

Voluntary services face bleak future as ‘servants of the Government’

Launching the final report from their Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services, the National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) has today called on voluntary and community services to face up to a decisive moment in its history. In a blistering critique of the systemic threats posed to the values, work and freedom of the sector, NCIA challenges voluntary groups to take urgent action to fight for the rights of the people they serve, protect their independence and resist the privatisation of public services. Failure to do this will squander the unique respect and radical space that charities and voluntary groups have historically occupied in British society.

Fight or Flight: Voluntary Services in 2015 provides the summation of extensive work over the last year by academics, researchers and activists. A copy of today's press release is downloadable [here](#). 17 separate reports have now been published as a result of this work, reviewing the current situation facing those voluntary organisations involved in providing services to local people and communities. All reports are downloadable from our website. Here's a summary of the main points.

Voluntary groups in ‘austerity UK’

Cuts to public services and the living standards of the poorest people are the largest in living memory, with much more to come. These are the people for whom charities and voluntary groups exist and most (especially locally-based groups) face increased demand and falling income. This ‘double indignity’ should have galvanised anger and opposition within the voluntary sector but the opposite is the case. Resistance to these public policies takes place outside the world of professionalised voluntary services.

Changes in funding are key

The shift in State support to voluntary groups from grants to contracts and the parallel rise of commissioning and procurement regimes explains how successive Governments have been able to ‘rein in’ independent voluntary groups and recast them as delivery vans for their own policies and programmes. At the same time, cuts to funding, alongside the deliberate creation of competitive markets, now means that many groups, especially those who are small or medium-sized and locally-based are now struggling to stay afloat and maintain levels and quality of services for their users. Many have already closed down. Outside of the visible ‘service providers’ the impact is also felt in informal settings – community groups and especially groups from within black and minority ethnic communities find they are expected to pick up the pieces from policies that create catastrophic hardship and discrimination, without either resources or recognition.

But there are also winners in this new zero-sum game

There is a growing gap between the larger charities and the rest. The former are better equipped to play the procurement game and many have moved into competing with each other and local groups for services contracts. Some of these charities (including housing associations) are aggressive and predatory in their approach.

‘Social enterprise’ – the new must-have

Many voluntary groups have fallen for the lie that they will survive and prosper by becoming more ‘businesslike’ and ‘entrepreneurial’. Turning to the private sector for finance (‘social investment’) creates new forms of debt dependency and new imperatives to create surpluses from their services to disadvantaged clients and communities. At the same time, dependent sub-contractor relationships with global corporations is seen as an acceptable way forward, helping private pockets to maximize profits from poverty.

What about the workers?

The impact of contracting, professionalisation, and new ‘managerialism’ has shifted the role of volunteers to that of ‘unpaid labour’, to the detriment of personal development and acts of solidarity between ‘givers’ and ‘receivers’. Paid staff too, are increasingly on the receiving end of cuts to pay and conditions, increasing use of zero hours contracts, the exploitation of weakened employment rights and heavy-handed management.

The failure of sector ‘leadership’

Sector leadership bodies like ACEVO and NCVO have shamefully failed to oppose the discriminatory and disproportionate cuts to poor and vulnerable communities. Nor have they defended voluntary groups themselves from the constraints placed on them by the ‘new normal’. Indeed, many national bodies have actively encouraged voluntary groups to enter the ‘marketplace’, bid to take over public services and form alliances with private contractors, many with reputations for criminality, dishonesty, poor employment practices and other abuses.

At local level too, most Councils for Voluntary Services have accepted cuts, competitive behaviours and subservience to commission regimes without question. And there are few examples of involvement of these umbrella groups in campaigns to defend community rights and oppose cuts.

The silencing of dissent

A crucial and damning effect of these changes has been the alarming extent to which the critical voice of the voluntary sector has been silenced. Open dissent, even mild informed criticism is now widely seen by local and national State agencies as unacceptable. This atmosphere is maintained by both formal contractual and informal means. There is a massive loss of ability, on the part of voluntary services, to think, act and speak independently, and especially to speak plainly and passionately where injustice and privation are being visited on their users and beneficiaries.

Why has this happened – the politics of today

The policy changes reviewed by the Inquiry are presented by Government and their supporters as ‘common sense’ responses to a changing world. However, it is clear to us that they are in reality part of an ideologically-driven programme to transform British society and the role of the state, involving the dismantlement of the post-War welfare settlement and

the social protections it embodied, the privatisation and outsourcing of public services, increased inequality, and support for a massive transfer of wealth from the poor to the already rich. Voluntary groups are bit players in this, invited at the margins to join this 'race to the bottom'.

Whilst New Labour appeared to regard the voluntary sector as 'preferred providers', the Coalition Government sees the sector as adjuncts to private corporations or left to pick up the pieces to meet needs from which no profit can be extracted. Too many within the voluntary sector have sown the seeds of their own demise by accepting this new role that has been set out for them and keeping silent about the consequences both for them and for their users.

Where are voluntary services heading and what can be done to stop this?

The fortunes of voluntary services now hang on the coat tails of privatisation, the shrinking of collective responsibility for social protection and the future for public services. The future is looking bleak.

Nonetheless, there is mounting evidence that many of those working within the current environment are unhappy and angry about the situation they find themselves in. The report calls for all who are concerned for the future of independent voluntary services in the struggle for social justice to take a stand and lead a truthful and plainly spoken campaign to change the mood and the music. This should include exposing the myths of privatisation and the false promise of voluntary sector participation in it; restating a commitment to stand with and speak out for the rights of users and embattled communities; pressing for the replacement of commissioning and procurement regimes by grants and service improvement plans that value voluntary services as complementary rather than replacements for public services; and building genuinely representative leadership groups that will fight to regain a proper place for voluntary services within a progressive and dynamic civil society.