

Justice and Home Affairs Committee's inquiry | Prison culture: governance, leadership and staffing



Our response

Submitted January 2025

About Clinks and this response

Clinks is the national infrastructure organisation for the voluntary sector in criminal justice in England and Wales. We support, promote and represent over 500 members and advocate on behalf of the estimated 1700 organisations working with people in the criminal justice system and their families. The National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance (NCJAA) is embedded in Clinks and is dedicated to promoting, developing, and supporting high quality arts and creative practice in criminal justice settings.

Clinks is the current holder of the HMPPS infrastructure grant, and we manage the secretariat for the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3).

The voluntary sector delivers services and support to people in the criminal justice system, most frequently to people in prison and on probation. The sector provides specialist skills and expertise, including lived experience, that HMPPS cannot provide alone. Evidence shows that the voluntary sector can be more effective than statutory providers at forming positive relationships with prisoners¹ and can build self-confidence, feelings of belonging, hope and patience, and provide a break from the 'prisoner' identity.² Arts programmes help build social connections, supporting mental health and recovery from drugs and alcohol.³ When the arts and creativity are genuinely embedded in prison regimes and cultures, they play as pivotal a role as other interventions and purposeful activity, delivering safer communities inside and outside prison.

We are pleased to respond to the Committee's inquiry into the governance, leadership and staffing of prisons. We have limited our response to three areas.

1. What are the challenges for prison leaders within local communities?

Prison leaders are facing increased capacity constraints but can meet the needs of their population more effectively by establishing strong partnerships with voluntary sector organisations. One of the challenges to doing so is the lack of coordination between voluntary sector services operating in prisons. Many different organisations provide support, but without a structured approach, there is a risk of duplication in some areas while significant gaps remain in others. Prison leaders must also navigate the need to provide tailored support for different groups within the prison population. Even where high-quality support is available, prisoners may not be able to access it due to a lack of clear communication or understanding of what is on offer. This makes it difficult for prison leaders to ensure that all prisoners have access to the support they need.

Between September 2016 and October 2017 Clinks supported a voluntary sector member of staff in three men's prisons to implement a bespoke model of voluntary sector coordination reflective of the needs of each prison's population. This became known as the Good Prisons Project (GPP).⁴ The staff member acted as a single point of contact in each prison and was responsible for:

- Mapping existing services to improve access to them and identify gaps in provision
- Ensuring voluntary sector staff and volunteers understand the prison environment, population and regime adequately in order to deliver their services efficiently and safely
- Enhancing knowledge of and access to voluntary sector support amongst people in prison
- Developing a strategic role for voluntary organisations working in prison.

The project led to several positive outcomes for prisons and the voluntary sector. This included a more normalised, community-facing prison culture to support rehabilitation, as well as improving communication pathways and involving prisoners in the process – such as - through peer-led initiatives – leading to increased participation in rehabilitation programmes.

Voluntary organisations can create capacity and meaningful work that builds skills. In the three GPP prisons, organisations recruited men to contribute to their activities, including:

- Producing directories of services
- Delivering training for voluntary sector organisations about prison life
- Gathering feedback on services from other people in prison
- Organising voluntary sector events
- Identifying gaps in service provision through focus groups
- Writing prisoner induction information
- Improving the physical environment by transforming disused spaces into information rooms
- Making provider information accessible through newsletters and information boards.

Effective partnerships with voluntary sector organisations can provide essential expertise and capacity, but only if these collaborations are well-structured, supported, and embedded into the overall prison strategy. Strengthening these partnerships would not only enhance rehabilitation efforts but also contribute to a safer, more stable prison environment and rehabilitative culture that benefits staff and people in prison, as well as the wider community.

In 2023, Clinks appointed a Voluntary Sector Coordinator at HMP/YOI ISIS, a prison in London for men aged 18-27. The coordinator works closely with the prison to identify service gaps specific to the needs of the young men at HMP/YOI ISIS, collaborates with voluntary sector organisations to address these gaps and provides support to those organisations. Clinks would be happy to facilitate a visit for the Committee if they wish, and we are keen to continue to support this model in other prisons and in partnership with prison governors.

2. Does HMPPS have a defining mission? What should its mission be?

HMPPS has stated objectives around public protection, offender management, and reducing reoffending, but these often conflict with the reality of overcrowded, under-resourced prisons. This leads to inconsistencies across the estate, where some prisons successfully deliver meaningful rehabilitation, while others provide little beyond containment.

Public understanding of prisons is largely shaped by the media, which tends to focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation. This has led to the perception that prisons should be punitive, limiting open discussion about effective rehabilitation strategies. The Daily Mail test—a term often used in justice circles—refers to the political reluctance to highlight rehabilitative work for fear of being seen as too lenient. This misconception diminishes public support for evidence-based interventions, including arts and creativity programmes that have been shown to reduce reoffending and improve prison culture.

Prisons should not simply be places of containment, but institutions that prepare individuals for reintegration into society. A redefined mission for HMPPS should place rehabilitation, resettlement, and crime reduction at the heart of the system. This would ensure that:

- Prison sentences are used proportionately, with alternatives prioritised where appropriate
- Rehabilitation is embedded into sentence management, staff training, and prison operations
- Prisons are accountable for reducing reoffending

3. What factors contribute to the “culture” of a prison? How are prisoners affected when a prison is badly run?

Prison culture is shaped by leadership, staffing levels, experience and skills, access to purposeful activity, and the physical environment. Well-managed prisons with sufficient, engaged staff and rehabilitative approaches provide stability, structure, and opportunities for personal growth. However, understaffing, lack of sufficient skilled and experienced staff, poor leadership, and a lack of resources and reduced access to education, employment training, and mental health support undermine safety and rehabilitation.

The voluntary sector can play a critical role in stabilising prison environments by providing peer led programmes, education and employment opportunities and planning, family services and support with physical and mental health, as offence focused work.

Without a clear mission, stable leadership, and sufficient resources, prisons will continue to struggle. We believe HMPPS must shift towards a rehabilitation-focused model. Expanding long-term partnerships between HMPPS and voluntary sector organisations would enhance prison culture, relieve pressure on staff, and improve outcomes for people in prison. Governance, leadership, and staffing are the foundation of an effective prison system, but without a clear mission, stable leadership, and sufficient resources, prisons will continue to struggle. HMPPS must move towards a rehabilitation-focused model, ensuring that every prison has the leadership, staffing, and partnerships required to break the cycle of reoffending.

End notes

1. Dominey, J. (2019). 'Inside or Outside the Criminal Justice System? The Example of Community Chaplaincy'. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 58(3), 313–328.
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2. Abrams, L.S., Moreno, L. & Harrikari, T. (2019). 'The Voluntary Sector Role in Youth and Young Adult Justice Services: A Comparative Case Study of Finland and England/Wales'. *Youth Justice*, 19(3), 278–298. Tomczak, P., & Thompson, D. (2019). 'Inclusionary Control? Theorizing the Effects of Penal Voluntary Organizations' Work'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 23(1), 4–24.
3. Lanskey et al (2024) Inspiring Futures: An Evaluation of the Meaning and Impact of Arts Programmes in Criminal Justice Settings. <https://artsincrimjustice.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/06093810/Inspiring-Futures-research-report.pdf>
4. Clinks (2018) *The good prison: Why voluntary sector coordination is essential* https://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/clinks_the_good_prison.pdf

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.

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