

National Coalition for Independent Action

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

Newsletter No: 3

August 2007

Welcome to the 3rd newsletter of the National Coalition for Independent Action. Once again, it's long and packed with information, in fact this is a mammoth one.

You'll see that we've been busy mobilising, working on the ground, finding ways to support activists. This appears to be in contrast to most of the other activity reported in this newsletter. There is certainly a lot of chattering going on. Most of it (though not all) is mind-numbing, tedious, and technocratic – both from Government *and* from the sector. And what is overwhelming about most of this stuff is the sheer lack of passion, let alone anger. Those looking for urgent, impassioned discussion on issues like power (rather than empowerment), collective action (rather than capacity building), political difference (rather than consensus), material benefits for local communities (rather than consultant reports) and the distribution of wealth (rather than justifications of the status quo) will be disappointed.

And now we have a new Prime Minister, everybody is looking upwards with more vigour – Gordon's more radical, more old-Labour, Gordon just loves campaigners..... so everything's alright now then? We think not. The world is what you make it. You don't need Gordon Brown's permission, or even encouragement, to think what you like and do it when you can.

But, take heart, we've examples of independent action by individuals, by organisations and through collective action, with a brave few voluntary groups speaking out. We want to see less research, less reports, less plans from on high, and more grassroots action.

Please pass this newsletter on to others you think will be interested and get them to sign up themselves. You can see previous Newsletters, and learn more about us by visiting our website - www.independentaction.net

What's the Coalition up to?

'Action Group' meeting

The Action Group brings together the people and organisations most closely committed to and active within the Coalition. It provides a reference point for our work, and for priorities and direction. A meeting of the Action Group took place on the 24th July to review where we have got to and agree where our energies should be focussed.

We talked about our hot topics: strategies to resist State control and to expose the co-option of our work; the situation for those providing services and for those involved in democratic participation and action; the impact of Local Area Agreements on our own agendas, especially

on black and minority ethnic interests; the theft of community-owned property by local authorities. A plea was made to protect especially the independence of middle sized local voluntary agencies, still resisting the corporate tide, as well as supporting small community groups. We agreed the importance of collective action as a way to expose, challenge, upset and unsettle attempts to divert us from our own intentions; to give support to activists who work for social justice; and to challenge bodies that say they represent us to do the same. If you want to be part of the Coalition Action Group, email us on indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

First 'independence audit' gets going

Work in London, with the Hackney Advice Forum, is now underway to find out how VCS groups in this local area feel about the freedom and opportunities they have to decide their own priorities, work in ways that suit their constituencies and communities and how well they are represented at the interface with the statutory sector. The local sector currently faces the threat of Council vandalism through its commissioning agenda. Focussing on the wide range of groups involved in independent advice work, the results will be used to sharpen the Forum's agenda to defend and develop independent advice and build a power base from which to pursue this.

This work will not only provide useful material for work in Hackney but will also provide lessons for using this approach in other areas. More information from Andy Benson at info@penandy.co.uk .

Northern organising

Given the rather London-centric nature of the Coalition so far, it is welcome news that activists in the North are beginning to organise. We hope this will provide opportunities for networking and action within the region. The next meeting of the Action Group in October will also take place in Sheffield. If you'd like to get involved or want more information, please get in touch with Sue Robson at sue@suerobson.co.uk or Ruth Townsley at ruthtownsley@btinternet.com .

Looking for solidarity and fresh inspiration? Want to talk about YOUR agenda with other community activists? FREE action learning opportunity!

The Coalition is setting up a pilot learning group for community activists and others with leadership roles working to resist government co-option of voluntary and community action. The group will follow an Action Learning model. For a full description of how AL works, see: <http://www.actionlearningsets.com/php/news.php?id=4>

The group (or 'set') will have a membership of 4-6 participants, plus a facilitator. Starting in Autumn 2007, the set will meet monthly over an extended period to develop thinking and support action on issues of concern to participants and the Coalition. Particular issues for discussion will be determined by the priorities participants themselves bring to each session. Full attendance is essential for maximum mutual benefit, and participation will be **FREE**.

This pilot will meet in central London. However, we are able and keen to offer a second set outside London in a location as convenient as possible to participants. Please tell us if you're interested, wherever you live and work.

The facilitator will be Jan McHugh, who has worked as a management and organisational learning specialist in the VCS for 30 years. She is keen to support efforts to develop critical thinking

and action in challenging contexts. If you are interested in joining a set -- or have further queries -- please contact Jan as soon as possible at: jan@proself.demon.co.uk or on 07989 432322.

Training developments – new course planned

Roehampton University's Centre for Human Rights, Social Justice and Citizenship Education – CRUCIBLE – has agreed to help the Coalition develop a new course to help people working in the sector understand and protect the roots of its independence. Provisionally entitled *The role and place of an independent Voluntary and Community Sector in the early 21st century* the course will initially be developed as a module on the University's MSc in Voluntary Action Management. Thereafter it can be widely disseminated throughout the University and beyond. Course development will include the identification of case studies as part of a range of teaching and learning material. More information from Colin Rochester at Cirochester@macace.net .

Money & practical help

We've got some!! Thanks to an anonymous funder, we now have £2,500.87 to spend (not sure how the 87p got in there, but we won't turn it away). This news gave us a boost in itself as a statement of support and, in practical terms, will pay for further website development and work to consolidate and extend the Coalition's national presence. And if you can give any time to Coalition work, email Penny on indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

Independent Action – who's busy?

Advisory Group on Campaigning and the Voluntary Sector

Here is evidence that individuals **DO** make a difference! Coalition supporter Ian Leggett from People and Planet drove this initiative until he found enough supporters to make it lift off. This resulted in an independent enquiry chaired by Helena Kennedy which examined the legal restrictions on campaigning both in respect of charity law, the criminal law and the ban on 'political advertising'. The report calls for radical change in the legislation "...to foster ... an engaged citizenry through campaigning and political action". Well said and well done Ian!! You can read the report at www.bateswells.co.uk/Files/News/CampaigningReport.doc and an interview with Helena Kennedy at: <http://society.guardian.co.uk/voluntary/story/0,,2085490,00.html>

The report has been welcomed by Gordon Brown, which, of course, could mean the kiss of death....

Power to the Voluntary Sector - training and advice in public law

This project is a joint undertaking between NAVCA and the Public Law Project (PLP), funded by the Big Lottery Fund. It aims to provide support to the sector on issues that arise as a result of poor, and sometimes unlawful, decision-making by public bodies, particularly in relation to funding. To date the project has trained around 300 people and saved organisations over £250,000 in funding that would have otherwise been lost.

'Public law' describes the set of legal rules that ensure public bodies discharge their legal duties and do not abuse or exceed their powers when they are carrying out their public functions, such

as funding the VCS. Public law wrongs can be challenged in a variety of ways from complaints through to judicial review.

The project provides three strands of support to all VCS organisations in England that deal with public bodies:

- **Training:** a programme of low cost workshops that aim to help organisations identify these problems and to use public law to negotiate more effectively
- **Advice:** an advice line providing free, specialist legal advice to voluntary and community organisations in dispute with public bodies
- **Newsletters and web-based resources:** quarterly newsletters are available via our websites; these include case studies and updates on training events. Both the websites have further resources and listings for the workshops. www.navca.org.uk or www.publiclawproject.org.uk .

For more information contact Terry Perkins at NAVCA on 0114 289 3972 or email terry.perkins@navca.org.uk

CVS's under the spotlight

Councils of Voluntary Services (CVS) are in the news as they get caught up in the long march towards choice, efficiency and fitness-for-purpose. In Solihull, the CVS has decided to close rather than be forced to bid competitively for its grant. The VCS said that the successful bidder would become a sub-division of the local authority rather than an independent facilitator of support to the VCS in the area. NAVCA boss Kevin Curley waded in on this one, and was quoted as saying that the tender document was a good specification and wouldn't undermine the organisation's independence. You can read the story at:

<http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/News/DailyBulletin/672104/CVS-close-rather-accept-council-contract/B0A3E40E9CACA2C013153742C93C3462/> .

Meanwhile, 'merger-itis' seems to have arrived in force. 'Political realities' has forced a merger of 5 CVS's in Cumbria; Scarborough and Whitney second tier agencies have merged to save money; in Kent, Sevenoaks Volunteer Development Agency and West Kent CVS have agreed to join up in principle; five CVS's and a volunteer centre in Warwickshire have a plan to merge. Much of this activity has fallen out of the ChangeUp programme, which provided government money for infrastructure development. Whilst good things have come out of this programme it also greatly increased the influence of the regional Government Offices over the profile and development of second tier support services. This influence has now been transferred to Capacity Builders. A recent NAVCA review of local second tier agencies concluded that there was considerable anxiety about the future for local VCS infrastructure, and that 'rationalisation' was seen as a spectre, a future threat or problem, rather than an opportunity. You can read the full report at:

<http://www.navca.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/10FD1287-5DA2-420A-915F-F223EA71F7B3/0/belvi.pdf>

Row brews over Commission on Integration and Cohesion

'Tasked', as we now say, by Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly to find ways of overcoming barriers to 'cohesion and integration', this Commission has just published its final report *Our Shared Future*. Amongst the recommendations is one that 'single group funding' (i.e. groups that are only concerned with one particular community) should no longer be promoted.

This has brought a sharp response from those working in and with BME communities, including a reported call for boycott of the proposal from voice4change, supported by the 1990 Trust. You can read the Commission's report here:

http://www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk/news/Building_united_and_resilient_communities_-_developing_shared_futures.aspx

Audit of democratic practice in Scotland

The first meeting of this new group, which focuses on democratic revival, took place on 25th July in Edinburgh. Mae Shaw, a member of the group writes "We have just published a special issue of Concept, the Scottish journal for the field of community education in Scotland (and beyond) on Learning for Democracy. This is to increase the profile of this initiative. A group of us are in the middle of drafting propositions and proposals which will form the basis of an alternative way of thinking about community-based education work, for building support to challenge the current regime. A small group is also working on developing a research project which is still fairly embryonic. We will be holding a more open meeting in Glasgow in October."

Contact Jim Crowther at jim.crowther@ed.ac.uk for more information. Mae also has a good article in CDX's June news bulletin. You can get a copy from admin@cdx.org.uk or indeed from Mae herself - mae.shaw@ed.ac.uk

"Nothing about us without us is for us"

On the 1st August, the Lewisham Community Network hosted a visit by the 60's Civil Rights Activist Curtis Muhammad, from New Orleans, USA. This was billed as a 'community development action learning experience' and according to our correspondent was "amazing". We'll include a report in our next newsletter.

Small Charities Coalition

The Small Charities Coalition (SCC) was due to have two inaugural meetings on the 23rd and 24th July. The Coalition is a new body set up and run by small charities to help provide stability and growth, to tackle head-on the gap between large and small charities, and to get government, businesses and organisations to sit up and take notice. You can find out what happened by e-mail to: admin@malecancer.net.

Sustainable Communities Bill passes through Commons

Since our last newsletter, the Sustainable Communities Bill has successfully passed through the House of Commons. It needs to go through the Lords before becoming Law. This legislation will attempt to wrest some control from central government and place it back in local communities where it belongs. The government will be under a new duty to 'reverse community decline' but before it draws up a policy to do this it will be required to consult Local Authorities. The Local Authorities, in turn, will be required to consult local communities, and give priority to 'community ideas'. Then the government will be required to act on the advice it has received from local level. More information from the Unlock Democracy website: <http://www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2007/01/final-final-copy.pdf>

Including Direct Action.....

Heathrow protests

As we go to press the issue of BAA's injunction application is in the High Court. The injunction, if granted, would ban some 5 million people who are members of various environmental groups (including the RSPB, the National Trust, Greenpeace and the Woodland Trust) from using platforms 6 and 7 of Paddington station, all trains travelling to Heathrow, the Piccadilly line, the M4 motorway and all service stations between junctions 3-6 and 13-15. At the hearing on the 1st August the judge revealed that she is a member of three of these organisations. BAA backtracked on their original application and said that they were only actually asking for an injunction on 4 named individuals, prominent within airport resistor groups. The Camp for Climate Action said the protest would go ahead (14th-21st August) whether or not BAA won its injunction.

You can get updates on this and other similar actions by signing up to the Freedom to Protest network – e-mail ftp@freedomtoprotest.org.uk

Tent City protest

London Citizens organised a 'tent city' occupation of ground close to Ken Livingstone's GLA building on the 30th/31st July to protest about the Mayor's failure to honour a promise to build 2000 affordable homes as part of the so-called Olympics legacy, using the device of Community Land Trusts. A last minute concession was wrested from officers that they would pilot a scheme involving just 100 homes by 2011. Curiously London Citizens view of this was that "Tent City, one of the most creative and ambitious CITIZENS actions, paid off in a big way"!! Hmm.....More information from info@londoncitizens.org.uk

Parliament Square protestors continue to be harrassed

Part of the New Labour spin-inspired 'Brown bounce' is a rumour that our new leader has lifted the restrictions on demonstrating near Parliament. This rumour is flatly contradicted by those involved, who describe the change of leadership rather eloquently as "same shit, different asshole". Evidence of continued Police harassment of protestors emerged after a Court hearing a couple of weeks ago at which the accused – Barbara Tucker – and three others were arrested outside the Court for carrying on an unauthorised protest and obstructing the Police. Seems to be business as usual, Mr Brown.

But the protestors saw Brown into office with a peace camp in Parliament Square between the 23rd and 28th June. More information from www.warisstilltheissue.org.

Meanwhile, the parliamentary Police seem very jumpy about MPs being allowed to see that one of their visitors was wearing a T-shirt urging an end to Israeli occupation. The Independent reported on the 7th July that a teacher, Peter Reilly, was told that he had to cover up his T-shirt or be denied entry to the building and he was forced to give Police his name and address.

London Coalition Against Poverty get busy

As we reported in our last issue LCAP is a new group 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. Their first action, during July, has been at Hackney Homeless Persons Unit where they have been offering applicants information on their rights and advice about the tactics used by the Council to avoid taking responsibility. More information from londoncoalitionagainstopoverty@lists.riseup.net

Latest from Smash EDO

Meanwhile another of our favourite we-won't-take-no-for-an-answer groups reports a further victory over EDO-MBM, the Brighton-based arms manufacturer. Two protestors from Smash EDO were acquitted of aggravated trespass after a factory roof-top protest over the Israeli attacks on Lebanon. There have now been over 30 failed prosecutions of Smash EDO members. As one of the protestors, Michael Heyman, said 'the court's decision today proves that peaceful protest is not a crime, Sussex Police's attempts to stifle protest have failed yet again.' You can congratulate Smash EDO by e-mailing them at smashedo@hotmail.com or visiting their website www.smashedo.org.uk

Sleep-out in Glasgow to protest treatment of asylum seekers

Our friends in Glasgow – Positive Action in Housing – are also keeping on keeping on. Over 100 people took part in a sleep-out in the middle of Glasgow in June, as a contribution to the *Still Human Still Here* campaign to end destitution of refused asylum seekers (see www.stillhuman.org.uk). And PAIH continue their protests and direct action against the forced removal of asylum seekers and dawn raids. More information from jamie@paih.org , who will also sign you up their regular newsletter QUICKMAIL.

Upcoming Events

NAVCA annual conference 2007 - Breaking the exclusion cycle: can the voluntary and community sector help build a more equal society? 11-12 September 2007 Keele University, Staffordshire. See: www.navca.org.uk/events/conference2007.htm

Poverty and Homelessness Action Week 2008: Opening Doors, Opening Hearts 27 January to 3 February 2008 – church-based initiative in which organisers are aiming for at least 100 events throughout the UK to reflect and act on homelessness and poverty. See: www.homelessness-sunday.org.uk

Writings, musings and resources

Well, here you go – 8 pages worth of reports! It seems that everybody and their dog is writing about the future of the sector and many of them are focussing on independence v enslavement. The chilling picture of what Government has in store for us, we've put at the end – where it deserves to be ([follow this link](#)). If the Coalition's progress could be measured by the weight of these reports we would be doing very well indeed. Hope you make it through to the end.

Are we independent or aren't we? Does it matter?

The interplay between State, Private Sector & Voluntary Activity: A Vision for the Future (Directory of Social Change)

A review by DSC of the changing nature of the relationship between State, private and voluntary sectors. Issues highlighted are that: 2% of the sector has the majority influence but government policy is directed towards this minority of organisations; most of the sector needs access to grants and not contracts; and that the future of the sector is not for the government to determine. The report calls for greater clarity about the ins-and-outs of sector involvement in public service delivery; finding out what the sector needs by way of State support and support from elsewhere; clearer distinctions between grants and contracts, more equitable contracts terms and liberalisation of grant conditions. We couldn't find the report on the DSC website (www.dsc.org.uk) so e-mail them if you want a copy at enquiries@dsc.org.uk

Stronger independence, stronger relationships, better outcomes (NCVO)

NCVO is on the case as well, using a meeting on the 4th July to launch a report of the results of a survey into sector independence. The survey reveals some interesting figures, despite an irritatingly new-Labour turn of phrase ("At a time of increasing pressure on public services and budgets, it is especially important that independence fuels voluntary and community activity to deliver better outcomes. Independence can fuel public service transformation too" ...) and a focus on independence that is technocratic:

- 59% of respondents said local public bodies are not demonstrating they understand independence
- 46% say groups find it a struggle to represent their users and be heard
- 69% say funded groups fear campaigning will affect their future funding.

At the launch event we were treated to the most patronising succession of presentations we have endured for many a year (when you're in a partnership it's called 'negotiation', but outside of the partnership you can call it 'campaigning' ...). You can get the report at www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/uploadedFiles/NCVO/What_we_do/Compact_Advocacy/Compact%20Voice%20Report%2004July07%20PDF.pdf

The Value and Independence of the Voluntary Sector (Barrow Cadbury Trust)

Now here's an interesting one. Six of the large foundations have been wondering whether independence of the VCS is something they ought to be worrying about. So they asked Barry Knight and Sue Robson of CENTRIS to do a bit of research for them. The headline result was that the VCS does not see itself in danger of government takeover, even though many of the groups in (their) sample accept government money. However at a meeting of the great and good at the Institute of Directors on July (yes, your Coalition rep managed to swing a fifth columnist invite!) 11 of the 14 groups in the case studies were present and the drum that most of them banged was – we have serious difficulty in getting listened to, getting the money for the things we want to do and finding the time to look downwards to our constituencies because of all the time we spent reporting to funders. You'll have to sort out the real story for yourself by reading the report which is at

www.bctrust.org.uk/reports/Value-Indep-Voluntary-Sector.pdf .

Are we as good at what we do as they say we are?

Voluntary sector 'not always best at public service delivery'

Consumers don't always find that charities are the best providers of public services, according to research published today by the National Consumer Council. Although employment services were rated by survey respondents as 'personalised and responsive', in other areas of provision such as social housing and domiciliary care 'third sector delivery is not particularly distinctive'. So why is the world being turned upside down? Have a look at:

www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC162pd_delivering_public_services.pdf

Leadership – a key concept in our sector's development (apparently)

Leadership in Communities – An Empowering Approach (BASSAC)

Useful short publication (despite the title – 'empowerment' together with 'partnership' are words that stick in our craw here in the Coalition) based on themes from a conference held in February of this year. The paper looks at why community leadership is needed, the barriers to it, what 'empowering leadership' is and the impact it can make and the key messages that need to go to government, statutory and the public sector. Report can be downloaded from

www.bassac.org.uk or if you want to strike up a conversation about it e-mail David Atkinson at davida@bassac.org.uk

Skilling Up for LSPs (NAVCA)

Another one on leadership skills this time from NAVCA and looking at the skills needed for 'effective strategic representation'. Sorry NAVCA, but this occupational standards-type approach just doesn't cut the mustard. Conjured up here is an army of VCS 'leadership cadets' being put through an NVQ-inspired course (accredited naturally!) where they can work through a 'matrix', have their 'capacity built' to make them 'fit for purpose', so they can be 'called to the LSP table'.... to be told that their funding has been cut and they've all got to compete with each other.... Anyway, no doubt those of you in the learning and skills brigade will want to have a look:

www.navca.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/27C3CCCB-307F-4FFA-9A29-F37948EE6618/0/SkillingupforLSPsFORWEBSITE.pdf

The Future of Commissioning lies in leadership (ACEVO + Futurebuilders)

The sector's ability to thrive as a public service provider will depend on the quality of leadership in the public and third sectors, not just policy interventions from above, according to "The Future of Commissioning: Leadership Challenges," a new research report launched this week by acevo and Futurebuilders. https://www.acevo.org.uk/UserFiles/File/The_Future_of_Commissioning_-_Leadership_Challenges.pdf. Haven't got a copy of this yet but imagine that it will have more of a private sector slant than BASSAC's offering.....

Campaigning and getting us citizens moving

'Contentious Citizens:

civil society's role in campaigning for social change' (Young Foundation)

New report from the Young Foundation which looks at 'civil society's role in campaigning for social change'. The discussion paper examines the history of campaigning, its role and future in the 21st century. This is definitely holiday reading (even the summary is 28 pages long!). Full report and summary both available at www.youngfoundation.org/node/475.

Commission on the Future of Volunteering wanted to hear about 'voice'

The Commission on the Future of Volunteering (just how many of these commissions are there?) has been collecting views from the sector but realised late in the process that they hadn't heard from people in the human rights and social justice bit of the sector. So a meeting was held on the 4th July called 'Voice volunteering: campaigning and active citizenship'. Interestingly very few campaigners were there (with the notable exception of Coalition representatives), indeed there seemed to be hardly any volunteers either. Leaving aside our comments on the use of the latest fad word 'voice', the upshot of this event was a highly confusing discussion about all manner of things related to the sector, the government, volunteering etc. etc. We have no idea whether the Commission was able to make any sense out of this but maybe it doesn't matter anyway.

The consultation period has now ended but if you want to see what they are up to the Commission's website is at www.volcomm.org.uk. Last time I looked, the latest news was that Baroness Neuberger has been appointed as the 'government's volunteering champion' and another of their number had got an OBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours. Now that's fantastic isn't it?

Learning Power (Scarman Trust)

The Scarman Trust has published a report called Learning Power which makes the case for teaching active citizenship and practical politics to strengthen community voice (there we go again with that word!) and end social exclusion. Copies of the full report and/or summary can be got from adebola.boboye@thescarmantrust.org

Citizen's Convention campaign launched (Unlock Democracy)

They who brought us the Sustainable Communities Bill are now calling for a 'Citizen's Convention - a constitutional convention in order to involve people from all sections of society in improving the way the United Kingdom is governed'. More information from <http://unlockdemocracy.org.uk/>

London Civic Forum launch 'The Big Opportunity'

The Big Opportunity, a coalition of 15 third sector organisations led by London Civic Forum (LCF), will scrutinise the work of the Olympic delivery agencies, ensuring that they deliver the benefits promised to Londoners. The Big Opportunity is offering the thousands of charities and social enterprises across London 'a space at the 2012 table'. According to their press release the Big Opportunity has everyone's support – the VCS, government ministers, the private sector, Ken Livingstone, the Olympic Delivery Agency. So it looks like protecting Londoner's interests is going to be a doddle...You can find out more from miriam@londoncivicforum.org.uk

Grants, Commissions, contracts.....

Don't ditch grants, says charity coalition

Ten second tier agencies have formed a coalition calling for the protection of local authority grants for the voluntary sector, seen as 'an essential part of the local funding mix for community organisations and remains essential for thriving local communities'. Here it is:

www.navca.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/C313D3B3-0315-417E-AD82-4DA7934B055E/0/SustainingGrantsWeb.pdf

Threat to vital children's services (NAVCA)

Children's services provided by local voluntary and community sector organisations are being cut - preventative services are the hardest hit. Vital VCS services are being taken in house by local public bodies and current commissioning practice is discouraging voluntary and community organisations from applying. These are some of the key findings drawn from a NAVCA survey called *Frontline Hopscotch*. Here it is:

www.navca.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/525CA686-FAAA-4EC6-A79F-D6C33C8FC86F/0/frontlinehopscotch.pdf

Why grants are important for a healthy local VCS (NAVCA)

NAVCA study of local authority policy towards the VCS in four areas. In its conclusion, NAVCA calls on the Government to make clear to local authorities that they should continue to provide grant funding to local voluntary and community groups. Here it is:

www.navca.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/CB516891-615E-4670-918B-9608AB5CF2B7/0/Whygrantsareimportant.pdf

London Councils to decide who represents VCS

Another interesting little quirk of the aggressive commissioning approach being taken by London Councils – there have been various tenders out for 'policy and voice' for different parts of London's VCS – disability, independent advice and the womens' sector for example. Consider this – London Councils decides that the sector needs representation so it draws up a specification, decides how much money to put into it, invites competitive bids (with a rule that you are not allowed to talk to competitors), and then decides who is best 'fit for purpose' for the job. That agency then gets the money and - bob's your uncle – the sector is represented!! Isn't there a bit of a flaw here? And where does the bidder's mandate come from? Certainly for the advice sector no-one came to our local area to ask us if we wanted them to represent us... Have a look at what London Councils are up to: www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/doc.asp?doc=20502&cat=937

What do the unions think?

Third sector provision of local government and health services (Unison)

Unison publishes a report on transfers of local authority and health services to the VCS. This follows a report last year on transfers of employment services to the VCS written for the Public and Commercial Services Union (see www.pcs.org.uk/Shared_ASP_Files/UploadedFiles/5C8650AB-E285-40DB-8F40-D3753C93CBDB_ThirdSectorreportFINALr.doc). The current excellent report reaches strong conclusions about the dangers to the quality of public services through transfer, misses a trick to use the VCS expertise to improve public services rather than transfer them, and the threats the independence of the sector. I think we will be heading for Unison and the report's

author to explore 'synergies' (we are sooooo modern here). Definitely have a look at this one: www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/B3257.pdf

UNISON briefing for local Councillors

Unison's response to the Local Government White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities", alongside the Health White Paper "Our Health, Our Care, Our Say." The union is especially concerned about the centralisation of power within local authorities and the 'marketisation' of services. Have a look at this at <http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/B3363.pdf>

Government bombardment continues – keep hitting us with reports, roll-outs and consultation exercises 'til we squeal for mercy

Third Sector Review – Final Report published from Office of the Third Sector

Those with their heads straining backwards to catch the latest plans for us from our very own government department, will be delighted that the Office of the Third Sector's final review report has now been published. Another tome that few frontline workers will, I suspect, have time to read (102 pages). My own attempts to get into it were overcome with cynicism when I came upon the protestation (page 9) that "it is not the government's role to define the purposes of individual organisations or set a vision for the sector as a whole. This comes from the sector itself." However, the usual suspects in the sector have warmly welcomed the report e.g. NVCO says "We believe this demonstrates a significant shift in the Government's approach to the voluntary and community sector and shows a deeper understanding of the sector in the context of wider civil society". We'll see. And you can see the report at:

http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/third_sector_review/final_report/index.asp

Incidentally, those of you who have been around the voluntary sector as long as we have will remember Phil Hope, the new Minister of the Third Sector, as a freelancer working with Framework. If you have a look at his mugshot on the OTS website he now looks every inch a government minister www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about_the_cabinet_office/phil_hope.asp. Well Phil - is the real you still there?

Access to Finance for the Third Sector

Another report that makes you lose the will to live, again from the Office of the Third Sector. This one sought to understand 'the current and future demand for external finance to support the establishment and development of third sector organisations'. Loads of focus groups, etc. Only thing I took from it, amongst the yawning, was confirmation of 'mission drift' amongst VCS agencies working to public sector contracts. Masochists can find the report at

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/documents/finance/finance_access_report.pdf

Third Sector Strategy for Communities and Local Government

And having made your way through the OTS stuff - if you still have stamina - Ruth Kelly's lot want to hear from you as well. The Department for Communities and Local Government has opened a consultation period on its future departmental strategy towards the sector. Interesting picture of people digging holes in the ground on the front cover (captions on a postcard please) which I

have to say is as far as I've got with this one so far. You can get it at www.communities.gov.uk/pub/152/ThirdSectorStrategy_id1511152.pdf

If you really want to be a friend to the Department, then you can also apply to be a '**strategic partner**' – organisations will now be able to bid for this privilege if you are "an organisation that pursues objectives that are in line with the priorities of the Department and operate at a national level in supporting local action". Have a look at the brief at www.communities.gov.uk/pub/148/ThirdSectorStrategicPartnerScheme_id1511148.pdf

Hearts and Minds: Commissioning from the Voluntary Sector (Audit Commission)

This one looks at the extent and nature of VCS delivery of public services; how government efforts to build capacity are seen; and the current state of procurement and commissioning practice. No, we haven't read this one either yet (well it only came out 2 days ago!) but it looks like it's packed out with brilliant new ideas about 'intelligent commissioning'. Another 76 pages but if you're game you can find it at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/Products/NATIONAL-REPORT/418C38AF-0D97-49dd-95D6-EE7E7BA43773/WorkingeffectivelyvoluntarysectorfinalproofREP.pdf

Councils and charities should get on better, says report (National Audit Office)

Local Area Agreements have been a missed opportunity to strengthen relationships between the voluntary sector and local government and increase public service delivery by the sector, according to a report today by the National Audit Office. Surprise, surprise. This can be found at: http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/06-07/NAO_Local_Area_Agreements.pdf

Review of full cost recovery (National Audit Office)

Another report from the NAO concludes that, despite being high on the policy agenda since 2002, a significant proportion of VCS agencies are still not getting full cost recovery although the target date for implementation has passed. Few departments had made significant practical changes to funding practice in response to this target. However, VCS agencies will be delighted to hear that these same departments "felt that the spirit of the target had been met" (are they quite mad?). This one must be worth a laugh: http://www.nao.org.uk/pn/06-07/full_cost_recovery_pn.htm

Partnership Improvement Programme rolls out to regions

The Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA's) Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP) is being rolled out to three regions this year, starting in the northeast on 13 June. It will move on to London and the northwest later in the year. All at a cost of £215,000. This project which was based on what was described as a 'successful' pilot last year is actually rather smelly. The pilot was run by the Institute of Voluntary Action Research and, as a result, a glossy report was published (www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/5145569) that included lots of positive quotes about the success of the programme. Our Coalition spies, however, attended a private meeting at which the researchers admitted that the partnerships they studied were a mess, were riven with conflict and made little progress in effective joint working. But hey! who cares – let's roll it out anyway. The spin is to be found at: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageld=6566351>

Endnote.....

A new way to manage

Interesting speech by maverick Tim Smit, founder of the Eden Project, on the theme of social enterprise – in which he talks about bureaucracy, sector-ism and management style. Not everyone's cup of tea but worth a look: <http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/Page.aspx?SP=2059>

Guardian articles of note

Kevin Curley's moan

Interview with the NAVCA Chief Executive, who bemoans the struggle of the sector to keep its head above water. <http://society.guardian.co.uk/voluntary/story/0,,2095793,00.html>

Under the thumb of the state

Voluntary groups must wake up now to the threat posed by the government's growing influence over their funding and activities, writes Ben Wittenberg, director of policy and research for the Directory of Social Change. <http://society.guardian.co.uk/voluntary/comment/0,,2096023,00.html>

A matter of choice

Senior Labour figures admitted that the government's market-driven public service reforms have confused and alienated staff and public alike. So can 'choice' stay on the post-Blair social policy agenda? <http://society.guardian.co.uk/futureforpublicservices/story/0,,2090449,00.html>

Tories' public service reforms to ape Labour

<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/conservatives/comment/0,,2095848,00.html>

Voices of experience

The forthcoming spending review is predicted to be the tightest so far but it will raise the debate on the type of care older people want

<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/publicservices/comment/0,,2095906,00.html>

'Brown's Britain'

We need Gordon Brown to embrace a new politics: the politics of the third sector as an equal partner in government. ACEVO report

https://www.acevo.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Browns_Britain.pdf

Third sector organisations contribute to the happiness of the nation

ACEVO report: https://www.acevo.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Happiness_Report.pdf

The Collaborative State: How working together can transform public services DEMOS, 203 pp.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Collaborative%20State%20-%20web.pdf>

Government sees voluntary groups offer added value. Tony Wright MP listens to commissioning concerns. <http://society.guardian.co.uk/voluntary/story/0,,2095792,00.html>

The brave new world of government reform

Despite many improvements in public services over the last decade, we now need a fundamental reassessment of New Labour's reforms, as well as a fresh analysis of future challenges, says Patrick Diamond. Those of us who were involved as policy strategists during the Blair years need to acknowledge what we got wrong.

<http://society.guardian.co.uk/futureforpublicservices/story/0,,606457,00.html>.

Public services are high on Labour's third-term agenda

<http://society.guardian.co.uk/futureforpublicservices/page/0,,649125,00.html>

From Third Sector Daily

Charities put their faith in Hope, new minister for the third sector

New third sector minister has background in the sector but will he help or hinder? Article quotes that he has always strongly supported government policies, including ID cards, replacing Trident, foundation hospitals, student top-up fees and the Iraq war. Hmmm.

www.thirdsector.co.uk/News/DailyBulletin/668350/Profile-Charities-put-faith-Hope-new-minister-third-sector/D06E833FB5D02ADC50B477132D72276D/

Respect our autonomy'

Six out of 10 voluntary organisations say local public bodies do not understand the importance of sector independence, according to research published today. <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/press/releases/?id=5468>

Good year for the top 500

The year to April 2006 showed that the income for the top 500 fundraising charities grew by 8.6 per cent to £10.9bn. "The top 500 are reaping the rewards, in terms of growth and efficiency, of their efforts to develop strong brands that are moulded around the public's altruistic needs and values" says the Charities Aid Foundation. God help us!

www.thirdsector.co.uk/News/DailyBulletin/671242/Good-year-top-500-says-Charity-Trends/C59F5EB36935D4B39A5FEE2D3E015B70/

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.