

We're not an arm of the state (or the private sector) – we have our own arms

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Protests grow as benefits cut whammy looms

This year April 1st promises to mark not just monumental foolery on the part of the coalition government, but a good measure of evil too. For this is the date on which massive benefit cuts will bite. Given the impact of this, and what it signals, our editorial says more than usual.

Changes to Council Tax Benefit move financial responsibility from central to local government accompanied by a 10% cut in the funding available. Councils can absorb the cut or pass it on. No prizes for guessing what most are choosing to do. This little demonstration of 'localism' ("empowering local people" remember) will affect 3.2 million people of working age and, since pensioners are excluded, the savings will all have to come from that group. For example, unemployed people who pay no council tax at present could find themselves having to find between £96 and £255 a year, presumably out of their pathetic dole money. Similarly, those in low wage work will find themselves hit with new charges, single parents in part time work and dependent on childcare being especially badly affected. An excellent report from the Resolution Foundation spells out the detail of this outrage - <http://bit.ly/WR8ISE>

Then there is the 'bedroom tax', a beacon of unfairness and mean-minded discrimination if ever there was one. Under the under-occupation penalty, tenants of working age in council or housing association homes and receiving housing benefit will have their payments cut if they are deemed to have spare rooms. Couples will be expected to share a bedroom as will children under 10, or under 16 of the same sex. The government's own impact assessment says 420,000 of the 660,000 households affected contain someone with a disability. The additional bill on families with disabled members is reckoned by the National Housing Federation to be £100M.

Anyone who doesn't want to pay the extra should take a lodger or move to smaller property says Ian Duncan-Smith. Not apparently bothered by the fact that there is a shortage of smaller properties, nor likely to be faced by the need to invite a stranger into his own home in the foreseeable future.

Resistance is however growing and this promises to be one controversy that is not going to go away. Demonstrations around the country have been gathering pace, culminating in protests in 52 locations across the country on the 16th March (see <http://bit.ly/XTHrQp>). Earlier that week, tenants, trade unionists and campaigners from all over the country gathered for a summit, as part of the Benefits Justice Campaign. The event was initiated by Defend Council Housing, Disabled People Against the Cuts and the Right to Work campaign, supported by others, including unions PCS and Unite, and aims to build alliances between national and local action. There will be another summit on May 11th, to track results of the opposition.

In the NE, Coast and Country Housing Association is spearheading a campaign of mass protest by 100,000 social housing tenants in the region. In contrast, in Liverpool, tenants are having to fight their landlord (Liverpool Mutual Homes), whose Chief Executive Steve Coffey had suggested that tenants could make up the shortfall in their rent by doing odd jobs for the association like picking up litter around the estate! In Scotland, Shelter and the Scottish TUC are backing a No Eviction for Bedroom Tax campaign organised by Govan Law Centre.

At national level protests are being supported by the Sunday People and at local level excellent briefings are being prepared by local campaign groups - here's an example from the People's Republic of Southwark -

<http://bit.ly/YBXiN1>; <http://bit.ly/WR9aAh>. Information also available from the Anti Bedroom Tax Facebook site - <http://on.fb.me/1348F90>. Housing Justice has set up a website to help people tell their own stories of the impact of the cuts (see Tell My Story later in this bulletin).

David Orr, chief executive of the National Housing Federation has come out against the changes, saying: 'Thousands of disabled people will have no choice but to cut back further on food and other expenses in order to stay in their own homes.' Even Duncan-Smith's think tank has criticised the policy. Christian Guy, MD of the Centre for Social Justice (sic) has said that people should only have to pay the penalty if they had turned down a suitable downsizing offer and that they recognised the extra social costs that the bedroom tax could cause.

Government concessions are emerging and more are still possible. As a result of a legal challenge, the DWP has now conceded that children with severe disabilities should not be forced to share a room. The regulations are also now not to apply to some foster carers and the parents of young armed forces personnel. Legal proceedings against Iain Duncan Smith have commenced on behalf of 10 vulnerable and disabled children, who claim the new regulations have failed to take proper account of the needs of vulnerable children and are discriminatory.

If you do nothing else to join this wave of protest, then at least sign the petition to scrap these catastrophic cuts - <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/41600> - and get your friends, colleagues, neighbours to do the same.

The evidence builds....

Resistance is fertile. But where are the voluntary groups?

NCIA has just published the findings of our inquiry into local activism and dissent - *Here We Stand* - which shows rising opposition to cuts and austerity, but no thanks to voluntary services agencies. The Inquiry documents how local activists exert an active democratic and egalitarian influence. We found growing resistance to cuts and austerity, with local people organising around what matters to them: safeguarding public services, fighting privatisation, enforcing community rights, protecting the natural world, creating alternatives to neo-liberal doctrines and offering solidarity to each other and their communities.

This action is mostly unpaid activism through self-organising networks. A world of action and energy rarely glimpsed through mainstream media. People tackling concrete problems together. But the Inquiry found a notable absence of professionalised voluntary agencies in these local struggles. So where are they? Too frightened to bite the hand that feeds them, to stand alongside local communities?

A common thread amongst those taking action was the willingness to think critically, confront and challenge authority, and to follow their own path. Some openly challenged injustice. Some subverted from within the system. Others dissent through self-reliance. And some - mostly the professional voluntary agencies - are still trying to decide whether or not to speak out. Sadly, we found that local voluntary umbrella groups do not offer a home for activism, or dissenters.

The role of the dissenting activist, of whatever form, has now become critical for our collective health and wellbeing. You can download the Inquiry summary and full report here - <http://bit.ly/15h5JRT>.

Faith groups lift the lid on the "Lies we Tell Ourselves" about poverty

Four faith groups have come together to take a look at 'truth and lies about poverty'. The report examines critically six popular myths about poverty such as 'they are just lazy and don't want to work' and 'they have an easy life on benefits'.

Using research evidence and personal testimonies, the results are powerful and passionate. "As a coalition of major British Churches, we want to create a new story; one grounded in truth, compassion and hope. Part of our calling as Christians is to seek

after truth, and that means facing up to our own blindness as well as calling others to account. Collectively we have come to believe things about poverty in the UK which are not grounded in fact. We need to develop an understanding of the depth and breadth of UK poverty that is compatible with the evidence available."

This is important stuff - you can download it here - <http://bit.ly/XTIZKi>

Smaller services can be beautiful, says new report

An alliance between Locality and Vanguard Consulting has produced a new report arguing against the supposed 'economies of scale' much loved by procurement officers and which is decimating many locally based voluntary services groups. The report attempts to scotch the orthodoxy that only by 'scaling up' can services be made more efficient and effective.

The report announces a research project to examine "examples of public sector service designs deploying different assumptions about the design and management of work; 'command and control', functionalised, economies of scale contrasted with those designed as 'systems' based around citizens... and research examples of small scale civil society solutions which appear to be delivering more for less." Bit of a mouthful but I think I know what they mean.

You can download Public Services, Civil Society and Diseconomies of Scale here - <http://bit.ly/YBXKuL>

Sex and power 2013 – who runs Britain?

At the current rate of progress, a child born today will be drawing her pension before she has any chance of being equally represented in the UK Parliament. It is now almost 40 years since the Sex Discrimination Act was passed, and over 80 since women got the right to vote equally with men, yet women, still, are all too often missing from politically powerful positions in the UK. This report from the 'Counting Women In' coalition, includes a mass of information about poor female representation in elected office, public appointments, the civil service, special advisers and the wider picture and proposes some changes that would improve the situation. You can be depressed here - <http://bit.ly/WyABg0>

Managing Democracy, Managing Dissent

This is the title of a new publication from Corporate Watch, centred around the contested notions of 'democracy', exposing the limited, carefully managed version we currently live under. In twenty essays, writers, academics and activists collectively argue that in today's 'democracy' elite interests are served by the limitations placed upon popular participation in decision-making, by the manipulation of public opinion through propaganda, and by the attempts to co-opt, marginalise and/or repress oppositional politics. It will be on sale from the Corporate Watch online shop, and in

radical bookshops in April, priced £8.00. For more information, including a list of contents, see - <http://bit.ly/WR9Jdt>

Heros, heroines, & keeping on keeping on

StreetCred 2 – a view from the frontline of service provision

A refreshingly honest account of the struggles confronting the voluntary services scene comes from Manchester based 42nd Street, a young people's mental health charity. Following on from a first report - StreetCred (2000) - the publication strives to present "the values and dilemmas faced by a voluntary sector charitable organisation that is locally based and responsive to local needs. In this climate of the 'contract culture' and 'austerity', issues are explored as to whether an organisation like 42nd Street can remain true to its core purpose and values and in doing so the dilemmas it has to face." We could do with a few more like this. £10 will secure a copy

Lest we forget....

It was cold on the 23rd February - too cold. Too cold to be sleeping rough. In Aylesford in Kent 35 year old Daniel Gauntlett, who was homeless, sought shelter in a derelict bungalow. But the police were called and, due to the new law criminalising squatting, Daniel ended up sleeping outside. He died. The cause of death was found to be hypothermia. The story is here <http://bit.ly/15h6Q3Z>

When the new law on squatting was introduced last year Mike Weatherly, the Conservative MP for Hove and Portslade, said "I am thrilled to see the bill that I worked so hard on finally come into force as a new piece of legislation.....the police will now have the power to arrest squatters right away for being in someone else's property."

Thanks to Mark Palframan for this terrible tale and who said in his email "apologies for sending this as a general email - I was just so cross and upset by this story." So should we all.

- you can find out more and order it here - <http://42ndstreet.org.uk/publications>

Kittens are Evil conference launches campaign against payment-by-results

A conference in Manchester called to debate the perils of contemporary 'outcomes focussed' performance management systems ended with a call to end payments-by-results schemes. Helped along by a thoughtful speech from Toby Lowe unpacking the muddled thinking and perverse incentives created by the focus on outcomes, the

conference went on to look at some case studies of more useful and relevant approaches.

The campaign - Say No to Payments-by-results - has a website where you can sign up to the declaration - www.saynotopbr.net - and find out more about the critique and action.

And another new site provides the opportunity for people to own up to the porkies they may have told to satisfy the outcomes appetite of funders and commissioners - you can have a peek here - <http://outcomesanonymous.net/>

Tell My Story campaign highlights welfare cuts hardship

Campaign group Housing Justice are doing a fine bit to oppose the welfare cuts and have set up the Tell My Story website to provide a chance for individuals to provide their own personal testimony and to offer a focus for collective action. Already there are some powerful accounts to be found on the site. Housing Justice intends to compile these into a dossier of shame towards the end of the year to help mount pressure on the government to reverse these "iniquitous welfare reforms".

You can read the stories here - <http://www.tellmystory.org.uk/> or tell your own here - <http://www.tellmystory.org.uk/tell/>

Dignity In Pregnancy campaign launched

All pregnant women need good maternity care and the support of friends and family. New research by the Refugee Council and Maternity Action finds that the UK Border Agency makes this impossible by moving women to housing across the country, sometimes multiple times, uprooting them from friends and family and taking them away from the midwife and specialist healthcare they have been receiving. Many give birth alone and struggle to cope as new mothers in an unknown place.

The Dignity in Pregnancy Campaign asks for a simple change in policy that could stop this practice in its tracks. More information from <http://bit.ly/15VDSst>

Boycott Workfare steps up the agro

This coming week sees a wave of protests pressuring charities to withdraw from the government's "mandatory work activity" scheme, organised by Boycott Workfare. The protests will include sit-ins, protests and letters delivered to shop managers protesting against the activity, the group said. Amongst the charities to be targeted are Barnardo's, RSPCA, Salvation Army, the Papworth Trust and the conservation volunteering organisation TCV.

Several high-profile charities have recently withdrawn from the scheme this month, including Sue Ryder, PDSA and Sense. Sue Ryder said that it had withdrawn because the protest actions threatened to damage its work, and because it needed to protect staff and supporters "from any further distress". Others withdrew because they were uneasy about the mandatory nature of placements.

Barnardo's, after being fingered by Boycott Workfare, denied involvement in the 'mandatory work activity' schemes, but Boycott Workfare said: "We've received testimonials from people who've been involved in mandatory work activity in Barnardo's shops... They've also been involved in the Youth Contract, a large component of which is workfare."

Check out the action here - <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=1996>

Non-hierarchical, democratic and consensus ways of organising – interested?

Are you involved in an organisation or group that runs in a non-hierarchical, democratic and consensus based way or interested in discovering more about it? If so Dr Daniel King from Nottingham Trent University would like to talk with you. He is currently working with a couple of charities in the East Midlands who are changing the ways that they organise themselves to work more in accordance with their values as an organisation. They are bringing in flatter structures and seeking to involve everyone within the organisation in the decisions. Please get in touch via email: daniel.king@ntu.ac.uk or phone 0115 848 2694 for more information or to have a chat.

At last – Councillors who come out against the cuts

A new network of local authority councillors has formed to support the fight against cuts. These councillors believe that instead of implementing the Coalition's cuts, councils and councillors should refuse to do so and help workers and communities organise in resistance. Get your local councillors to join the network. Find out more here - <http://councillorsagaincuts.org/statement/>

This month's 'That Takes the Biscuit' Award ACEVO, NCVO, NAVCA & Social Enterprise UK

Sadly it seems, few can compete with our national 'leadership' organisations for the celebrated That Takes the Biscuit Award. For here again is ACEVO and NCVO, this time accompanied by NAVCA and SEUK. What have they done this time you ask? The answer is to team up with those notorious predators Capita, Ingeus, Avanta and Serco to bring us the '*Commercial Masterclass - Skills for Competition and Sub-contracting*' road show. Funded (surprise, surprise) by the Cabinet Office, these two day courses, costing a mere 25 quid, will "guide you through the commercial skills required to succeed in a world of contracts, competition and payment by results".

Lucky punters will, amongst other choice benefits, get to "understand the perspective of the private sector". So if you want to learn how to make profit out of misery, drive down wages, ban unions, put other people out of business, rip off local charities, or even, in Serco's case, beat people up without leaving any visible marks, then this is the course for you.

Trouble rumbles on at Turning Point

Proposed changes to staff conditions at national charity Turning Point are not going smoothly. Last November the charity announced that it was to sack its 2,300 staff and reemploy them on new contracts. Fortunately for the 2,300, 500 of them are members of Unite who have stuck their foot in the door. Talks with management have broken down and industrial action is now threatened. The union has described Turning Point management as "corporate renegades" and accused them of bullying staff.

"This is a perverse decision - a charity robbing its staff to prop up profits and boost expansion," said Jamie Major, regional officer at Unite. "It seems that corporate greed is not exclusive to the bankers and we now have our own corporate renegade right here in the charity sector. A management spokesperson said: ""We need to move towards a market rate for employees, one that protects their base pay, and we are proposing to increase base pay for those who are the lowest paid."

Barnet outsourcing fiasco leaves residents spitting blood

Barnet Council, proud purveyors of the 'if it moves, outsource it' approach to public service provision, has egg on its face with its first venture. One year after it privatised disability support services by creating 'Your Barnet', it has now been revealed that the enterprise is heading for an actual deficit this year of £60k and needs a bailout loan of £1M from the Council to see it through the next 2 years. As part of the deal, proposals have been put forward to cut staff, reduce services and cover, lower wages and increase charges to users. All of this was predicted by the Barnet Alliance for Public Services who are hopping mad to have been proved right.

They are hoping to gain some satisfaction this coming week as the judicial review brought by Barnet resident Maria Nash is due to be heard. She is claiming that the council's 'One Barnet' programme to outsource a large group of public services failed to consult Barnet residents adequately. More info on what's going on up there from the website - <http://barnetalliance.org/>.

Also in Barnet, we reported on our website the successful action to keep the Friern Barnet library open - a combination of direct action and more conventional means of protest. You can see an insightful video from those involved here - <http://vimeo.com/59247997>.

9 housing aid centres go down the chute

Shelter has confirmed that it will close nine housing advice centres with the loss of up to 90 jobs. The housing and homelessness charity, which had an income of £52.9m in 2011/12, receives legal aid for its face-to-face advice services, worth about £6m a year. The charity said that government cuts from the legal aid budget - in force from 1st April - mean that up to 50 per cent of this money could be lost. The centres affected are in Rotherham, Ashford, Dover, Milton Keynes, Cheshire, Gloucester, Somerset, Hertfordshire and Cumbria.

Campbell Robb, chief executive of Shelter, said "While service closures are absolutely a last resort, we simply cannot fill the gap created by the scale of these cuts with other sources."

Southwark Heygate madness

Against all common sense and justice Southwark Council has agreed to sell off a prime piece of development land at the Elephant & Castle to a gigantic Australian property company. Large sections of the community are up in arms and you can see why. Instead of grasping the opportunity to support community led regeneration, the Council has handed control of the planning of the area and its community to a global property developer.

Only 25% of the housing planned will be 'affordable' (judged as 80% of private rent levels in the area), and even this may not materialise, for the Government has just announced that across the country any Section 106 agreement (the agreement that binds the developer to concessions like affordable housing) can be renegotiated at any time! If a developer says that a Section 106 agreement is no longer "viable", Councils will be obligated to renegotiate the deal until in the developer's view it is viable.

The Council's promises to the community mean almost nothing. The community has fought against this, mobilising large numbers of people, but none of this has deterred the Council who continue to provide cover for a developer who has zero commitment to the community and every commitment to its shareholders.

The Elephant Amenity Network are investigating a Judicial Review on the grounds that the Council is disregarding its own plan and is violating equality considerations. So much for "localism", but if the Council will not fight, the community must.

Urban Forum puts brave spin on its decline

Urban Forum, the umbrella body for more than 900 community organisations, is making all four of its staff redundant as part of "moving to a new model of operating that will use trustees and associates rather than paid staff."

The organisation's joint chairs said of the changes that they "need to be operating more as a business" and would be "re-launching as a more streamlined and mobile organisation with the aim of providing the key information services that members value, and offering services in partnership with other organisations". Sounds basically like good news then? I'd have expected them to be pissed off? You can read the Chair's statement here - <http://bit.ly/WRa3Jj>

Healthwatch debacle becomes a farce

Healthwatch, the new 'consumer watchdog' for health and social care services has got off to bad start. Set up by the government as a replacement for LINKs, which it abolished, a new national body - Healthwatch England - and local Healthwatch groups around the country have been set up - well tendered out actually - over the last 9 months. All, however, before Jeremy Hunt issued the statutory regulations, which, when they appeared, created a bit of a stir. They appear to say that Healthwatch will not be allowed to involve itself in any matters of law or policy, whatsoever and for ever, as these would be deemed political activities "not of benefit to the community"!! (the full story is on our website - <http://bit.ly/15h7Oxd>)

A deal of scurrying around resulted in a House of Lords debate which extracted a 'this is all nonsense' response from the government spokes-lord. And the Department of Health promised to 'clarify' the guidance. Apparently satisfied that 'they didn't mean it' everyone seems to have happily gone back to what they were doing. This includes a government funded publicity campaign involving NAVCA, CSV, National Voices and Regional Voices to encourage the great British public to become local Healthwatch volunteers, and a branding and communications toolkit from Healthwatch England. Branding is likely to be a key activity for these groups as they are required by law to be 'social enterprises' and to be financially self sufficient within 3 years, so they are definitely going to have to sell themselves to someone.

Oops – a correction needed

In our last newsletter we featured an equalities comparison between the UK and Nigeria. Sean Baine from the Equality Trust has pointed out that "the Independent report about inequality here being worse than Nigeria is from 1996 and refers to another Tory government. This seems to be doing the rounds after someone put it out as current. Things are actually not a lot better but different data is needed." Thanks Sean....

Events coming up

1000 Mothers March in Tottenham - 13th April

A wide alliance of campaign groups in Haringey and neighbouring boroughs are organising a '1000 mothers' speak out on the 13th April to draw attention to the fact that often it is mothers who have to bear the brunt of "feeding their children or

keeping them warm, paying the rent or paying for a bus fare, coping with the council tax bailiffs fees or paying for a school trip, dealing with debts to doorstep lenders or being evicted as the caps, cuts, council tax and rising prices and rents take their toll."

Assemble Tottenham Town Hall at 11 am. More information from Rev Paul Nicolson: taxpayersagainstpovertytap@gmail.com; 07961177889 & 0208 376 5455

Coalition of Resistance People's Assembly – Saturday 22 June 2013, 9:30am – 5pm

The Coalition of Resistance is organising a national People's Assembly Against Austerity in London on 22nd June "to bring together campaigns against cuts and privatisation with trade unionists in a movement for social justice." Launched by a letter in the *Guardian* at the beginning of February, whose signatories intend that "the assembly will be ready to support co-ordinated industrial action and national demonstrations against austerity..."

You can register for the Assembly here - <http://bit.ly/Z93dch>

New training programme from Disability Law Project

The Disability Law Project has announced its next round of courses which include the Equality Act and employment rights for disabled people, special educational needs, an introduction to community care law and the Equality Act and provision of goods and services.

All courses in mid April and they charge £75 for VCS groups and individuals. More information from www.dls.org.uk or contact: christine@dls.org.uk or call 0207 791 9828.