

Influencing policy

Clinks



Part of the Stronger Voice project

June 2021

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Funded by

**LLOYDS BANK
FOUNDATION**
England & Wales



Introduction

The voluntary sector working in criminal justice has extensive knowledge and experience that is a vital tool for effectively advocating and bringing about tangible changes in the criminal justice system.

Clinks has been funded by the Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales to deliver the Stronger Voice Project – a three-year project with the aim of strengthening the voice and influence of the voluntary sector working in criminal justice through a programme of information, collaboration, training and capacity building.

As part of this project, we are running a series of expert seminars; the first of which seeks to highlight the different approaches and strategies voluntary organisations working in the criminal justice system take to influence policy. We hope that through sharing these varied examples organisations can develop a greater understanding of policy influencing work and gain new knowledge about different approaches that can then inform their activity.

The following case study compliments [an online recording of Clinks' expert seminar](#) which explores what we mean by influencing policy, what you need to consider when working in this way and how Clinks approaches this work and why.

About Clinks

Clinks is the national infrastructure organisation supporting voluntary sector organisations working in the criminal justice system (CJS). Our aim is to ensure the sector and those with whom it works are informed and engaged in order to transform the lives of people in the CJS and their communities. We do this by providing specialist information and support, with a particular focus on smaller voluntary sector organisations, to inform them about changes in policy and commissioning, to help them build effective partnerships and provide innovative services that respond directly to the needs of their users.

We are a membership organisation with over 600 members, including the voluntary sector's largest providers as well as its smallest. Our wider national network reaches 4,000 voluntary sector contacts. Overall, through our weekly e-bulletin Light Lunch and our social media activity, we have a network of over 15,000 contacts. These include individuals and agencies with an interest in the CJS and the role of the voluntary sector in rehabilitation and resettlement.

The National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance (NCJAA) is embedded within Clinks, and it is a national network of over 800 artists, arts organisations and criminal justice practitioners using creative approaches to reduce reoffending.

Influencing change: Clinks' approach

What approach does Clinks take to influencing change in criminal justice policy?

Our approach to influencing policy is guided by our position as a membership organisation as we need to work to balance the needs and experiences of our diverse members. We have two aims:

- To keep members informed about, and engaged in, the development of criminal justice policy
- To ensure that the voluntary sector's role, knowledge and expertise in reducing reoffending is reflected in policy decisions.

Our approach to affecting change and influencing policy is focused more on building relationships with officials in government departments rather than working to lobby parliamentarians. Due to the focus of the work of our members, we largely work with civil servants at the Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to promote the role and expertise of the voluntary sector working in criminal justice and to encourage change to policy that would improve the operating environment for those organisations and services and outcomes for people in contact with the CJS. Much of our work is to act as a 'critical friend' to stakeholders and decision makers.

This type of policy influencing work is more geared towards changing policy over the long-term rather than an approach that has a single campaign aim related to a specific issue. That doesn't mean that throughout our work we don't seek particular and specific changes in policies or processes that could happen quickly, but when we seek such changes, it is often to contribute to wider change we would like to see happening. We therefore acknowledge that it may take many months and years for the change we would like to see happen, especially around issues that are particularly complex.

As a membership organisation, how does this impact your policy influencing work?

As well as keeping the voluntary sector up-to-date on policy developments, it is vital that we are reflecting our members' experiences and needs back to the government and key decision-makers, the challenges they are facing and the issues they are seeing the people they support experience. As a membership body, the voluntary sector's extensive knowledge and experience informs the basis of all our policy positions.

We have a variety of ways for ensuring the intelligence we receive from the voluntary sector is up to date and accurate. One of the main ways we do this is through direct consultation with voluntary sector organisations. Clinks has also developed a model of local support and engagement through our Area Development Team. The team gathers intelligence that enables us to better understand the impact of national and local policy on the voluntary sector. We can then ensure that our national responses to government policy are representative of local experience on the ground.

It is worth noting that over the past few years, we have had many different ministerial teams, shifts in policy making and priorities, major reforms to criminal justice, and of course the Covid-19 pandemic. All the while the needs of people in the criminal justice system have been growing more urgent and complex. Such turbulence and significant changes to the criminal justice landscape means that we often have to revisit our priorities, our key policy asks and our approach for achieving them.

Why do you take this approach to influencing policy and are there difficulties with it?

For us, the decision to work this way makes the most strategic and tactical sense. We feel working as a critical friend to the government is where we can have the most influence and add the most value to the influencing and campaigning that takes place within the sector.

Our membership consists of both small grassroots charities and large organisations that hold public service contracts, meaning we must consider the sometimes-competing interests of a wide range of organisations. We are always mindful of maintaining our relationship and line of communication with the government, which we hold on behalf of our members and the sector, so their voice can continue to be involved in policy making discussions.

There is the potential risk in approaches like this of being perceived as being too close to the government and not critical enough. This can impact on relationships with other organisations in the sector and service users.

We are acutely aware of these challenges and are consistently considering and reflecting on this in our work. This helps us ensure that we are careful to maintain our independence and there is a clear distinction between our role and that of the government. One way we manage this is by being as transparent as possible in what we are doing and how we are doing it so that we can maintain trust amongst those we are advocating on behalf of. As part of this, we regularly provide updates to our members on our policy work through mechanisms like monthly ebulletins, blogs, briefings and updates at events.

Decisions can be made by the government which result in developments in policy that are detrimental to people in the criminal justice system and the people that our sector supports. When this happens, regardless of our strategy to build relationships with the government, to remain true to our core purpose we must publicly challenge this. Depending on the circumstances, the most effective way to do this may differ but it could involve making a public statement or acting as a co-signatory for a public letter for example.

Can you provide some examples of how, in practice, Clinks goes about influencing policy?

There are many ways we work to put this approach into practice and raise the voluntary sector's voice in policy development decisions.

Responding to consultations

The government will often launch public consultations when they are considering making a major change to policy or legislation. Where the proposals outlined in consultations are relevant to our work or that of our members, we use this opportunity to respond, basing our submissions on the knowledge, expertise and experience of the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system.

By doing this we can highlight the impact of policies on the ground, based on the voluntary sector's experience, and potential impact of both intended and unintended consequences of the proposals. It also enables us to highlight and champion the role of the voluntary sector as both a strategic and delivery partner. Perhaps most importantly, it provides the opportunity to make recommendations for action, suggest alternatives or potential solutions including areas for collaboration with the voluntary sector.

Select committees work in both the House of Commons and House of Lords and work to check and report on different areas of government policy which they do through conducting public inquiries. These are an important mechanism to engage with and we often provide written evidence to a number of committees – particularly the Justice Select Committee – and if invited also give oral evidence which builds on the written evidence we have submitted. The government is committed to reply within two months of the publication of a select committee report, where possible and will detail how the government will respond to the recommendations made in the report.

When deciding about whether to respond to a consultation or submit evidence to an inquiry we think about the following:

- What is the remit and is it relevant to us and the sector?
- If it isn't focused solely on criminal justice, is it an opportunity to raise the profile of the criminal justice voluntary sector?
- What is the likelihood of achieving buy-in?
- What is our resource to engage and how does it relate to other work we are undertaking?

This helps us work out the best way of framing our response and shaping our recommendations so that they are relevant to the department or committee, within their gift to act on and be as persuasive as possible. It is vital to ensure that our responses are evidence-based to give our points validity.

Providing advice and scrutiny

We sit on a number of scrutiny and advisory groups that are focused on particular areas of policy within criminal justice. For example, work to tackle race inequality in the criminal justice system, work to support people in the criminal justice system to maintain family ties and treatment of women in contact with the justice system. Sometimes we sit alongside our members on these groups whilst at other times we sit on them as the representative for the voluntary sector. Doing this is another opportunity to ensure the voice of the sector is heard and provide challenge to the government on its policies and their implementation.

In addition to these groups, we provide the chair and secretariat for the [Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group \(RR3\)](#). This is an advisory group to the government made up of senior leaders from the voluntary sector, each with expertise in areas of policy relevant to reducing reoffending. The group meets quarterly with officials and sets up time-limited special interest groups focused on specific issues as the need arises. More members of the voluntary sector with expertise in those areas are then recruited to the special interest groups.

The RR3 provides a formal mechanism for the voluntary sector to provide direct feedback and advice to the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS on its policies and practices, ensuring acknowledgement of – and response to – the recommendations made by the group.

What advice could you give to those looking to influence change?

Understanding the issue

The first step is to identify the key issues you are concerned about and what areas you would like to see change around. For example, there may be a challenge you keep coming across in your work or one that colleagues, or services users, are reporting regularly. From there it is important to develop a deeper understanding of the issue and what you think is driving it.

Doing some desk-based research is a good starting point to find out what existing evidence there is, but also what work has already been done on the issue you have identified and what other organisations are out there who this also might be a priority for. By doing this, you can create a better understanding of the bigger picture which can help you determine what your next steps should be.

Reach out to your network, including your service users, so that your organisation can gather their input and add to the evidence base. Ensuring you have tangible evidence to refer to is very important for being persuasive, having your expertise recognised and ensuring your organisation has a legitimate voice.

Working out the best response

There's no one right way of influencing policy and there are a number of different approaches your organisation can take. As a first step, it is important to take a step back and consider whether your organisation is the right one for this work. It is impossible to work on every issue that impacts the criminal justice system, so consider how much expertise you have on the issue, what resource you'll need for it and what opportunities there are for change. Influencing can be time consuming and requires ongoing resource – sometimes you have to be selective about what you focus on and conscious of your charitable objectives.

A key question to ask is whether there is a specific policy you want to change, or are you looking to establish relationships to influence something over time? This will underpin your approach. Key to this

is reflecting whether there has been a development in the external environment that requires influence or has created an opportunity for it. For example, if an issue has been indicated as a ministerial priority or if there is a programme of reform taking place. This can help assess the likelihood of influence strategies being successful and provide a mechanism or 'hook' for you to push for change.

When raising an issue, you are also more likely to get buy-in and engagement from stakeholders if you are solution-focused. Key decision makers are more likely to be responsive to the challenges you raise with them if you can also highlight potential ways for working to address them.

Partnership working

Working in partnership is often an effective way of working to influence change on an issue, particularly where capacity is a challenge or where different approaches can support each other. The more collective support there is for a change, the more powerful and persuasive the ask is likely to be.

We would recommend conducting a stakeholder analysis to identify whether there are other organisations who might be working on this issue. Rather than duplicating, think about how you can work together or how your work could complement each other if you bring different expertise to the table. For example, if Clinks wanted to do some work on the employment of people in the criminal justice system, we would engage with other members of the voluntary sector who specialise in this subject.

There may also be the possibility of building a coalition. Clinks is a member of several coalitions and alliances. These include:

- [The Making Every Adult Matter \(MEAM\) coalition](#) – a partnership with Homeless Link, Mind and associate member Collective Voice aimed at supporting the coordination of services for people facing multiple disadvantage.
- [The Transition to Adulthood Alliance](#) – an initiative of the Barrow Cadbury Trust's to develop and promote evidence of effective policy and practice for young adults at all stages of the criminal justice system, and to enable the voices of those with lived experience to be heard.
- [The Prisoner Learning Alliance](#) – a network of organisations and individuals with expertise and experience in prison education who use our collective voice to improve prison education.
- [The EQUAL Independent Advisory Group](#) – which aims to help those involved in the development and delivery of criminal justice practice and policy to create a system free from unfair outcomes for black, Asian and minority ethnic people.

Membership of these groups enables us to join our knowledge and areas of expertise with that of others to address a joint issue.

Our vision

Our vision is of a vibrant, independent and resilient voluntary sector that enables people to transform their lives.

Our mission

To support, represent and advocate for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.

Join Clinks

Are you a voluntary organisation supporting people in the criminal justice system?

Join our network of over 600 members.

Clinks membership offers you:

- A voice to influence change
- Practical assistance to be effective and resilient
- Support from a community of like-minded professionals.

www.clinks.org/membership

Clinks

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