones." He went on to say: "The Housing Association movement shows that with the right help, every community can be empowered to express itself and help shape their areas."

He doesn't seem to have caught up with the mergers, takeovers, and corporatisation that has allowed housing associations to become massive private sector look-alikes, paying their chief executives 6 figure salaries. Or maybe this is what he thinks 'grassroots' and 'local control' really means?

Council-owned assets to be snapped up.... by the private sector

The much vaunted right-to-buy community assets is likely to be an empty promise for most community groups, according to umbrella body Community Matters. About 5,000 council-owned buildings used by voluntary and community groups are likely to be sold between May and December this year - before charities and voluntary organisations gain the legal right to bid for them.

A Community Matters spokeswoman said provisions in the Localism Bill, which would give charities and community groups the right to bid for these assets, are unlikely to come into force in this time and the figure was "very worrying".

Big Society banking reform

The Big Society Bank will help banks understand social enterprise, David Cameron, has told charities and social enterprises. In a speech to voluntary sector figures and journalists, Cameron said: "Banks don't necessarily understand social enterprises. The Big Society Bank should mean more money, more lending and hopefully a better price." Don't hold your breath.....

Our fracturing society: Clobberings, cuts, and closures

Cut the voluntary sector... don't cut the voluntary sector.... Blah, blah

Either our stout Minister for Communities has experienced a dramatic conversion or our sector leaders have fallen for the old tosh yet again. For Eric Pickles announced to the NCVO annual conference on the 1st March that 'he expects local authorities to behave reasonably in the way they manage their relationship with voluntary and community groups.' By which he meant they should not pass on disproportionate cuts to local and voluntary groups ('bigger reductions to budgets than they take on themselves'); they should talk to

voluntary and community groups at a very early stage about how services need to change; and they should give at least three months notice about the need to end or alter a grant or other support. He also gave a commitment to consider giving statutory force to these expectations should local authorities fail to meet them. Pickles speech can be read [here](#).

And pigs might fly. The *Guardian* revealed last month that Pickles had already blocked such suggestions when they came from a No10 adviser, other Cabinet ministers and Baron Wei, offering instead to hold one-to-one conversations with the worst-offending councils that were "gung-ho" about the cuts (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/feb/07/big-society-volunteering-eric-pickles?INTCMP=SRCH>). Perhaps more significantly, cuts to local authority budgets have been frontloaded to the year 2011/12, which begins when? The die is already cast and it's too late for Eric Pickles crocodile tears.

In a typically underwhelming statement, Stuart Etherington, noted that the announcement was 'a warning shot across the bow of local government not to make disproportionate cuts to the vital services that the voluntary and community sector provides'. Local council leaders must be terrified.

Meanwhile, Nick Hurd told the 'Big Society in Practice' conference that it would be irresponsible to argue that voluntary groups should be immune from public spending cuts. Hurd said he was concerned about the effects that cuts would have on the voluntary sector, but the budget deficit had to be reduced. And David Cameron in another speech (they certainly have been out and about) accepted that local authority spending cuts would be difficult for the voluntary sector. "Not all local authorities will make good decisions," he said. "Some charities will get cut."

However, he suggested charities could offset the effects of this by bidding for more service delivery contracts. "Instead of getting a drip-feed of public money they can run services that operate on a payment-by-results model," he said.

So what do you think dear reader? Is it that the government just don't get it and are a bit all over the place? Or is it that they know exactly what they are doing and are playing us for fools?

NAVCA comes off the fence on cuts

NAVCA has estimated that 26,000 staff at local charities will lose their jobs this year.

The local infrastructure organisation has demanded that local and national government intervene by ring-fencing funding and taking action against councils that make drastic cuts to voluntary sector budgets.

Kevin Curley, chief executive, said: "Many local authorities claim that they have no choice but to slash funding for local charities and community groups. But we know there is a choice because Reading Council has increased funding to the voluntary and community sector by £200,000 to more than £7m."

This position is set out in some detail in NAVCA's submission to the Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into voluntary sector funding, worth a read. You can get it here:

<http://www.navca.org.uk/news/pascinquiry.htm>

Consolidated cuts website launched

25 national and regional infrastructure bodies have now come together to present a consolidated portal to log voluntary and community sector cuts. You can access the site here: <http://voluntarysectorcuts.org.uk/> and enter your own information onto the database. So far the site contains details of 371 cuts to a value of £58.5M.

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.