

## Compact – a failed initiative

The hoary old Compact seems to be back on the agenda, in another attempt to ‘refresh’ (as we say down at the LSP) a failed initiative. This is the one where important personages from the VCS and the statutory sector have signing ceremonies where they promise to do things like ‘respect each other’, ‘work in partnership’ or ‘embed equality of opportunity and social inclusion in everything we do’. Problem has been that it doesn’t work. When the local authority wants to screw you, it will do it anyway, Compact or not.

### A failed initiative

There is plenty of evidence from around the country that for many statutory agencies the Compact is not worth the paper it is written on. A classic recent example comes from Stoke, where the community transport charity Communibus has claimed that Stoke Council breached the Compact by withdrawing £40,000 of funding. The Compact specifies that a minimum of three month’s notice should be given. However, the charity said that when the local authority decided in March to award the contract to a private company, it gave the charity only two weeks’ notice its funding was being stopped.

In another recent case, the Voluntary Organisations Disability Group (an umbrella group of providers of social care support for disabled people), has accused Councils and Primary Care Trusts across the UK of infringing the Compact by telling healthcare charities they will receive no extra cash for public contracts this year. The group said that it had received complaints from its members about 14 PCTs and 12 local authorities.

John Adams, general secretary of the VODG, said: “Asking charities to maintain the same services, with rising costs and for no extra money, runs totally counter to the spirit of the Compact, and it breaks all the rules on full cost recovery. It’s asking charities to use voluntary income to fund public services. You’ll eventually put people out of business.” A third example comes from the Learning and Skills Council, where an internal Compact Review concluded that “weaknesses in leadership of this agenda at regional and local levels to ensure this issue is given sufficient priority and focus” obstruct the LSC from adhering to the Compact. Meanwhile Third Sector Daily revealed that Saskia Daggett, who has just left her job as Compact Advocacy Manager at NCVO “represented about 100 victims of breaches of the Compact during her three years there” – about 1 every 10 days.

This is confirmed by the findings of the recent NAVCA survey, revealing widespread scepticism about the Compact. 40% of respondents said the Compact was not a useful tool in managing relationships with local public bodies. And from the other side, research from consultants nfpSynergy, shows that only one in four councillors, local authority and primary care trust staff think the Compact has had a significant impact on their relationship with charities. A spokeswoman for nfpSynergy said the majority of councillors and local authority staff were either unaware of the Compact or thought it did not make much difference.

All of which has not been lost on the national Commission for the Compact. Sir Bert Massie, Commissioner for the Compact has launched a research study to “identify the key factors behind successful Local Compacts and positive local partnership relationships”. Hmm bit of a spin there! Their press release goes on “Local Compacts – agreements between local government, local public bodies and the local voluntary and community sector – can now be

found in 99 per cent of local authority areas. Their significance in determining effective partnership working is huge. However, there are varying degrees of success across England and this research has been commissioned to explore what makes a successful Local Compact". Not surprisingly the consultants appointed to do this bit of work are IVAR (Institute of Voluntary Action Research), who have considerable experience of putting a positive gloss on things that go wrong (like 'partnership working')! The findings will be published at the end of August 2008.

### **Fixing something that's broken**

Recently there has been an upsurge in interest in the Compact. Most of those involved acknowledge its failings but still want to hang in there with it. One aspect that has been latched onto is the prospect of giving the Compact statutory force. For example, Kevin Curley of NAVCA said of their research, "People are saying that they do not think it is useful because their local authority can choose to ignore it if it wants to. It is the lack of any kind of statutory powers around the Compact that people are saying 'no' to. They are not saying they do not want to have a properly structured agreement with their public body." Stuart Etherington from NCVO also believes that the Compact will end up being mandatory.

The second gripping aspect of this is the way the question of independence has been grafted onto the discussion, especially interesting to us in the Coalition. Recently NCVO have been asking whether the Compact is protecting the independence of the voluntary sector. NCVO has also been encouraging VCS agencies to sign a 'declaration of independence' as part of Local Compact Independence Day, 4<sup>th</sup> July. This initiative began in Newham, where local activists are resisting local authority attempts to bring the sector under its control. This is a positive development, though when Paul Baraisi, NCVO's Local Compact Voice Officer says "The Government recognises 4th July as Sector Independence Day. It's official. Wow, that really is something!" one wants to put one's head in one's hands! No Paul, I don't think you get it.....

### **The critique**

The difficulty with the Compact parallels the other problems that the sector faces in its relationship with the State. This can be generalised by saying that the State has a plan and an intention for the sector, is determined to shape the sector to these intentions, and will do nothing voluntarily to limit the power that it holds over that process. That is what Governments, and their agents at local level, do. In the Coalition we believe that these intentions are flawed, reactionary and will damage or destroy the very thing that the Government says it – and we – values about the sector. Others – the Bubbists for example – take a different view and see Government policy as an opportunity to build empires and be paid six figure salaries. The Compact is also itself another example where the sector is required to make undertakings in reverse. Where relations are determined by unequal power structures and obfuscated by meaningless jargon, where people neither say what they mean, nor mean what they say, it is the less powerful that will come off worse. Trusting to sombre declarations, whether with statutory force or not, will not do the business.

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.