

CLiNKs

STATE OF THE SECTOR

The voice of the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

20 24



Executive Summary



Foreword



This year's State of the Sector research moved away from a survey to a qualitative approach in order to gain a deeper understanding the sector's experiences. Having heard consistently of the challenges organisations face we wanted to explore in more depth what those challenges look and feel like and how organisations feel they might be overcome. By listening to voluntary organisations through focus groups and interviews, facilitated by our longstanding research partner NCVO, we have been able to gain a richer and more detailed understanding of the challenges they face and the impact this has on their ability to deliver vital services. I want to take the opportunity to thank our facilitators, and all of you who gave your time and your thoughts to this piece of work.

The findings reinforce what we have heard year-after-year. Demand for voluntary sector support continues to grow, with people presenting with more complex and urgent needs against a backdrop of declining public services and a rising cost of living. In response, organisations are increasing caseloads, stretching staff capacity, and making difficult decisions about what they can and cannot sustain. This is not a sustainable way to deliver essential services. Staff burnout is a major concern, as is the ability to retain skilled workers when salaries cannot compete with those in the public sector. Vetting remains a barrier to employing people with lived experience, despite widespread recognition of the value they bring.

At the heart of this is the precarious nature of funding. Short-term contracts, underfunded commissioning, and a competitive funding environment have left many organisations subsidising public services just to keep them running. While voluntary organisations are committed to adapting and innovating, there is a limit to how much they can absorb without sustained investment. If these issues remain unaddressed, the quality of support available to people in contact with the criminal justice system will suffer.

Yet, despite these challenges, there is still hope, resilience, and impact. Organisations continue to find ways to deliver high-quality, life-changing support—whether through employment programmes, women's diversion schemes, or trauma-informed services that reduce reoffending. The voluntary sector remains a driving force for rehabilitation and justice reform, but it cannot be expected to do this work alone, nor should it be treated as an afterthought in policy and funding decisions.

Looking ahead, it is essential that voluntary organisations are recognised, valued, and properly resourced. We need to move beyond a system where the sector is constantly expected to adapt to unstable funding cycles, shifting policies, and gaps in statutory services. Instead, there must be genuine, long-term investment in prevention, rehabilitation, and partnership working with the voluntary sector—not just as a delivery mechanism, but as an equal and integral part of the criminal justice system.

This report is a picture of a determined sector facing adversity head on at a time when there's an optimism about policy direction but continuing concern about funding amounts and models. It's always humbling to sit and write this foreword, trying to come up with an overall narrative that might encourage and inspire, but this year I'm leaving that to one of our participants as they've said it best: "We keep going because we have to. Because if we don't, who else will?"

Anne Fox

Chief Executive Officer – Clinks



About this Report



For over a decade, Clinks has surveyed the voluntary sector working with people in contact with the criminal justice system, capturing a snapshot of the landscape and the conditions in which these organisations operate. Using data gathered through our survey, Clinks has reported on the financial and structural challenges faced by the sector, including subsidising government contracts, the inclusion of lived experience and need for cultural competence, the growing scale and complexity of need, and the sector's determination to keep delivering against the odds. This year, we took a different approach. Rather than conducting a survey, we set out to gain deeper insight into the persistent challenges organisations have raised year after year.

To do this, we partnered with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) to facilitate a series of focus groups and interviews with voluntary organisations and funders across the sector, creating space for candid conversations. This report draws on both these findings and our extensive, ongoing engagement with voluntary organisations across England and Wales. This is the seventh consecutive year we've worked with NCVO and we are particularly grateful to Harriet Pearce Willis, Alex Ruhland-Syquia and Sarah Menzies for their insights and support this year as we have looked to better understand and represent the problems the sector is facing.

Qualitative data offers a valuable way to reflect on the lived experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by voluntary organisations. Focus group participants could articulate the barriers they encounter, the impact of shifting policies, and the strategies they have developed to adapt—insights that might be lost in purely numerical analysis. Although qualitative data does not provide the same level of generalisability or statistical comparability as quantitative methods, it remains crucial for understanding the complexity of systemic changes and for informing meaningful, evidence-based responses. We have used participants' own words extensively, in this summary report and in the fuller presentation of findings on our website.



Key Findings



- Organisations are struggling to meet the rising demand for services as social exclusion and poverty increase.
- Service users are presenting with more complex needs, including mental health challenges and neurodiversity.

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“Young people that [we] are working with have got PTSD...have got ADHD...Neurodiversity. Mental health issue[s]. And there's nothing in place. I'm kind of overwhelmed at the lack of what's in place, like mental health services and stuff like that. There is nothing to access.”

“I think that, for us, the complexity of need has increased. And that's meant that we've had to put in extra precautions. So now ... we've put clinical supervision in for all artists, we've done lots of training on relational practice, mental health training, trauma-informed practice.”

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1. Increasing Demand and Complexity of Need

Organisations echoed what we have heard for many years - the demand for services has surged, placing immense pressure on organisations who are struggling to meet the needs of all service users. These needs have become increasingly complex, and organisations see this as having intensified due to the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and declining public service provision.

People in the criminal justice system are vulnerable and need specialised support, including services that meet their intersectional needs.





Key Findings



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“We're all on a cliff edge waiting for the spending review, and we just don't know at the moment. And the MoJ gave us core costs grants for a number of years. So we don't know if those are coming out again.”

“I'm really incensed that at a time of massive, massive, unparalleled need in the whole charity sector, that three of the largest funders in that sector, grant funders, have closed their doors to go through their own internal review processes. ... I reckon that's £150 million a year taken out of the sector.”

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- Increased competition and short-term funding cycles are destabilising organisations.
- Large funders pausing grants have further reduced available funding, leaving many organisations uncertain about their future.

2. Financial Pressures and the Funding Crisis

Participants emphasised that short-term funding cycles create instability, preventing long-term planning – especially for smaller organisations. They described the sector as “plugging the gaps” left by declining public services. Participants described challenges with statutory funding that we have seen in previous years’ surveys: freezes on prison budgets, contract shortfalls, and limited clarity on future opportunities while the sector awaits the outcome of the spending review. This has coincided with increased competition for funding from trusts and foundations. The sector’s sustainability is further challenged by the decision of several philanthropic funders to close while they review their priorities.



Key Findings



- There was cautious optimism about the new government, particularly regarding sentencing reform and women's justice.
- However, many organisations remain sceptical, citing a lack of meaningful policy action.

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“With the appointment of James Timpson and the things that have been coming out of Shabana Mahmood about women and that they shouldn't be in prison. At last some of that messaging is coming out now from government. So we're sort of hopeful for the first time in quite a number of years that things might change a little bit.”

“I feel like we've been in a political holding pattern for at least a year ... Labour have come in, but there's still a 'let's wait and see' approach, and they've been quite quiet about what their big plans actually are.”

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3. Policy and Systemic Barriers

The change of government has sparked cautious optimism, particularly regarding plans for a Women's Justice Board and sentencing reform. However, many organisations report seeing little tangible impact so far, with concerns about delays in decision-making and funding. Changes to probation delivery, both those in place and those planned, has had mixed effects, with some improvements in stability but ongoing issues around staff turnover, excessive caseloads, and lack of autonomy.

Participants reflected on the challenges of both the early release schemes, known as End of Custody Supervised Licence (ECSL) and SDS40. Though supportive of these in principle, the schemes placed additional strain on voluntary organisations, with many unprepared for the influx of service users needing urgent support.



Key Findings



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"We're losing staff hand-over-fist to probation. We're training staff really well. Seven years of experience. And then probation, who put a lot of our work, can pay them higher salaries. So they go into probation."

"Our turnover is really stable and it's actually low compared to the national level ... And I think that's because we do pay generously, even though I don't think it's very generous when you compare, you know, we're thinking about the difficult jobs our frontline team are doing."

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- Recruitment and retention are major concerns, particularly as charities lose staff to better paid public sector roles.
- The emotional toll of frontline work is significant, with many staff experiencing burnout.

4. Workforce Challenges

Recruitment and retention are major issues, with voluntary organisations losing staff to better-paid public sector roles, and anticipating this worsening as the increase in employer's National Insurance Contributions starts to bite (public sector employers are protected from this increase). Clinks has raised concerns collectively through The Civil Society Group and directly with justice ministers and senior officials.

Participants reported staff under extreme emotional strain, with burnout widespread, particularly among frontline workers dealing with high levels of trauma. Vicarious trauma is also an issue, with organisations reporting staff being diagnosed with PTSD.

In addition, vetting policies and processes are continuing to prevent many people with lived experience from securing roles, despite their invaluable insights and contributions and the sector's commitment to inclusion. The vetting framework is under review – [see Clinks work on it here](#).



Key Findings



- Organisations operating in the North and rural areas report fewer services and referral pathways compared to London and the South.
- Service accessibility remains a major barrier, particularly in rural communities.

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"We're a service that delivers in the north of the country. ... Just life opportunities living in the North. And we deliver services in some of the most deprived areas of the country, you know, and ... we see that playing out."

"Some of the guys from Cornwall have to travel over an hour and a half on the bus to get to a probation appointment."

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5. Regional Disparities and the Geography of Need

Services are unevenly distributed, with significant gaps in rural areas and certain regions, such as the North of England and the South West. Additionally, transport provision can make it difficult or impossible for people to access services, and for organisations to recruit and retain staff. There was increasing concern over a "postcode lottery" in service provision, exacerbated by inconsistencies in funding allocation.



Key Findings



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"I find that a big thing that I come across is people saying, 'well, we can't do this because the public perception is that people don't want to support people in prison'. I don't believe that to be true."

"That showcasing of people who've started [as] very unskilled workers [becoming] extremely skilled at something is very good at changing the public mindset of what can be done inside."

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- Media portrayals of crime reinforce punitive narratives, making it difficult to gain public support for rehabilitation.
- Some organisations challenge assumptions, showing that public attitudes can be changed with the right messaging.

6. Public Perception, Media, and Criminal Justice Narratives

Some organisations see opportunities to reshape public discourse, particularly by highlighting the social benefits of rehabilitation and community-based solutions, including around employment. The impact of this has since been acknowledged by the Sentencing Review Panel.



Key Findings



- Despite funding and systemic barriers, organisations continue to develop impactful programmes.
- Many focus on holistic, trauma-informed approaches that address the root causes of offending.

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“If the system listens to the people in it, they tend to give them the solutions they're looking for.”

“Very often the people that we work with in prison settings, they're not used to being listened to and heard.”

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7. Innovation and Effective Practice

Despite the challenges described above, many organisations continue to develop and deliver programmes that create impact, including:

- Employment initiatives leading to job placements for prison leavers
- Music programmes to improve mental health and employability
- Women's diversion schemes reducing reoffending
- Faith led resettlement support
- Physical fitness programmes to enable emotional wellbeing, recovery from drugs and alcohol and physical and mental health
- A 15% increase in voluntary sector funded education courses
- Trauma-informed and holistic approaches that recognise the intersectionality of need
- Strong partnerships between voluntary organisations and statutory agencies that enable more effective service delivery.



Key Findings



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“When the system takes something internally themselves, it creates less opportunities for the third sector. And if they don't take all of that innovation with them, if they just take part of it, you don't end up with the same thing. You end up with a version of it that's not as effective.”

“We have been through so much in the last five years, but there is a great will to continue and to keep going.”

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- Organisations call for long-term funding, better support for people with lived experience, and greater investment in rehabilitation services.
- Many remain committed to their work despite uncertainty.

8. Calls for Change and Future Needs

Organisations recognise the challenging political and economic context in which they operate, but also see the impact that well-resourced services can have on the individual, their family, and their community. They want to be able to continue delivering the vital services and support they provide, and are calling for actions including:

- Longer-term, sustainable funding models.
- Greater investment in preventative services, particularly for women and young people.
- Increased statutory support for community-based interventions to reduce reoffending.
- Recognition and inclusion of people with lived experience in shaping policy and service provision.
- A shift in government and public attitudes towards rehabilitation over punishment.

Looking Forward

This year's State of the Sector report speaks to issues and concerns that have been raised over many years now. By taking a qualitative approach, we aimed to delve deeper into the challenges the sector has faced over the last year, and create space to continue the conversation and develop solutions.

These findings highlight a voluntary sector under immense strain but unwilling to give up. While funding constraints, systemic barriers, and increasing demand present significant challenges, organisations continue to push for meaningful change and to believe that it can be achieved. These are best summarised by two participants.

“The voluntary sector is stepping in where public services have retreated, but we are not resourced to bear the brunt of a system that is falling apart.”

“We keep going because we have to. Because if we don't, who else will?”



Recommendations



1. The Government should work with the voluntary sector to develop a national framework of service delivery and evaluation

- Develop a consistent approach to service evaluation across the voluntary sector in criminal justice.
- Support organisations in measuring their impact effectively, allowing them to demonstrate success and secure ongoing funding.

2. Statutory and charitable funders should consider how to support long-term funding opportunities

- Funders should prioritise multi-year funding to improve service continuity and reduce financial insecurity.
- Longer-term funding enables organisations to retain skilled staff, prevent funding cliff-edges, and provide service users with certainty about ongoing support.

3. Statutory and charitable funders should create opportunities for unrestricted and core funding

- Funders should offer unrestricted funding where possible, allowing organisations to allocate resources based on service user needs rather than rigid funding criteria.
- Where full unrestricted funding is not possible, funders should ensure a proportion of project funding can contribute to covering [FB1] core operational costs.

4. Statutory and charitable funders should work with the voluntary sector to strengthen partnership working and embed co-commissioning

- Encourage models that involve voluntary sector organisations as equal partners in the design and delivery of services, rather than as subcontractors to statutory agencies.
- Foster cross-sector partnerships between voluntary organisations, local authorities, and statutory agencies to reduce duplication, and ensure service users receive holistic, well-coordinated support.

5. Statutory and charitable funders should provide meaningful feedback for unsuccessful funding applications

- As competition for funding increases, funders should provide constructive feedback to unsuccessful applicants.
- This would help organisations improve future applications and access alternative funding opportunities.

6. Statutory and charitable funders should ensure their funding processes are culturally competent funding processes

- Funders should ensure that funding assessments are culturally competent and that assessors understand the unique value of organisations led by and for racially minoritised communities.
- This would help reduce barriers for organisations that provide essential, specialist support to groups facing structural disadvantage.



Read the full 2024 report and view some of our previous reports on our website



**Printed this document?
You can access the full report
via our State of the Sector
Linktree**



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.

[Click here to find out more about our work.](#)

Join Clinks: be heard, informed, and supported.

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

[Click here to join our network of over 500 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.

Membership starts at just £80 per year and is free for organisations with little income.

CLINKS

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