

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

www.independentaction.net info@independentaction.net

Want to talk back to us? Plenty of opportunities to make your mark on our bloggy-friendly website
www.independentaction.net

Newsletter No: 36

December 2013

Poverty and inequality – the new normal? No Way!

A week after Osborne's pronouncement that the recession is over and prosperity again looms, the truth starts to trickle out that the 'recovery' is due to consumer spending, itself based in increased personal debt. So 'growth' is actually growth in debt; just what we need. This, of course, helps to explain why, down on the street, it still feels like things are getting worse not better. And they are. Little-by-little, chilling and insidious, the political establishment and their media allies are getting us all used to the idea that poverty and inequality - whether in work or out of it - is the new normal, unremarkable, just the way it is. This week sees the opening of the first 'social supermarket' - a special shopping club for poor people (with their own swipe card!) selling rejected provisions, dented tins and upside down labels (all "perfectly wholesome" according to the passionate young woman hopeful that their social enterprise will "flourish"). Such is their great sensitivity that frosted glass has been installed in the front windows to "help overcome the stigma" of shopping in this place.

Have we gone mad to put up with this shite? If we only look in the direction of the voluntary services industry the answer to this question is mostly 'yes'. Privatisation races on, and managers have their heads down looking for the next supply chain opportunity. But elsewhere, small acts of resistance abound, some of which are reported in this issue - a CVS joins an anti-cuts group, local residents stand up against steamrolling developers, a manifesto for a fair society arrives on the web.

We are coming up to the time of New Year resolutions, and small actions speak loudly. Do what you can, when you can.

News from NCIA

Update on our Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services

Our Inquiry is fair flying. The response to our appeal for help to review what is happening in the voluntary services world and try to figure out how we can get back to some proper voluntary activism, has been overwhelming. We now have 16 people working on different issues such as: procurement and commissioning practices, social enterprise and investment, the position of sector ‘representatives’ (NCVO, ACEVO, NAVCA, Locality etc.) nationally and locally (CVSs etc.), the activities of national charity services, the political and business connections of trustees, the impact of outsourcing and privatisation... the list goes on.

A meeting is due to take place on the 19th December bringing this group together to share preliminary results, after which we will produce a bulletin of progress. In the meantime, a lot of information about the Inquiry is already on the website; trawl it via the drop-down button ‘Voluntary Services Inquiry’ on the website - www.independentaction.net.

What are charities for? BBC Radio 4

‘What are charities for?’ was the theme of Radio 4 ‘Analysis’ programme on 14th October. 25 minutes of powerful evidence, including from interviews with us, set out the stall of how state co-option and contracting has sapped the independence of charities and all but extinguished the fire in their belly to fight for social justice. But in the last 5 minutes, the presenter Fran Abrams, rather went off on one, concluding that we were all a bunch of self interested complainers, (and “children of the 60s” in the case of our NCIA spokespeople) motivated by quasi-religious beliefs about virtue. Weird.

A slightly fuller explanation of this puzzling encounter is on the website [here](#), where you can also link to the BBC site and listen again to the programme.

Offering a challenge to NAVCA

Prompted by the occasion of NAVCA’s AGM, we issued a public call to NAVCA to persuade its members to oppose delivery of public services by civil society organisations and take a tougher line against Government cuts. In a hard-hitting statement released on the eve of NAVCA’s AGM and publication of its annual report, NCIA said: “It is the job of charities to fight poverty and inequality. It is not their job to be compliant or silent” and called on NAVCA to start a debate with its members. More detail of our proposals are [here](#).

Barney Mynott, NAVCA’s Public Affairs Officer, said that NAVCA agreed with NCIA that voluntary organisations should not be co-opted by the state and must always retain their independence, but disagreed that contracting with local and national government caused them to lose that independence -or their campaigning bite. Joe Irvin, NAVCA’s director, said he would raise NCIA’s points with his members. We’re still waiting.

Making research accessible

Working with the University of Bedfordshire and the Critical Management Studies Network, we’re helping with a project to find ways to make academic research more accessible to practitioners, trustees and managers. The idea is to develop and pilot three different ways to re-present research material and evaluate how useful these are. In the first instance we are looking for authors who have a recently published or presented article (or even a long neglected one!) that strengthens the case for a more robust response from voluntary groups to the pressure of cuts, outsourcing,

managerialism, etc. and would be interested to look at ways of re-presenting their material.

More details will appear on our website in the next week or so, but if this takes your fancy you can find out more now by emailing Christina Schwabenland at Christina.Schwabenland@beds.ac.uk

The evidence builds....

Big NGOs prioritise a 'seat at the table' with government and business

In a new book, *The Poverty of Capitalism*, John Hilary, Executive Director of radical charity [War on Want](#) tracks the failures of corporate globalisation and the rise of popular resistance movements worldwide. This includes a sharp critique of mainstream British charities, which Hilary condemns for choosing to cosy up to corporations and governments, rather than align with grassroots movements.

In comments that are strongly reminiscent of our own NCIA criticisms of the domestic UK voluntary sector scene, Hilary accuses NGOs of becoming overly professionalised and too focused on technical, incremental change. The sector, he says, has "lost its political analysis, its transformative ambition, and any radical soul". Instead of challenging the UK government, which Hilary characterises as increasingly regressive and reductive in its approach, charities are giving it "such an easy ride" and appear to have been "seduced by power".

£13 will snap it up from [here](#).

Mutualise the private sector, not England's NHS

As the Government again pushes the 'mutualisation' of the NHS, in an article for Open Democracy, Dexter Whitfield, of the European Services Strategy Unit, explains why the transfer of NHS and other public services to social enterprises, mutual or cooperatives is privatisation, irrespective of the ownership model, staff and user engagement, democratic structures and community support. It examines the pathways to markets, the performance of social enterprises and the way forward including the re-integration of client and contractor and strategic improvement of in-house NHS services.

You can clock this one [here](#).

So who's running the show?

Over here at NCIA we often rail on about the apparent shortage of radical voluntary organisations. But maybe we wouldn't be so surprised if we took the trouble to find out who is running these organisations. This is what Mike Barker does in an incisive article called the 'The Austerity of Charity'. Mike charts the way in which city bankers, venture capitalists, directors of privatisers like Virgin Health and Carillion and the big consulting firms get brought in to do their good works as trustees of groups like NCVO, ACEVO, Future Builders and the Mayor's Fund for London. These people will, of course, bring with them their own views about the causes of poverty, inequality, etc. etc. which will likely have little to do with the ways in which they earn their (usually not inconsiderable) living. You can catch the dirt [here](#).

Latest Big Squeeze report from LVSC shows rising demand

'A Fragile State' reports the results of LVSC's latest survey of the London voluntary sector and headlines that a massive 82% of respondents had experienced increased demand for their services as a result of changes to the economy or government policy (last year's figure was 66%). Demand for advice services was especially high as a result of benefit cuts. 93% said they have had to change the way they work to cope with changes to the economic and policy climate, 51% reported a reduction in their overall funding in 2012/13, and 53% had to dip into their free reserves to cover running costs.

Eithne Rynne, chief executive of LVSC, said: "If the government does not seriously review the impact the welfare reforms are having on groups, particularly those protected by the Equality Act 2010, the long-term effects on London's most vulnerable and on health and social care could be catastrophic."

You can catch this one [here](#).

Even NCVO slams PBR madness

The craziness of Payment-by-Results contracts is documented in a recent report from NCVO and lawyers Bates Wells Braithwaite. Based on a review of a number of PBR contracts, the report says that public bodies often enter into PBR contracts without a clear idea of why they are doing so, and simply duplicate terms from non-PBR contracts. "There appears to be a significant and worrying gap between parties' experience on the ground delivering the service and what is being reported back up the management chain," the report says. "Even though there is a recognition that contracts are not working, there is huge political pressure to declare the contracts a success."

Though this of course restates what we already know, NCVO soldiers on with their 'we can fix it' mantra. Karl Wilding, director of public policy at the NCVO, said it supports the use of PBR because it encourages commissioners to focus on procuring for good outcomes, rather than services. The report says it is not surprising that PBR faces problems, because it is a new type of contracting with potential teething problems. Bless.

Here's the offending [item](#)

The defeat of the voluntary sector

In an outburst of pure NCIA-speak, Guardian journalist David Walker lambasted the 'leadership' of the voluntary sector for its dismal failure to clock - and oppose - the real views of Ministers towards the sector. Using the gagging bill debacle as a focus, Walker says: "The Tories' determination to restrict the political capacity of charities...has exposed not just the limits of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (Acevo), but their own naivety."

The sweet music around the Big Society though "...an empty charade from start to finish, (it) took in charity leaders." And "talk about opening up public services proved equally seductive, pulling Sir Stephen Bubb, chief executive of ACEVO, into unholy union with the government over the Health and Social Care Act."

Music to our ears, as is Walker's assertion that "...some day, the organisations that pay their subs to NCVO and ACEVO will be asking why."

It's a good read and it's [here](#).

Heros, heroines, & keeping on keeping on

Manifesto for a Fair Society

The Campaign for a Fair Society has launched its manifesto to explain and promote the demands that it stands for. These focus on 8 crucial principles: human rights, clear entitlements, early support, equal access, choice and controls, fair incomes, fair taxes and sustainable reform. Each of these principles is justified and supported by argument and there is a mass of other dead useful material on the site. Coherent, comprehensive, definitely a site to visit. Feast your eyes [here](#).

Two new books boost NCIA case

Two new books from well known academics in the voluntary sector have appeared in close proximity. Both deserve wide recognition:

Rediscovering Voluntary Action, The Beat of a Different Drum from Colin Rochester, shows how ideas about voluntary action have been reshaped by establishment 'wisdom', and the role and activities of voluntary groups subsumed within wider forces of the state, public services and the private sector. He exposes the misunderstandings and misrepresentations and presents a more authentic and radical view about the contribution of voluntary action to a healthy society. There's even a chapter about our own humble NCIA work, so this is definitely required reading (I keep reading it).

Colin has also been responsible for facilitating NCIA's first (and probably only) *special offer!!*. Readers of this newsletter can buy the book at the reduced price of £16 (a saving of £3.99, yes, that's £3.99, more than half an hour at the minimum wage!). Log onto the website [here](#) to order quoting the special discount code: WRVAC2013a.

Voluntary Sector in Transition: Hard Times or New Opportunities from Linda Milbourne examines the shifts in values and ideology within voluntary agencies, especially those offering community services, in the wider context of the dismantling of public services, the growing power of markets, the role of civil society and the voluntary sector's role within this environment. Drawing on her own research with local voluntary groups grappling with the changes, Linda discusses the loss of trust relationships, the damaging impact of competition, dilemmas in collaboration (in delivering public services, for example), where advocacy and democratic participation is going, and finishes with 'values and visions for a future voluntary sector'.

This provides strong supporting material for those struggling to remain independent and press for more creative relationships between voluntary action, the state and other interests. Sadly no special offers here and the book is only available in hardback (write and complain). So I'm afraid it will set you back £56. You can get it [here](#). Or get your local library to order it, if you've still got a local library that is.

Gagging bill protests pile on the pressure

Pressure on Parliament to back off on the gagging bill has continued over the last couple of months. This has included public meetings around the country, extensive media coverage, targeting individual MPs and Peers, and support to the Commission on

Civil Society and Democratic Engagement, whose first [report](#) was a damning critique of the Bill. These actions will culminate this coming week with a mass lobby on 10th December, the day that sympathetic Peers will table amendments in line with the Commission's recommendations. The Committee stage of the Bill will begin on the 16th December.

Friends of the Earth have been playing a key co-ordinating role in this campaign. If you want to be on their mailing list for updates on developments email Liz Hutchins at liz.hutchins@foe.co.uk, or call 07957145996.

E-petition calls for new deal for sick and disabled people

An e-petition calling for a Cumulative Impact Assessment of the welfare cuts and a new deal for sick and disabled people has cleared the 100,000 signatures hurdle which triggers a debate in Parliament. The petition also calls for an end to Work Capability Assessment, a free vote on the repeal of the Welfare Reform Act and an independent committee-based inquiry into welfare 'reform'.

This action was spearheaded by Resistance to War on Welfare with the support of comedienne Francesca Martinez. More information [here](#).

Devon residents up in arms about Localism sell out

Residents in North Devon have written to the Prime Minister to complain that the 'opportunities' for communities under the Localism legislation are "hollow and misleading". Their complaint is about how housebuilders Persimmon with the support of local authorities are "throwing up housing at a cracking pacewith no play parks, schools bursting at the seams, no community facilities, no transport, no employment, a beleaguered medical centre, no shops and no walkway into town."

The District Council will not halt construction and enforce planning consent conditions to provide open space and community facilities as it cannot afford the legal fees involved in an appeal by Persimmon. Nor can they attract support from either Town or County Councils. Residents say they have presented a petition, attended dozens of meetings, provided evidence to scrutiny committees, and obtained the support of the local press in making clear the objectives of residents to have the basic facilities needed here to function as community. All to absolutely no avail.

If you know what else they can do, or if you just want to offer a bit of solidarity then get in touch with Maureen McCormack at fairplay403@gmail.com

CVS affiliates to anti-cuts group

Adur Voluntary Action, the CVS for the Adur area, is to affiliate to *Don't Cut Us Out*, the West Sussex based anti-cuts group, following thorough consideration by its Board of Trustees. *Don't Cut Us Out* was set up in February 2011 to unite campaign groups, charities and care providers in defending vulnerable people from cutbacks in social care and service funding, currently but not exclusively by West Sussex County Council. According to their research, there were £79m of cuts to essential services in 2010 and this is set to grow in the coming two years by a further £141m. This money would previously have been used for essential services but has instead been used to grow council reserves from £108m to £216m.

AVA encourages other voluntary and charitable organisations working with, or representing, users of caring services to consider affiliation, because this provides the opportunity to contribute an Adur perspective, and ensure an accurately informed and balanced campaign. AVA welcomes views and experiences of local groups and service users, and will feed these back to the Don't Cut Us Out group. To find out more, e-mail dontcutusout@gmail.com, phone 01243 555561 or visit www.dontcutusout.org.uk.

TUC produces new guide to defend the NHS

A new TUC guide for NHS campaigners aims to help people fight to defend the NHS, as the impact of cuts and the speed of privatisation intensifies. Despite widespread opposition we are left with the Health and Social Care Act, pushed through in 2012, and the Section 75 regulations which force NHS outsourcing, contrary to government assurances. As a result the pace of privatisation is accelerating and there is an 'arms race' amongst corporate firms to scoop up as much as possible.

The [NHS Campaigners Guide](#) provides a set of tools to help community groups, grassroots campaigners and union activists develop on-the-ground activity to help keep the fight going to save our NHS. Developed by the TUC in partnership with Keep Gloucestershire's NHS Public, it provides the context on what's happening in the NHS and why, information about how to find out what's happening in your area, ideas for campaign plans, activities and events and a guide to NHS jargon and terms that you might come across.

Charities walk away from contracts

Two charities in the north-west of England have walked away from local authority contracts because they consider the terms of service to be unacceptable. The charities, Local Solutions and Person Shaped Support, both based in Liverpool, said they had either pulled out of or not submitted bids for contracts because the levels of service in the contracts for beneficiaries were too low.

[Local Solutions](#), a charity that supplies a range of community support said that over the past two years it had pulled out of existing contracts or refused to renew contracts with at least four councils. "We are being more circumspect on the contracts that we accept and at the point of renewal we are coming away from some contracts", said Chief Executive, Steve Hawkins, "As a charity we need to work for the higher good for our staff and beneficiaries. We have got empathy with the public sector, and it has huge financial problems, but someone needs to say that enough is enough."

Meanwhile, Lesley Dixon, Chief Executive of [Person Shaped Support](#), said it had increasingly declined to bid for contracts because staff were unhappy with the terms of service and PSS believed it did not fit with its core values.

NatCAN national conference – 22nd March 2014

Details of the next national conference of the National Community Activist Network have been announced, scheduled for March next year in Manchester. The event will focus on 'Age of Austerity - what can you do?' from the perspectives of individuals, neighbourhood groups, regional and national organisations and at the political level.

Further details [here](#) and you can sign up [here](#).

Lewisham People's Commission launch report

The Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign launched the report of its People's Commission on the 27th November. The Commission played an important part in the successful action through the Courts to halt the Government's attempts to push through the hospital closure. The struggle is not over, however, as Jeremy Hunt has announced intentions to change the Law to allow them to close this and other hospitals without the annoying intervention of ordinary concerned citizens. This must be what they mean by 'putting the power back in the hands of local people'. You can download the Commission report [here](#).

Edge Fund seeks regular donations

The Edge Fund is trying to expand its supporter base by attracting people willing to make regular donations, large or small. The Fund, which aims to provide funding to small, grassroots groups demanding justice and equality, is often the only source available to groups with a radical agenda. Decisions on funding are made collectively by Fund members. If you'd like to be a part of this then you can sign up here - <http://edgefund.org.uk/donation/>.

www.edgefund.org.uk

www.facebook.com/edgefund

www.twitter.com/theedgefund

Workfare appeal successful

The government has lost an appeal in the Supreme Court over a ruling that its back-to-work schemes were legally flawed. The original case was brought by plucky museum volunteer Cait Reilly and Unemployed HGV driver Jamieson Wilson.

But the victory may be pyrrhic as workfare schemes are now run under new regulations. A spokesman for the Department for Work and Pensions said: "The judgment changes nothing in DWP today. Claimants will continue to be mandated onto our back-to-work schemes under the new regulations we laid in March."

What to do if a supermarket is trying to take over your local pub or high street shop

Increasingly, the 'Express' format stores are popular with the major supermarket chains. Part of the reason is that they often don't need planning permission to convert existing buildings such as pubs to shops.

The Town and Country Planning Association has produced a guide to the planning rules for Tescopoly, the campaign group opposing these take overs. In three parts the guide, provides an overview of the retail policy framework, guidance on the local plan and neighbourhood planning process and a quick guide to responding to retail planning applications.

You can download the 'Community Guide to Retail Planning' [here](#).

Wealth inequality in the UK

A neat little video from Inequality Briefing in 3 minutes unpacks the scale of what we all know is going on - the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. If current trends

continue then we will have reached Victorian levels of inequality in just 20 year.
Required viewing - <http://inequalitybriefing.org/>

Oxford bucks the trend on outsourcing while the Scots nationalise

An October Guardian interview gives Peter Sloman, Chief Executive of Oxford City Council a platform to explain how he has managed to keep council services in house rather than outsource to the private sector. "We have demonstrated that you don't need to privatise services", says Sloman, "we've also proved that you can motivate people. We do not want to see our services externalised to a for-profit organisation. We should be an exemplar for running those services". Rejoice [here](#).

Meanwhile, the Scottish Government has announced its intention to nationalise Prestwick Airport! Cheer yourself up [here](#).

The madness continues

'Voluntary' agencies push mandatory workfare

It's unclear whether the irony is lost on them but various infrastructure groups including Voluntary Action Leeds and Voluntary Sector North West are encouraging voluntary groups to sign up with private contractors (yes A4E, G4S, Serco, Ingeus, etc. etc. as usual) to offer *mandatory volunteering* (yes that's it, compulsory volunteering) placements as part of the Government's next workfare scheme.

Community Work Placements are due to be introduced in April next year, targeting unemployed people who have failed to get work through the Work Programme. These unfortunate people will be required to take up an unpaid placement 30 hours a week, for 6 months and, if they refuse "without good reason", Jobcentre Plus will be able to sanction (i.e. cut) their Jobseeker's Allowance. To add insult to injury, the voluntary groups providing the placements will, however, be paid for their generous contribution to demonise and harass the unemployed.

Juliette Green at Southampton-based social enterprise 'Women's Wisdom', tweets that they "are looking forward to working with the prime contractors to offer Community Work Placements". They should all be ashamed of themselves. You can read more about this appalling use of the phrase 'community work' at the Boycott Workfare site - <http://www.boycottworkfare.org/?p=3087>.

Mind you, the 'primes' offering placement payments are only doing what Stephen Bubb has asked for - "If the government expects charities to take on many more volunteers through the Help to Work scheme, those places will need to be funded," he said. But even Bubb warned that many charities will have qualms about taking on people whose ability to feed and clothe themselves will depend on their participation and NCVO, echoing the same point, then typically argued that "Charitieswill need to be consulted on the best approach to take." Huh? Well that would be boycott then?

This month's 'That Takes the Biscuit' Award Goes to:

G4S for brass nerve

It has been widely publicised that G4S and Serco have been caught with their trousers down for overcharging on their 'tagging' contracts and putting in invoices for work that wasn't done (even for prisoners that had died). If someone was fixing your house, or whatever, and did that to you, what would you do?

Probably not be as forgiving as Government Ministers - they say once the business has been through a period of 'corporate renewal' (whatever that means), we'll give them more work.

Undeterred, and without the hint of a blush, G4S, in an attempt to head off criticism, offered a 'settlement' of 23M quid, *as a credit note!!* You've got to hand it to them, spivs to the end....

National Consortium of Social Enterprises in bid for a slice of privatisation

A new bidding consortium for social enterprises is aiming to become the "go-to provider" for public service delivery contracts and to enlist 1,000 organisations by January 2014 (they had better get a move on!).

The National Consortium of Social Enterprises, which is being backed by the bidding consortium 3SC, Social Firms UK and Social Enterprise UK hopes to make it easier for social enterprises to respond to public procurement opportunities and scoop up contracts for public services. They have managed to blag £219k from the ESF and National Offender Management Service for their little escapade and will focus initially on "employment opportunities for offenders through the delivery of public services by social enterprises". Given the miserable failure of consortium working, this sounds like more heat than light, as well are jobs for the boys....

'Inspiring' Probation Futures?

In eager anticipation of the upcoming big Probation sell off, the bees are circling the honeypot hoping for a piece of the action. One such is the 'Innovation Unit for Public Services', a "social enterprise committed to using the power of innovation to solve social challenges". Their contribution is 'Probation Futures', a website "...that has been set up to create a 'safe space' for an open and honest conversation of the big issues that are at stake with the impending changes suggested by the Transforming Rehabilitation proposals. We want it to be used as a resource to inspire a new generation of probation providers."

Funded by A4E (not best known for open and honest conversations), the 'big issues' involved do not apparently include the likely impact of smashing up a high performing public service and turning whole swathes of the criminal justice system over to global

corporations, aided and abetted by voluntary services groups hanging onto their supply chain shirt tails. Instead we are wowed by such insights as ‘remember the purpose’ and ‘plan for the future not just the present’. Have a laugh [here](#), if you’re bored, but then do get back to doing something useful.

Meanwhile a more intelligent and less shallow commentary on the Criminal Justice ‘reforms’ (according to my dictionary the word reform is associated with the concept of improvement) is to be found at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. Professor Paul Senior unpacks the “risky and fundamentally misguided” changes now being orchestrated, bemoaning that their basis is ideology not evidence. [Here](#) it is. That’s more like it.....

Charity challenge through judicial review will be reduced to “zero”

Speaking at a hearing of the Barings Independence Panel in October, Ravi Low-Beer, from the Public Law Project, said that Government proposals to restrict the use of judicial review would diminish the ability of charities to use this device to almost ‘zero’. Under the current rules the means of describing who is able to bring a judicial review claim was deliberately flexible - anyone who has “sufficient interest”. But under the proposed new rules only an individual with a “direct interest” in a case, would be able to bring a judicial review.

“This is more restrictive than currently”, said Low-Beer, “It may appear benign, but it is problematic. Sometimes an individual directly affected by an unlawful state act cannot be found....

Evidence was also given on the issue by Shauneen Lambe, a lawyer from Just for Kids Law. She said that she was shocked by Grayling’s comments on judicial review and asserted that the role of charities and civil society was to provide a voice for those who did not know what they were entitled to and it was essential these groups had fair access to judicial reviews. “We need a system where the future Jews, or homosexuals, or gypsies are given access to courts,” she said.

Crunch time at the Co-op bank

Thousands of worthy people who felt that they were at least trying to sidestep support for the obscene excesses of the banking industry have been crestfallen not only by the colourful revelations about the Chair, Paul Flowers, but more significantly by the prospect of the bank being taken over by hedge funds and private investors. It now looks certain that this deal will go through, removing the principle of ‘mutuality’ and threatening the future of the bank’s ethical reputation.

Co-op Bank customers have set up their own Save Our Bank campaign and are urging people not to switch quite yet. Part of the problem though is who to switch to! If you’re a Co-op customer you can sign up to the campaign here - <http://saveourbank.coop> where you can also get up-to-date information about the financial manoeuvrings.