

May 2020



CLINKS
RESPONSE

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport select committee inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on the charity sector

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 500 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 13,000 contacts. These include individuals and agencies with an interest in the CJS and the role of the voluntary sector in rehabilitation and resettlement.

Clinks manages the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance, a national network of over 800 artists, arts organisations and criminal justice practitioners using creative approaches to reduce reoffending. We also support a network of women's centres and specialist women's services working in the CJS.

The voluntary sector working in criminal justice

Voluntary organisations working with people in contact with the criminal justice system provide essential services to people who often exist on the margins of society. Estimates suggest there are around 1,700 voluntary organisations working in the criminal justice system and they provide a wide range of services, including resettlement support, advocacy, housing advice, mental health service and arts-based provision to name but a few examples.

Clinks' annual *State of the Sector* research demonstrates the successes and challenges organisations are experiencing. Our most recent report, published in 2019, shows there are a number of deep-seated and systematic challenges facing organisations including; a rise in service user need and number; struggling to achieve full cost recovery on contacts; and a reduction in grant funding, which is essential for small, community based organisations. The Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating these already acute challenges the sector are experiencing, putting them under increased pressure and questioning their long-term sustainability as they continue to work to provide their services.



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Clinks' work to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic

Clinks has taken several measures to both understand the impact and support organisations to operate through these difficult circumstances:

Covid-19 inbox

We have created a designated Covid-19 mailbox for voluntary organisations working in the criminal justice system who have concerns or questions regarding how Covid-19, and the justice system's response to it, will affect their operations or the information they should provide to service users. Clinks has a dedicated line of communication with Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to discuss the issues being raised by voluntary sector organisations and to develop solutions.

The RR3 Special Interest Group

The Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3) is an advisory group to the government that Clinks chairs and coordinates, consisting of 16 recruited voluntary sector leaders, who are appointed for their expertise across a range of specialisms. The RR3 meets quarterly with senior officials to advise on policy developments, and can also set up special interest groups (SIGs) to delve into an issue in more depth. In response to Covid-19, the RR3 set up a SIG to support more effective working between voluntary sector organisations and the government to mitigate the impacts of the outbreak on services, and to best ensure the safety of people in contact with the criminal justice system, and those who work with them. The SIG meet remotely each week. After each meeting, with key issues being discussed, a recommendations paper is agreed which is sent to senior officials in the government, and summaries are disseminated to member organisations through Clinks' communications channels.

A bi-weekly survey

To track the impact the pandemic is having on organisations staff, volunteers, service delivery and finances, we are running a bi-weekly survey. We launched our first survey on 27 March and heard from 171 organisations.

The information presented in this response draws on the intelligence we have gathered to date through these various channels from voluntary organisations in our network, including those providing arts and creativity based activities in the criminal justice system. This is an ongoing process with the impact of the pandemic on organisations changing frequently, and we would be pleased to provide the committee with additional information in the coming months.

Impact of Covid-19 on organisations working in criminal justice

Many organisations who responded to our survey told us they were struggling to operate their services. Just 7% of organisations told us they were fully operational and 19% said they were no longer able to operate at all. Indeed, 12% of organisations said most or all of their staff were having to work reduced hours and a further 8% said all or most of their staff were unable to work at all. This is particularly true for organisations providing frontline services to people in prison and in the community due to the lock down and social isolation measures. Organisations providing gender-specific support are likely to be disproportionately impacted by this as their workforce are predominantly women, many of whom will be balancing childcare responsibilities. As has been demonstrated by other countries experiencing lockdown,



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instances of domestic violence are likely to rise meaning demand for specialist women centred voluntary organisations is likely to increase, as well as the needs of service users.

Organisations highlighted the particular challenges for those who deliver services in prison or who rely on community spaces to provide group work or workshops. Whilst many wrote that administrative and existing office-based staff were able to continue their role from home, the responses indicate prison work has in many cases ceased and staff working directly with people in prison furloughed. One survey respondent said “all our staff have been furloughed, as we are unable to go into prisons” whilst another told us “all the premises we access for group work and support are closed and our group activity/intervention work has been suspended.”

This has particularly impacted organisations that are a part of the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance network, which Clinks manages. These organisations deliver arts and creative activities in prisons and are unable to meaningfully deliver activities online or replace them with digital resources. Organisations in this position have furloughed the majority of staff, excluding chief executives and minimal admin and finance support. They are applying for emergency funding to support them through the crisis. However in some cases, despite organisations having healthy reserves, if these funding applications are not sufficiently successful, charities will not survive a lockdown lasting more than 12 weeks.

% of organisations say their frontline staff continue to deliver face-to-face support, acting as key workers to deliver their services to people in contact with the criminal justice system. For these organisations their charitable aims are even more pertinent than ever, meaning they are not in a position to furlough their staff, but none the less are facing pressure due to service demand and the need to adapt in the current operating environment.

Clinks welcomes the government’s announcement of £750m financial support for charities working to provide support during the pandemic, as an important first step towards supporting the voluntary sector to continue their work through this crisis. We are concerned that this package of support, however, is not enough to provide organisations with the funding they will need to sustain vital services now and into the future. Further, the focus on organisations working specifically in response to the Covid-19 pandemic risks omitting organisations affected by the crisis that provide vital services but are not specific to the Covid-19 response.

Organisations are responding to these challenges flexibility and innovatively. Most have moved to provide their services primarily through telephone contact with clients (70%) and video conferencing (48%). 69% also reported being able to do desk-based work using laptops and home computers. Other organisations have adapted their delivery through providing online digital resources such as those provided by Project 507 and the Prisoner Learning Alliance, as well as a free drama performance from Open Clasp’s ‘Key Change’ prison drama.

Volunteers are the vital backbone of many voluntary sector organisations but the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the ability of organisations to draw on this important source of support. 32% of respondents said none of their volunteers were able to volunteer for them and 25% said less than half were. This will have serious implications for the ability of organisations to continue to deliver their support as many organisations rely heavily on the work of volunteers.

Although the future for many organisations remains uncertain, many are expecting to issue redundancies, with 18% of organisations expecting this to be the case and some expecting it within the next month. However, 35% said they were unsure if they will need to issue redundancy warnings, which demonstrates that for many the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their operations, even in the near future, remains an unknown. One organisation told us “the future is very uncertain, which is unsettling.”



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Charitable trusts and foundations have led the way in working to provide much needed support to the sector at this time, through giving organisations they grant fund financial flexibility and acknowledging organisations will most likely need to adapt their activities. We are concerned that our survey results indicated that this may not be universal across the funding community.

In particular, statutory funders have been slow to act and there is significant uncertainty in the sector about the status of contracts, particularly to deliver activities in prisons that are now under lockdown. For some organisations this represents as much as 80% of their income. Further, many organisations in the sector, particularly those delivering arts activities, have moved to a business model which draws the majority of their income from fee earning, contract project work commissioned by individual prisons, government departments or health trusts, which is particularly vulnerable in the current context. It is essential that statutory funding provides the same flexibility with regards to grants and contracts as trusts and foundations to take into account the impact of Covid-19.

Whilst it is important for funders to be flexible now, with many diverting funds to support services and work specific to Covid-19, this raises issues for the availability of funding in the future for organisations, especially as funders' endowments are likely to be negatively impacted by a future economic downturn. Although the full impact of the pandemic is yet unknown, organisations are likely to operate and be very different in terms of their staffing, volunteer numbers and income, meaning that existing fundraising strategies and plans may no longer be relevant, alongside reduced resources to undertake fundraising activities.

For example, one organisation told us: "where our funders are prepared for us to amend the focus of our work – e.g. to deliver some online best practice sessions ... we can supply services. This is not yet clear from all funders we're working with." Whilst another said the following: "our work does not lend itself well to adaptation online ... we are reliant on funders being prepared to provide unrestricted funding to enable us to continue to survive. Without this, we will definitely need to furlough staff or close the charity for the foreseeable future, as it looks unlikely we could diversify our services quickly enough to provide an online offer and meet grant/fund stipulations."

18% of organisations told us they have applied for financial support from the government, whilst a further 20% expect to apply for this support in the next month. Of most interest is the finding that 47% say they are not sure if they will apply for financial support from the government, demonstrating that for many organisations the full implication of the Covid-19 pandemic on their work remains unclear.

Ensuring organisations can support people on release from prison

The government's announcement that they will release people from prison early on licence has been welcomed by the sector and is an important step to protect people serving prison sentences from contracting Covid-19. Clinks has developed a protocol with HMPPS for the matching and mobilising of voluntary sector delivery organisations' offers to work differently across Prison, Youth Custody Service (YCS), National Probation Service (NPS) and Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) activity, including Through the Gate (TTG) and Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), to support people on early release.

However, at the time of writing there remains a lack of information about this in practice and confusion from many organisations within the sector. As such, the RR3 SIG has made the following recommendations to the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS that need to be addressed if the sector are able to provide their essential services and support people's resettlement back into the community:



Recommendation 1

The MoJ and HMPPS should publish full information regarding the eligibility criteria for the early release scheme, projections for the numbers of people eligible in each area, the timelines for releases and the information that needs to be passed on to people in prison and their families.

Recommendation 2

HMPPS plans for early release should be shared now with service delivery organisations locally and nationally that stand ready to assist, and include named contacts centrally and regionally.

Recommendation 3

HMPPS should remove restricted marking from all its operational guidance and share widely and in a timely way with the voluntary sector, families, prisoners and those under supervision in the community.

Recommendation 4

The MoJ, HMPPS and Youth Custody Service (YCS) should establish with voluntary organisations and Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) a clear plan to coordinate the release of each child from a secure setting.

The focus on people being released early must not mean we miss the needs of the roughly 5,000 people who are released from prison every month, who often face serious challenges in accessing the services they need to resettle into the community. The Covid-19 pandemic is compounding many of these difficulties, with housing, welfare and health services facing increased demand while having to rapidly change the way they deliver their services. The RR3 SIG have reiterated a number of their priority recommendations that need to be addressed urgently. As follows:

Recommendation 5

The MoJ and HMPPS should establish an accommodation guarantee for people leaving prison, by establishing new accommodation in hotels or other settings. The MoJ and HMPPS should engage with charities on how best to implement this as soon as possible.

Recommendation 6

The discharge grant should be immediately increased to the equivalent of six weeks' benefits for the duration of the crisis to ensure people leaving prison have enough money to meet their basic needs.



Recommendation 7

People leaving prison must be given a smart phone, if they don't have one, with internet access in order to access virtual services and maintain contact during isolation. Some people may need financial or practical assistance to maintain internet or phone access for the purposes of both support and complying with supervision requirements.

Conclusion

Clinks will continue to work to support and advocate on behalf of the voluntary sector working in criminal justice. We will continue to run both our R33 SIG and our bi-weekly survey to remain up to date as new developments occur in this fast-moving environment. In recognition that things are moving at significant pace, we would be glad to provide the committee with additional information on an ongoing basis.



Clinks supports, represents and advocates for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.

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