

## Work Programme heralds double whammy for voluntary action

It's another blow to the independence of the community sector as massive contracts go to private companies, writes Andy Benson.

This month sees the beginning of the government's new Work Programme. Leaving aside views about where this latest attempt to harness the skills of the workless comes from or is likely to go, the programme marks another milestone, indeed millstone, in the relationship between the government, the private sector and the wonderful world of voluntary action. For as predicted, 40 of the 42 of these massive contracts have gone to private sector companies.

It may be that the mechanics of payments-by-results will anyway scupper the whole plan, since these companies are not used to waiting for such a long time to get their hands on the dosh. And making a profit out of the unemployed is the name of the game. However, the programme marks a more sinister development with the welcome it gives to the new era of sub-contracting. The technique itself – of finding local voluntary and community groups to do the legwork on behalf of the corporate bosses – is not new, indeed the previous welfare-to-work programme turned up a number of abuses in the ways in which the sub-contractors were treated.

What is new is that this is the first of a wave of similar initiatives and clearly enshrines an important aspect of how the government intends to roll out its privatisation programme. From their perspective, it's a perfect marriage – the service is out the door, the private sector picks up the business and the voluntary sector provides the we're-all-in-it-together-working-for-the-community cover.

But the implications for voluntary action are dire. Is this really how we see our future? Is this really what we want to recruit volunteers for? Our previous - and current - complaint is that too much of the sector has become an armslength delivery van for government and state policies. Are we now also to be subservient to private sector contractors in our acquiescence?

All of which strengthens our belief that we are right in our choice of priorities within NCIA – to make visible and oppose the privatisation of public services, to support the alternatives to 'new managerialism', so much a feature of the corporates, and to defend and nurture the autonomy and independence of the community sector.

This article appeared in our [June 2011 Newsletter](#).  
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