

July 2008

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.

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 - 40% of respondents to a NAVCA survey said the Compact was not a useful tool in managing relationships with local public bodies. And research from consultants nfpSynergy, shows that the majority of councillors and local authority staff were either unaware of the Compact or thought it did not make much difference.

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.

So what to do? 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 - unlikely then that he'll be looking at why it doesn't work! The findings on why the Compact is a good thing will be published at the end of August 2008. And Kevin Curley of NAVCA and Stuart Etherington from NCVO also want to hang onto the Compact - by giving the Compact statutory force all will be well. But can we fix what is structurally broke?

The difficulty with the Compact reflects wider problems that the sector faces in its relationship with the State. 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, and their agents at local level, holds over that process. The task facing the sector is to rediscover our own perspectives, 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 users and communities want. 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. Read more....

<http://www.independentaction.net/compact>

January 2009

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

respectives 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.

May 2009

'Empowering the Voluntary Sector' gets Lottery dosh

The Lottery Fund has agreed to give 3 years money to 'empower the voluntary sector' (it was probably the trendy title that did it!). This project is a collaboration between NCVO's Compact Advocacy Programme and the NAVCA/Public Law Project's previous 'Empowering the Voluntary Sector' hook-up. The funding will ensure the continuation of work around the Compact and Public Law.

In typical weasel words, the NCVO press release described the Compact Advocacy Programme as having been set up "...to help voluntary and community organisations use the Compact to improve their relationships with Government." Wrong. The Programme existed to hold the Government and State agencies to account when they were in breach of the Compact. And generally, the project staff did this pretty well (no one can say we don't give credit where it's due!). So why can't the NCVO press office call a spade a spade?

Anyway, if you need help and support on how to use the Compact, what principles have been breached and how to best challenge whoever is dusting you over, you can [contact the Compact team](#).

July 2009

More banging-on about the Compact

If there's a *process* that *does* waste people's time it's the bloody Compact. As we've said before, why people think that officials working to Government targets are going to pay any attention to the lofty principles of the Compact beats us. The latest move over the last year or so has been to 'give the Compact more bite' by putting the whole thing on a statutory footing. Latest attempt here was a Parliamentary 10-minute rule bill back in May to give the Compact a "limited number of new powers and duties". Not too many though. Tom Levitt who tabled the motion was quoted as saying it would not be appropriate to give the commission stronger powers beyond naming and shaming because "having hard and fast rules is outside the spirit of the Compact". I thought it was the lack of spirit they were complaining about. The bill is 'unlikely to become Law'. You don't say!

Meanwhile the Commission for the Compact wants to measure yet again "awareness, knowledge, use and understanding of the Compact in central government departments and non-departmental government bodies", and then plans to repeat the exercise every year. Tenders have been out for this important (not!) piece of work and results will be in by November apparently.

And Compact Voice, the NCVO-driven, voluntary sector bit of this partnership industry is going to do a survey of its own to "see how the Compact is working locally." This is consistent with its general approach - it has recently come out with: 'new methods of monitoring and evaluating local Compacts need to be found to combat widespread cynicism'. This is taken from a report called [Problems, Issue, Solution: the Future of the Compact](#). Quite how monitoring and evaluation can dispel cynicism is a new one on us, but according to Oliver Reichardt, head of Compact Voice, "The recommendations in this report will ensure the Compact delivers on its potential." Give us a break.

Half of funders 'refuse to negotiate terms and conditions', according to Directory of Social Change

More evidence for the 'widespread cynicism' about the Compact, and suchlike, comes from a DSC report, 'Critical Conditions', which looked at how Government departments, trust and foundations approach their grant-giving. 61% of the Government departments and 45% of the trusts and foundations who responded said they did not negotiate terms and conditions with applicants.

The report concludes that: "Charities are being forced to compromise what they do to secure grants because funders refuse to negotiate terms. When funding terms and conditions are non-negotiable, applicants can be faced with a take-it-or-leave-it situation. If they refuse to sign the agreement, they could lose their

funding. If they sign and ignore the terms, they may jeopardise their project, organisation and beneficiaries." You can get the report here: [Critical Conditions](#),

Meanwhile, here at the Coalition we're working on a template for a voluntary sector contract which groups can use as a basis to negotiate with funders. We'll tell you when it's ready and put it on our website. But if there's anyone out there who already takes this approach get in touch at indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

October 2009

New, shorter Compact comes in for criticism

"Compact refresh consultation events" are being held around the country throughout September and October to take feedback on the proposal to abolish the existing document's five codes of conduct and replace them with three sections on policy development, allocating resources and, commissioning and achieving equality.

Criticism of the proposed approach has come from Voice4Change England (which represents about 6,000 black and minority ethnic third sector organisations) and the Community Sector Coalition (which speaks for community groups). Voice4change opposes the moving of BME commitments into the broader equalities section. "The BME code exists for a purpose," said Vandna Gohil, director of Voice4Change England. "It recognises there are barriers that don't allow BME organisations to exist on a level playing field."

While Matt Scott of the CSC is upset about the loss of the code concerning community groups. "It is not clear where the commitment to that part of the sector and constituency now lies", he says, adding "In effect, what we have is a Compact for third sector subcontractors. If you look at the bulk of the content, that is surely how it reads. The majority of the sector will draw its own conclusions and figure that it is not for them."

You can download the 'refreshed' Compact here: <http://compactvoice.live.rss-hosting.co.uk/files/101223/FileName/CompactconsultationpaperFINAL.pdf>

Independence Matters – new guidance from the Commission for the Compact

A new guide to the Compact and 'third sector independence' has been published by the Commission for the Compact on behalf of the Compact Partnership (Office of the Third Sector, NCVO, Compact Voice and the Baring Foundation). This looks at a number of dilemmas, like what happens if you criticise your funder, or whose voice counts in local policy debates, and then outlines how Compact principles can help to untangle these dilemmas. Some useful tactical material here, although alongside an

awful lot of glossy and obscure photographs illustrating we know not what. You can download the report here:

<http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/files/101230/FileName/IndependanceMattersGuide.pdf>

December 2009

Compact hysteria and dizzy 'spin' culminates in Orwellian re-launch

If it wasn't for the 32 campaigning groups that have now lost their promise of £750k from Capacity Builders, the recent furore over Angela Smith's (Minister for the Third Sector) decision to pull the money would be nothing short of hilarious. The decision, you see, involved the Minister saying 'stuff the Compact!' The result was that, for a couple of weeks, the whole of the Compact industry was thrown into a state of shocked hysteria.

Egg on the face for Compact Voice, which purports to the represent the voluntary sector end of this failed initiative, and who have been trying to persuade us that the Compact 'refresh' (how I hate that word....) consultation indicated a resounding endorsement of the revised 'grail' (despite only getting 80 or so responses). NCVO threatened legal action only to find they didn't have a case. The so-called independent Commission for the Compact pussyfooted about, saying that the decision was deplorable, but at the same time congratulated the Minister for admitting it - "that's the least she could have done" said Richard Corden, Commission Chief Executive. Compact Voice calls for an investigation, but the Commission refuses, saying the Cabinet hadn't yet given them the power to do any investigating. Editorial and commentaries in Third Sector magazine. A virtual petition on <http://www.louder.org.uk/> to try and get the dosh back on track (failed of course). Calls for the launch of the 'refreshed' Compact to be cancelled by Compact Voice, rejected by the Commission and, of course, expressions of deep commitment to the Compact from the guilty Minister, whilst offering her "regrets and apologies" for the breach.

Now, however, the fuss is over, point made and it's all back to business as usual; this from Richard Corden, with touching naivety: "The main thing is to put a lot of effort into promoting the Compact from the new year onwards. One of the things that wasn't done with the original Compact was to promote and sell it to government. It was felt it would implement itself and it didn't. Next year is an important time to make a big splash."

So we got the 'refreshed' Compact re-launch on December 16th
(http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/information/101803/102028/compact_refresh/)

and what do we find? A clear primary focus on voluntary organisations operating a sub-contractor role to the state (we know what side their bread is buttered on), to the detriment of those thousands of people engaged in supporting and developing their own communities through their own action, and most outrageous of all, the complete loss of the specific code for work with black and ethnic minority communities.

And to add a further terrifying chill to the whole sorry tale, the document invents a new description for the equalities world - **PEOPLE WITH PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS**. This Orwellian description will now apparently be applied to black people, others from ethnic minorities, women, disabled people, gay and lesbian people, older people and people who express religious beliefs (which probably in total means the majority of the population!). What the f**k???

But there's more! For then we see the famous five faces of our sector's leaders - Stephen (ACEVO), Kevin (NACVA), Stuart (NCVO), Justin (Volunteering England), and Debra (DSC) - welcoming this scandalous 'new speak' as heralding a new era of partnership between the two sectors (<http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/files/102067/FileName/StatementofSupportfromfiveleadingsectororganisations.pdf>). Stephen, of course, we've been worried about for some time and his comment quoted elsewhere in this newsletter that charity chief executives have been shouldering much of the burden of the recession, confirms our view that he is in need of a little lie down. Stuart too can be relied upon to say the right cuddly partnership thing, and Volunteering England is hardly at the cutting edge of plain speaking. But Kevin and Debra - what are you doing in this company? Retraction is surely a minimum requirement to get back to some self respect?

Immediate opposition has come from the Community Sector Coalition but that's it. Not a word so far from Voice4 Change England, which has been shafted by the new Compact, and which is run by 'people with protected characteristics', whom one might think would object to being reclassified in this way.

Over here at the Coalition we hate saying 'I told you so' (not), but this is what we wrote about the Compact back in July 2008 - "The difficulty with the Compact reflects wider problems that the sector faces in its relationship with the State. 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, and their agents at local level, holds over that process. The task facing the sector is to rediscover our own perspectives, 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 users and communities want. 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."

Or expressed rather more succinctly: "When the local authority (or Government) wants to screw you, it will do it anyway, Compact or not". You can see the whole of our article here: <http://www.independentaction.net/?p=763>

March 2010

The NCIA Compact Challenge – “sector leaders” respond (most of them anyway)

Infuriated by the endorsement of the new Compact by 'sector leaders' (see newsletter 14 for the awful background - <http://www.independentaction.net/?p=4643>), in January we press released an open letter (<http://www.independentaction.net/?p=4813#more-4813>) to the famous five, calling them out.

The replies were interesting, or, in the case of Stephen Bubb, entirely absent. We have engaged and thoughtful replies from Directory of Social Change, Volunteering England and NAVCA. Stuart Etherington at NCVO got the wrong end of the stick and did a 'let's shut this down'-type response. Their replies are on our website and you can see the lot here (<http://www.independentaction.net/?p=5173#more-5173>).

As for Stephen Bubb at ACEVO, perhaps his "Head of Comms, the talented Ms Mckeown" (to use Stephen's own description) failed to pass the letter on to him. However, she did find our botched article in the Times (botched in that we didn't quite actually write it...) which seemed to do the trick and caused Stephen a "deeply irritating day". We don't like to encourage bad behaviour but if you want to see his excoriating attack on us, then you can find it here: http://bloggerbubb.blogspot.com/2010_01_01_archive.html

The Compact Can-Can continues

The happy-clappy Compact machine grinds on. Compact Voice has its annual meeting, a great celebration, by their own account, of all that is so worthy about their work. However, the reality behind the spin is a bit different. First off, Sir Bert Massie, Commissioner for the Compact tried to do a bit of a guilt trip on the voluntary sector, in an effort to whip up some enthusiasm. According to Third Sector magazine, Sir Bert said that "the Compact would be strengthened if voluntary sector bodies publicly promised to follow it. Some public bodies had privately expressed frustrations to him that third sector organisations were keen to criticise public bodies' breaches of the Compact, but would sometimes not keep to their own side of the deal. He suggested that sector umbrella bodies should be among the first to sign up."

Secondly, more disappointment came in his acknowledgement of the poor response to their survey about awareness of the Compact amongst government departments (only 143 replies when they expected at least 325!). So a bit of work to do there.

And then comes news that the Commission for the Compact is going to have to pay accountants Grant Thornton good money to persuade local authorities to use the Compact. Apparently they are going to identify the 'economic and social benefits of applying Compact principles'. According to Third Sector magazine: "The commission wants the public sector to take it more seriously than the old version and hopes to convince councils that there are financial benefits to adhering to it." Great, that should do it! And it turns out that they paid some other consultants £39,000 to tell them that European funding timetables "do not always adhere to the Compact". Oh dear, now they have got to sort Europe out as well.

No doubt there will be more and more of this, but before we move away from the Compact we need to offer an apology to Voice4Change England. In our last newsletter we said that they had remained silent on the matter of the new improved Compact, but this is not true. We missed an article (18th December) saying that V4CE had expressed themselves "extremely disappointed" by the new Compact. "The refreshed Compact is full of gaps as far as small, BME and equality groups are concerned. We have been ignored and marginalised," they said. Quite right, well done for coming out on it and our apologies for not seeing it.

July 2010

Compact to consume more 'refreshments'

Notwithstanding the fact that the £6M committed by the Government to the Compact is 'being considered for cuts', David Cameron has pledged to "refresh and renew" the Compact. Oh no, not again!!!

Cameron said he wanted to make sure it "really means something". In a somewhat obscure but ominous response, Sir Bert Massie, Commissioner for the Compact, said: "Although the Compact was refreshed last year, the new agenda relating to the big society might mean that we need to examine how the Compact relates to the private sector and whether further changes are needed."

And Oliver Reichardt, at Compact Voice, which maintains that it represents the voluntary sector on the Compact, said: "It's great that the Prime Minister recognises the vital role of the Compact in building better relationships between public bodies and civil society."

Oly is being a bit Canute-like here as the reports flood into Compact Voice of cuts that are clearly in breach of Compact guidelines. For example, Eleanor Knowles,

director of the Cumbria Development Education Centre, said she was told their funding had been axed by email at 6pm on a Friday and the following Monday a press release was sent out announcing the decision. She said: "They've seriously broken the protocols in the Compact. It says an organisation should have a chance to challenge a decision. They've flashed it all over the papers before they've even talked to me."

The Departments of Health, and Communities and Local Government reckon they are also worried about Compact breaches and have announced new initiatives to promote their commitment to the Compact. This will include supporting and promoting a new page on Compact Voice's website providing information about the importance of the Compact when making spending cuts. That should take care of it then.

Meanwhile more support for the Coalition's position on the Compact comes from historian Meta Zimmeck, a visiting research fellow at Roehampton University. Writing in the first edition of Voluntary Sector Review, she described the Compact as "a handsome facade with not much behind". She said last year's refreshed Compact "does not remedy the opaqueness of the original version and indeed adds additional levels of obscurity".

But at Compact Voice HQ, Oly Reichardt was back in positive mood. He agreed that progress was initially slow but "over the past five years has been rapid"... and "We now have many examples where the Compact has transformed areas and relationships for the better," he said.

October 2010

Compact merry-go-round – here we go again

Students of linguistics will have noted that the hoary old Compact is now to be 'renewed' not 'refreshed'. According to Compact Voice this is because: "the partners wished to emphasise that this process is being driven by the need to renew the entire process (as originally signalled by David Cameron earlier in the year), not just the document, to ensure that Compact principles are widely adopted and followed by Government." Hmm I thought that was what the last circus was all about.

Anyway, it *is* apparently being 'renewed' and we are all again invited to proffer our views. The draft document is out and about and is even shorter than the last version. Should be able to get it onto one side of A4 by about 2012.

However, the solid commitment of the Government to Compact principles has not got off to a good start. The consultation on the changes themselves has been cut from 12 to 6 weeks - but Compact Voice says that the change of government and the threat of severe public sector cuts justified the reduction. And then they did

it again in announcing cuts to the Government's 'strategic partners programme', which has provided quite a lot of dosh to national and infrastructure agencies. No consultation period at all this time, but justified by Nick Hurd in a statement by: "the need to provide sustainability and stability for the sector, in this case, overrides the normal requirement for a 12-week consultation process". Another day-is-night announcement - apparently cuts in funding provide sustainability and stability!

December 2010

This month's 'That Takes The Biscuit' award goes to....

COMPACT VOICE

Not a stranger to our little award, Compact Voice this month gets the Huntley & Palmers again. This time because they are the living testament that cuts in state funding are by no means inevitable when your face fits with the right people.

Compact Voice's funding settlement has been agreed with the Office for Civil Society for the next four years. This year they got £307,000. Next year it will be a whopping 14% more and comes in at £350,000. Thereafter £358,000, 368,000, £378,000. Nice work if you can get it.....

Commissioning trundles on despite the evidence (and the Compact breach)

The Office for Civil Society has issued a green paper called 'Modernising Commissioning' which 'consults' on proposals to move to payment by results, setting targets for service delivery by independent providers, streamlining the procurement process and giving voluntary organisations a new 'right to challenge' local authorities when they think they can provide better services. The green paper itself breaches Compact principles by giving less than a month (and including Xmas and New Year) for responses and in a great display of gobbledygook says of this: "This falls outside of the Compact but the shorter timeframe will be mitigated by more targeted engagement." Eh?

If you're short of Xmas reading (and that sad) you can get the paper here:

<http://download.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/green-paper/commissioning-green-paper.pdf>

Meanwhile, private sector consultant John Seddon lines up with others to dish the principles and practice of commissioning as we know it. For example, talking of the fashion for mergers and bigger-is-better he said to the Health Select Committee: "Most of the Ministers concerned with the public sector believe in bigger is better, that we should, for example, share services, share front offices and back offices and these kinds of things which have IT-led change. The greatest example of this failure at the moment is HMRC. I think the numbers are that something like 1.7 million people have paid too much, more than 4 million people have paid too little and

17 million people they are not sure about, which must be most of the people on PAYE."

New Compact on the skids

In the culmination to an on-off-on-off farce that was less resonant of Whitehall and more of the Whitehall Theatre, the new Compact finally appeared in the middle of December. Having set a Compact-breaching deadline for the consultation ("to protect voluntary organisations from badly managed funding cuts caused by the comprehensive spending review..." (sic)), the government then failed to publish its proposals in time to be considered, and then was late publishing the final version. Which - not to our surprise - fails to address the shortcomings of the previous 'refresh' exercise. Once again, there is a primary focus on voluntary agency contractual relationships in privatisation programmes and continued neglect of the 800,000 community groups that form the backbone of voluntary action. You can catch the dismal culprit here:

http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_compact_with_page_numbers.pdf

Once again the famous faces are wheeled out to offer their warm support - here they are:

http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/statement_of_support_from_leading_sector_organisations_2.pdf though Debra Alcock-Tyler from Directory of Social Change is notable by her absence this time (well done Debra, if indeed you have done anything).

And once again we (NCIA) have criticised the whole entertainment: "This exercise is another example of a flawed, technocratic approach to understanding the relationship between voluntary action and the State. It ignores the vast bulk of sector and its current activity, and it ignores the political context within which the debate is being conducted, that is, massive, regressive, unjustified, cuts in public expenditure, increasing pressures on vulnerable populations and communities, and the dismantling of the welfare state."