

**CLINKS**

supporting voluntary organisations that  
work with offenders and their families

# Our impact

2016



**Findings from an independent impact assessment**



## About Clinks

### Our vision

Clinks' vision is of a vibrant and independent voluntary sector working with informed and engaged communities to enable the rehabilitation of offenders for the benefit of society.

### Our mission

Clinks supports, represents and campaigns for the voluntary sector working with offenders. Clinks aims to ensure the sector and all those with whom they work, are informed and engaged in order to transform the lives of offenders.

### Become a member

Our strength comes from our membership and over 500 organisations have already joined. The more members we have, the more powerful our voice becomes.

Join today: [www.clinks.org/membership](http://www.clinks.org/membership)

## About the authors

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Researched and written by Helen Shaw and Chris Tully

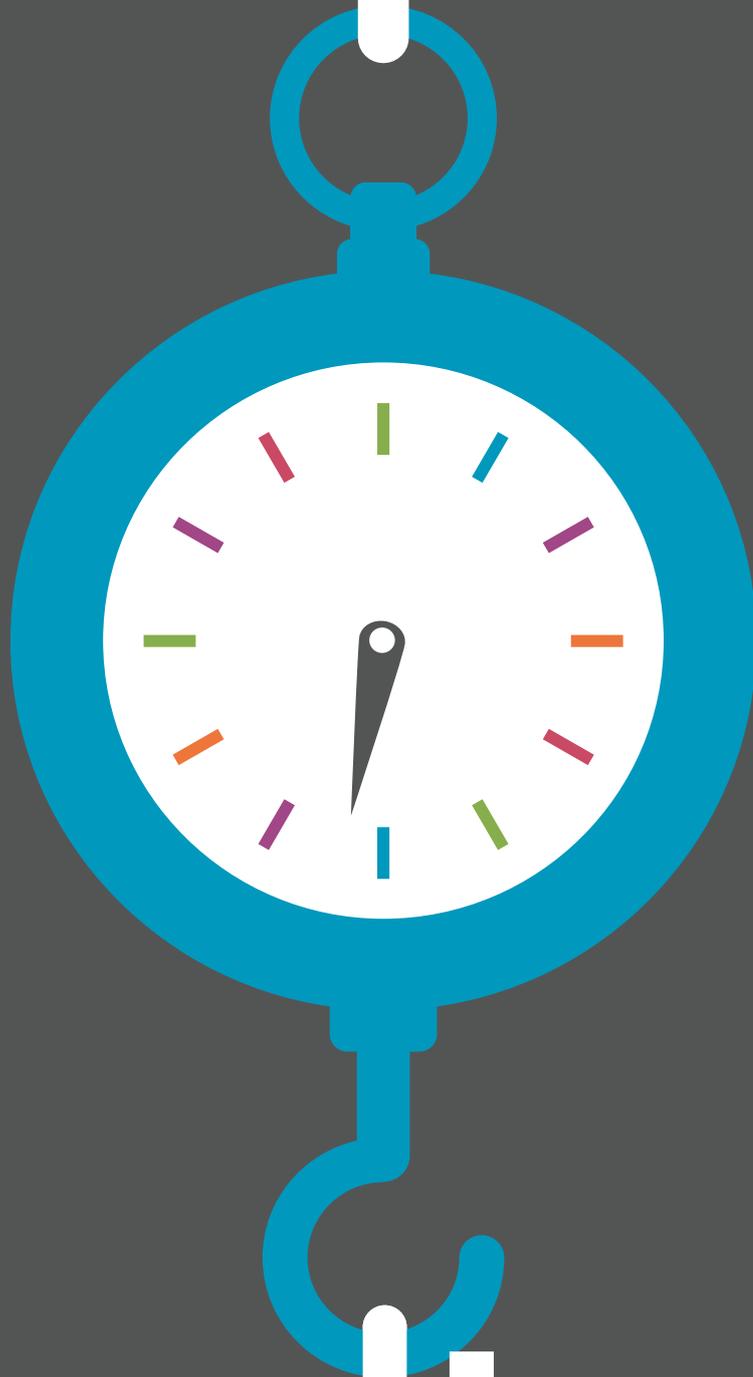
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# executive summary

## Introduction

This report presents the findings from an impact assessment that was researched and written by independent consultants Helen Shaw and Chris Tully between mid-February and March 2016.

The consultants were appointed through an open tendering process carried out by Clinks.

The research methodology involved an analysis of the context in which Clinks works, document analysis, a survey, semi-structured interviews, observation and analysis and interpretation of data.

The aim of the impact assessment was to assess:

- 1 Whether Clinks is providing the range of services and activities that its stakeholders want and need
- 2 What difference Clinks is making to its members and the wider voluntary sector in criminal justice, and ultimately, to their service users
- 3 Whether Clinks' work is of a good quality.

At the time of the assessment, Clinks had 613 members<sup>1</sup> and was working nationally, regionally and locally with members and partners to deliver its vision of a vibrant and independent voluntary sector working with informed and engaged communities to enable the rehabilitation of offenders for the benefit of society.

This report presents the views of a range of Clinks members and key stakeholders, including small and medium voluntary sector organisations, statutory stakeholders from local and national organisations, funders and those who have worked in partnership with Clinks. Respondents fed back on what Clinks does well, where it could do better and offered recommendations for its work. The overwhelming response from those consulted was positive. In particular, the interviews allowed members to give more detailed responses. This resulted in valuable insight into how Clinks is perceived and has provided constructive criticism that will help shape its future work.

The impact assessment has been carried out during a changing and challenging environment for the voluntary sector working in the Criminal Justice System (CJS). This environment is described in more detail in Clinks' *State of the sector* report for 2016.<sup>2</sup>

## Perceptions about what Clinks does for the sector

Information sharing was the most commonly identified aspect of Clinks' work that added value. Its information sharing was characterised as:

- Accurate
- Accessible and jargon free
- Authoritative
- Detailed
- Contextualised
- Up to date
- Relevant to the sector
- Beneficial to service delivery.

Light Lunch – its weekly ebulletin – was almost universally praised, with particular appreciation of the vacancies and funding sections. Individual responses were shaped by job role and position in and/or knowledge of the sector.

With over 10.5k followers, representing a 35% increase on the previous year,<sup>3</sup> the reach of its Twitter accounts has developed considerably and demonstrates the action that has been taken a result of feedback from previous impact assessments.

There were mixed views on Clinks' website, with the majority finding the range of information available invaluable. However, a number of members and stakeholders wanted more thematic organisation of material, more regular updates to ensure all material is current with a more professional look to set a benchmark for the sector and more use of modern applications.

There was widespread satisfaction with the briefings, policy papers and other publications, characterised by Clinks' ability to interpret and contextualise complicated government policies. These publications are described as high quality, timely and concise, adding value and increasing confidence for members by linking policy to political context and simplifying documents for easy access. It's clear that staff in the voluntary sector feel they are time poor. The way in which Clinks interprets and analyses information, prepares responses to policy, signposts, provides opportunities

for networking and briefs the sector is hugely welcomed and appreciated. A few respondents felt that Clinks tries to provide too broad a range of materials, resulting in a lack of focus and quality.

Events and training opportunities offered by Clinks are immensely popular and in keeping with the feedback data from Clinks training events in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Respondents welcome training that improves their services and helps them develop organisational sustainability. The cost of travel, linked to a lack of localised training, was identified as a potential barrier to attendance. Some suggested shorter courses, or developing an online training provision. A small number feel that Clinks could do more to challenge the sector about becoming more professional and could develop training and events to reflect its own professionalism and message.

Regular consultation with members and professional analysis of evidence give Clinks a reputable basis from which to represent the diverse voices of the sector. This is seen as crucial to the organisation's impact and legitimacy. However, there is evidence of survey fatigue, with a preference from some for face-to-face consultation, perhaps using scaled down round-tables. Others want Clinks to be more effective in reporting back on how members' evidence has been used.

Clinks is seen by many as the interface between government, the Criminal Justice System and the voluntary sector. Stakeholders regard strategic thinking as being a crucial facet of an infrastructure organisation. By seeing the bigger picture, Clinks enables organisations to think ahead, plan and develop effectively and to engage in discussion about service delivery and sustainability. Particular benefit is felt by smaller organisations that feel more removed from decision makers at a national level, or simply don't have the resources to engage with the broader issues within the sector.

The formal support provided via the funding, partnership and consultant finder services were seen as crucial to members' organisational development, sustainability and resilience, as were information sharing, policy, strategic oversight and networking opportunities.

## How Clinks creates impact

There is universal praise for the staff team. The organisational culture that underpins Clinks' approach is highly valued. It is seen as fundamental to how it is positioned to meet some of the future challenges. Managing the introduction of the new CEO caused some anxieties about how this approach will be sustained, but initial soundings suggest Clinks is managing this well.

There are concerns about capacity and the impact on the sector if Clinks is unable to operate with a full complement of staff. Much of Clinks' success is based on reputation and sector knowledge. The majority of respondents identified Clinks as a credible, authoritative and effective infrastructure organisation. On-going consultation and communication and its history of work with the voluntary sector means it shares an empathetic relationship with members.

Respondents and stakeholders see the role of Clinks as providing a voice for the voluntary sector. They recognise the vital function of coordinating opinion from across the sector. However, there were questions from a few about how Clinks reconciles diverse member voices and whether it should even try.

Clinks' recognition of the advantages and value of developing partnerships within the sector is highly valued, as is providing a framework for linking members, other organisations, stakeholders and agencies outside the voluntary sector.

Clinks' success in bringing together groups to discuss issues and seek solutions is popular and effective and praised for engaging a broad section of organisations. This is exemplified by the case study of the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3), with participants drawn from across the sector, generating a sense of democracy and involvement. Clinks' approach helps to challenge a perception that some organisations are being side-lined.

Clinks performs a crucial role in creating opportunities for members and others in the voluntary sector to have a sense of community,

with shared values and vision. Networking is also important for members who provide direct services and wish to either collaborate with similar providers, or avoid duplicating provision. As the sector segments and responds to the challenges of new ways of working this threatens this sense of community.

Clinks' ability to build and sustain relationships, and to manage and facilitate difficult and challenging conversations, underpins its ability to have an impact. Many respondents from the statutory and funding sectors spoke about Clinks' important role in bringing people together for dialogue, often in areas that can be difficult or challenging.

Government, other statutory agencies and key funders see Clinks as an honest and trustworthy source of information. Many members see Clinks as a route to policy makers and influencers. For many it is important to know that Clinks' comments on policy are evidence based and linked directly to the experiences of its members. Government officials, who think Clinks is very well placed "to navigate the sector through the impact of policy announcements" appreciate this role.

Clinks' work at local and regional levels supports and strengthens the sector. This work has developed local partnerships and cemented work with regional infrastructure bodies. Respondents felt this could be better communicated across the sector to raise the profile, making it more visible for potential users of Clinks' services.

## Challenges and opportunities

There were assumptions and confusion about who Clinks represents within the voluntary sector, despite its clear statements of vision and mission. As greater pressure is felt by small and medium sized organisations, the vision and mission statements may need to be revisited, clarified and possibly added to, in order to reflect a growing focus on sustainability, resilience and diversity. There were concerns from some in the sector about Clinks straying from its key remit. This may be linked to a misunderstanding of its mission.

Some stakeholders and members questioned how to balance London and regional work and how Clinks can respond to the devolution and localism agenda, in order to continue to shape and influence discourse.

Clinks and its members are "navigating a course in uncharted waters". Working with this complexity, the tensions it creates and the room for misunderstandings cannot be underestimated. The idea that Clinks can make positive use of the uncomfortable middle position it occupies, facilitate more dialogue, and extend the range of those it engages with, was welcomed enthusiastically.

Clinks might also consider how it responds to the emerging reframing of the debate on the CJS. Can and should Clinks contribute to changing the narrative on crime, punishment, rehabilitation, multiple and complex needs etc.? What will the CJS look like in the next few years and what environment will the voluntary sector need to work with and within?

Structural reforms and funding of criminal justice services, Transforming Rehabilitation (TR), health, local authorities and police and crime commissioners all present the sector with challenges in funding service provision. There are different perspectives on whether engaging with commissioning and receiving funding in this way aligns with the values of the voluntary sector and Clinks is uniquely placed to facilitate some of the necessary conversations.

The role taken up by Clinks during the roll out of TR has provoked significant comment. There is rich learning for Clinks from its TR experience. Some expressed the view that Clinks had embraced the process too enthusiastically, whilst others questioned the quality of the legal and business knowledge offered by Clinks. Nearly all identified it as a priority for Clinks as the key infrastructure organisation working in the sector.



## Clinks has listened and responded: 10 pledges

In order for Clinks to know it is doing the right things, in the right ways, and delivering the best possible impact, it needs to hear from and respond to its stakeholders. This impact assessment has shown that Clinks is providing the right range of services and activities to meet its members' needs, that these are having a positive impact and are of a good quality.

Clinks is keen to make changes where it can to respond best to what the sector needs in order to work most effectively with its beneficiaries and on their behalf. It will be making some changes and investing time and resource in new activities to reflect what's needed at a crucial time of change and challenge for the sector. As a result of the recommendations produced by this impact assessment, Clinks has made 10 pledges to inform its future work.

## Clinks' pledges

### 1 Knowing our strengths and goals

We will be clear about what we do, why we do it and for who. We will revisit our vision, mission and values and ensure there is clarity about our remit and messaging across all our communications channels.

### 2 Valuing our people

We will ensure we understand and sustain our organisational culture and safeguard our valued and respected organisational stance. Some of this can be achieved through continued investment in staff. In 2016/17 we are investing in key roles that will allow our teams to work more effectively together and we will be looking for ways to help all our staff contribute effectively to our shared mission.

### 3 Keeping our finger on the pulse and responding to need

We will be looking at a broad range of strategies to maintain our impressive track record of consultation with our membership. This could include greater use of the roundtable model and facilitating groups representing particular demographics/ types of work/ shared interests. We will continue to work with research and infrastructure partners to better understand the sector, its needs and future challenges and to respond accordingly.

### 4 Keeping it local

Across England and Wales we are investing in core roles to provide a more tailored and localised support offer. We will engage more with key commissioners, influencers and processes that are likely to impact on our locally based member organisations. This will include a focus on devolution and supporting strategic engagement by the sector with reform prisons, reformed probation providers and police and crime commissioners.

## 5 Keeping you in the loop and on the agenda

We will implement a new communications strategy that aims to make most effective and timely use of relevant communications tactics and channels. This will allow us to inform the sector and shape the agenda affecting how it works. We will continue to invest in our social media presence, building on our impressive results to date. We will look at how technology can help us to more effectively connect those in the sector to one another, to those they need to work with or alongside, and to those they need to influence. We will help the sector understand the outcomes and the impact of our collective work. Because we share the work we'll share the successes and learning.

## 6 Growing our base and support

We have invested in a revised membership, training and events offer. We will be working with members and wider partners to offer services that provide the sector with timely, effective, relevant support, not duplicating but adding value. Where practicable and needed, we will have a more localised and regional offer. We'll look at the potential benefits and uptake of short courses and online training, enabling greater engagement with isolated and cash strapped members.

## 7 Keeping you informed

We will share a 12-month forward plan with members, as part of our communications strategy, to help reduce the potential for misunderstanding, organisational overlap and duplication of effort. We will refine our stakeholder engagement approach and provide more ways to hear from you and tell you what's happening, what you've helped achieve and what's coming next.

## 8 Partnering for progress

We will work with a range of partners from various sectors to broker relationships that provide voluntary organisations with opportunities to improve outcomes for their beneficiaries. This will include scanning the horizon for new opportunities and providing the practical support organisations need to respond positively.

## 9 Building our future strength

We will diversify our income and aim to grow our earned income. This will allow us to respond better to the needs of the sector, whilst continuing to work with those funders and partners where there's synergy and mutual benefit. We will do this with due consideration to the income needs of the sector and, wherever practicable, will aim not to duplicate or compete.

## 10 Connecting for change

We will build on what we are best at – advocating with, and on behalf of, the sector through change and challenge as the policy and service landscape continues to evolve. We will learn from the policy experiments of recent years and apply these lessons for the benefit of the sector and its beneficiaries as further changes happen. In doing so we will further develop our work as a facilitator of difficult/challenging conversations within the voluntary sector and with our key stakeholders.

1/

# introduction



This report presents the findings from an impact assessment that was researched and written by independent consultants Helen Shaw and Chris Tully between mid-February and March 2016. The consultants were appointed through an open tendering process carried out by Clinks. The methodology involved an analysis of the context in which Clinks works, document analysis, a survey, semi-structured interviews, observation and analysis and interpretation of data.

The aim of this impact assessment is to assess whether Clinks is providing the range of services and activities that its stakeholders want and need, the difference it is making to them, and whether Clinks' work is of a good quality.

## The context in which Clinks works

At the time of the assessment, Clinks had 613 members<sup>5</sup> and was working nationally, regionally and locally with members and partners to deliver its vision of a vibrant and independent voluntary sector working with informed and engaged communities to enable the rehabilitation of offenders for the benefit of society.

Since Clinks last commissioned an impact assessment in 2013,<sup>6</sup> it has conducted a number of investigations into the state of the voluntary sector working in the Criminal Justice System. The consultants used four reports in particular to set the context for the impact assessment

- *The State of the Sector 2015*<sup>7</sup>
- *The State of the Sector 2016*<sup>8</sup>
- *Critical Friends: An independent review of voluntary sector infrastructure in the Criminal Justice System*<sup>9</sup>
- *Change and Challenge: The voluntary sector's role in Transforming Rehabilitation*<sup>10</sup>

The sector is hugely diverse, with mixed funding streams and multiple skills, expertise and needs. It works with service users whose needs over time have become more complex and increasingly challenging to meet. Government policy reforms on crime,

health, housing and prisons have seen the sector having to develop ever more resourceful approaches to working with their service users, including the provision of basic needs like food or clothing.

Organisations reported that their difficulties in meeting need are underpinned by financial challenges, including constrained grant funding, uncertainty over contracts and the ability to win them (especially for small and medium sized organisations), the advent of payment by results (PbR) and Transforming Rehabilitation (TR), the impact of reduced statutory provision and for some, an increasing reliance on spending reserves to remain operational.

Organisations also reported becoming more time poor as they spend ever more resources on generating income. Running in parallel was an increased use of volunteers and the required support, training and supervision to make volunteer roles successful. Organisations reported on average having 1.7 volunteers for every paid member of staff,<sup>11</sup> with some having many more.

The *Critical Friends* report outlined the value the sector places on infrastructure organisations and how having a voice and advocacy informed ministers and civil servants. Participants wanted help with funding and procurement, events and workshops, nationally, regionally and locally. There was a need for information to keep abreast of a fast changing sector, including networking and policy briefings and to identify opportunities for development and risks to sustainability.

The report identified clear challenges for infrastructure organisations like Clinks

- Infrastructure organisations need to be active in developing diverse income streams that include earned income, private sector investment, charitable trusts and foundations and government funding.

- In order to fulfil the role of a trusted broker, infrastructure organisations need to be accountable to the full diversity of their membership by representing various perspectives and addressing different needs.
- Specialist infrastructure organisations need to focus on providing high quality two-way information between government and the voluntary sector. This requires expert staff and a mechanism with which to check that high level policy documents have been correctly interpreted.
- Infrastructure organisations need to be flexible and able to adapt quickly to the changing needs of the voluntary sector. Collaboration and partnerships should be developed where it is necessary to access relevant expertise.
- Infrastructure organisations need to ensure that they have the appropriate legal and governance arrangements in place to ensure openness, transparency and accountability.



2/



# Clinks' impact

# The value of Clinks to the sector – your view of what Clinks does

Overall, the view is that Clinks is providing the right services for its members and other stakeholders and these are of a good quality. Respondents identify a number of key elements in support of this. Information gathering and sharing is vitally important for an organisation that is regarded as the interface between the voluntary sector and central government.

Clinks is able to distil complex policy and thinking into useful briefings and analysis for its membership and others, and by doing so enables participation by increasing understanding and signposting developments and opportunities. The flow of information between the sector and government is due to an impressive approach to gathering evidence from across the sector and using that to inform its own thinking, publications and reports. This is valued by respondents.

Practical interventions are also hugely valued, in particular Clinks' training, events and consultancy support. Organisations that regard themselves as isolated were particularly keen on the opportunities for networking and collaboration that the training and events offer. These go some way towards informing the debate around sustainability and providing resources otherwise difficult to access, especially for smaller organisations at a time of economic uncertainty. Respondents also reacted favourably to the communication channels for sharing information and resources. Light lunch is very popular as is the website and Twitter. Clinks has made great strides in its use of social media and added value accordingly.

## 1 / Information sharing

The most commonly identified aspect of Clinks' work that adds value is its information sharing. Respondents describe Clinks' information provision as accurate, accessible, detailed and

up to date and welcome an authoritative voice that recognises the specific needs of the sector. Particular praise was reserved for Light Lunch and Clinks' willingness to embrace Twitter. The website is praised for its depth of information, use of blogs and guest contributors and benefits in supporting organisations with service delivery issues. A few suggest it looks old fashioned and could be re-developed thematically by demographic groups.

Briefings and policy papers are deemed invaluable in keeping members up to date in a fast changing sector. They also enable people to distil policy into practice, which is shared with other organisations with which they work, thus increasing knowledge and understanding in other sectors.

*“ I send regular updates to supported housing services and partner agencies which is relevant to supporting service users. Clinks' information is reliable and contemporary and this helps this service to keep up with changes – particularly around Transforming Rehabilitation. ”*

Respondents identified particular value in the following information sharing channels.

### Light Lunch e-bulletin

There was almost universal praise for Light Lunch from members, stakeholders and funders. It is viewed as a concise and accessible tool for staying in touch with the sector, relevant to the most pressing issues of the day and as an important resource for sharing with colleagues located both within and outside of the CJS.

*“ Light Lunch is vital in a fast moving environment. ”*

*“ Their Light Lunch bulletin is brilliant – it's the only one of those newsletters I read – all the relevant information is in Light Lunch but easier to read. ”*

Respondents value the vacancies section and explained that, for small charities, the cost of advertising is prohibitive. It is particularly useful because vacancies go to a targeted audience. The funding element of Light Lunch is also important to members, who value information that is specific to the sector, relevant to small and medium sized organisations and located in one section for ease of

use. This is particularly important for overstretched members at a financially challenging time.

However, some members felt Light Lunch was aimed at a different audience.

“Light Lunch makes interesting reading but I feel that it is not particularly pitched at the many small charities such as ours.”

Job role and position in, and/or knowledge of, the sector frequently affected the way Light Lunch was perceived with some finding it overwhelming.

“Light Lunch is not light: it is a five course medieval feast.”

## Social media

Respondents praised the strides Clinks has taken to engage with social media. With over 10.5k followers, a 35% increase on the previous year,<sup>12</sup> Clinks' Twitter reach has developed considerably. Previous impact assessments had noted calls for greater use of social media and Clinks has successfully embraced the need. The profile of the organisation is seen as having been enhanced by the spread of information publicised through Twitter.

“It was slow onto social media but doing a fantastic job now.”

## The website

The majority of respondents find the website to be a valuable resource. There has been a 30% increase in traffic on the site, with 79,476 unique visitors in 2015.<sup>13</sup> Over 20% of the survey respondents mentioned the website as being either one of the things they valued most and/or contributed most to Clinks' effectiveness. Key to this was the broad range of information available and the ease of use. Respondents describe it as effective, simple to use and with a clear lay out. One respondent called it “inspiring and motivating.”

“Information provided on Clinks' website has enabled our organisation to access training events and also potential grant funding opportunities.”

The use of blogs and guest bloggers is seen as very positive.

“The blogs provide a really useful catch up on the stuff going on across the sector.”



Observations on how it might be improved focused on a more thematic approach to information based around specific demographic groups i.e. young people, women, mental health, service user involvement, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and equality issues and/or service delivery.

“It would help if the website could be organised more thematically so you could enter the site and click on mental health, or women and the information was there to access.”

One respondent felt the website should reflect a higher standard of presentation than exists across much of the sector and that Clinks should be setting the quality benchmark.

“The website looks like much of the sector's things are hard to find, there are typos and not enough care is taken about the quality of presentation. This plays into the impression that the charity sector is amateurish and Clinks doesn't counter that presentationally.”

A further point was made regarding the ease of booking onto events, with the current digital form filling exercise and e-mail system replaced with a more up to date process.

“Website needs to be improved, it's creaky and it must start to modernise. A good example is its events booking system, why is it not using Eventbrite?”

## Briefings, policy papers and other publications

In 2015 Clinks produced 13 reports, 3 case studies, 2 guides, 5 briefings, 7 responses and one speech.<sup>14</sup> The early part of 2016 saw the publication of *The Guide to Service user involvement and co-production*<sup>15</sup> which perfectly illustrates the benefits of multi-platform messaging with publicity for the guide appearing on Twitter, the website and in Light Lunch. Those we heard from referred to the quality of publications and responses to government policy and initiatives. There was widespread satisfaction with this type of information sharing, characterised by Clinks' ability to interpret and contextualise what can be complicated government policies. Respondents clearly rely upon Clinks to join up the dots.

“*Their analysis and responses to government reviews and policy announcements provide an excellent summary of key points of what can be very lengthy documents, e.g. the government response to the Harris Review.*”

The policy papers and briefings are described as being of high quality, timely and concise.

“*It has got much quicker at responding to policy.*”

Clinks adds value for members by linking policy to political context and simplifying complex documents for easy access.

“*Excellent bulletins and updates, indispensable work summarising and distilling weighty, difficult to understand government documents.*”

By maintaining close relationships with policy makers the organisation is able to operate quickly and responsively.

“*Staying near to policy makers and researchers so as to always be well informed.*”

It enables members to engage with policy makers and key stakeholders in the sector.

“*Clinks are our main link to national policy and thinking on the criminal justice sector.*”

A small minority feel Clinks is trying to provide such a broad range of materials that it lacks focus and, as a result, quality suffers.

“*Its material needs to be of higher quality – do a bit less but do it better. The fact that it is not quite up to standard is indicative of a lack of order and focus.*”

## 2 / Events and training

Clinks training opportunities are hugely popular – nearly 30% of respondents identified positive value and impact. This was in keeping with the feedback data from Clinks' training and events in 2015,<sup>16</sup> which was universally positive. In all, 821 delegates attended events and training during 2015.<sup>17</sup>

Respondents welcomed training that improves their services and helps them develop organisational sustainability.

“*Clinks training supports members to offer better services to their service users.*”

They also identified networking as an important bi-product of these events.

“*Thanks for arranging this event. It's great to be able to come together to hear different insights as well as network with others in the sector.*”

For some respondents the cost of travel prohibits attendance at training and events and therefore more localised training would be welcome. In addition, some interviewees suggested shorter courses, or an online training provision.

“*Needs to have less of a London centric approach and do more work in Wales and the regions, especially for meetings, conferences and training opportunities.*”

Some felt Clinks needs to be more creative about the platforms and methods of engagement it uses and move more quickly with online tools. Suggestions included using webinars and other digital platforms for engagement so participants do not have to travel to an event to participate.

## 3 / Evidence gathering from the grass roots

By operating a tried and tested method of regular consultation with members and analysing evidence

to inform discussion and debate, Clinks has earned the right to represent the diverse voices that make up the sector. Respondents were quick to praise Clinks' commitment to basing dialogue with government, funders and other key stakeholders on grass roots evidence. Some want Clinks to look at alternative ways of gathering evidence, perhaps based around specialist roundtable events, with less emphasis on sector wide surveying.

The majority of respondents believe that Clinks' evidence gathering is crucial to its impact.

“ We welcome the organisation's commitment to gathering information and evidence from its members. ”

“ The evidence provided by Clinks really helps these organisations. Without Clinks there would be a lack of attention paid to society's most vulnerable people. ”

“ Good at knowing what's going on in the field and then identifying the right research to undertake. ”

Conversation with central government is enhanced when it reflects the experience and expertise within the sector. Evidence also contributes to successful service delivery.

There is, however, some evidence of survey fatigue, with a suggestion there's an increasing tendency to ignore requests for feedback when it arrives by email. For some there is a preference for face-to-face consultation, perhaps using scaled down roundtables.

In addition, others want Clinks to be more effective in reporting back on how members' evidence has been used.

“ Clinks needs to report back more often on what has happened to the evidence that members provide it with. Transparency and impact need to be communicated to make the process a two way thing. Ultimately organisations are asked to attend so many consultations but unless the difference their attendance makes is shown to have impact, it's tempting not to bother. ”

Statutory bodies were also impressed by the quality of Clinks' evidence.

“ Their work on tracking TR has helped to pitch the level of criticism at the right level – they could have reflected more of the negative noise but Clinks has actually helped to achieve a more measured view. This is very useful to us as we are all about triangulation and they are not just a hostile lobby group but use reputable academics to do their research and interact with members to create real data. ”

## 4 / Strategic thinking and a collaborative voice

Clinks is seen as the interface between government, the CJS and the voluntary sector and stakeholders. Members regard strategic thinking as being a crucial facet of an infrastructure organisation like Clinks. By seeing the bigger picture Clinks enables organisations to think ahead, plan and develop effectively and to engage in discussion about service delivery and sustainability.

Much of the positive comments focussed on the ability to think with greater clarity.

*“ Strategic work has helped me feel less isolated and more progressive with my thinking. ”*

Particular benefit is felt by smaller organisations that feel more removed from decision makers at a national level, or simply without resources to engage with the broader issues within the sector

*“ They help smaller organisations understand the strategic overview. ”*

Larger organisations, even those with their own policy departments and particularly those with a wider remit than criminal justice, also value the policy overview produced by Clinks. It was described as reassurance that they haven't missed an important development and very supportive to their own planning and policy work.

Sustainability was identified as being really important for respondents, with a need for positive, actionable strategic thinking on future developments.

*“ I like the fact that they have become more strategic over the years as we have to develop sustainability for the sector. Some of the team have very strategic minds and think at a high level and I really value them bringing those views to the table. ”*

*“ It (Clinks) attempts to keep 'ahead of the curve' on policy developments. ”*

*“ Without Clinks a strategic voice and collaborative presence would be missing. ”*

*“ Clinks are the most user-friendly and proactive national organisation we deal with. ”*

The impact of Clinks' strategic thinking in a complex political arena is also recognised by funders.

*“ I completely trust my colleagues in Clinks. There is some difficult work to manage from a strategic political point of view and I know I can work that out with Clinks – an example being how Clinks worked with us to look at volunteering and the CJS. ”*

## 5 / Developing voluntary sector sustainability

Clinks is able to help organisations develop through formal channels, such as the funding, partnership and consultant finder services it offers, providing resources, expertise and support with systems and process. Other support is also valued – sharing information, future planning based on up to date information on policy and strategic oversight and providing opportunities to connect with others in the sector to share good and emerging practice.

*“ Clinks as a conduit for broadening the understanding of the way others work, and outlining good practice. ”*

The relationship with officials is valued highly.

*“ There are ministers who continue to be interested in working with the voluntary sector and we are aware of over 2000 working with offenders. How do we deal with all of that? I can route my queries through Clinks and they will discuss things honestly with me. ”*

Smaller voluntary sector organisations were more likely to comment on the practical support offered by Clinks, and welcomed more of this.

*“ Consultancy support is valuable as if we can access the funds it enables us to undertake work we couldn't otherwise fund. ”*

One member felt Clinks might be replicating existing services already provided by local and regional Councils for Voluntary Service and, with better mapping, could avoid duplication.

*“ One of the listed 'benefits' of Clinks' membership is access to a grant-finding database yet most councils and local voluntary sector support agencies already offer access for free. ”*

# 3 / how Clinks generates impact: what's the added value?



It is evident that those it serves hold Clinks in high regard. There are a number of facets as to why they feel Clinks generates impact. It demonstrates an unselfish organisational culture in which experienced, knowledgeable and approachable staff operate. Clinks recognises the value of dialogue, partnership and collaboration and by managing to embed these features in its own ways of working, encourages its members and the broader sector to do likewise. By engendering a sense of community and participation, members will give their time, knowledge and experience. In return, Clinks has earned the right to give voice to the needs and concerns of organisations that may otherwise struggle to access policy makers and influencers.

Clinks can find itself in the difficult position of managing conversations with diverse voices and agendas. As the sector diverges and segments further, it will inevitably be doing more of this. Challenges for the future will include balancing local and regional demands with maintaining a national profile, an increasingly privatised market and an ever greater need to create opportunities for dialogue and thinking on the CJS as a whole.

## 1 / Staff

There is universal praise for the staff at Clinks. Survey respondents described the staff as of a high standard, valuable and contributing to its effectiveness. Comments were framed in the context of approachability and openness and that Clinks staff are friendly, accessible, efficient and down to earth.

“Clinks staff are a team that focus on the issues rather than the reputation of the organisations involved.”

Staff were also praised by members for their insight into the sector and their ability to deal with both generalist requirements and more specialist concerns.

“Staff all seem really well informed and knowledgeable about the CJS. The policy documents and research are excellent.”

“(We) value the input and care of staff at Clinks who provide essential information for ex-offenders and third sector small organisations working at localised levels.”

“Staff are very keen and approachable and they have prisoners' families at the heart of their work.”

## Organisational culture

Evidence emerged from a range of key stakeholders about the importance of the organisational culture that underpins Clinks' approach and is perhaps fundamental to how it is positioned to meet some of the future challenges. At this key point in Clinks' development, with the change in leadership, this was felt to be an important asset that needed to be nurtured.

“Clinks doesn't have an organisational ego and that is one of the reasons I believe it is so successful. Everyone is working in the service of the organisation and its objectives. I think it works very well.”

## Organisational leadership

Since the last impact assessment there has been a change of chief executive. Following in the footsteps of a long-standing Director, who was very closely linked to the culture of Clinks, is not easy. Questions of succession planning were raised in the previous impact assessment. Initial soundings from those we heard from suggest Clinks has positively addressed concerns.

“Anne Fox brings a whole new optimism and Clinks needs that.”

## Maintaining capacity

Issues were raised regarding capacity and the impact on the sector if Clinks is unable to operate with a full complement of senior staff.

“They are pragmatic, quick to respond and open. They don't have to stop and seek permission to do something sensible but there's a slight one-man (sic) band feel. It feels slightly worrying that if one person fell ill or worse would there be anyone to replace them?”

“When you are so stretched you are inevitably reactive as even with clear planning if you are the go-to body you will be asked for your opinion. When dealing with government you need to send someone with suitable seniority to face-to-face meetings and who then has sufficient time for thinking and writing. The possibility for making mistakes and the stress on individuals is huge.”

However, there is overwhelming evidence that Clinks' impact on the sector derives, in part, from an accomplished staff team that bring knowledge and skill to work on a diverse range of needs, resources, experience and delivery.

## 2 / Reputation and knowledge

Much of Clinks' success is based around its reputation and sector knowledge. The vast majority of respondents identified it as being credible, authoritative and effective in carrying out its role as an infrastructure organisation.

*“ I am very happy with the standard of services and believe the services do support our work. Clinks are seen as a credible ambassador for the CJS voluntary sector. ”*

Ongoing consultation and communication and its history of work with the voluntary sector means it shares an empathetic relationship with its members.

*“ Clinks understand and speak the same language as their members. ”*

One respondent summed up its reputation:

*“ Never heard a bad word or specific criticism about them. ”*

## 3 / Providing a voice for the voluntary sector

Respondents see the role of Clinks as providing a voice for the voluntary sector. That voice is given legitimacy because it is a membership organisation and can rely on grass roots evidence when communicating messages to key stakeholders.

*“ Clinks is effective because of a critical mass. It has so many members it is the biggest representative voice in the sector. ”*

*“ They are absolutely the voice of small and medium organisations that are critical for our (NOMS) work in the CJS. They can show government that these organisations have a positive and important role to play. ”*

### Co-ordinating opinion

Respondents recognise the vital function of co-ordinating opinion from across the sector.

*“ A strategic voice, its support, leadership and voice is vital for the sector. ”*

Clinks' key stakeholders, such as the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), also rate this legitimacy and these relationships are important for delivering the sector's views to central government and to other stakeholders.

*“ The work we've funded them on is all about how to bring the voice from the frontline to the policy debate. ”*

### Managing competing demands

A recurring theme is how Clinks reconciles diverse member voices - can it realistically speak with one voice for the sector, should it even try and in a segmented sector how does it balance diverse demands and agendas? Respondents are, in the main, supportive of Clinks' approach.

*“ They occupy a unique and valuable position and manage to maintain a positive credibility and value really well in difficult circumstances. ”*

Some of those interviewed believe that Clinks needs to clarify its core message and, within that core message, to also identify what's important to the sector as a whole and how Clinks communicates that. Some respondents suggested a minority of member organisations hold influence on the basis of their size and ability to speak the loudest.

*“ There are strong opinions from some members about some issues and I can't understand why they respond to those views. ”*

*“ Do they tone things down because they don't want to upset members and does that mean they don't challenge when sometimes challenge is what the sector needs? ”*

There may be value in identifying what the organisation's key messages are and this may involve trying to do less, mapping what issues it adds extra value to and prioritising those for future work. By trying to be all things to all people its message may be a bit opaque.

*“ A large part of Clinks' work is now less relevant as we are a dying breed as a charity. We don't deliver government services and bid for contracts and we are really clear as an organisation that we want to keep independence. ”*

“ I feel our voice is on the side-lines – there are a lot of us not involved in contracting and whilst we recognise Clinks' important role in supporting those who are, there is also a valuable role and voice for the independent voluntary sector. ”

There is however, a sense that an infrastructure organisation like Clinks will always find itself negotiating complex relationships.

“ There's always tension between the umbrella organisation and members and Clinks has navigated this very successfully so far. The CEO and senior management team are very public and visible and accessible. All are approachable – if they lose that it would be a real shame. You want a welcoming and accessible team and if they're not you don't want to phone them back. ”

## 4 / The one stop shop

Clinks offers members a broad range of services that can be accessed as and when required. The way in which Clinks interprets and analyses information, prepares responses to policy, signposts, provides opportunities for networking and briefs the sector is welcomed and appreciated. It's abundantly clear from those we heard from that staff working in the voluntary sector feel they are time poor. Having an organisation that fulfils these functions and packages up information and support in one place, with the website as a first point of contact, is hugely valued.

This impact is felt most keenly by those who deliver services and they were the most complimentary.

“ I would consume more time in gathering the information myself. Given the limited funding and the amount of work I am required to do, Clinks supports me in providing a high quality service to each client and helps me in using my time efficiently when it comes to research for the right up-to-date information. ”

## 5 / Clinks' partnership building

Much credence was given to Clinks' recognition of the advantages and value of developing partnerships within the sector and providing a framework for linking members, other organisations, stakeholders

and agencies outside the voluntary sector. Advantageous partnerships were identified as being both informal and formal. Whilst partnerships are increasingly used to meet client needs, they are not undertaken without difficulty, especially around capacity. Clinks offers a supportive environment for partnership building and leads by example in its own openness to working with others.

Some identified the benefits of their partnership with Clinks.

“ A really brilliant partnership. I really enjoy the partnership both personally and professionally. I like that I have a critical friend and I can be a critical friend. ”

Respondents suggest that Clinks adds value to what can be a “self-interested” sector by lacking ego – recognising that its success is based on the ability to support its members.

“ I really value that they are very thoughtful, considered and less focussed on themselves compared to other voluntary sector organisations. ”

A funder also noted this openness. They identified the difficulties that some organisations can have relating to their funders.

“ I really like my contact with Clinks – the people and the way they relate to you is refreshing. When you're a funder people talk to you differently and they don't, they have ability to relate to us properly and are not intimidated by us because we hold the purse strings. ”

More formal examples of partnership working discussed during interviews highlighted the impact of the RR3, Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) and Clinks' role in the Justice Data Lab and National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance (NCJAA).

Work undertaken at regional levels also supports good partnerships and helps target service delivery.

“ They give us an insight into the work of other organisations that we would otherwise probably never find out about (particularly some of the local initiatives). This is helpful in terms of understanding opportunities, for example referrals, or for recognising where there may be some conflict between our service and that of others. ”

“ Partnership working becomes very straightforward when working with Clinks. ”

In interviews with key stakeholders it was clear that the use of the roundtable model of working is popular and effective. One respondent mentioned attending a roundtable meeting, called at short notice following the announcement of the impending closure of HMP Holloway, with the aim of using the evidence gathered to inform meetings with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). The participant praised Clinks for asking a broad section of organisations with expert knowledge and welcomed this form of consultation.

“ What is important now is that the evidence and findings of this roundtable are taken to MoJ and NOMS and are listened to. ”

## Creating a community of interest

It is felt that Clinks performs a crucial role in creating opportunities for members and others in the voluntary sector to feel part of a community with shared values and vision. Networking can be formal, but increasingly it's happening for members on a much more informal level. Events and training delivered or hosted by Clinks are well regarded as networking opportunities, as are collaborative projects.



## RR3 Advisory Group

### Networking in a diverse sector

The Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3) exists with the purpose of building a strong and effective partnership between the voluntary sector, the Ministry of Justice, and NOMS to reduce re-offending. The chair for the group and its secretariat is provided by Clinks.<sup>18</sup>

This advisory group brings together representatives of 14 organisations with staff from Clinks and from the MoJ and NOMS. Feedback from RR3 meetings highlights some fundamental aspects of Clinks' ability to facilitate such a group and in many respects, the attributes that Clinks aims to project as an organisation. These include:

- Collaboration
- Diversity
- Honesty and transparency
- Strategic thinking
- Pragmatism
- Independence and impartiality
- Leadership.

As one stakeholder stated in an interview:

“ Roundtable meetings bring together experts and knowledge on the basis of experience and track record, rather than simply on size of organisation or financial clout. ”

Opportunities and aspirations identified by the group at the inaugural meeting<sup>19</sup> also echo Clinks' mission:

- Tracking approaches to service delivery
- Evidence based approach
- Recognition that the voluntary sector has a voice – heard by Ministers and the Secretary of State
- Experience / institutional memory and history
- Influencing good practice
- User experience and client led
- Creating a bank of resources.

Clinks' facilitated networking generates a sense of democracy and, as was identified at the inaugural meeting, is not competitive. In this segmented sector, this model could help clear the perception that some providers are being sidelined.

“ Reconciliation of diverse membership can be best addressed through further use of round table meetings. RR3 is an example by which larger organisations... that are doing very well out of TR, are meeting with small organisations that either couldn't engage with TR because of size, contracting or wouldn't engage on the basis of ethos. ”

*“ They are naturally collaborative and open and there is not a lot of posturing so when Clinks says something it has impact. ”*

The Clinks culture of openness – one respondent described the CJS as a broad church after all – was confirmed by a funder.

*“ I was invited to attend a member event as a guest and was surprised to be invited – not every organisation would be as open to sharing as Clinks. ”*

Networking is also important for members providing direct services to service users and wishing either to collaborate with similar providers, or avoid replicating provision.

*“ Clinks help to promote networking and awareness of other services/issues, which helps staff to make relevant referrals. ”*

As the sector segments and responds to the changes of new ways of working, there is a threat to this community of shared interest. Clinks' challenge will be to develop a strategy that broadens the networking opportunities for stakeholders outside the CJS. An important question will be how it works more closely with other sectors because, as service users' needs get more complex, there will be a huge amount of cross over work.

## 6 / Facilitating dialogue within the sector and beyond

Many of those in the statutory and funding sectors spoke about the important role Clinks plays in bringing people together for dialogue, often in areas that can be difficult or challenging. This is an important role for its members and the wider sector and one Clinks can embrace as a trusted confidante. This sense of trust creates opportunities for conversations within the sector – around what it is doing well, and what it could be doing better – and further dialogue beyond its own membership and sector.

Key stakeholders spoke about a meeting facilitated by Clinks between government and trusts and foundations. Whilst there were differing perspectives on the content of the meeting, all were of the opinion that the role of Clinks, in creating and holding a space where those with different views can come together, was crucial.

Respondents said that Clinks should do more of this, to provide the means and support for facilitated conversations within the sector but, more crucially, also those outside the CJS.

*“ It is a conduit for messaging from within the sector to government and other stakeholders. ”*

*“ They are very versatile in supporting us with the more difficult questions and we can use the relationship we have to navigate through these. ”*

## 7 / Providing a route to policy makers and influencers

Government, other statutory agencies and key funders and trusts see Clinks as an honest and trustworthy source of information about the sector. This enables it to function effectively in a complex and fast changing external environment. For many small organisations it is invaluable to belong to a trusted representative organisation.

*“ I would ring them and ask can you help me with this because of their knowledge of the sector, their translation of policy documents into ordinary English, and that helped me to produce a briefing for our foundation's trustees. ”*

For funders, it is equally invaluable to be able to rely on a trusted source of information on the implications of policy changes for statutory agencies and government.

*“ The work with Clinks massively supports our work and our policy agenda. The work we've funded them on is all about how to bring the voice from the frontline to the policy debate. ”*

It is also a reminder to the MoJ and NOMS that the sector is diverse, and that smaller specialist organisations with less public profile have much to offer in service delivery.

*“ They shine in their work reminding us about and supporting specialist organisations. ”*

*“ They are absolutely the voice of small and medium organisations that are critical for us to do our work in the CJS. They show government that these organisations have a positive and important role to play. ”*

For others it is important to know that Clinks' comments on policy are evidence based and linked directly to the experiences of its members. Clinks is valued because it can synthesise and reflect many of these concerns.

*“ The policy information on TR was so clear on their website it was easy to get hold of the issue and explain it to others – I know some ... who still don't understand it. ”*

This role is clearly appreciated by government officials who think Clinks is very well placed to navigate the sector through the impact of policy announcements.

*“ They are the interface between government, CJS and the voluntary sector. ”*

Clinks' legitimacy with government departments, with statutory bodies and with funders derives, in part, from its ability to represent the views of a coalition of organisations. Clinks' very good reputation with some government departments is reliant on the working relationships built over many years. This reputation is not immediately transferable to other departments where no such relationship exists. In areas where Clinks is one of the leading thought leaders its opinions are valued and looked to by officials and politicians when agenda setting.

Consideration needs to be given to how these solid relationships can be built in new contexts and on a wider range of issues if Clinks is to stay at the policy and government table.

## 8 / Local support

Clinks' work at local and regional levels is important in supporting organisations and for shared learning. Clinks is strengthening the sector by communicating the work of other organisations, especially work which is happening locally and may be less visible. This approach has developed local partnerships and cemented work with regional infrastructure bodies.

*“ Without Clinks, local partnership working with other agencies would not be as well developed. ”*

The benefit of local partnership working and regional development needs to be communicated across the sector and respondents feel Clinks could do more to raise the profile of the regional work it does, making it more visible for potential partners. The benefits of localised partnerships are outlined through Clinks' work with Voluntary Organisations Network North East (VONNE). See page 26.



## Clinks and Voluntary Organisations Network North East

### Local support, national influence

The North East Development Officer working at Voluntary Organisations Network North East (VONNE) has over 13 years' experience of working in the sector in the North East. She is currently seconded to Clinks and, with a foot in both camps, facilitates regional criminal justice support with national influence. Her work includes:

- Influencing – including police and crime commissioners to work more closely with the voluntary sector
- Communication – disseminating information through access to Light Lunch, VONNE's e-bulletin and North East specific briefings
- Events and networking – examples include TR, women's health inequalities, and social enterprises in prisons
- Supporting the development of the MEAM approach in Sunderland
- Producing and disseminating examples of good and emerging best practice, shared locally and nationally
- Research and mapping of the voluntary sector organisations working in the CJS and production of a directory of those organisations.

Assessment of the impact of this work shows:

- 100% of organisations felt their needs were being met
- 90% valued the information sharing
- 86% felt more informed about the CJS and that they can influence policy at a national level.

“Great example of partnership work which benefits VONNE and Clinks. Clinks has greater presence in the North East and VONNE has the chance to feed evidence and thinking back to central government. It's important for the regions to have easy access to a national voice, national data and briefings etc. which can then be compared to local policy and practice.”

Clinks' strategic overview and a trusted network mean organisations are able to benefit from a national knowledge bank that is adapted for local or regional need.

“National research/campaigning but continuing to make this relevant by facilitating networking/working groups in local areas.”

What respondents want to see at a local and regional level is predicated, in part, on resources.

“More money needed for Clinks to deliver consistently at a regional level, which in turn strengthens evidence and partnerships at a national level.”

“Offering a great service to small organisations working at local level by waiving membership fees for small groups who work on a voluntary level.”

And there is a desire for more local relationships, VONNE being a prime example of great practice.

“Reach out more locally especially to regional infrastructure bodies.”

4/



# room for improvement: the challenges Clinks faces

This section looks at some of the emerging themes that present both opportunities and challenges for Clinks in the next few years. It was clear from key stakeholders that Clinks plays an important role in helping members and the wider sector work with the changing and challenging external environment. Clinks may benefit from reflecting on the findings from this assessment and how to take forward some of the recommendations to enhance its reputation around transparency and collaborative ways of working. Clinks might want to consider working on an organisational theory of change<sup>20</sup> to meet the challenges presented to ensure both it and its members are fit for purpose to meet the challenges ahead.

## 1 / Vision and mission: who does Clinks represent?

Many organisations working with Clinks are clear about its aims and objectives, but in a number of conversations with both members and others, there were assumptions and some confusion about who Clinks represents. This is despite its clear vision and mission statements. There was a tension expressed about differences between organisations based on size, location and whether they were contract holders or not. Some members expressed a view that Clinks should make it clear that its focus is on small and medium organisations.

*“ More representation of the smaller, high impact charities that are doing exceptional work, often on a shoestring. ”*

Those who shared an appreciation of Clinks' effectiveness and stance up until the present, expressed concern about whether it needed to make some changes in the future.

*“ The lack of profile outside of the CJS sector could be a hindrance in the changing environment in the future. Their lack of public profile, whilst deliberate and a stance that has worked for them up until now could be a barrier for them in the future. The same service users they talk about are also of interest to other sectors. ”*

*“ At the moment it knows who it's talking on behalf of, but that will be tested in years to come as the sector diversifies around levels of provision and contract status. ”*

In light of this and other findings in the impact assessment, Clinks may want to revisit its vision and mission statements.

## 2 / Strengthening its regional and local base

Clinks is based in London and its focussed policy work aimed at central government means much of that work and its key events necessarily take place in London. Stakeholders and members raised a number of questions about how to balance London and regional work.

Some members raised questions about how to maintain and develop the Local Development Team. Other respondents asked Clinks to consider a more consistent approach to developing its presence at a local level but in a different way, holding more training, networking events, roundtables and so on based outside London, rather than replicating the work of the Local Development Team.

*“ Clinks needs to hold onto and develop further its regional base. ”*

At a strategic level, Clinks' role as a shaper of narratives and an influencer on behalf of the sector cannot be underestimated. This also has regional and devolved implications and links to the changing legislative agenda around devolved powers.

## 3 / Tailored services in a diversifying sector

There were several comments made about whether Clinks would be more effective and accessible if it segmented its services and made it clearer where to go for support and information on particular issues or those that are relevant to particular sectors.

There was also discussion about focussed support. It was felt by many that Clinks should be offering targeted support and help to any/all start-ups working in the CJS with advice, information, optimism and enthusiasm. This is especially important when gaps appear in provision of services and new organisations step in to fill the breach.

“It needs to map out what others in the sector are doing, decide what it's for and what it can do that adds value.”

## 4 / Prioritising work streams

“Clinks do not need to be reinventing the wheel, there are already organisations out there doing work on gender, race and young people's services, it should do more signposting towards organisations working well in the field. Even though Clinks' reach is big it can't cater for the whole sector and signposting organisations to more local intelligence, especially on issues like commissioning services, would be very helpful.”

There were observations and comments about Clinks' remit and range of work arising from a number of different perspectives:

- There were those who felt Clinks may be straying into others' perceived territory
- Those who felt that the range of areas shared between such a small staff team placed too much pressure on the team and meant they ran the risk of being too broad and not deep enough
- Those who felt that Clinks wasn't clear as to what the priorities were and this contributed to confusion
- Those that wanted Clinks to offer a focussed work stream on how to engage with the commissioning process.

Some of these suggestions and wishes may point to an issue for Clinks about communicating more clearly about its work. One member suggested that it would be helpful for Clinks to publish a 12-month plan that would provide the sector with some reassurance and framework in a very uncertain external environment.

Part of developing such a forward plan could be building on mechanisms for horizon scanning and could potentially involve greater utilisation of members and stakeholders' networks and knowledge/intelligence base.

A clear plan could assist in avoiding unintended spread into areas already being worked on

elsewhere in the sector. Such a plan, shared with members, could reduce the potential for organisational overlap, avoid duplication of effort – which was a concern expressed by a range of stakeholders – and assist others with their own business planning. It could also identify further areas for collaboration and the development of complementary strategies and is consistent with Clinks' ethical approach to working within the sector. It may be that developing a theory of change aligned to a forward plan would assist stakeholders as well as staff to be clear about agreed objectives.

Clinks could accommodate both a planned and forward thinking approach to its strategic work, as well as accommodate more opportunistic and creative responses to issues as they arise. These are not mutually exclusive approaches.

## 5 / Navigating a course in uncharted waters

Clinks is operating within a rapidly changing environment where its members and stakeholders are engaging with a number of significant changes including:

- The impact of cuts over the next three years
- Further anticipated policy changes
- An increasingly fragmented sector
- Possible closure and merger of member organisations
- Operating services within a mixed economy
- The new legislative framework in relation to lobbying and government funding.

“In the context of the new legislation relating to lobbying by organisations in receipt of government grants that may have a significant impact on the sector I am concerned about Clinks. Under the previous Compact it was accepted that the sector should have a campaigning side but this is different and whilst there may be exemptions it is a fine line that they walk and they can overstep it without realising.”

Clinks will need to attend to how it responds so it can best represent and support the sector and itself.

**“** *Making themselves more strategic and high level has been effective and that makes them more effective. They understand better and are on the page in terms of vast cuts. Some groups are still going on about grants being cut but you have to look at the overall picture.* **”**

Clinks occupies a unique space that presents both opportunities and challenges and, as the external environment becomes more challenging, so the room for misunderstanding increases. In this context, perceived reality and actual reality are two very different things. There are assumptions about intentions and belief that are often disconnected from what is actually occurring. This was reflected from a range of viewpoints – members who think Clinks has become a spokesperson for government, or champions of TR, and government representatives and statutory organisations that think Clinks is too outspoken against government policy. The same is true within the membership, with small organisations assuming Clinks speaks for larger operators and vice versa. Clinks frequently has to navigate between competing interests whilst still advocating for the depth and breadth of opinions expressed by voluntary organisations. The complexity of the working environment cannot be underestimated. How that is reflected in the differing responses within the sector and key stakeholders to the changing environment will be equally complex.

## 6 / Facilitating dialogue and difficult conversations

Many respondents were extremely positive in their praise for Clinks' willingness and ability to facilitate the difficult conversations with a sensitivity that makes dialogue possible. The idea that Clinks can make positive use of the particular position it occupies at the interface between the voluntary sector, government, funders, public and private sector providers and commissioners – and do more of this and extend the range of those it engages with – was welcomed enthusiastically. Some of the suggestions that were made included:

- A conversation with private sector providers about what they thought was good and what they thought was challenging about the sector's practices

- A conversation within the sector about how it was evidencing why it worked in particular ways with its service users that might help and challenge some of the established practice that continues without any critical thinking or evaluation
- A conversation with commissioners and the sector about expectations on both sides
- A conversation within the sector about how to address sustainability and indeed survival in the current context.

**“** *The CJS is very slow to pick up and work with new people. (e.g. TR, private prisons and probation). These are now live and as was evidenced at the TR event in January, still not very widely represented at the Clinks event. Clinks needs to make its network wider and involve the private sector in conversations with the voluntary sector.* **”**

This was echoed from a public sector perspective.

**“** *Relationship with Clinks has been very helpful. (I) want to ensure the voice of the voluntary sector is heard within the public sector as there's so much work in common. Not sure whose responsibility this is, but Clinks has a big part to play.* **”**

But, Clinks may also need to have those difficult conversations within the sector.

**“** *Clinks never challenge the sector and ask are you effective and how do you know if you think you are. Clinks could play a role in reflecting concerns and difficult questions and views back to the sector. Could Clinks ask the question 'How effective is the sector really?' There are so many examples of real amateurish work and practice and a hotchpotch of approaches.* **”**

## 7 / Defining the debate on the CJS

Part of defining the debate may be Clinks hosting roundtables to consider the re-framing of the debate on the CJS and changing the narrative on crime, punishment, rehabilitation, multiple and complex needs etc. It may be worth asking questions about what the CJS will look like in the next few years and what the voluntary sector will need to do to meet the challenges of working with, and within, the system.

In the context of competition for ever more dwindling resources, there may be a role for Clinks in working more strategically to assist the sector to meet the challenges. Structural reforms and funding of criminal justice services, TR, health, local authorities and police and crime commissioners will impact on the sector. Key stakeholder respondents from the commissioning, governmental and funding organisations all predicted there would be closures and mergers in the voluntary sector in the near future.

*“There will be some quite seismic shifts in the next three years with the changes to local authority funding. Probably more cuts and closures of charities and mergers – in three years’ time the context will be very different and is Clinks ready for the challenges ahead?”*

Can Clinks rise to the challenge and work with the sector as a whole, to ensure sustainability and to build resilience? This is a challenge for the sector and for Clinks itself.

Clinks is seen as a valued strategic partner in the voluntary sector working in the CJS context. But it needs to be extending thinking about the sector and sustainability, particularly in the current context of the existing pressure on internal and external resources.

## 8 / The funding climate

During the course of interviews, respondents from all sectors commented on a challenging funding climate. There is concern in the sector, from funders and statutory stakeholders, about the long-term sustainability of some member organisations. The time spent investigating diverse funding streams and the associated application and bidding processes, the difficulties associated with full cost recovery on contracts, and the limited success of PbR for members, is well known to Clinks. In this context, members and stakeholders identified immediate support for small and medium sized organisations as being a priority and, in the long term, identifying ways that Clinks could support the whole sector in engaging in new and diverse relationships to fund services. The challenge for Clinks is in providing specialist services that cater for the needs of a varied sector.

*“There has always been competition in the voluntary sector, it was for grants and now it’s for contracts. They need to do more of the same to support the sector, even if the framework for funding has changed, the principles have not.”*

Clinks has a difficult line to walk, managing support for small organisations that have not been “seduced by the notion that it had to either be involved with TR or in trouble” and also acting as an advocate for the voluntary sector with funders...

*“Clinks needs to keep funders and grant makers informed and this should be an important part of its work.”*

...and, increasingly, the private sector.

*“Clinks needs to be saying some uncomfortable things and putting members in the same room as those they (some members) wish to demonise.”*

For one stakeholder, it is important that Clinks works with its membership to better understand what the private sector wants from partners and equip members to deliver, if they wish to.

*“The private providers like to work with good organisations, good suppliers and will be more likely to work with them in the future. Clinks needs to be helping develop new skills around dealing with the new providers, and increase the understanding of these new business models.”*

Some were also keen to talk about how Clinks is funded, framed both in terms of its ability to deliver a high level of services and whether it has an “integral compromise” at the heart of its funding strategy. Clinks receives a large proportion of its funding from government. This will continue in 2016/17, but is not secure for the future.

*“Are they free to go to MoJ and NOMS and say we’ve polled our members and 75% of them say a particular piece of legislation or policy is wrong, and potentially harmful?”*

*“It’s about keeping up with the political landscape and making sure they keep their voice without undermining funding.”*

There are different perspectives on whether engaging with commissioning and receiving funding in this way aligns with the values of the

voluntary sector and therefore where Clinks' attention should be focussed. Clinks is uniquely placed to facilitate some of the necessary conversations around these issues as they become the norm in local government too.

“ A significant amount of their funding comes through NOMS and that's not a bad thing. But it's about knowing what that entails – the money is not coming from the goodness of NOMS' heart and they have an agenda and it's not the agenda we have. ”

“ How does it make long term funding strategies work? How does it become the go to place for CRCs for advice and guidance on making things work in the sector? Does it team up with social investment businesses? ”

## 9 / Transforming Rehabilitation: what can be learned?

Clinks finds itself in the midst of a perfect storm. Aside from the rapidly changing environment relating to policy reform on health, benefits, housing and education, all of which will impact Clinks members' service users, for many respondents the eye of the storm remains the TR agenda and its implications for the sector.

Clinks has been seen as an honest broker in a polarised and contentious arena, providing useful and targeted information that has allowed members to work out the pros and cons of participation, the legal information to negotiate new contractual relationships, and has provided opportunities to seek partnerships within the Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) framework or indeed to decide that participation was not in their best interest.

“ All of the services around TR were absolutely vital - in such a chaotic and uncertain period, Clinks felt like an incredibly well-connected, supportive and available (accessible) organisation. ”

“ On TR they have helped to pitch the level of criticism at the right level – they could have reflected more of the negative noise but Clinks has helped to achieve a more measured view. ”



“ Without Clinks there is no way we could have taken part in TR. ”

There is a perception from some that when Clinks challenges the MoJ and NOMS it is doing so from a position of relative strength – that it is not at risk as it is not a service delivery organisation, with contracts – and therefore the MoJ understands its value to the sector.

However, some criticism exists, centering on a sense that much of the uncertainty about TR could have been avoided if Clinks' approach had been more measured rather than, as has been suggested, becoming a spokesperson for the new agenda.

“ It must learn to manage expectations effectively. It publicised a lot of information about what TR was offering, but those were not delivered for lots of organisations. It's about the ability to ask questions of (the) MoJ and NOMS and being transparent about what Clinks can and cannot do in relation to influencing those bodies, and being influenced by them. ”

Some questioned the legal and business knowledge offered by Clinks.

*“ I’m slightly concerned that they are not as expert as some may think on the TR process. Do they understand the commercials of the relationships between the Ministry, NOMS, CRCs and suppliers? ”*

The questions about TR successes and failures are for central government, but it also presents a significant challenge for Clinks as demonstrated by the number of respondents who identified it as a priority for the key infrastructure organisation working in the sector.

*“ Clinks was given money by the Government to offer support on TR and it provided workshops/information/consultancy but in the end very few organisations saw TR contracts and therefore it was money not well spent. ”*

*“ The creation of the CRCs and the rest of the TR agenda is predicated upon the desire of ex-offenders to engage with it, those with real needs and multiple issues are being offered a ‘parsimonious’ offer which does not use up valuable resources whilst those that already can/will are given the opportunity to ‘progress’ and draw down PbR funding. The only referrals we have been offered since early 2015 are the clients with multiple long-term ‘high dependency’ attitudes/needs. ”*

There is a sense that, as the pre-eminent infrastructure organisation in the CJS, members aggrieved at policy made at a government level will be more likely to direct their ire at Clinks with whom they have an existing relationship, rather than

central government which is more distant. Clinks should accept that it will be used as a sounding board, but understand the implications of unpopular policy and learn lessons for future engagement.

*“ It knows who it’s talking on behalf of, but that will be tested in years to come as the sector diversifies around levels of provision and contract status. ”*

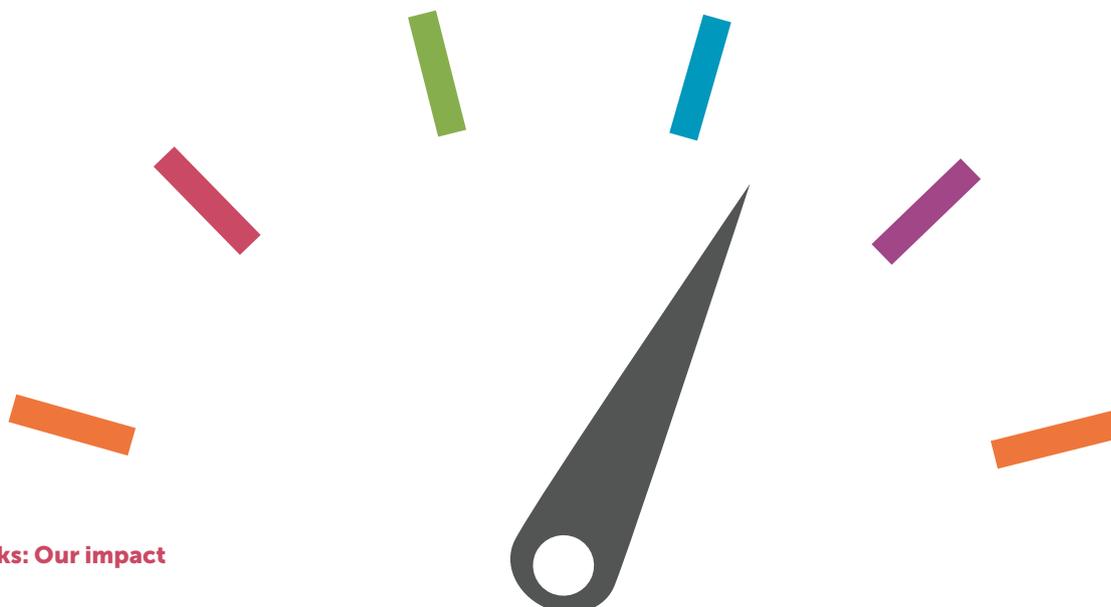
## 10 / Developing work with local authority commissioners

As Clinks draws together the lessons for the sector it represents from the introduction of TR, it may want to think about how its learning can be applied and shared with the voluntary sector as commissioning is increasingly developed by local authorities.

*“ I wonder if it would be useful if Clinks could do some work bringing local authorities up to speed on thinking in the voluntary sector on the changes about to happen in relation to cuts, devolution, commissioning etc. ”*

*“ Can Clinks help develop organisations to win contracts – consortia models with small organisations under the wing of larger bodies? How would Clinks feel about hosting a commissioning forum? ”*

*“ There are big questions around TR – is it effective and how well have CRCs commissioned the voluntary sector, can we in local authorities learn from this experience? ”*



5/

**Clinks has  
listened and  
responded:  
10 pledges**



Clinks is grateful to its stakeholders and members for taking the time to offer their valuable feedback and input. In order for Clinks to know it is doing the right things, in the right ways, and delivering the best possible impact, it needs to hear from and respond to its stakeholders.

This impact assessment demonstrates the significant impact Clinks has within the Criminal Justice System - for its members, other stakeholders, funders and central government. It has shown that Clinks is providing the right range of services and activities to meet its members' needs, that these are having a positive impact and are of a good quality.

Those that use and rely on it hold the organisation in high regard. It provides information and advice enabling its members to work effectively with their service users, and opportunities to bring organisations, agencies and others together engendering a spirit of openness and collaboration. It helps central government understand the voluntary sector and vice versa and by doing so promotes opportunities for involvement and participation. It allows members to access policy information and seek the thoughts and opinions of its membership in response.

In offering practical support, it gives small and medium sized organisations a chance to thrive and consider sustainability options and opportunities. Much of this is achieved through an organisational culture that has its foundation firmly rooted in an excellent staff team operating in a spirit of approachability and with expertise, something it must protect and nurture.

There is evidence of an organisation-wide commitment to seek the opinions of those it serves and to use that evidence to create real dialogue within the CJS, and in the areas of support outside the CJS that are required or accessed by service users who often present with multiple needs. It hears the clear message that it should foster relationships with other infrastructure organisations and seek alliances outside the sector in order to develop this vital area of work.

Clinks believes that the recommendations it is responding to require evolution rather than revolution. Clinks is aware of the rapidly changing face of the CJS and the pressures felt by members. It will take the opportunity to reflect on what the sector needs for the next three years and beyond. The external environment is marked by uncertainty, chiefly around funding and long-term sustainability as new models of working are developed. Clinks must respond to the needs of its membership. The internal considerations are well within its control and with creativity and strategic thinking can be addressed to maintain its reputation and standing as the go to infrastructure organisation in the CJS.

Clinks is keen to make changes where it can to respond best to what the sector needs in order to work most effectively with its beneficiaries and on their behalf.

Clinks will be making some changes and investing time and resource in new activities to reflect what is needed at a crucial time of change and challenge for the sector. Below Clinks sets out 10 pledges of things it will be doing following this impact assessment.

**See our 10 pledges on pages 36-37**



## 1 / Knowing our strengths and goals



We will be clear about what we do, why we do it and for who. We will revisit our vision, mission and values and ensure there is clarity about our remit and messaging across all our communications channels.

## 3 / Keeping our finger on the pulse and responding to need



We will be looking at a broad range of strategies to maintain our impressive track record of consultation with our membership. This could include greater use of the roundtable model and facilitating groups representing particular demographics/types of work/shared interests. We will continue to work with research and infrastructure partners to better understand the sector, its needs and future challenges and to respond accordingly.

## 5 / Keeping you in the loop and on the agenda



We will implement a new communications strategy that aims to make most effective and timely use of relevant communications tactics and channels. This will allow us to inform the sector and shape the agenda affecting how it works. We will continue to invest in our social media presence, building on our impressive results to date. We will look at how technology can help us to more effectively connect those in the sector to one another, to those they need to work with or alongside, and to those they need to influence. We will help the sector understand the outcomes and the impact of our collective work. Because we share the work we'll share the successes and learning.

## 2 / Valuing our people



We will ensure we understand and sustain our organisational culture and safeguard our valued and respected organisational stance. Some of this can be achieved through continued investment in staff. In 2016/17 we are investing in key roles that will allow our teams to work more effectively together and we will be looking for ways to help all our staff contribute effectively to our shared mission.

## 4 / Keeping it local



Across England and Wales we are investing in core roles to provide a more tailored and localised support offer. We will engage more with key commissioners, influencers and processes that are likely to impact on our locally based member organisations. This will include a focus on devolution and supporting strategic engagement by the sector with reform prisons, reformed probation providers and police and crime commissioners.

## 6 / Growing our base and support



We have invested in a revised membership, training and events offer. We will be working with members and wider partners to offer services that provide the sector with timely, effective, relevant support, not duplicating but adding value. Where practicable and needed, we will have a more localised and regional offer. We'll look at the potential benefits and uptake of short courses and online training, enabling greater engagement with isolated and cash strapped members.

## 7 / Keeping you informed



We will share a 12 month forward plan with members, as part of our communications strategy, to help reduce the potential for misunderstanding, organisational overlap and duplication of effort. We will refine our stakeholder engagement approach and provide more ways to hear from you and tell you what's happening, what you've helped achieve and what's coming next.

## 8 / Partnering for progress



We will work with a range of partners from various sectors to broker relationships that provide voluntary organisations with opportunities to improve outcomes for their beneficiaries. This will include scanning the horizon for new opportunities and providing the practical support organisations need to respond positively.

## 9 / Building our future strength



We will diversify our income and aim to grow our earned income. This will allow us to respond better to the needs of the sector, whilst continuing to work with those funders and partners where there's synergy and mutual benefit. We will do this with due consideration to the income needs of the sector and, wherever practicable, will aim not to duplicate or compete.

## 10 / Connecting for change



We will build on what we are best at – advocating with, and on behalf of, the sector through change and challenge as the policy and service landscape continues to evolve. We will learn from the policy experiments of recent years and apply these lessons for the benefit of the sector and its beneficiaries as further changes happen. In doing so we will further develop our work as a facilitator of difficult/challenging conversations within the voluntary sector and with our key stakeholders.



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