

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

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Voluntary action (old agenda) to be replaced by 'supply chain sub-contractor'

Regular readers of this newsletter will note in this edition the number of references to G4S, Serco and the other massive quasi-criminal firms now stalking the land. NCIA has not morphed into an anti-capitalist campaign group (though our sympathies certainly reside there). But the role of these global corporations in the decimation of decent public services and the privation of individuals and whole communities cannot be ignored. Nor can we continue to press our case for the defence of independent voluntary action without acknowledging - and opposing - the appalling threat that these global corporations represent to voluntary and community groups.

The scale and pace of privatisation to these behemoths is eye-watering. In 2012-13 Serco alone booked a cool £3bn from UK public sector and central government contracts, and G4S walked off with £1.3bn of our money. With Capita and Atos, the other big two, the total was £6.6bn last year. And there is massively more in the pipeline. The fact that, in the process, some of them lie and steal, abuse and, in some cases actually kill people, makes absolutely no difference to the government's willingness to hand over the cash.

As funding has moved from grants to contracts and as contracts have moved to these corporations, voluntary services groups especially are being told their future lies in sub-contracting. This is no future at all. How anyone can think that the proper job of voluntary action (especially from those that call themselves a charity) is to help global firms boost their profits is beyond understanding, especially firms guilty of appalling practices.

This has to be stopped and this month we have one small opportunity to stick our foot in their door and tell them to sod off - the Government's so-called 'Help to Work' programme will depend on voluntary sector involvement. Hence our joint campaign with Boycott Workfare to persuade voluntary groups to turn their back on this programme.

Please join us and add your voice to the growing number who are saying ‘we will not do this’.

News from NCIA

Join us in Keep Volunteering Voluntary - ‘Help to Work’ doesn’t help and won’t work

On the 28th April, the Government launched its Help to Work programme. This will force people who have been unemployed for 2 years or more to sign on every single day at the Job Centre, received ‘mandatory intervention’ (which is what they call support) or work 30 hours a week for 6 months for a charity or voluntary group in a so-called ‘community placement’. Non-compliance (officially called ‘offences’) will result in the withdrawal of benefits income. Ian Duncan-Smith says “this is the end of the something for nothing culture”.

We have joined up with Boycott Workfare to oppose this programme and have set up the Keep Volunteering Voluntary campaign. Compulsory volunteering is a contradiction in terms and it is, to us, completely unacceptable that the state should actively *create* destitution through benefit sanctions. In addition the government’s own evaluation of piloting community placements found that they made no difference to the number of people finding work. Our conclusion is that the real purpose of the scheme is to further demonise benefit claimants.

We are calling on all voluntary groups to dissociate from this programme and to do so publicly by signing the ‘keep volunteering voluntary’ statement on our website - www.kvv.org.uk. In the first week, more than 160 groups have signed, including Oxfam, NAVCA, Children England and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, as well as numerous local CVSs, voluntary and community groups. Please join us; this is one battle we can win.

NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services

We have been overwhelmed by the support we have received in undertaking this groundbreaking piece of work. At the last count some 20 contributors were researching and preparing working papers on a wide range of topics and themes. The first three papers will go up on our website in the next couple of weeks - *Social Enterprise and Investment*, the *Impact on Volunteer- based Community Groups* and the *Role of National Infrastructure Groups regarding Cuts and Privatisation*. A further seven papers will soon follow and more thereafter. You can catch up with progress [here](#).

NCIA author gets the spotlight!

An interview with NCIA director Colin Rochester appeared in a recent edition of Third Sector. Delving into the arguments of Colin’s tasty new book ‘Rediscovering Voluntary Action, the Beat of a Different Drum’, the article sets out the stall for a radical reappraisal of the direction taken by voluntary groups, especially those involved in delivering services. You can clock the interview [here](#) and there’s an academic review of the book by Armine Ishkanian of the LSE [here](#).... but even better, read the book, which you can order [here](#) .

The evidence builds....

Unmasking Austerity: Opposition and Alternatives in Europe and North America

A new publication from NCIA supporter Dexter Whitfield exposes how austerity policies have fuelled the fire of recession rather than stimulated growth. It identifies key lessons from organising and action against such policies, and urges a rethink of trade union, community and social movement strategies to overcome austerity.

A radical alternative strategy includes economic stimulus, reconstruction of public services, faster fundamental reform of banks and financial markets, the elimination of corporate welfare that enriches big business, and strategies to increase labour's share of national income.

Further details [here](#).

Performance-related payments 'too risky' for charities, NCVO warns

Public sector payment methods that link funding to performance outcomes are putting off many charities from bidding to deliver government programmes, says a new report from NCVO. The amount of working capital required to deliver contracts tendered under the payment-by-results (PbR) funding mechanism makes bidding too great a risk for many voluntary sector groups.

Support for this position comes from Children England who said the NCVO findings would "resonate" with many in the children's sector. Its chief executive Kathy Evans said:

"PbR is certainly not the 'golden bullet' funding solution for transforming public services that it was once hoped to be, as the Children's Centres PbR pilot seems to have proved. The ability to try something truly innovative in the design and delivery of services requires a strong level of trust between projects and their funders. Investment in innovative ideas within the VCS demands the flexibility and simplicity of discretionary grant funding."

You can read more [here](#).

Report from Spartacus shreds employment support for disabled people

'Beyond the Barriers' is a new hard-hitting report from the Spartacus Network of disabled people. It examines the workings of the Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and the Work Programme and the barriers to work faced by people with long term health conditions and impairments.

It finds that ESA is not working with tests that are inaccurate, unreliable and invalid, with few claimants found fit for work actually finding jobs, in comparison to claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance. The report is a damning indictment of the ways in which ill and disabled people are treated by the Department of Work and Pensions. It goes on to list numerous recommendations for creating a system that is humane and fit for purpose.

This is a major piece of work and you can get hold of it at the Centre for Welfare Reform [here](#).

Round and about

Lisa Nandy sets out Labour strategy for voluntary sector

In an interview with Third Sector, shadow minister for the voluntary sector, Lisa Nandy, set out what Labour's approach will be, should they win next year's General Election.

Looks much like business as usual. Public services privatisation looks set to continue and there is a lot of talk about making contracting easier for voluntary groups, leveling the playing field against the global firms (oh yes?), more cuddly 'trusted partnerships', and the importance of the Compact (oh no, I hear you groan). Positives, should they be followed through, are repeal of the Gagging Act, an end to gagging clauses in contracts, less sub-contracting, and a focus on better pay and conditions for front-line staff.

Be underwhelmed [here](#).

Labour promises repeal of the Gagging Act

The Labour Party has promised that it would repeal the lobbying act if it comes into power at the next election. Angela Eagle, shadow leader of the Commons, said that the party would repeal the act and replace it with a universal register of all professional lobbyists backed by a code of conduct and sanctions. She also committed the party to consult with 'charities and campaigners' about what laws should be introduced to replace it, which sounds ominous given the widespread view in the sector that nothing is needed.

Almanac shows shrinking sector

[The voluntary sector is shrinking](#), according to figures in the UK Civil Society Almanac published by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. The report says charities lost £1.3bn of income from central and local government in 2011/12 compared with the previous year.

'Big Society hits the bin again

The government's least favourite toxic brand has suffered another setback as plans for a 'Big Society Day' appear to have been binned. In a BBC interview Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society, slithered off the question by saying "...*arguably, every day is a big society day*"! A Cabinet Office spokeswoman declined to comment further.

Average debt of welfare cuts tenant up to £3,000

The average debt of social housing tenants taking part in a 'Real Life Reform' study now stands at £2,943. The Real Life Reform Steering group has been surveying tenants periodically to assess the impact of the benefits cuts on health, housing, wellbeing, finances, education and employment prospects.

Andy Williams, chair of the Steering Group, said: "*Nearly 8 out of 10 people in the study owe money. With an underlying average debt of £2,943, some may never pay this off given that they have, on average, as little as £3 left at the end of each day for food.*" The research also found that 46 per cent of respondents said they have nothing left to live on once rent, food and bills have been paid. You can depress yourself [here](#).

This month's 'That Takes the Biscuit' Award

G4S, the Cabinet Office and the DWP

Alongside the scandal of the so-called 'Help to Work' programme, comes the news that G4S, the company, along with Serco, at the centre of the electronic tagging fiasco, has won 6 of the 18 regional contracts for the programme. G4S remains under investigation by the Serious Fraud Office, despite agreeing to repay a cool £109M for overcharging on the tagging contract (including claiming for people who were dead).

This decision comes less than three weeks after the government lifted a ban on G4S winning public sector work because of their misdemeanors. Part of their rehabilitation has apparently involved "corporate renewal" and they also now have their very own probation officer - privatised of course (Ian Tyler, formerly CEO of Balfour Beatty) - who has been appointed as the government's 'minder' of these slippery customers.

All of which explains how the DWP can say of the Help to Work contracts: *"All contracts have been awarded after open and fair competition. G4S were successful in this competition and, following their recent corporate renewal approved by the Cabinet Office, have been awarded the contracts."*

So there we have it - all you need to keep sweet with the government is have a process of 'corporate renewal' in your back pocket, whatever that means, and a minder to keep an eye on you, you naughty boy. Do they think we are totally stupid?

Heros, heroines, & keeping on keeping on

Refugee Action wins judicial review

[Refugee Action](#) has won a judicial review against the Home Secretary, Theresa May, in the High Court. The charity had challenged May over her ruling that the financial assistance available to asylum seekers in the UK would be frozen at 2011 levels. The High Court ruled that the Home Secretary was "irrational" and "misunderstood information" when setting the level of financial support. The ruling requires the Home Secretary to make a new decision on the level of support by 9 August.

According to Refugee Action, people whose asylum claims have not been finally determined and do not have the right to work receive financial support of as little as £5.23 a day. Dave Garratt, chief executive of Refugee Action, said that the decision to seek the judicial review had not been taken lightly and that it followed "extensive research and advocacy by Refugee Action and our partners across the sector. After five years of our evidence being ignored, we felt legal action was our only option."

Mental Health service users won't take no for an answer

Service users of a Cambridge NHS mental health clinic, 'Lifeworks', have been occupying its Tenison Road building for nearly 8 weeks, in a defiant battle to stop its closure. The

service has been offering vital support for those with Personality Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder for the past 12 years. But the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Foundation Trust planned to close it without any consultation and despite protests from 27 consultant psychiatrists, other health workers and users groups campaigned hard.

The fightback has been largely led by women, who make up around 95% of those who use Lifeworks. Initially planned as a '2 hour sit-in', the occupation has been going strong for the past 7 weeks with no signs of ending. A spokeswoman said: *"We were told that Lifeworks was for life, hence the name. We are really angry that nobody bothered to speak to us about the cuts and that they have not consulted with service users, carers or even GPs."* In response to the pressure, the Trust has admitted *"we could have done more to engage with service users"*. It says it is *"now planning to have further discussions with all those affected. All options over the future of Lifeworks remain open."*

You can send them a message of support at savelifeworks@mail.com

NatCAN conference debates fightback tactics

The recent National Community Activist Network (NatCAN) conference was devoted to answering the question 'in the age of austerity, what can you do?' The debate centred on strengthening individual activism and promoting neighbourhood action, as well as working at regional and national levels and the formation of new political parties and structures. A report of the discussions can be downloaded [here](#).

Corporate madness continues

Serco to be thrown off Community Payback contract

Serco's £37M contract to manage community punishments has been cut short amid claims the scheme has been "a disaster". The contract (held with the London Probation Trust) intended to run until 2016 will now finish at the end of this year. Concerns were first raised when the BBC broadcast allegations that offenders were not properly supervised. A Ministry of Justice spokesman told the Evening Standard that ministers wanted to overhaul all probation services nationally *"to ensure a consistent approach."* Ah, nothing to do with problems then.

G4S, Serco and asylum housing - yet another scandal

And as if we need any more evidence, nonetheless more comes from the Public Accounts Committee, which has issued a lambasting report on the government's failure to manage outsourced contracts, notably the involvement of Serco and G4S in the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers.

Three contractors secured the new big contracts; two of them, G4S and Serco, had no previous experience of accommodating asylum seekers. Comments from the report include: *"G4S and Serco failed to inspect and check the properties before taking them over.... The standard of the accommodation provided has often been unacceptably poor for a very fragile group of individuals and families.... The companies failed to improve quality in a timely manner... the Department's failure to impose penalties on contractors in the transition period... over a year into the contract the accommodation is still not of the required standard."*

You can read an excellent Open Democracy article on this scandal by John Grayson [here](#) and you can see the PAC report for yourself [here](#).

ATOS down the chute too!

And in what is probably a first, the DWP announced via Twitter that they are cancelling the contract with ATOS for Work Capability Assessment: *“Today we are announcing we are seeking a new provider to replace ATOS for the Work Capability Assessment. [9:50 AM - 27 Mar 2014](#)”*

Dismay over the corporates in criminal justice field too

The latest UK Justice Policy Review from the Centre for Crime and Justice also bemoans the extent to which Serco and G4S are creating a stranglehold in this corner of the public realm.

G4S and Serco were paid nearly £600 million by the National Offender Management Service (Noms) for prison and probation-related work between May 2010 and October 2012: some 40 per cent of the £1.5 billion spent by Noms during this period. And even this understates the position since many of the smaller organisations with contracts are actually owned by or associated with our two least favourite companies, along with Sodexo, the third big boy on the block.

Richard Garside, Director of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies said:

“Despite the government’s expressed commitment to creating a diverse marketplace for criminal justice services, it is currently dominated by a couple multinational security companies with tarnished reputations and a few large national charities.

As the government continues to press ahead with plans to privatise the probation service, this only adds to concerns that there are simply not enough credible and experienced organisations out there that can competently undertake the complex work involved.”

You can clock the sorry story [here](#).

Meanwhile.....G4S guards charged with manslaughter

The three G4S guards who were found by an inquest jury to have unlawfully killed Jimmy Mubenga are now being brought to trial. The preliminary hearing was held at the Old Bailey on 16th April. The three are charged with manslaughter. No corporate manslaughter charge is to be brought against G4S as the CPS said there was ‘insufficient evidence’.

*****And one chance to have a go at the global corporates - Show Serco the Door - 8th May - London *****

‘We Own It’ is a campaign group set up to defend public services from privatisation and they are turning up to Serco’s AGM to make the point - **10.30am - 11.30am, Thursday 8th May, outside the offices of Clifford Chance LLP, [10 Upper Bank Street, London E14 5JJ](#).**

Sign up to the event on [facebook](#) or email them at info@weownit.org.uk to let them know you’re coming.

And if you want to find out more about ‘We Own It’ and their position they have produced a new infographic that you can have a look at [here](#).

Not to forget other madness!

Merger-itis hits homelessness provision

A total of 36 London homelessness providers have been lost due to merger or closure over the past five years, according to a report from the London Housing Foundation - between 2008 and 2013, 12 agencies had closed and 24 had merged, with just eight new organisations entering the sector. 'Floating support' is now concentrated in the hands of three providers (Single Homeless Project, One Housing and Look Ahead), who deliver 80% of services.

One anonymous provider quoted in the report said: *'We are feeling the full impact of two particularly vicious and unhelpful agendas: welfare reform, and ever less intelligent procurement. Multiple tendering exercises and providers promising ever-cheaper services result in disruption for service users and ever-greater insecurity for staff. We can't keep cutting forever, replacing one set of unqualified and inexperienced staff with another with even less experience and skill.'*

No 'transparency' for charities doing public services

Taking a somewhat contradictory position, the government has assured charities delivering public services that a drive to improve transparency in outsourcing will not result in them being subject to the Freedom of Information Act, i.e. reducing transparency.

The Ministry of Justice was responding to comments from ACEVO's Stephen Bubb, who wrote saying that he feared the introduction of legally binding FOI Act requirements would price charities out of delivering public services and sought assurances that this was not the *"start of a slippery slope"* towards further red tape for charities and social enterprises.

Outrageous that Bubb should argue such a position and outrageous that the government should agree with him.

Dramatic Rise in foodbank use as a result of sanctioning

The Trussell Trust has published [figures](#) which reveal a dramatic rise in the amount of people receiving support from their foodbanks. Key findings include:

- 913,138 people received three days' emergency food from Trussell Trust's foodbanks in 2013-14 compared to 346,992 in 2012-13, a 163% rise in a year
- 83% of foodbanks report benefit 'sanctioning' as cause of rising numbers
- While there has been a 163% increase in foodbank use in the past year, there has only been a 45% increase in the number of Trussell Trust foodbanks opening

Trussell Trust Chairman Chris Mould says that these figures are just the *"tip of the iceberg of UK food poverty, it doesn't include those helped by other emergency food providers, those living in towns where there is no foodbank, people who are too ashamed to seek help or the large number of people who are only just coping by eating less and buying cheap food."*

And just to cheer you up

We know that reading our newsletters can sometimes be a grim experience, so here's a couple of things to finish with that we hope will put a smile on your face.

The first is an article from our friends over at Open Democracy by Adam Ramsey. Entitled '*Scotland isn't different, it's Britain that's bizarre*', it nicely puts into context many of the things we have been complaining about and allows us to realise that in other parts of the world things are sometimes a bit less mad. Feast on this [here](#).

The second is a stunning bit of You Tube footage that came via our funky friends at the People's Republic of Southwark. It features a teacher - Šeherzada Delić - from Bosnia-Herzegovina, giving both barrels to her local political representatives. We could do with a bit of this at the Palce of Westminster and at quite a few town halls around the country. Marvel at her courage - [here](#)