

National Coalition for Independent Action

Celebrating voluntary & community action to change and challenge the world around us
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Newsletter No: 9

January 2009

A New Year - time for resolutions

Newsletter 9 and the beginning of a New Year. Large parts of 2008 taxed our optimism, full as it was with the dark news about the 'transformation' of the voluntary sector, as the Bubbists would say. Not to mention, the inevitable crumbling of an unsustainable global economic system. At the same time, we would hear about some brave and independent action involving people not 'driven' by or 'delivering' the new managerial agenda, prepared to forswear the stifling orthodoxy of this new order and carve a new way for themselves. Our hope, as we travel into 2009, is that we find more and more of the latter to put a smile on all our faces.

So here are our 10 suggestions - from us to you - about what might make a difference in 2009:

- Decide what you need to do with your users and your community and hold to that; chase the money to do that job and that job only
- Speak plainly and tell the truth as you see it, even - especially - to those you fear are more powerful than you. If you don't like something, say so. If the Emperor is naked, don't pretend to admire his new clothes
- Argue *for* what you want - for policies, responses, solutions - and not just *against* those that are unacceptable. Say what you want and know how to get it
- Be willing to say 'no' - to money, to unsound ideas, to co-option - and be prepared to stand up to the vilification and exclusion that may follow from that
- Repeat to yourself until you breathe it - the voluntary/community sector is DIFFERENT to the statutory and private sector. This is structural not personal. We each have a different job to do; and this may commit us to dissent - with each other and with others. If you don't know what the differences are, then find out
- Stop looking upwards for the next set of instructions; look sideways to your users, communities, friends and colleagues for inspiration and guidance

- Don't allow yourself or your organisation to be isolated, frightened and exposed through corrosive competitive relationships and encounters - look for allies and work together
- Pay attention to the exercise of power - who has it, how it is used and for what purpose; reach for collective action to redress power imbalances
- Act tactically; remember that there can be many ways to get a result
- Act as you believe. Don't just talk about the problems and the pressures - DO something about them. None of this stuff is going to get sorted by itself.

And please remember, as always, that we want to hear your reactions to all this - both the issues that face us all, and the stance that we, in the Coalition, take on them. Join our Google group or e-mail us at indyaction@yahoo.co.uk and tell us what you think. And please pass this newsletter on to someone else you think might want to read it.....

Organising, mobilising and keeping-on-keeping-on

Eviction for Advocacy in Darlington – the next twist in the tail

Regular readers of this newsletter will have been following the battle between Advocacy in Darlington and their local Council (there is an account of this on our website too - [here](#)). Last time we reported that AinD's position had at last been vindicated, that the care home at the centre of the dispute was to be closed and the Police were investigating various things, including the involvement of both Councillors and local authority officers.

Now comes the news that the Council has moved to evict AinD from their premises. Not waiting for the bailiffs to arrive the group has now relocated to new premises, from which it intends to continue with its attempts to insist that the Council is held properly to account for its actions. You can catch up with progress at <http://a-i-darlo.com/wordpress/>

The Olympics – What will be left when the Circus leaves town?

Those of us who live in East London endure a constant barrage of propaganda about the promise and potential of the Olympic Games, which by these accounts is going to transform the quality of life for the locals and bring us health, wealth and happiness. In public life hereabouts, raising doubts about this or even, dare I say, being *against* the Olympics is tantamount to heresy.

But there is another voice which asserts that this jamboree will merely create a handful of low paid, temporary jobs, undermine union membership, worsen the housing crisis in the area and benefit only corporate sponsors and property developers. You can learn more about this perspective at an event being planned for **Thursday 8th January 6.30 – 8pm**. This event is supported by London Coalition Against Poverty and London Social Forum and sponsored by Newham Sixth Form College. It will take place at **Stratford Circus, Theatre Square, Stratford** (opposite Pizza Express). More information from londoncoalitionagainstopoverty@gmail.com

Losing community services? – set up your own!

Whilst failing banks and car manufacturers seem to be worthy recipients of mind-boggling suitcases full of our collective assets, the same principles do not appear to extend to failing community services

like shops, Post Offices and pubs. In many rural areas, enterprising folk have been taking the matter into their own hands and, in particular, setting up their own shops (there are now 170 community-owned shops). Here, maybe, is a useful alternative to the corporate confidence trick of 'social enterprise'.

Support for this has come from ViRSA - the Village Retail Services Association - which can offer advice, start-up loans, and other support. Check their website for more details - www.virsa.org/index.cfm/villageshop/About.Home

Now, there is interest in applying the lessons from the countryside to urban areas, where local community services also find themselves under increasing pressure. If you're interested in finding out more about how ViRSA's experience could be of use to you then get in touch with Alan Wyle on alanwyle@googlemail.com

Hazel Blears gets it in the neck from her constituents

The editor of the Salford Star, a community paper in Hazel Blears's constituency, has written an open letter to Hazel complaining that, despite all the brave words about community empowerment, they can't get any support from the Government or any local statutory body, even though they "... are ticking every single empowerment box on the planet." The award-winning Salford Star is under permanent financial stress and feared that it would be unable to bring out its Christmas issue. The challenge to Hazel was to "...show me any government fund that supports real democracy and empowerment, and where the Salford Star (or similar community magazines) would be eligible to apply. If you can, great. If not, we will take your 'Communities In Control: Real People, Real Power' White Paper - and chuck it in the Irwell.

Messages of support to Stephen Kingston at skingston@salfordstar.com or have a look at their website www.salfordstar.com

Dale Farm gypsy community – still under threat

The Dale Farm gypsy community in Essex remains under threat. At the beginning of December they were joined by supporters in a protest outside the Royal Courts of Justice, London, where Basildon Council is appealing a High Court decision from May this year which halted the planned eviction of Dale Farm, and ordered local authorities to find alternative land for them to live. This is despite the fact that the community of 100 families - effectively a village of 1000 people - actually own the land, but don't have planning permission.

Basildon Council is trying to get the green light for a £2 million eviction of Dale Farm, with the self-proclaimed 'gypsy eviction specialist' bailiffs, Constant & Co, chaffing at the bit to be let out of their cages to do the dirty work. It was after seeing footage of Constant's violent evictions of previous traveller evictions that persuaded the High Court Judge to halt the Dale Farm eviction in May, and urged Basildon Council to not use them in any future eviction.

Large communities like Dale Farm come about because life on the road and working itinerantly is now nearly impossible in England. Park-up land around the country has been taken away and their only recourse is to buy land and live on it - with or without planning permission.

The judge's decision on the appeal is due in the new year, but already some 200 people have pledged to join the community to resist if it comes to an eviction.

Petition to ban 'Mosquito' devices

For the past year The National Youth Agency along with 11 Million and Liberty have been working with young people from Corby and Groundwork North Northamptonshire on the Buzz Off campaign to ban the use of Ultrasonic Teenage Deterrent (Mosquito) Devices.

Recently a petition was initiated on the Number 10 website asking the Government to ban mosquito devices. You can sign up at: <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/ANTITEENDEVICE/#detail>

Unmasking the State – a rough guide to real democracy

New publication from World to Win's Paul Feldman. Useful analysis of the historical origins of the contemporary British capitalist state and the long struggle for democracy and political rights, from the Levellers to the Chartists and beyond. *Unmasking the State* describes the changes under globalisation and how representative democracy has been undermined. The book makes a series of proposals for a new, transitional state to extend democracy into workplaces and society as a whole. Jolly good read. You can get it for £3.99 online or order by post .

<http://www.aworldtowin.net/about/UnmaskingState.html>

Academics slam new criminal Legal Aid arrangements

A hard-hitting report from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies junks the changes introduced by the Government for the delivery of advice to those arrested or detained by the Police. It finds that "a previous government commitment to equitable access to legal representation has been replaced by a drive to secure convictions and limited access to legal services." Their press release and report can be found here - www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/pr061008.html

In memoriam – leaving the voluntary sector

What constitutes this thing called the voluntary sector has always had blurry edges but we've generally been able to live with this level of ambiguity. But the widespread changes now taking place raise serious questions about who really should be entitled to regard themselves as a part of a sector that stands for voluntary and community action. Current ideas about social enterprise, of course, are one such example, where loose definitions easily allow London buses to pass through without fear of scrapping the sides. Another is the large scale plans for privatising public services to the 'private and voluntary sectors' - notice how this often this combined expression is used by Government ministers and spokespeople.

However, many people were shocked back in September when it became public that a number of charities were intending to bid to run the new 'Titan' super-prisons. Will it be the army next that the Bubbists reckon could be better run by a voluntary management committee? Here our correspondent in the criminal justice field bemoans the whole sorry tale.....

Trying to face both ways - big charities in the scramble for prison cash

In 2007 the Lord Coles' report on the future of prison accommodation recommended the building of new bigger prisons to meet pressures on current capacity. Jack Straw, Minister of Justice, very quickly announced the TITAN programme- three huge new prisons, each with a capacity of 2,500- the current largest gaol holds 1,461. Each prison would depend heavily on technology, and one of the clearly stated aims from the beginning has been to obtain 'value for money'. Predictably it has also been clear from the beginning that these mega-prisons would be built and managed by the private sector.

Every Penal Reform and Trade Union organisation in the Criminal Justice field has been strongly opposed to these plans from the beginning. At a time when there are huge holes in the Ministry of Justice budget, and the Probation Service, itself the subject of wasteful and doctrinaire re-organisation, faces serious cutbacks the Government remains determined to press on regardless. There is plenty of evidence that sentencing in the community is operating efficiently and effectively, but a touchstone of the Government's philosophy continues to be 'lock 'em up' in larger and larger numbers. This makes no sense at all either in terms of dealing with offenders or a rational use of public money. At a very recent Prison Reform Trust Conference the distinguished American Criminologist said that he feared Britain was being taken towards an American style justice system- in effect copying the most wasteful and prison focused system in the developed world. As Juliet Lyon, Director of the Prison Reform Trust said:

'It is shaming enough to be the greatest incarcerators in Western Europe without slavishly copying America's failing prison system'.

How tragic therefore that NACRO, the largest voluntary sector organisation in the Criminal Justice field should have turned its back on many years of honourable campaigning for better use of community sentencing and less use of prison by announcing its participation in a consortium to run one of the new TITAN gaols. Paul Cavadino, Chief Executive spent the summer as one of the loudest voices against the scheme and by early September their plans to join in were public. Since then others, including Rainer Crime Concern, another large justice charity, and Turning Point, the substance abuse agency, have joined them.

The argument seems to be that if these prisons are going to be built, then better to have a hand in making a decent job of it. This is a pretty hollow justification when your whole stance up to that point is that the idea is unworkable! The answer, realistically, is that they have decided the funding opportunity is just too great to miss out on and be left behind!

So with Criminal Justice, as with much else in the public sector, the privatising of provision makes huge changes in the landscape facing voluntary organisations. Faced with uncertain futures and economic pressure it is very easy to fall in line, change your mind and take the money. In penal policy though there is a very strong argument against these processes- when the state takes away your freedom, surely the state should be directly accountable- there is no argument in favour of a privatised Police service- so why is it OK to privatise sections of the Prison service? There is certainly no evidence at all that existing privatised prisons work well, and the Trade Unions concerned have continually provided plenty of evidence that this is the case.

But surely, in the face of all this, the responsibility of great national organisations, like NACRO, is to honour their values and stand up for what matters. By failing to stand by what they claimed to believe they have weakened the campaign against a wasteful and shameful plan and forfeited their independence and respect.

Editor's note - this issue is due to be debated at the AGM of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies - 'Partners or Prisoners? - Voluntary sector independence in the world of titans and contracts'. This event will take place on the 13th January at 6pm at Edmund J Safra Lecture Theatre, King's College London. You can book a place by e-mailing info@crimeandjustice.org.uk

Greece – mindless rioting or a new youth movement?

As the mainstream media loses interest in the continuing mass unrest in Greece it is worth asking - what is really going on there? Our correspondent in Crete (what reach these people have, I hear you exclaim!) lets us have the text of an open letter which is being widely circulated throughout the country:

WE WANT A BETTER WORLD! HELP US

We are no terrorists, hoodies, the known - unknowns

WE ARE YOUR CHILDREN! These known - unknowns...

We are dreaming - don't kill our dreams!

We are impetuous - don't quell our impetuosity

REMEMBER! You used to be young too.

Now you only chase money, you only worry about your image!

You have grown fat and bald.

YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN!

We were expecting you to stand by us . We were expecting you to care.

To make us proud of YOU just for once.

IN VAIN!

You are living fake lives, you have given in, you stoop and are just waiting for the day you die.

You are not using your imagination, you are not falling in love, you are not creating. You only buy and sell.

MATERIALISM EVERYWHERE! LOVE NOWHERE ! TRUTH NOWHERE

Where are the parents? Where are the artists? Why are they not coming out to protect us?

THEY ARE KILLING US! HELP US!

TA PAIDIA [THE KIDS]

PS: Don't throw any more teargas. WE CAN CRY FOR OURSELVES!

.....And adds "I have seen this plea derided as adolescent angst - perhaps youth workers might resist this easy put-down? Without doubt the situation is complex and contradictory, but whilst the response of Greek youth would not be regarded as a positive activity in many circles, it holds out more hope, however frail, than a *million accredited outcomes*."

Government manoeuvres

Single Issue Funding – Blears Backs Off

The DCLG has published the replies it got in response to the consultation on its draft Cohesion Guidance for Funders. Though the report's author's put a brave face on it, the responses add up to a blistering criticism of the muddled thinking and uninformed assertions of the original document. The significance of which is that the Government has backed off on the central issue - the suggestion that public money should not be committed to groups working with 'single communities' (defined here as ethnic communities, rather than communities of faith groups, for example, or communities of older people, etc.). In an interesting way of announcing Government policy, Hazel Blears does the honours in her foreword where she says:

"... we have concluded that guidelines from Central Government are not the way forward. Instead we look to local leaders to show a measured approach drawing on their knowledge of what's happening in their neighbourhood: taking tough decisions if necessary and being prepared to explain and answer for them..... No-one has more expertise or passion than local leaders and I am confident that they can make it happen."

Apart from noting the startling statement that Government guidelines are not the way forward (surely this must be a first?), our suspicion here at the Coalition, is that the real message is 'we're not going to tell you to do it, but we want you to anyway'. We would like to hear from people affected by decisions of statutory agencies to turn down, restrict or discontinue funding to 'single issue' groups and help you fight those decisions if we can.

Legal Aid review – pressure from UNITE pays off

Behind the scenes horse trading at the Labour Party conference seems to have paid off, as pressure from trade union UNITE appears to have forced the Government to announce a review of local legal advice. The review announced by new Justice Minister Lord Bach will examine:

- the impact of the recession and the demand for civil legal advice
- the impact of civil legal advice fixed fees on local providers - financially and in terms of the type of work they are taking on
- the initial experience of Community Legal Advice Centres, including the impact on other providers in the area
- trends in funding from sources other than the Community Legal Service, including local authority funding, national lottery funding, charities, central government departments and others.

This follows various moves by independent advice providers to 'raise the anti' on legal aid changes including the decision of Cornwall County Council to withdraw from joint commissioning with the Legal Services Commission, the launch of a campaign against Community Legal Advice Centres by the national advice agency AdviceUK, the fallout from the strike at Shelter (a consequence of changes in Legal Aid funding) and a union demonstration protesting these changes outside the LSC's headquarters on 8th December.

The review gives the so-called 'representative' national bodies, who come together as the Advice Services Alliance, another chance to take an assertive stance to protect the independent advice

sector, as their previous attempts to influence the Government on these issues have been ineffective and, frankly, pathetic. You can tell them what you want them to say by e-mailing: info@asauk.org.uk

New Minister Kevin Brennan – what do we all think?

Unsurprisingly, we at the Coalition are underwhelmed by the replacement of Phil Hope by Kevin Brennan as 'Third Sector Minister'. Despite his insistence that he will be a 'strong champion' for the sector, to us it looks like one suit for another, until we are (happy to be) proved wrong.

More interesting is what his arrival tells us about the national second tier agencies that will likely be 'called to his table'. According to Third Sector magazine, Kevin Curley from NAVCA can't hide his disappointment at losing Phil because he was so brilliant. Seems like Ben Hughes from BASSAC agrees, as he exhorts Kevin not to change third sector policies. We suppose this is because the sector is doing **SO** well with these policies? Graham Benfield from Welsh Council for Voluntary Action is delighted because Kevin comes from Cardiff, and Steven Bubb from ACEVO, well, is nothing short of gushing with excitement, since he "...know(s) he (Kevin that is) has a passionate interest in the sector and realises our potential in terms of transforming public services and standing up for the most vulnerable."(sic).

We need more seats at the Government's table, says Urban Forum

Regeneration network, Urban Forum has complained that the VCS needs more representatives on the Third Sector Partnership Board and all government advisory bodies and committees. Chief Executive Toby Blume said, "The sector needs to ensure its voice is heard on the full range of policies that may affect it." Doing this kind of thing (sitting at Government tables) is a fairly major activity for Urban Forum. Indeed, the ChangeUp and Capacity Builders crowd have all done quite a lot of it, many of them acquiring a crick in the neck from too much looking upwards. It would be good if Toby could make space to recognise that being called to these tables is not the only, or even the most effective, way of influencing Government policy and it's time we all put a bit of distance between them and us, so we might rediscover as a sector what we are all here for.

Empowerment Fund fails to target local groups

The DCLG has responded to the consultation responses on its proposed Empowerment Fund by failing to take the main point - that the dosh should not be chunted off to national organisations. A number of the infrastructure bodies had made the rather cynical connection between the Government effectively shutting down local Community Empowerment Networks on the one hand, and, on the other, proposing to line the pockets of yet more national agencies who purport to be able to empower us citizens. A brave face was put on this by Toby Blume, from Urban Forum, in a message to members. Despite the recognition that "...for our many members operating at a local level the outcome will not be all you hoped for...", Toby feels that the end result is "... a significant improvement on the original proposals and generally reflect the points we raised". And Toby was obviously pleased to be able to report that "Hazel Blears made a point of calling me personally to thank us for our submission and to say that she agreed with the points we'd raised and that she had tried to incorporate these into the scheme." Well not very successfully though - apparently - it would seem - or have we got it wrong?

The other main issue was the proposal that these same national organisations should have a minimum turnover of £400 grand a year to qualify for the dosh. This, it seems, has been reduced to £170k, not

exactly peanuts. Organisations smaller than this who think they might have a bright idea for empowering us will have to find a few partners, one of whom needs to crack the £170k threshold.

If you want to see how the Government thinks this £7.5M pile of money is going to empower local communities have a look at the prospectus here -

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1006294.pdf>

Charities, human rights and freedom of information law – Government responds

The Cabinet Office has responded to the call in the Public Administration Select Committee's report on public services and the third sector that the Human Rights and Freedom of Information Acts should be extended to voluntary sector organisations. The answer seems to be a 'definite maybe'. The Government statement agrees that the exercise of public functions should be covered by the HRA, regardless of who is performing the function, but says charities should be subject to the Act only when they are providing public services. With respect to the FOI Act, the Ministry of Justice will apparently comment "in due course" on its recent consultation on whether freedom of information legislation should cover bodies that deliver public services.

So where does this leave us? Given there was nothing in the Queen's Speech about any of this, please don't hold your breath or you will find yourself falling over.....

Homeless Link goes mooney-eyed

Jenny Edwards, Chief Executive of second tier agency Homeless Link, has launched an impassioned campaign to end street homelessness that will have them crying in the aisles. Here's a flavour:

"To reach the new ambition we need to set aside old thinking, pessimism, cynicism, rivalries and approaches that have worn out - like a shabby winter coat that it's time to throw away. There will be times when we have to ask for help or go and seek resources in new areas and from new allies. We will be practical and optimistic - never underestimating our own potential to bring about the changes needed, never underestimating the qualities and potential of the people we are there to help. We know that, to succeed, we have to think about the path towards zero in a completely new way.

The Government has set out a visionary strategy, full of ambition and practicality. It states unequivocally that, in 21st Century Britain, everyone should have an alternative to sleeping on the street and, if needed, the support to set them safely on the path to independence.

There's a great Brazilian proverb "When we dream alone, it's just a dream. But when we dream together, it is the beginning of a new reality."

Hmmm. This is the same Homeless Link who told some of their members two years ago "no way will you find us criticising the Government in public". Our correspondent wrote "Personally I think that if you just put this on your website you'd probably get more people signed up to the cause than any considered article which attempts to outline how charities have been compromised. I'm so stunned by what Jenny Edward's has just written that I feel like it must be a satire."

Compact review takes up a lot of people's time

The Commission for the Compact has applied for statutory powers to enforce the Compact - the agreement between voluntary organisations and government. This is the headline of the Commissioner's full list of recommendations published in December, after a consultation exercise stretching back to the summer. Specifically, the Government is asked to give the Commission power to investigate alleged Compact breaches, demand information relevant to inquiries and make recommendations based on its findings, as well as the power to require people or organisations to respond to its recommendations. However, it would not be able to take any further action against Compact abusers.

The appointment of Bert Massie as Commissioner and the consultation exercise itself was a recognition that the Compact was a failed initiative (our words not theirs, of course). The Commission's own research concluded that "A barrier and challenge to effective partnership working at a local level is a lack of trust and communication between partners." Another piece of work they called for recommended that civil servants should have the Compact written into their job contracts to make them "...adhere to and promote the agreement and its codes."

This whole debate has consumed many person- and organisation-hours on the part of the national infrastructure organisations and quite a few local voluntary agencies who were persuaded to fill in the questionnaires or go to the focus groups. And those leading the debate were unremittingly cheery about the Compact and its' potential. For example, we were treated to very upbeat sales messages from Compact Voice, the NCVO project set up to generate a head of steam, such as: "Local Compacts are about common purpose harnessing mutual advantage through working together to produce wins that improve people's lives and strengthen the local community" or "Simply saying it isn't working can become a self fulfilling prophesy. Your Compact is a done deal. Expect public bodies who have signed up to your Compact to work together with the sector to put things right when they go wrong." Eh?

In the Coalition we made our position clear in an earlier article on our website - see <http://www.independentaction.net/compact> - and we stick by it:

"The task facing the sector at both local and national level is to rediscover our own perspectives and strategies for our role in our society, consider whether State intentions are compatible with these, recognise that structural differences between statutory and non-statutory are key to our understanding of our respective roles and, above all, organise to redress power imbalances to give us some chance of getting what WE want for our users and communities. If we do these things, then a Compact can be a useful weapon in our armoury. But without these things, it will remain a useless piece of paper."

Support for this view comes from a report from the Australia Institute which looked at Compacts, including the UK's, and concluded that they "...could not be relied upon to ensure an effective and respectful long-term relationship between government and NGOs - these things will occur only if NGO advocacy is recognised as a legitimate and valuable element of public debate" (Agreeing to Disagree: Maintaining Dissent in the NGO Sector - you can get a link to this valuable report here - <http://digbig.com/4xjwk>).

Kevin Brennan, 'Third Sector' Minister is apparently supportive of the move to give the Compact more "traction rather than more bite" (whatever that means), but there was nothing in the Queen's Speech about this, so presumably that's that for the time being. Oh well.

Independence of the sector gets more air time

If the number of meetings, focus groups and reports dealing with the sector's independence was translated into effective action to defend it, we in the Coalition might be able to hang up our clogs and go off to grow vegetables. Another spate of these has come along, some more useful than others.....

Independence checklist – latest from NCVO and the Barings Foundation

Standing Apart, Working Together is the latest offering from NCVO. Sponsored by Barings Foundation and indeed written by its Assistant Director, Matthew Smerdon, this is a checklist, aimed at staff and trustees. It poses a number of questions under the headings of 'upholding purpose and values', 'managing relationships with partners and funders', and 'challenging others'. Answering the questions will, the author hopes, "help you reaffirm what you already do to assert independence and to identify actions that will help to promote your independence, where this is necessary." If you want to do the quiz, you can get it at <http://offlinehbpl.hbpl.co.uk/NewsAttachments/NST/Checklist.pdf>

Promoting and protecting the independence of VCS organisations – Manchester Alliance for Community Care and the Delivering Inclusion Network

Matthew Smerdon from Barings pops up again as the keynote speaker at the event which formed the basis for this report. Matthew's approach to the whole question of independence was summarised in his introduction when he says that "independence (is defined) as a positive statement rather negative or defensive and (he) believes the idea of voluntary sector autonomy is a myth..... He was keen to emphasise that the Baring Foundation's Strengthening the Voluntary Sector programme...is not anti-government. It does not suggest that government is without values. It is based on the premise that organisations need to build positive relationships with government to protect their freedoms."

Despite the cuddly 'partnership' vision of this perspective, participants at the event lost no time to crack on and list many of the ways in which the Government and the State is busy subverting their independence:

- "contracts threaten our independence and constrain our work"
- "Government rhetoric values and wants to utilise what the sector has to offer but in reality it seems they are looking for cheaper services and savings by contracting with larger organisations", etc. etc.

or what is needed to resist these moves:

- "members have more negotiating power as a collective than they would alone"
- "Collective actions stops the erosion of our services"
- "Collaboration gives us more power and more clout"

Some useful material here; you can get a copy of the report by emailing info@macc.org.uk

Dancing to our own tune – the Compact; strengthening voluntary sector independence

This one from Compact Voice at NCVO, reports the results of five focus groups involving staff from national VCS agencies in England. In the introduction, Matthew Smerdon (yes the very same, this boy does get about!!) says "Some of the people involved in the research reported here directly question the power and relevance of the Compact to help organisations preserve their independence. And yet the substance of the threats to independence that people say they are experiencing..... correspond exactly to the provisions and codes set out in the Compact." So there we are then - these people are just plain wrong.

Unfortunately this introduction rather sums up the whole report - a dogged commitment to the Compact in the face of what people actually said in the focus groups. For whilst much of the commentary is positive and supportive about statutory-voluntary relationships, the direct quotes provide a strong testimony of the damaging pressures that agencies are under, and the negative views and feelings these evince.

Have a look at this one here -

<http://www.thecompact.org.uk/files/102433/FileName/TheCompactstrengtheningvoluntarysectorindependence.pdf>

About this Newsletter

This newsletter is the voice of the NCIA. Views expressed are not necessarily that of everyone involved with NCIA. We aim to issue newsletters regularly to keep you informed of what we and others are doing or saying.

How Can You Participate?

Tell us your news, write articles, sound off with your opinions and feedback but - most important - find ways of taking your own practical action to defend and protect the independence of your work and aspirations.

Talk to us and others via the Coalition google group <http://groups.google.co.uk/group/ncia-discussions> or the Coalition email address - indyaction@yahoo.co.uk .

We are all volunteers here and we welcome more offers of help. If you'd like to help make this initiative prosper then please get in touch with us.

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