

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

www.independentaction.net info@independentaction.net

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Are we going crazy... or is it them?

This is a strange and unsettling time to try and make sense of events around us. In Scotland nearly half (sadly not enough) of the population are so fed up with the Westminster clique that they are prepared to leave the country entirely. And it appears that it was older and richer people who stopped it happening. Pathetically approximate promises of greater devolution from English political leaders immediately look likely to be kicked into the long grass. The conference season then treats us to a Labour Party that appears to be in a coma and the Tories, fearing UKIP, promise more 'welfare clampdown' and further erosion of our liberties. The Liberal Democrats have yet to come but, well, who cares? The Gagging Act now comes into force - will, we wonder, find ourselves in Court if we urge people not to vote for any of them?

Meanwhile, in a stunning illustration of how surreal things have become, it is revealed that the assumed *profits from prostitution* are now included in the official figures to demonstrate our miraculous economic recovery ("a small but colourful addition" said the BBC correspondent). The theme of you-couldn't-make-it-up farce is ably amplified by our very own Civil Society minister who manages to catch himself with his trousers down (exit stage left clutching his jimjams and selfie). Big Society Network and the Office for Civil Society continue to try and avoid telling us how they managed to do sod-all with the three million quid they made off with. And the new kid at the OCS turns out to be the ex-DWP Social Justice Director, where he could hardly be congratulated for enhancing the department's reputation for social justice!

Maybe the answer is to declare the Westminster village a separate country and then the rest of us might well be 'better together'?

Meanwhile back in the real world.....

News from NCIA

'Localism Watch' - new project launch

www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/collections/localismwatch#0

In collaboration with Open Democracy we have just launched Localism Watch, an online resource to help grassroots activists make sense of the government's localism agenda - and challenge it. It's edited by one of our directors, Laird Ryan.

Localism as a form of activism emerged in the 1970s out of a concern for society and the environment in the face of globalisation. Not surprisingly, the Coalition government has worked hard to 'reform' localism. The Localism Act 2011 purports to 'shift power from central government back into the hands of individuals, communities and councils'.

But set against austerity and privatisation, it's clear that the new localism is another tool in the Coalition's drive to concentrate power in the privileged centre and maximise profits for its private sector backers. While local communities now 'enjoy' the right to challenge councils to run public services, they have lost the right to challenge strategic planning proposals like nuclear proliferation, fracking, and HS2.

By informing, engaging and challenging, Localism Watch aims to take localism back to where it truly belongs.

Have you a story to tell about localism? Are you preparing a Neighbourhood Plan, or bidding for one of the community rights? Has your council tried to outsource a public service, or encouraged voluntary groups to become social enterprises? Have 'oligopolies' like G4S and Serco taken over your local services? Or would you, quite simply, like to know what all the fuss is about?

If your answer to any of those questions is 'yes', get in touch with Laird at Localism Watch: lairdryan@bignall.free.online.co.uk

NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services

We have released six more Inquiry reports since the last newsletter. These are:

[The position and role of national infrastructure bodies concerning the cuts to and privatisation of public services](#) by *Lis Pritchard* and *Andy Benson* looks at the record of six national infrastructure organisations (ACEVO, NAVCA, NCVO, Locality, Clinks and Homeless Link) to show how they have implicitly or explicitly supported the outsourcing of public services. Most have committed resources to encouraging and supporting voluntary groups to bid for public services contracts.

[Incidentally, NCVO's response to this report was to accuse NCIA of "ideological ramblings"; a bit rich given that any interest in ideological debate is precisely what they appear to shrink from!]

[Homes for local radical action: the position and role of local umbrella groups](#) by *Penny Waterhouse*. This report shows how many local CVSs and other infrastructure groups have actively assisted with the outsourcing and privatisation programme, despite mounting evidence that their own local voluntary groups are losing out to national charities and private sector contractors. Voice is given to the frustration of many frontline workers and others who want to resist these changes, gives examples of alternatives that are emerging and sets out an agenda for change.

[Inquiry into the future of voluntary service support to BME older people](#) by *Valerie Lipman* demonstrates that little has changed for BAME older people over the last 30 years in terms of inequality, access to services and unmet needs, as mainstream bodies persist in neglecting this group of people. This has created a situation in which the

contribution of small BAME groups is crucial but these groups are undermined by cuts in spending and further marginalisation.

[Refugee and Migrant Group Action on Xenophobia and Public Policy](#) by *Lisa Roden* looks at the response of VSGs working with migrants and refugees to rising xenophobia within public policy and concludes that co-option and bureaucratisation has decreased solidarity amongst potentially radical factions within the voluntary sector concerned to defend the position of refugees and migrants.

[Lenin's Useful Idiots? Voluntary Action and Public Service Reform in Northern Ireland](#) by *Nick Acheson* reviews recent developments in relations between voluntary agencies and the devolved administration, showing how the familiar pressures of cuts, privatisation, reliance on state funding, fashions for impact measurement and self censorship have played out against the background of the province's distinctive history. It reveals "*a profound sense both of discomfort and disempowerment among many, reflecting a loss of belief in their capacity to effect change in line with mission.... It is difficult to identify sources of potential resistance.*"

[What is happening in Scotland](#) by *Nicola Gunn*. Written before the independence referendum this report offers a brief review of the current context on which future decisions and directions will be built.

The other reports in the series are:

[The Ideological Context](#) by *Dexter Whitfield*.

[The Rise and Influence of Social Enterprise, Social Investment and Public Service Mutuals](#) by *Les Huckfield*.

[Outsourcing and the Voluntary Sector](#) by *Laird Ryan*.

[The Devil that has come amongst us](#) by *Andy Benson*.

[Ordinary Glory: Big Surprise not Big Society](#) by *Mike Aiken*.

[Does Size Matter Paper 1](#) and [Does Size Matter Paper 2](#) by *Ursula Murray and Linda Milbourne*.

Keep Volunteering Voluntary keeps on keeping on

The Keep Volunteering Voluntary campaign continues to persuade voluntary groups to turn their back on 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.

We are keen to gather information about groups that are offering placements and about the experiences of claimants who have been sent on them. The government has again refused to reveal any information about take up of the scheme, arguing in response to a recent Freedom of Information Act [request](#) that releasing this information is against the public interest!

426 groups have so far signed up but the rate of new signers has slowed. Please continue to promote sign ups to the pledge amongst groups you are in contact with via the KVV website - www.kvv.org.uk. We have made a good start but there is so much more that could be done to oppose this odious scheme and for this the campaign needs more people helping with the practical work. If you're up for this, please get in touch via the 'contact us' button on the website.

Heros, heroines, & keeping on keeping on

‘Unlocking detention’

Campaign group Unlocking Detention is mounting “a virtual tour of the UK’s immigration detention estate”. Each week from September through to December, they will turn the spotlight on a detention centre, allowing people to share their experiences of the week’s detention centre (either from being detained, or knowing or supporting someone who has) and their views on immigration detention in the UK.

The tour will be taking place through Twitter and through interactive material on Facebook, Instagram, Storify and the Unlocking Detention blog. You can catch contributions and add your own at <http://unlocked.org.uk/>

TUC and Children England launch ‘Declaration of Interdependence’

In an important contribution to the tangled debate about the future of public services and respective roles of voluntary and statutory groups, Children England and the TUC have jointly launched the [Declaration of Interdependence](#). This marks the beginning of a campaign which seeks to build a new relationship between the public and voluntary sectors, based on their shared public service ethos and skilled workforces. The Declaration sets out a rights-based vision for the future based on collaboration not competition and “mutual respect for the importance of public service, charitable mission, professionalism and voluntary action in a more creative and collaborative future for children’s services.”

Over 40 organisations have so far signed up to the declaration. If you’d like to join them then please email nick.davies@childrenengland.org.uk.

Councillors Against Cuts

Finally some sign of resistance from local government to the cuts agenda comes with the formation of Councillors Against Cuts. This network has been formed because: “We believe that instead implementing the Coalition’s cuts, councils and councillors should refuse to do so and help workers and communities organise in resistance. We do not accept that cuts are ‘necessary’: there is plenty of money in society, but it is in the wrong hands. Taxing the rich and business, taking the wealth of the banks and cutting Trident are all rich sources of funds.”

Amongst posts on the site are chilling accounts of Labour councillors being expelled from the Party for refusing to vote for budgets which outsource and cut local services. Find out more [here](#).

Public services for people not profit

Behind closed doors, your public services - your railways, NHS, care services, local council contracts - are being handed over to private companies who put their profit before your needs. This is happening despite all the failures of privatisation and outsourcing over many years. Many MPs know that outsourcing our services to companies like G4S and Serco causes all kinds of problems - but they don't really know what to do about it.

The campaign group We Own It, have drafted a Public Service Users Bill which would mean new legislation to give us all a say over public services, put our needs first and make outsourcing companies transparent and accountable. The group says “It’s not the whole answer but it’s a good first step..... We think lots of people feel strongly that public services work better when they put people ahead of private shareholder

profits.” They have set up a petition to raise the profile which you can sign up to [here](#).

This month’s ‘That Takes the Biscuit’ Award goes to:

Mark Fisher, Director of the Office for Civil Society

The new boy at the OCS has just been announced and it is none other than Mark Fisher who leaves his current job as Social Justice Director at the Department of Work and Pensions where he was “responsible for delivering on the government’s agenda for social justice, helping prevent long-term worklessness.” Close watchers of the DWP will no doubt wish to point out that ‘social justice’ and ‘DWP’ are not frequently found in each other’s company.

But there is more than oxymoron to Mark’s career, for his previous claim to fame was as the DWP’s Job Seeker’s and Skills Director, responsible for their unemployment schemes, including the design and delivery of, yes, none other than the Work Programme.

Clearly the cutting edge candidate for the job.

Austerity Bites - a journey to the sharp end of cuts in the UK

A new book from Mary O’Hara exposes the injustice and the craziness of the UK Government’s deceitful ‘Austerity’ programme. The book tells the human stories that strip away the vicious rhetoric of skiving, scrounging and defrauding, in which British politics and the media is now mired. It provides useful facts, figures and good summaries of the inane and poorly thought-through policies being imposed and it offers a well judged and coherent framework for describing this mess. Chapters deal in turn with hunger, poverty, debt, worklessness, insecurity, disability and harm. In reviewing the book, Simon Duffy cried: “I have to admit that I certainly did not expect such savagery or stupidity from a UK Government..... I often feel that I am losing sight of my own country. Britain seems to be sinking and another, more dreadful place, is arising to take its place.”

You can order the book at the Policy Press website -

<http://www.policypress.co.uk/display.asp?K=9781447315605>

More reports highlight the damage of the cuts in Newcastle

Two new reports from Newcastle CVS document the impact of the cuts, the first on families with young children and the second in the area of Walker. ‘A Stitch in Time’ reveals, amongst other things, that one in three children in Newcastle are living in poverty, whilst their parents find increasing difficulties in accessing childcare and public services or escaping crippling debt. The Walker study - Below the Waterline - shows that, despite high levels of community spirit and social capital, people in the area suffer from low skills and lack of job opportunities, damaging impact of the Bedroom Tax and sanctions, lack of opportunities and facilities for younger people and rising food poverty.

Both reports can be downloaded from the CVS site -

<http://www.cvsnewcastle.org.uk/representinginfluencing/our-research>

Oxford historian hums NCIA tune

In an address to the Charity Commission's annual public meeting, Oxford historian Frank Prochaska hit out at the willingness of the voluntary services sector to be drawn into the contracting culture for public services and thereby weakening their independence and autonomy. He said that the existing contracting culture for public services had resulted in charities "swimming into the mouth of the Leviathan" and that: "The use of charities to do the government's bidding has been criticised as a devolved form of government administration that turns the intermediary institutions of civil society into agencies of the state through contracts and financial control." But charity sector leaders, particularly those that supported Labour, were not minded to change this, he said: "They are content to act as welfare providers dependent on state grants and service contracts, which pays their salaries and keeps them in touch with national policy. Full story [here](#)

The madness continues!

Rewarding failure - housing association style

A bungled £132m PFI contract between Housing & Care 21 and Oldham Council has cost the association close to £30m to rectify problems and pay penalties. Chief executive Pushpa Raguvaran also got the push having assumed responsibility for the debacle. Not all bad news for her though, as she walked away with a cool £174,000 "in lieu of notice".

A housing expert familiar with compensation negotiations said that, although Ms Raguvaran's payment might look like 'rewarding failure', it was broadly in line with what he would expect - usually around a year's salary. Nice work if you can get it.

Big Society embarrassment rumbles on

The embarrassing story of government funding and the Big Society Network shows no sign of going away, despite attempts to do just that. Society Network Foundation, the charitable parent of Big Society Network, had applied to Companies House to be struck off the register of UK companies. The trustees have also told the Charity Commission that they intend to wind the charity up. The advantage of taking this route is that, if the striking-off application succeeds, the charity will not have to file its 2014 accounts with Companies House as the regulator will not chase any more compliance once a company has been struck off. However, it now emerges that the striking off process has been stopped because an objection has been filed with the regulator. Nothing is known of the objection but the process will now be stalled for 6 months or until the objection is withdrawn.

This follows a [damning report](#) on Big Society Network from the National Audit Office, despite the Cabinet Office previously clearing itself of any wrong doing. Grants were repeatedly made despite repeated missed targets. In the worst case the Your Square Mile project only achieved 61 users out of a target of 1 million. Nesta has now publicly claimed that they were [forced](#) into making the grants by the government. As well as taking millions and failing to deliver, other allegations include [bypassing](#) the proper grant making channels, not meeting BIG's criteria, an opaque governance structure (utilising for profit companies in a complex structure), and using [restricted funds](#) to cut its deficit. The direct involvement of Nick Hurd, the Minister responsible remains [unclear](#). He resigned from the job just a week before the NAO report was released. The latest twist to the saga is that it turns out that the Cabinet Office seconded 5 staff to help set up Big Society Network. Total funding for Big Society Network was over £3M.

Tories keep up the pressure on ‘political campaigning’

Aside from his colourful selfie, Brooks “Deadmeat” Newmark may be best remembered for his first and only major speech as Minister for Civil Society, in which he told charities to ‘stick to the knitting’ and keep out of politics. But he has not been alone in the Tory clamour to clamp down on dissent.

In an [article](#) for the Sunday Telegraph, Chris Grayling, the Justice Secretary, had another go, raising concerns about voluntary groups that “hide behind a veneer of neutral non-partisanship” and criticised organisations, such as the Howard League for Penal Reform, for speaking out against government policy. “Britain’s professional campaigners are growing in number” he wrote, “sending emails around the country, flocking around Westminster, dominating BBC programmes and usually articulating a left-wing vision that is neither affordable nor deliverable”. Meanwhile the Charity Commission confirmed that it is “assessing concerns” about the Institute for Public Policy Research after [allegations](#) from Tory MP Charlie Elphicke that the charity was too close to the Labour Party and had broken rules on political neutrality.

The 19th September, of course, marked the point at which the Gagging Act came into force, so we might expect to hear more on this theme. Newmark’s successor - Rob Wilson - is unlikely to offer any respite. According to the website ‘They Work For You’ Wilson has voted “very strongly” for greater restrictions on campaigning by charities and other third parties during elections. Earlier this year [he complained to the Charity Commission about the Family and Childcare Trust](#), claiming that its Twitter activity effectively endorsed a Labour policy, and he has urged the Commission to update its guidance on campaigning and political activity to include social media.

More evidence of gagging clauses, threats of closure and self-censorship imposed through fear of losing funding was revealed in the recent edition of John Waite’s ‘Face the Facts’ on Radio 4. He tells of voluntary groups fearing for their future if they dare to speak out about local or central government policy. You can listen again to this programme [here](#).

Shelter fails to answer 30% of calls for help as demand rockets

Shelter has acknowledged that last year 30% of calls (over 50,000) to their helpline went unanswered. In the year, calls to the helpline rose by 20% to nearly 180,000. Campbell Robb, Shelter’s chief executive, said: “Every 11 minutes, a family in Britain loses their home. With more and more people having to stretch their finances to breaking point in a bid to make ends meet, it’s not hard to see why. But as more people come to us desperate for support, sadly our helpline is also being stretched to its limits.”

King’s Fund signs up to NHS Trojan Horse ‘mutuals’

More spin on ‘soft’ privatisation comes via a government commissioned [review](#) of ‘staff engagement and empowerment in the NHS’. The review, carried out by think tank the King’s Fund concluded that: “... having studied the experience of public sector mutuals, we argue that they should play a bigger part in the NHS in future.” Much is made of the power of ‘co-ownership’ to inspire and motivate staff and leaders. NCI’s own [report](#) on social enterprise, social investment and mutuals criticises the ways in which ideas about shared decision making, ownership and co-operative working are corrupted to promote privatisation. Meanwhile, Caroline Molloy, in a spirited [article](#) on the ‘Our NHS’ website, debunks the allure of mutuals and exposes the muddled thinking and deceit that hides the real agenda.

UK government in breach of legal obligations towards disabled people

A new report from Just Fair, concludes that the UK government is in breach of its legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of disabled people. The report examined rights to independent living, work, social security, social protection and an adequate standard of living, combined legal analysis with testimony-based evidence. It concludes that government policies are compromising disabled people's enjoyment of these fundamental rights, causing significant hardship.

[Dignity and Opportunity for All: Securing the Rights of Disabled People in the Austerity Era/](#)

St Mungo's staff in strike ballot

More than 500 staff at the homelessness charity St Mungo's Broadway are being balloted over possible strike action. The dispute arises from what Unite the union described as "sweeping changes" to employees' terms and conditions and HR practices after the merger of St Mungo's and Broadway earlier this year. The starting salary of a new project worker has been cut from £25,000 to £20,000, and significant changes made to HR policies and procedures without consultation with the union.

Nicky Marcus, regional officer at Unite, said: "Management has slashed the pay of new starters by £5,000 a year for a project worker and for existing staff being restructured; taken pay out of collective bargaining; imposed new, draconian policies and procedures; and breached the recognition agreement with Unite repeatedly. Staff are furious. They are simply not prepared to stand by and watch the heart and soul being ripped out of their organisation." The ballot will close on 7th October and union members will meet on 8th October to discuss when any industrial action might take place.

Round and about....

The DWP and benefits sanctions continue to wreak havoc across the land

The staggeringly incompetent and ruthless administration of the Work Programme by the DWP is becoming more and more visible: corporate prime contractors, businesses looking for cheap labour and charities hanging onto their coat-tails.

The death of David Clapson, who died starving and destitute after being sanctioned for missing a meeting at the Job Centre, received wide publicity. Nearly 210,000 people have so far signed the [petition](#) (still open if you haven't yet signed) started by his sister and calling for a full independent review of benefits sanctions. The Guardian coverage of the death prompted a deluge of stories from readers struggling with the sanctions regime and attracted nearly 2,500 [comments](#).

This personal testimony provides vivid confirmation of what voluntary groups have been saying. The Trussell Trust reported that 83% of its food banks felt rising demand was driven by sanctions, whilst CABs have seen a 60% increase in the number of problems related to Jobseekers' Allowance sanctions since the minimum sanction period was increased from one week to four weeks in October 2012. 871,000 claimants were sanctioned in 2013. A [review](#) by Manchester CAB Service in October 2013 documented the impact of sanctions on clients and claimants. More recently a report from the Centre for Welfare Reform examines the "ineffective and harmful" effects on disabled claimants moved from Invalidity Benefit to the 'Work Related Activity

Group'. [Fulfilling Potential?](#) concludes that those involved: "are now less likely to find work and more likely to be anxious and fearful. People are being sanctioned for failing to carry out tasks that their disability makes impossible. Common sense has gone missing and instead people are being offered no sensible support."

But pressure continues to mount:

- False Economy has launched a new website - [DWP Unspun](#)- to broadcast "everything the government doesn't want you to know about work and benefits". Here you will find the 'amazing DWP Truth Detector' to fact-check government statements, plain English guides to welfare cuts and changes, data on the debacle of Universal Credit and more besides;
- A number of disenchanted ex-DWP staff have set up the [Job Seekers Sanctions Advice](#) website to offer free help, advice and assistance to counter Job Seeker's Allowance sanctions and disallowances;
- [Boycott Workfare](#) is planning another week of action 4th-12th October with pickets and other action around the country - full details [here](#)
- [Keep Volunteering Voluntary](#) continues to persuade voluntary groups to boycott the Help to Work Programme.

Even sleepy old NCVO has come out with a report criticising the Work Programme! But with typical naivety, [Stepping Stones](#) touchingly believes that the problems with the programme were the result of being "...hampered from the start by design flaws that came about because of a lack of consultation with service providers." Bless.

Grants becoming de rigueur?

A little bit of cheer comes from Kevin Curley who says "I was in Middlesbrough and Clacton recently speaking at CVS events. In both places the CCG and the Police Commissioner have decided to set up grants funds to support the local sector because they have been convinced that contracts awarded after tenders don't deliver for them." Rock on.