

Press release: 19/1/10

Co-option or what? NCIA asks second tiers why they support the new Compact

The National Coalition for Independent Action today released an open letter to the Chief Executives of the five national bodies which have endorsed the revised National Compact, launched on December 16th. The full text of the letter reads:

“19/1/10

Dear Stephen, Debra, Stuart, Kevin and Justin,

We write this open letter to you, having been confronted by your ringing endorsement of the ‘Refreshed Compact’. Over here at the NCIA we have long taken a critical view, both of the Compact and the industry that has been created to promote its goodness and effectiveness. Nothing has changed in that department. The Compact is still a fig leaf for unequal power relationships.

But the reason why we are now spending time on it is because the whole ‘refresh’ process, culminating in the December 16th launch and your own contribution to this, so vividly illustrates what we have been complaining about in the sector for the last three years. The relentless orthodoxy that there is only good news out there; that the sector is thriving and partnerships with government and their agents at local level are harmonious, successful and effective; and, that any disagreement with this version of events is seen off as misinformed, mischief-making or ignorant.

What we see is a rather different picture, in which a large amount of public money has now been spent on the Compact good news industry, and where the new version of the document:

- ♣ pretty faithfully reflects what the government wants it to say
- ♣ was built on a grossly inadequate consultation exercise (79 responses from 179,000 charities – never mind the hundreds of thousands of non-charitable community groups) and involved ignoring the views and recommendations of some of those most closely involved in the process (via the Compact Refresh Panel)
- ♣ has ended up with a worse document to the one that preceded it, which focuses on the procurement/contract/privatisation agenda, marginalises (again) the community sector, and totally dumps equalities issues
- ♣ retains the voluntary code idea that all good people will, of course, take their Compact obligations seriously, so obviously flying in the face of the evidence
- ♣ and, to add a chilling Orwellian echo, promotes the reclassification from the Single Equalities Bill of ‘people with protected characteristics’.

Meanwhile state agencies (right up to the OTS Minister herself) continue to ignore or flout Compact compliance and the bulk of the sector remains quite unsurprised by all this, having long since realised that the Compact, despite its tactical use by a few plucky local activists, is hardly at the cutting edge of helpfulness in their relationship with statutory agencies.

Even the evident focus on public service privatisation and the sector's assumed role in this, is naïve and will be seen to be ironic, for 2010 will see the beginning of savage public expenditure cuts. Even now, Government lawyers, civil servants and officers at all levels of the statutory sector will be busy identifying any devices that can be used to remove or reduce funding, interfere with operational 'efficiency', require increased outputs and outcomes, tighten performance management, defer or avoid paying for necessary cost increases, or drive a harder bargain in new contracts. Voluntary organisation contractors will feel this thumb on their collar. Many will experience for the first time the double whammy of losing their independence and finding themselves legally responsible for providing public services without the means to do so. Moaning then about what isn't in the Compact, or lack of compliance with what is in it, will not get them very far.

The effects of the recession will also be felt by the largely unfunded, volunteer-based, community sector, which has remained marginalised, despite the lip service paid to empowerment and citizen involvement. These groups, involved with deprived or marginalised communities, will find an increase in demand for their support from people and neighbourhoods experiencing hardship. The new Compact has absolutely no relevance at all for this vast and valuable national resource.

We know that there are dissenting views amongst yourselves, amongst your members (where you have them) and elsewhere in the sector. So where are these views represented; where is the plain speaking that is needed? Where are the riches of diversity, so often celebrated as the "unique selling point" of voluntary action?

The relationship between the state and our world of voluntary action is in crisis right now. And whilst we, in the NCIA, don't pretend that we have all the answers, we are going to carry on telling the truth as we see it, and holding you and your organisations to account when we get the chance. If you want to be able to say that you 'represent' the voluntary and community sector, you are going to have to do better than this supine spin. We look forward to a response, which we are keen to receive,

Yours sincerely,
Andy Benson
Joint Convenor NCIA"

Notes for editors:

NCIA is an alliance of individuals and organisations who believe that our freedom to join with others in independent voluntary and community activities is in danger. The Coalition acts to expose these dangers and to do what it can to protect self-determination in community and voluntary action.

We mobilise, support and work with those who share our concerns; combine to expose and resist the current direction of travel; to have our own agendas; and to become actively involved in dissent where this is needed. We are building a strong voice to give confidence

to those wanting to speak out and take action, and to create an alternative way of doing things.

The national Compact is an 'accord' between the Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector. The NCIA has long been a critic of the reliance placed on the Compact as an effective mechanism for respecting and protecting the independence of VCS groups and the sector as a whole (see for example – <http://legacy.independentaction.net/?p=763>).

The national Compact was last year put through a review process which resulted in a revised document that was launched on December 16th. The stimulus for this open letter was the statement of support for the revised Compact document issued by Compact Voice, which can be viewed here –

<http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/files/102067/FileName/StatementofSupportfromfiveleadingsectororganisations.pdf>