News from the Front Line: a consideration of the current position of the UK Third Sector by those who are managing and delivering services.

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Over the last 10 years ASSURE has observed the UK’s Third Sector rapid expansion as charities and voluntary bodies responded to the call of Central Government to increase their participation in service provision. Many organisations have taken on new roles and developed innovative services in line with the New Labour Agenda but now there is a climate of concern as fund mechanisms change and donations decrease all of which has prompted considerable reflection by managers and directors on the impact of the change and its implications for the future of the Third Sector.

This paper captures the thoughts and considered opinion of a range of providers operating in region noted for its long term social and economic deprivation. From small community based groups offering services to the socially excluded and ethnic minorities through to large, national organisation delivering locally there are major questions being raised about their own and the sectors ability to survive and to continue to deliver services to those most in need.

ASSURE has worked alongside over 30 Third Sector providers including Help the Aged, NACRO and National Children’s Homes during the last 10 years providing them with evaluation and research services. During that time member of the Unit have held a privileged position within these organisations working alongside managers and delivery staff observing practice, considering the long term sustainability of the programmes and their place within a network of provision aiming to ensure families receive the kind of support that prevents them from entering high tier, statutory services. Using a framework provided by Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley’s ‘Realistic Evaluation’ for internal evaluation and ‘Actor Network Theory’ (Michelle Callon, John Law et.al.) for an understanding of external networks, ASSURE has considered the impact on organisations of each change in the funding mechanisms, for example from a sliding scale of direct grant funding to a service commissioning model. However, the challenges faced in predicting the outcome of the current situation with the inevitable reductions of Central Government funding to local authorities and the subsequent fall in resources to their commissioning partners, is considerable. The interviews with managers and front line staff aimed to clarify particular aspects of their present position and to also record their perceptions at this fragile moment in the history of the Third Sector in the UK.

ASSURE has revisited a number of the organisations it has worked with over the last 10 years to carry out in-depth, one-to-one interviews with key members of staff many of whom have worked within the sector a considerable number of years. Questions focussed on the impact of the changes that have taken place at each organisation, how they have affected local provision, thoughts on the current situation and their strategic plan for the future. The results were documented and circulated among academics working with various Government Task Forces for commentary.

This is one phase of a larger piece of work that has been undertaken by ASSURE relating to the support and on-going career development of those in social care and particularly in the Third Sector. Although the findings can not at this stage be generalised across the UK they do give an in-depth view of the journey many organisations in changing from a ‘voluntary’ body to a ‘Third Sector’ organisation, an indication of their current concerns and a stark review of the challenges they feel their face in the future.