



KEYRING | SUPPORTING OFFENDERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Case study of a Clinks member

April 2016



People with learning disabilities are disproportionately represented in the Criminal Justice System, and can face a range of distinct issues including disability discrimination, poor identification of individuals with these conditions, and a lack of appropriate services and support¹.

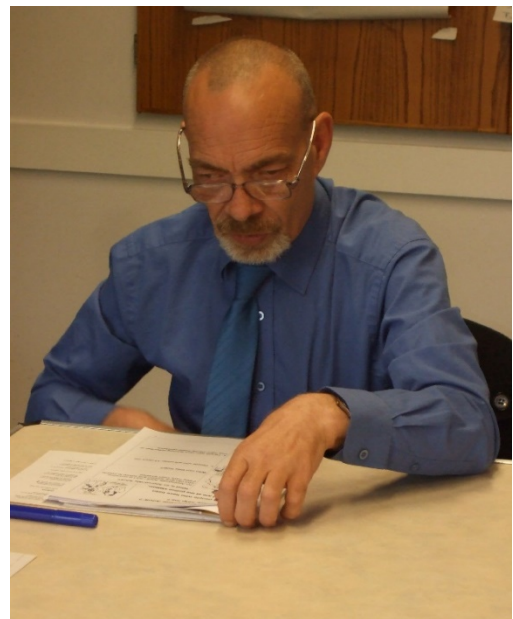
An estimated 5 to 10% of the adult offender population has a learning disability, and many more people will have 'borderline' learning disabilities; a number that is disproportionately higher than the general population. A learning disability is defined as a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life. People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complex information and interact with other people.² Many people with learning disabilities have support needs which, if left unmet, put them at a significant disadvantage when trying to navigate the Criminal Justice System.³

This case study focuses on KeyRing, a registered charity supporting approximately 1,000 vulnerable people throughout England and Wales, a large number of which are people with learning difficulties in contact with the Criminal Justice System. Their aim is to improve the life chances of those they support and enable them to take control and responsibility for their lives so that they can reach their full potential.

About KeyRing

Established in 1990, KeyRing is part of the [Advance Group](#) which provides a range of housing, support and employment services to vulnerable people. They describe their support as 'asset-based' - encouraging the development of confidence and further skills, creating a 'virtuous circle and reducing dependency on support which is paid for'.

They support people who might be considered vulnerable – including people with mental health problems, autism, and those who have age-related support needs, as well as those with learning disabilities. Their vision is for vulnerable people to be at the heart of their communities, and their Members get involved in activities such as neighbourhood improvement projects, campaigning for local change, and raising money for charity.



Clinks also had the opportunity to speak with Danny McDowell, a KeyRing Member with a learning disability who has had contact with the Criminal Justice System. Throughout the case study, transcripts of our conversation are shown in the boxed text to illustrate points using Danny's personal experiences.

Could you tell me a little bit about yourself, and how you first came into contact with the Criminal Justice System?

My name's Danny McDowell, I live in Wrexham in North Wales, but I'm originally from Northern Ireland. I first came into contact with the Criminal Justice System when I was about 7 or 8 years old - shoplifting and stealing sweets from shops. And from then I've been in boarding schools, training schools, borstals, psychiatric units, and prison. I've spent 22 years and 9 months in prison. But in total I've spent about 40 years in institutions - a big chunk of my life - I'm now 61.

My last time in prison was 14 years ago, but after I joined KeyRing my offending stopped.

In the following sections, KeyRing describe the support they provide for people who have had involvement in the Criminal Justice System.

A network of support

Our support model is based on creating a 'network' of around 10 people living in a small geographic area. Each network has a volunteer who acts as the group facilitator and supports the others (KeyRing 'Members') with their everyday issues. Support workers then help the group with larger pieces of work such as giving advice around finances, benefits advice, and housing concerns. This model of support, with an emphasis on volunteering and mutual support, means everyone pulls together and there is always a 'friendly face' available if something goes wrong for someone.

Do you know other people who receive support from KeyRing?

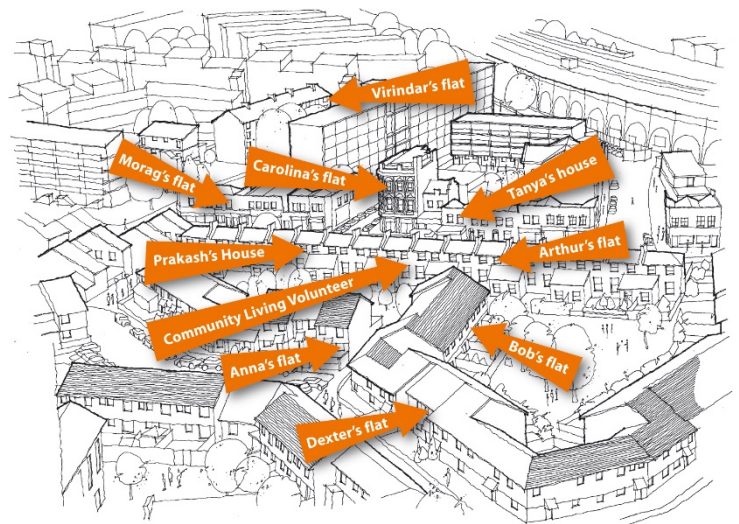
There's about 20 people in my network in Wrexham, and there's other networks throughout North Wales. You're talking about 100 networks nationally. I see quite a lot of the Members regularly. Everybody helps each other; Members help each other, and look out for each other. If one person's not well and they need a bit of shopping done, then they'll phone me - that's how the network works. It's a community I can rely on.

Overcoming the challenges

Our core business is supporting people with learning disabilities and we have a lot of experience in this area. Many offenders we work with have a learning disability, and every individual we support has different needs which means good support planning is crucial. The person being supported needs to have a high level of ownership of the outcomes that we are aiming for – it's about supporting people to identify aspirations, perhaps for the first time, and to dare to imagine a different future. To help us with this we have spent quite a lot of time training people to use the 'Outcomes Star' in a person-centred, accessible way.

We also make sure our paperwork and support tools are available in accessible formats, which means that staff are well equipped to explain things clearly to people.

We understand that simply sign-posting people to other services is unlikely to be enough – we need to rehearse any journey required, provide timely reminders and perhaps accompany them to their appointment.



What was the first thing that KeyRing did for you?

They found me accommodation when I was first released from prison. They took me out of a hostel and into a council-owned bungalow, and they helped me work out how to do my shopping, my bills, and just live generally in the community.

They helped me to buy furniture, and fill out the forms. In other words, they help you to see the right people, and get on the right track.

Services for ex-offenders

We find that people who have been involved in the Criminal Justice System don't need any 'specialist' support from us, but what they do need is 'responsive' support which is planned to address their needs and where we can bring in support from a range of other services as needed. For example, if somebody was referred to us with issues around alcohol misuse which became exacerbated in times of stress, and this led to them offending, our job would be to mitigate the causes of their anxiety where possible. This might involve supporting them with budgeting or social skills, or supporting them through anxious times, signposting them to alcohol services and supporting them to attend appointments.

What would have happened if KeyRing hadn't been there for you?

If I hadn't had someone like KeyRing many years ago, I would have still been in and out of prison. It's been life changing. I met them 13 years ago, and I haven't been in trouble since.

Do you think KeyRing have been a big influence in stopping your offending?

Oh yeah, they helped me get a place to live, sort my bills out and work my money out. And they helped me get in contact with my son, so they've done quite a lot for me, for a person who's been in prison and a bunch of different institutions.

How is the support provided by KeyRing different from other services?

They have time to listen. If they say they're going to do something they do it. I've been let down by others in the past, but they're not like other services. If KeyRing say they're going to help, they'll be here the next day and have it done. In other words, they practice what they preach.

They're always there when I need them. I've got their emergency numbers; I've got all the staff numbers in Wrexham, including the support workers and managers, so I've got quite a lot of people I can pick up the phone to. If I phone someone and they can't make it, there'll be someone else who can make it. Although they don't work 24 hours, there's always someone on the end of the phone for me. There's nothing they wouldn't help me with. I've never come across a situation where I've asked them to help me with something and they couldn't do it.

Our style of support helps people to address their chaotic lifestyles, meaning that, for example, they are better able to manage their finances (including keeping up-to-date with fines, rent, and other payments) and attend important appointments. We often find that people with a mistrust of authority will engage with our flexible, less formal style of support; they will engage especially well with our volunteers, with whom they build a close and informal relationship. This means it can be particularly helpful for people with experience of the Criminal Justice System, and helps to ensure our clients have settled accommodation which is often cited as a significant contributor to reducing reoffending.

KeyRing's emphasis on a group approach supports people to develop social skills in a safe environment. Following a risk assessment, people with a background of involvement with the Criminal Justice System are placed in our mainstream services, giving them an alternative peer group and consequently an alternative outlook. By connecting people with their local community, this brings a sense of belonging for many people, which in turn discourages them from offending in a community which likes and respects them. We find that as people see that their worth in the community is recognised, they develop their self-confidence and move further away from their offending behaviour.



(Members of the Working for Justice group winning Learning Disability Award for Accessibility in 2014)

Working for justice

KeyRing has also established a service user group – the Working for Justice Group - with the support of the Prison Reform Trust, to give feedback on their experience of the Criminal Justice System to others with a professional interest in this area.

Members of the group have learning disabilities and/or autism and have direct experience as suspects, defendants or offenders. The group meets regularly to help staff and policy makers understand the needs of people with learning disabilities in the Criminal Justice System. Over the last 8 years, and with some success, this group has been vocal about the need for 'Easy Read'

information in the Criminal Justice System, and in recognition of this work they won the Learning Disability Award for Accessibility in 2014. Easy Read is an accessible format designed for people with a learning disability. The Easy Read format is easy to understand because it uses simple, jargon free language, shorter sentences, and supporting images.⁴

“Using the ideas that the Working for Justice Group gave us, we created a new Easy Read form that has proven to be very effective indeed. As a result we have seen a significant surge in applications from the vulnerable groups we have been trying to reach out to.”
Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC)

What's your role now with KeyRing?

I'm now a trustee at KeyRing, so I go to the board meeting once every 3 months and use my experience to help their work.

As well as being a Member, I'm part of the Working for Justice Group, and we do a lot of work with the Prison Reform Trust. We try to train prison officers to teach them what it's like for people with learning difficulties to go into prison. We have run about 20 classes with about 10-12 prison officers in each one. The officers were from a lot of different prisons.

In 2011, the group helped the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) to put their application form into 'Easy Read'. Since using this form the CRCC have had a 50% increase in applications to their service and have received a great deal of praise from their stakeholders, including lawyers and prison staff, about the new form.

Have you been involved with any other charities?

I also do volunteer work with a charity called Revolving Doors Agency, representing people with learning difficulties. They're there to support people with substance misuse issues, young people, and old people, who are in trouble with the Criminal Justice System. Together with other volunteers, we're working with them to help prepare a report around offender health, and supporting people with psychiatric problems. We've lived it, and can help people going through similar experiences.

If I can tell my story to someone, and talk about my past, and it stops them from getting into trouble, even if it's one person, at least I've done something.

What are your plans for the future?

I have a son who's married and I have two grandchildren to spoil. If I keep going on the way I'm going, I'll be alright.

People with learning difficulties often have difficulty with everyday activities and need support to develop new skills, understand complex information and interact with other people, all of which puts them at a significant disadvantage when trying to navigate the Criminal Justice System. The holistic, flexible and person-centred approach provided by KeyRing enables their clients to access long-term support around relationships, employment and finances, whilst helping them to feel part of their community and feel more in control of their future – all factors that are known to contribute to the desistance process⁵. KeyRing's clients, such as Danny McDowell, therefore receive the support they need to re-integrate into the community, stop offending and ultimately rebuild their lives.

Written by Ben Watson, Clinks.

For more information about Keyring, visit

<http://www.keyring.org/>

¹ Prison Reform Trust (2008) No One Knows. Online:

www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/ProjectsResearch/Learningdisabilitiesanddifficulties

² Mencap, online: www.mencap.org.uk/definition

³ NHS England (2015) Liaison and diversion manager and practitioner resources, Learning disability. Online:

www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2015/10/ohc-paper-05.pdf

⁴ Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust website. Online: www.cnwl.nhs.uk/service-users-carers/easy-read-information/

⁵ Clinks (2013) Introducing desistance: a guide for voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations. Online: www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/null/Introducing%20Desistance%20-%20August%202013.pdf

STAY INFORMED WITH CLINKS



Live updates of news and resources from Clinks and those working within criminal justice [@Clinks_Tweets](https://twitter.com/Clinks_Tweets)



Discussions on matters of interest to the voluntary sector in criminal justice www.clinks.org/blog



Features and interviews with speakers at our conferences www.youtube.com/user/ClinksVideos



Free weekly digest of opportunities, resources, funding, events and job vacancies www.clinks.org/subscribe



A huge resource of information for anyone working in the VCS in criminal justice www.clinks.org

CLINKS

Tavis House, 1-6 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9NA
020 7383 0966 | info@clinks.org
www.clinks.org

Published by Clinks © 2016
All rights reserved

Clinks is a registered charity no. 1074546 and a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales no. 3562176.

£5

where sold