

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

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Open letter to Lisa Nandy - you sound just like the Tories

The Labour Party has opened a consultation called 'Renewing Our Bond with the Third Sector'. With the General Election less than a year away, many of us have tried to put aside our memories of New Labour and how they started the rot - cuts to services, cuts in living standards for the poorest in our communities, co-option of voluntary action and the selling off of vital public services to greedy, predatory private corporations. With the Coalition government continuing these 'reforms' (as they are deceitfully described), we desperately search for a positive alternative. Well, keep looking.

Today we have sent Lisa Nandy, Shadow Minister for Civil Society, an open letter to tell her how disappointed we are. Here is an excerpt from our letter:

"There is no mention in your document of the current climate of cuts and austerity, the corrupt politics and unequal power relations that are present, the xenophobia, the hostility towards those who have little and the demonisation of benefit claimants, the pressures on individuals and communities and the democratic role of voluntary action to stand up to these attacks. There is nothing about how government, and now the private sector attempts to co-opt the spirit and self determination of people to organise around their own issues. There is nothing about comprehensive and accountable public services and how voluntary services augment not substitute for this. There is no heart or soul. And there is certainly no change of culture offered."

You can view her dismal consultation paper [here](#) and the full text of our letter on our website - www.independentaction.net.

News from NCIA

NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services

This major work is what has kept us busy over the last few months and is now coming to spectacular fruition. So far we have released 7 papers and there are another 9 to go. Available now are:

[The Ideological Context](#) by *Dexter Whitfield* examines the changes brought about by the commitment of successive governments to the principles and practice of neo-liberalism, explains what neo-liberalism is, how this has reshaped the environment in which the UK voluntary and community sector now operates and its impact on voluntary agencies.

[The Rise and Influence of Social Enterprise, Social Investment and Public Service Mutuals](#) by *Les Huckfield* documents how New Labour and Coalition governments, within a framework of neo-liberal thinking, have introduced business concepts and quasi markets as a way of re-engineering voluntary services. The report shows how, using 'capacity building' and with the support of sector leadership bodies, the voluntary services industry has been reined in as 'governable terrain' and led to adopt private sector assumptions and ways of working.

[Outsourcing and the Voluntary Sector](#) by *Laird Ryan* documents the Coalition Government's drive to privatise public services and evidences the damage being wrought by competition and marketisation, shows where the money is going, and uncovers the growing trend of Voluntary Services as sub-contractors to profit-hungry corporations like Serco and G4S

[The Devil that has come amongst us](#) by *Andy Benson* looks in detail at the procurement and commissioning regimes through which this progressive enslavement on voluntary groups has been achieved, and the ways this has diminished interest and capacity to take their mandate from users and communities and speak out against injustice.

[Ordinary Glory: Big Surprise not Big Society](#) by *Mike Aiken* looks at the impact of the changed environment on small volunteer-based community groups, shows how the influence of contracting and marketisation has damaged all levels of voluntary action but describes how, with a little encouragement, these groups and their activities might discover the seeds of a positive future.

[Does Size Matter Paper 1](#) and [Does Size Matter Paper 2](#) by *Ursula Murray* and *Linda Milbourne* include new research findings and examine the changing ecology of the voluntary sector, paying particular attention to the emerging differences - and fortunes - of small and large voluntary services groups. Paper 1 looks at the trends in income distribution across the sector and the evidence from area-based studies on the extent to which size is a factor in influencing experiences and approaches. Paper 2, drawing on in-depth interviews with 17 voluntary groups, explores the specific experiences of competition between larger and smaller providers in specific service areas. The paper concludes by setting out the practical and ethical dilemmas for groups caught up in this turbulent environment.

More reports to come in the next few weeks; you can catch up with progress [here](#).

Keep Volunteering Voluntary - 400 groups (and rising) say no to 'Help to Work'

400 voluntary groups have so far signed up the Keep Volunteering Voluntary pledge to boycott the Government's so-called 'Help to Work' community work placements scheme, which forces people to work with charities or face their benefits being withdrawn. The list of signatories is a wonderful mixture of national and local charities,

second tier support groups and community organisations all prepared to make a simple public statement that they will not be involved in this programme.

Meanwhile pressure grows on the DWP's corporate contractors to find voluntary groups or local authorities that *are* willing to offer Community Work Placements, as they are dubbed. We have only found a handful so far, including Portsmouth and Bexley Councils, Groundwork and Faith Regen, although press reports say that 15,000 people have so far been sent on the scheme. Interestingly, one participant - Bytemark IT Solutions - was 'dropped in on' by Chancellor George Osborne (he must do that all the time). This publicity gave opponents the opportunity to explain to Bytemark what they were really involved in. To their credit they promptly withdrew from the scheme and tweeted: "*You've spoken, we've listened. From tomorrow, no more involvement ever with #workfare. Had the best of intentions, we were wrong.*"

We are keen to gather information about groups that are offering placements and about the experiences of claimants who have been sent on them. Please contact us via the KVV website - www.kvv.org.uk. Please also continue to promote sign ups to the pledge amongst groups you are in contact with. With enough support we can crash this odious scheme.

Heros, heroines, & keeping on keeping on

Black Mental Health UK wins Inquiry into mental health deaths

The human rights campaigns group, Black Mental Health UK (BMH UK) has welcomed the announcement by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission to hold a year-long [inquiry](#) into non-natural deaths of people with mental health conditions detained by the state. This will include people detained in psychiatric hospitals and by the Police and is the culmination of 30 years of campaigning about the disproportionate representation of African Caribbean people detained under the Mental Health Act.

According to official figures 215 people died in prison last year - the highest number since records began. Of these 74 were suicides. There were 98 non-natural deaths of people detained in psychiatric hospitals and almost half of those who died in police custody in 2012/13 had mental health conditions.

You can find out more about BMUK's campaign against black deaths in custody [here](#), and you can back the campaign by signing their petition [here](#).

Victory for 'Keep Profit Out of Child Protection'

A vigorous campaign to stop the privatisation of child protection work has seen the Government back down on the proposal. A 38 Degrees petition launched by Children England attracted over 12,500 signatures in 2 weeks and this, together with opposition from other places such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services, knocked the proposal on the head. However, the change only relates to the involvement of private firms, not to the principle of outsourcing. The government has said that only non-profit organisations will be eligible to deliver statutory child protection services. A step in the right direction but leaves unanswered whether voluntary groups should be doing this work either? You can read more [here](#).

Kathy Evans, chief executive of Children England said: "*We really welcome the fact that government has recognised the breadth and strength of feeling about the risks of allowing profit-making in child protection*". Meanwhile adviser to Michael Gove and former Barnardo's chief executive Martin Narey revealed in an article defending

privatisation, that he had not been told of the proposal. His rather self-centred conclusion was that this meant there really wasn't a "*master plan to privatise child protection*" otherwise he would have heard of it!

False Economy launches 'DWP Unspun'

False Economy has launched a new site to tell you everything that the Government doesn't want you to know about work and benefits. Highlights of 'DWP Unspun' will include:

- The amazing DWP Truth Detector - to fact-check government statements.
- The essential guide to welfare cuts and reforms - often complex changes explained in plain English.
- An 'incredible infographic' tracking the unstoppable progress of Universal Credit.

Some of [DWP Unspun](#) will make you laugh, like coverage of the government's increasingly desperate attempts to put a positive spin on its failing reforms. But much of it will make you angry - and the site's [Take action](#) section explains what you can do next.

This month's 'That Takes the Biscuit' Award

Housing Benefit limits? Well not for MPs!

In 2013, 335 MPs with constituencies outside London were paid more than £5 million to rent second homes. Half of them claimed more than £1,675 a month in rent, and the biggest rent claim was for £2,467 a month. Monthly rent for the typical London household is £1,300.

A whopping 254 of these claimed more in rent payments than the maximum a single housing benefit claimant in Westminster is eligible to claim (£1,083 and the highest in the country). And to add insult to injury, our guardians of the public purse voted against a Parliamentary motion to ban letting agent fees, despite 57 of their claiming back their own bills for this.

You couldn't make it up (or rather you could now... it's all so blatant).

Radical funding body passes £¼M landmark

NCIA offers its congratulations to the Edge Fund, which supports grassroots groups aiming at radical social change, and has raised its first £250,000. Following the motto 'radical funding for radical change', the fund supports groups that are considered too radical by most other funders.

Launched 18 months ago, Edge has funded an eclectic range of organisations, from lesbian migrant support groups and Roma community organisers to those opposing police repression, immigration raids and the arms trade, from anti-capitalists and anarchist groups to people working on disability rights, local community organising and climate change.

Edge Fund's fourth funding round has now opened with grants of up to £5,000 available to support work run by - and for - communities most affected by discrimination,

inequality and injustice, and work that aims to create systemic change. The application consists of 5 questions, which can be answered over the phone or by email. The deadline for applications is 5pm on Monday 8th September. And the fund is now looking for donations to make a fifth funding round possible. For more information about making a donation, applying for funds or becoming a member, go to www.edgefund.org.uk or call 0300 123 1965 or 07767 126 915.

Keep the Safety Net Campaign launches petition

From April 2015, the government is proposing to cut the £347M budget for Local Welfare Assistance Schemes. This fund is used by councils to provide emergency support. Its removal will make it increasingly difficult to help vulnerable people facing short-term crises, as well as place an enormous strain on voluntary groups

The Keep the Safety Net Campaign has been launched by the Cripplegate Foundation and Islington Council to get this decision reversed. More details on their website [here](#).

‘Our’ groups start to spread

In another challenge to increasingly moribund local CVSs, community groups in local areas are starting to come together to ‘stand up for local people’, building alliances between small charities, activists, advice services, youth workers, campaigners, trade unionists, and community organisers. The main but not exclusive focus of these groups is on planning and regeneration issues. Examples include [Our Tottenham](#), [Our West Hendon](#), and Our New Cross.

Salford Star to be back in print again

The award winning radical local newspaper, the Salford Star is to be re-launched as a print magazine. The Star had been a thorn in the side of Salford Council, rapacious private developers and other such hench-people for a good long while before financial problems confined it to online publishing. Now after 5 years, it will once again physically hit the streets, with the first print edition appearing in September. The print run of 20,000 will be delivered free to homes, shops, businesses and community centres.

If you’re in the area and want to be involved with the Star, then email info@salfordstat.com or phone 07957 982960. <http://www.salfordstar.com/article.asp?id=2284>

Detained Fast Track asylum system unlawful says High Court

In a Landmark ruling in the High Court, Detention Action won its case earlier this month and established that the Home Office’s Detained Fast Track (DFT) system for asylum seekers is unlawful. Sonal Ghelani of the Migrants Law Project, who acted on behalf of Detention Action said: *“Serious concerns regarding the operation of this process have been expressed, over a number of years, by respected organisations such as Detention Action and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The Government failed to heed these concerns necessitating legal action by a small charity. The Court has found that the DFT is an unlawful process”*.

You can see the full judgement [here](#) and a summary briefing [here](#) . There will be more news after the 17th July, when a further hearing will determine what action the Home Office must now take. Detention Action will seek suspension of the process until deficiencies have been remedied.

In a separate initiative a Parliamentary Inquiry into immigration detention has also been launched. A website has been set up for this, managed by the office of Sarah Teather MP. You can find out more here - <http://detentioninquiry.com/>

‘Assembly for Democracy’ forms new Steering Group

Following an Assembly for Democracy planning meeting at the House of Commons on July 1, a Steering Group has been set up to move the initiative forward. This aims to make concrete plans for an Assembly, including structure, working groups, outcomes, fund raising, publicity, linking with local People’s Assemblies against Austerity and democracy movements internationally. The group will meet on Thursday, July 31 at 6.30pm. Further information from Corinna Lotz at World to Win - info@aworldtowin.net

‘Justice for Sale’ - unions campaign to halt privatisation and cost cutting

Justice for Sale has been published by the TUC and its seven unions with members employed in the justice sector, as the first activity of the ‘Speak Up for Justice’ campaign.

The report looks in detail at what has been happening in the three areas of offender management in England and Wales - prisons, probation and electronic tagging. It shows that one in six of the UK’s prisons is now run privately, with fewer staff, on lower wages and with higher levels of prisoner overcrowding. All these contracts are held by G4S, Serco or Sodexo. Both Serco and G4S have been investigated by the Serious Fraud Office for overcharging on tagging contracts.

Meanwhile much of the Probation Service will have been handed over to the same firms by next year. The report highlights the slide into lower standards, higher risks to the safety of the public, and a criminal justice system that is run for profit rather than rehabilitation. You can depress yourself with this chilling picture [here](#). And find out more on the Speak up for Justice Campaign at www.speakupforjustice.org

The madness continues!

Tory MP whips up more gagging hysteria

More evidence that the attacks on charity campaigning are part of an orchestrated government strategy comes in the form of the latest foray by Tory MP Conor Burns. Burns has complained to the Charity Commission about an Oxfam tweet which was part of their campaign against poverty in the UK. The context was the launch of a report by Oxfam, Church Action on Poverty and the Trussell Trust showing that food poverty in Britain has risen over the past year, with over 20 million meals handed out by the three main food aid providers, an increase of 54% on the previous year.

Here’s the [offending item](#) and an article about it. After Burns’ complaint, fellow Tories Charlie Elphick and Priti Patel then waded in and Burns claimed the Prime Minister’s support for his action. Oxfam hit back with a rigorous defence and many voluntary groups (including NCIA) stood with them via a letter printed in The Times. Many see this as an opening salvo in the moves to shut down dissent to the government’s policies on public services, privatisation, and cuts to benefits and living standards for the poorest people, as we move to the arrival of the Gagging Act provisions in September.

Trussell Trust tones down criticism after government anger

More evidence of Government pressure on charities comes from Chris Mould, Chair of the Trussell Trust, who revealed to the Barings Panel on Independence that the charity decided to tone down its criticisms of the benefit system after someone in power warned them that they could get shut down. He reported a face-to-face conversation in March 2013 with “*someone in power*” where he was told that he must think more carefully otherwise “*the government might try to shut you down*”. In another example

he spoke of receiving a phone call on his day off “*from someone in the Secretary of State’s office which was basically to tell me that the boss was very angry with us because we were publicising the concerns we have over the rising number of people who were struggling as a consequence of delays and inefficiencies in the benefits system*”.

The charity then took the decision to tone down its criticisms so that the government would maintain its contact. Mould said that this decision was a response of a “*positive nature*” (ed. In what way this was “positive” was not reported).

It’s the rich what gets the gravy, it’s the poor what gets the blame

In 2004, you needed £700 million to be in Britain's 50 wealthiest people. 10 years later, that figure is now £1.7 billion. In 2004, the richest 1,000 people owned assets worth £200 billion, today they are worth £519 billion. The 5 richest families now own more wealth than the bottom 20% combined. The average salary for a FTSE 100 CEO is now £84,000 A WEEK.

Meanwhile 13 million people, 20% of the population, are now classed as living in poverty, of which over 8 million come from families who are IN WORK. In 2004, the median weekly wage was £462. Today, it is £427 a week. The cost of living has risen by 34% since 2004, meaning that the average disposable income per household is now almost £1,200 a year lower.

In addition, 913,138 people used food-banks in 2013/14, compared to 346,992 in 2012/13 and 26,000 in 2008/09. There has been a 74% increase in the number of malnutrition-related hospital admissions since 2009, whilst cases of rickets have risen by 25% in 4 years. Public health experts have warned that the rise of malnutrition in the UK “has all the signs of a public health emergency.” [from a Guardian comment 30th May 2014].

And this is happening right now, right here, in the good old United Kingdom, one of the richest countries on earth.

People need support, not sanctions says new report

A new report from Catherine Hale, a Work Programme service user, is a damning indictment of the Government’s back-to-work programmes for people with disabilities and health conditions. [Fulfilling Potential? ESA and the fate of the Work Related Activity Group](#), is based on the experiences of over 500 people being required to engage in back-to-work schemes. The findings are startling.

- Most people wanted to work if they could find the right sort of job and support
- The Work Programme and Jobcentre Plus were pushing people into generic activities rather than providing specialist support
- The inappropriateness of these activities and the threat of benefits being cut was leaving people feeling very anxious
- People said their health, confidence and sense of purpose in life were all worse after engaging with the programmes.

More evidence that, far from helping people into employment, these Government programmes actually make things worse.

‘Conditionality’ now spreads to housing associations

Some time ago we reported that Yarlington Housing Group had introduced a ‘household ambition plan’ as a condition of new tenancies, encouraging tenants to ‘gain employment, adopt a healthy lifestyle, get a qualification or contribute to their local

community' (NCIA Newsletter No 32). It appears this was not an isolated outbreak of enthusiasm for the 'housing-manager-as-moral-guide-and-guardian' role. As conditionality spreads throughout the benefits system, so it has also become the rage in the social housing field we are being told. For example, New Charter Housing Group in Tameside now has a 'Community Contribution' scheme that means applicants for housing get extra points if they are in work, volunteering in the community, in 'approved job related training', are registered carers or foster carers, or are former or current armed forces personnel. Applicants are now placed in a 'band' - gold, silver or bronze - according to their needs and their positive impact on their community.

'A Call to Action for the Common Good' - sector 'leaders' at it again

A working group of 'sector leaders', led by Lucy de Groot of Community Service Volunteers

has called for a radical rethink of how the state, private and voluntary sectors as well as citizens interact with each other in order to address the challenges of the 21st century.

The report, *A Call to Action for the Common Good*, acknowledges real problems such as male hegemony, concentrations of power, and private sector monopolies before proposing 'solutions' that can only be described as mindless pap. Their three prescriptions for change are 'investing in tomorrow', 'everyone doing their bit' and 'getting connected' all including, of course a "*leading role for the voluntary and community sector*". This report - which you can belly laugh at [here](#) - is an extraordinary example of how people who have been co-opted by the establishment and occupy the rarified atmosphere of public policy have completely lost the ability to see the wood for the trees.

A poetic response from one of our correspondents to this report:

*"Invest in tomorrow
Everyone do their bit
Get connected"*

*This is not a social policy
It's not even a philosophy*

*"Rediscover our social selves"...
Perhaps it's pop psychology?*

*But most
It looks like spin to cover a sell-out*

To old fashioned capitalism.

Just ask Mark Carney.

So naturally the voluntary and community "sector" is rewarded with a "key role"

*Because it believes in nothing consistent
Nobody could accuse it of selling out
Even though it has little to sell
Beyond its own spin
That tedious, unevicenced "call to action"
True or false - who cares, anyway?
Blank verse, bland faces, bleached policies."*

Charities should run prisons says Tory MP

Guy Opperman, the Tory MP for Hexham, has said that the next step for public sector reform of the prison system should involve charities taking over prisons. Speaking at a Westminster Hall debate Opperman suggested that *"we should be looking into the idea of an academy prison, whereby the whole prison is run by a charity or altruistic institution?"*

He went on: *"The current model is either state or private, whereas in schools we have transformed education by the provision of academies that are outwith the state or private institutions. Surely, the next step for public sector reform of prisons should be the charity not just providing the education within a small segment of a prison, but taking over the whole prison itself."* Jeremy Wright, the parliamentary under-secretary of state for justice did not rule out the possibility.

So there we have it - charities should not just be responsible for helping criminals, but for punishing them too. Twenty years ago such an idea would have been unthinkable, now it presents a glimpse of an entirely plausible future.

Round and about....

Third Sector survey shows gathering support for NCIA positions

Third Sector magazine's *State of the Sector* survey (July 2014) shows that more and more people are coming to share NCIA's analysis of the deteriorating environment for voluntary services groups. Highlights of the survey results are:

- Nearly 40% had 'no idea' which party had the best policies for the sector and 23% said 'none of them';
- Nick Hurd's 3 stated goals for the sector (more resources into the sector, easier to work with the state and easier to run a charity) all got a strong thumbs down - 70%, 62% and 52% respectively thought not;
- 63% felt that independence is compromised by the shift from grants to contracts;
- 57% thought the Government is less tolerant of challenge and criticism and 51% that the gagging act is a deliberate attempt to muzzle the sector;
- Only 11% felt the sector's independence is 'in excellent health'.

The independence of not-for-profit organisations is under threat globally

The independence of not-for-profit organisations is at risk due to the hostile rhetoric and regressive policies of governments around the world, says a new [report](#) from the Charities Aid Foundation. This describes a wave of policies which are weakening the independence of not-for-profit organisations, and in both the developed and developing world. Governments in emerging economies such as Azerbaijan, Ecuador, Indonesia and Algeria are joined by the likes of Canada and the UK in introducing legislation to restrict the ability of NGOs to campaign and influence government policy.

Residential children's care - an example of market failure

Here's an interesting article from Kathy Evans, of Children England, which examines the incremental development of a market in residential children's care services. This tracks the changes that have resulted now in $\frac{3}{4}$ of provision being run by commercial companies. As Evans says:

"Unlike most other 'market creation' in public services, no government ever decided deliberately to create a competitive market for children's care, nor did anyone assess how such a new market should operate. If anyone had theoretically assessed the

residential care market before allowing market competition to proliferate, they would have found that in classical economic terms, it is inherently imperfect: a market that has few paying customers (oligopsony); has limited scope for growth or surplus/profit through sales expansion; has financial and regulatory barriers to new providers entering the market (tending to oligopoly); and high risks of price distortions and cartels. Economic theory would have told us that a residential care market was structured for market failure, requiring significant market regulation and national strategic oversight.”

You can clock the whole article [here](#).

Peterborough SIB sacrificed to Probation privatisation

The much-lauded Peterborough Prison Social Impact Bond programme is being cut after only 3 of its proposed 7 years time span. This, the Government claimed, was, for reasons of consistency, to allow the ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ (TR) privatisation programme to replace the SIB within the area. This decision was taken despite the second evaluation of the Peterborough SIB showing ‘promising results’ in reducing reoffending. Meanwhile the evaluation of a second SIB - at Doncaster Prison - showed poorer results; this scheme is being run as a payment-by-results contract much closer to those proposed for the probation sell-off.

So what’s going on? The devil is in the detail as Les Huckfield, our correspondent on the subject explains:

- *Peterborough is a cosy, subsidised operation compared with TR. As TR begins to unravel, comparisons will be made about the disparity of resources between the two. Leaving Peterborough intact would lead to demands to increase TR resources significantly. TR should deliver big MoJ savings and that, rather than reducing reoffending, is its rationale.*
- *Peterborough's 'success' is only provisional and is in no way comparable to what is intended under TR. The better comparison is that at Doncaster Prison, which is being delivered on a TR basis.*
- *Peterborough providers are secure in their funding, so that they don't carry the risk. In TR, prime and subcontractors carry all the risk.*

In short, I think we can show that Peterborough is being scrapped because it makes TR look cheap, risky and unreliable - which it is!”

Food banks caught between the moral and the political

Debates have raged for years within the homelessness scene about the role of soup runs, one side arguing that they are a matter of ‘immediate necessity’ and driven by a sense of humanity, others saying they are a ‘sticking plaster’ response, letting the state off the hook. As hunger has again marched into the settled community, these debates are now taking place amongst those responsible for food banks. A useful insight into the state of play within the food bank world is provided by a blog piece from the The Primitive Ranter, a “*bible loving, liberation theology inspired, urban Christian activist*”. You can drop into their conversation [here](#).

Significant changes in EU directives

NAVCA has produced a useful [summary](#) of the recent changes to EU procurement directives. Though compulsory registration on the National Contract Finder website, of all local government contracts worth over £25,000 is proposed, other changes could be positive for local voluntary groups. For example, contracts falling into the health and social services, educational, criminal justice, cultural or community services categories and worth less than 750,000 Euros are removed from EU procurement law. The legal

scope for imaginative interpretation to introduce the concepts of social value and to build up local capacity is much increased, so if the spirit is willing....

Rethinking Commissioning - a blast from the past

In a sobering reminder that things never seem to get better, Simon Duffy of the Centre for Welfare Reform has re-published his 'Unlocking the Imagination', a paper which first appeared in 1996. *"It offers a path for commissioners who do not see themselves as experts in how other people should live, but instead want to create the conditions for citizenship and stronger communities for everyone. It is as challenging today",* says Simon, *"as it was when it was first published in 1996."*

Amongst the issues explored are:

- What does community inclusion really mean?
- How the service system provides gifts, rather than entitlements
- Why the prevalent model of commissioning is bound to fail?
- The practical strategies necessary for commissioning that empowers

Not so much a trip down Memory Lane as a kick up the backside - it really is time that we put into place a system that works for people. Be re-enthused [here](#).

Taking action on poverty: Does civil society hold the answer?

This is the title of a special supplement from the New Statesman, published in May in partnership with the Webb Memorial Trust. It explores the role of civil society in reducing poverty and inequality, and questions why the voluntary sector has not been as vocal as it could or should have been in the face of increasing poverty and inequality throughout the UK. Excellent pieces, including articles by NCI's Colin Rochester and Penny Waterhouse. Good bedtime reading [here](#).

Electoral Commission publishes gagging guidance

The Electoral Commission has now published full guidance for 'non-party campaigners' who are worried that they may be breaking the gagging act in the run-up to next May's General Election. You can access this [here](#). The Commission is also planning a series of [Webinars](#) to explain the rules.