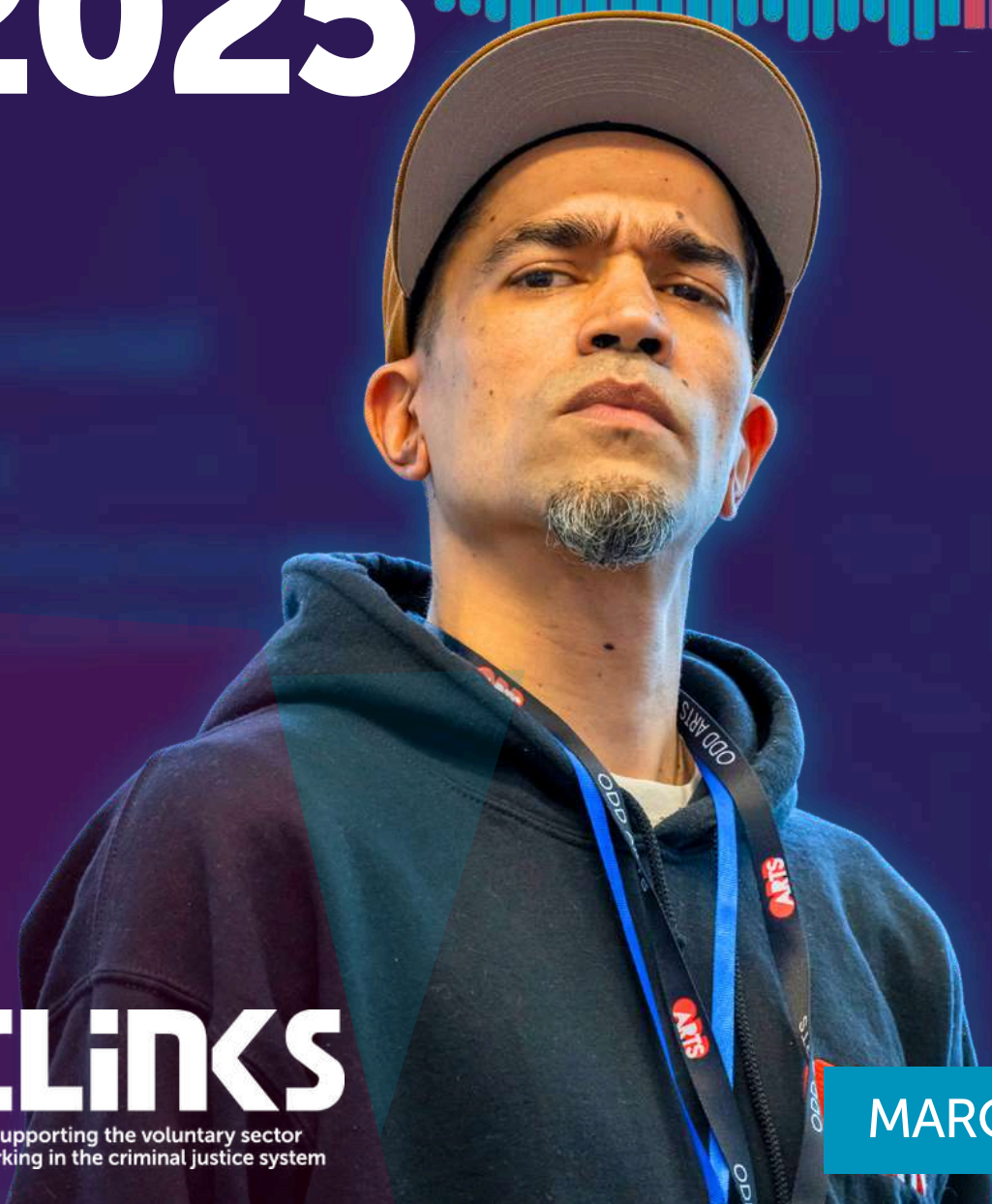


KEY TRENDS IN THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR
WORKING IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE 2024/5

STATE OF THE SECTOR

2025



CLiNKs

Supporting the voluntary sector
working in the criminal justice system

MARCH 2026

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FOREWORD

FOREWORD

ANNE FOX, CEO

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Thank you for reading this report. It is really important to Clinks, and for the best outcomes for people in the criminal justice system, that the voluntary sector working in criminal justice is understood. This report provides a snapshot of how organisations are faring, what they are doing to support the people they serve, what gives them concern, and what gives them comfort.

Each organisation has its own challenges and its own reasons to celebrate, but collectively, its important also to look at trends and patterns, especially those that arise at the interface of the sector and the criminal justice system it works alongside.

This year's report paints a stark picture in relation to funding and staffing as well as the needs of people coming to organisations for support. Year-on-year this is the story organisations tell us. This doesn't devalue this report but, by contrast, only serves to emphasise that year-on-year our sector is continuing to face the same challenges. Funding remains as tight as ever, with contracts often short-term and not covering the costs incurred by voluntary organisations.

The nature of commissioning continues to present barriers to small, specialist organisations given the size of contracts. And the political context is incredibly difficult given the rise of populism and the risk of a further shift towards more punitive public narratives on crime.

Yet, the power and the value of the voluntary sector is not in question. Far from it. Despite challenges, our sector never wavers and continues to have an outsized impact on so many people in contact with the criminal justice system. The barriers, no matter how big or small, don't stop the sector from being the essential component in a system that has been teetering on the brink. And for that reason, there is so much to be proud of.

Much of what follows will make for hard reading, though none of it will come as a surprise. For Clinks, as the sector's national infrastructure organisation, these findings will only serve to strengthen our resolve to advocate for the entire sector. To ensure that we have a criminal justice system that works for our sector and for the many people that our organisation's exist to support. The recommendations are co-produced with all of those who gave up their time to contribute to the research and for that, we are hugely grateful. We now look forward to communicating the findings and to continues are efforts to advocate with and on behalf the sector to achieve the changes that we so desperately need.



1. ABOUT THIS REPORT

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Through our annual State of the Sector research, we highlight the challenges faced by the voluntary sector working in criminal justice, presents evidence to decision makers and advocates for change. This year, we have continued our partnership with NCVO, who have supported us to produce our State of the Sector reports since 2017.

The research aims to understand the experiences and needs of organisations and the people they support. It explores the barriers to success and areas where support is lacking, alongside good practice and successes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report is based on data collected via an online survey and focus groups with criminal justice voluntary organisations and funders.

ONLINE SURVEY

We received 160 cleaned unique responses to our online survey of criminal justice voluntary organisations, which was sent out to Clinks contacts and shared through multiple communication channels and networks.

A total of 5 duplicate entries were found in the organisational list. We removed the duplicate data that could skew results.

The survey ran between late September and early November 2025 and sought an extensive understanding of the state of the voluntary sector working in criminal justice. Despite our focus on promoting the voices of smaller, specialist organisations, larger organisations are over-represented in our survey sample; 43% of survey respondents had incomes below £500,000, when around 82% of all criminal justice charities fall under this threshold. More details on the profile of respondents are included in the appendix.



FOCUS GROUPS

We held 12 focus groups, including 11 with criminal justice voluntary organisations and 1 with sector funding organisations, between October 2025 and February 2026. 74 people from 69 organisations took part. Voluntary organisation focus groups were held in each of the 6 HMPPS areas in England and one was held for organisations working in Wales. We also held focus groups for organisations working with racially minoritised communities, women, families impacted by the criminal justice sector, and a group for organisations working in the arts.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

We also have a separate report that analyses the most up-to-date financial data held by the Charity Commission, including the latest available returns for criminal justice charities. This provides a quantitative picture of sector scale, income sources and financial resilience. We refer to these findings where relevant in this report. [Read more.](#)





2. THE CONTEXT

THE CONTEXT



In our 12 focus groups, we asked organisations about the political, economic and cultural context in which they were operating, and how it had influenced their work.

THE POLITICAL & POLICY CONTEXT

We heard some positive feedback from organisations about the (relatively) new Government and its direction of travel. In particular, some organisations mentioned:

- The Independent Sentencing Review, and its broad intention to increase community provision.
- The establishment of the [Women's Justice Board](#).
- More appetite among policymakers to listen to the voices of voluntary organisations.
- Signs of an increased recognition of the role and needs of families of people involved in the criminal justice system (through, for example, the Government's election manifesto pledge to support children with a parent in prison and interest in this group from the Department for Education).

However, organisations commented that they were yet to see much effective policy action from the Government, despite the proposals contained within the (then) Sentencing Bill.

In terms of action that had taken place, participants noted the impact of prison early release schemes, such as the ECSL and SDS40 schemes. They said these had presented operational challenges, most notably in increasing demand for those working in the community or preparing people in prison for release.

Several organisations highlighted a feeling of uncertainty – they knew further policy and commissioning changes were coming, but they did not know how those changes would impact them and whether there were resources in place to support these policy changes. There were concerns about the implications of the Independent Sentencing Review, and the subsequent Sentencing Act, which will increase demand for voluntary sector services because of a planned expansion of community-based alternatives to custodial sentencing and because of measures such as the progression model and reforms to the recall process. In our survey, only just over a half (52%) of respondents agreed that they would be able to cope with any new demand associated with the Review (n=118). Many commented that they could only do so if additional funding was provided.

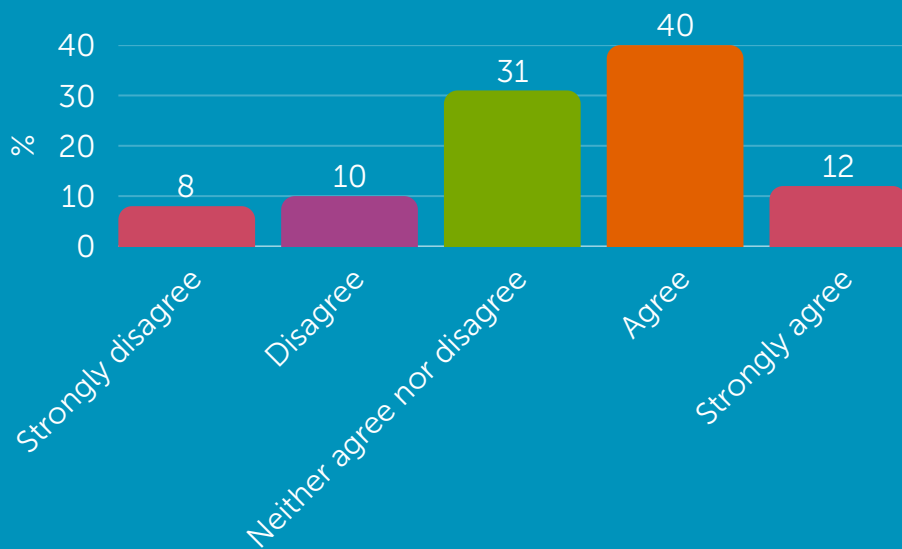


Figure 1: The Independent Sentencing Review may lead to increased demand for some organisations. If this impacts you, to what extent do you agree or disagree that you will be able to cope with any new demand?

Beyond comments on current policy, some organisations expressed general concerns around factors that they saw as hindering effective policymaking. These included:

- A lack of understanding among policymakers of the underlying needs of people involved in the criminal justice system.
- Insufficient long-term strategic thinking in criminal justice policy.
- A lack of joined-up thinking across government departments on how to meet people's needs.
- Successive new governments wanting to introduce changes rather than sticking with what works.

Organisations also raised concerns about the rise of populist parties, including worries that such parties might form the next government. A couple of organisations spoke about their experiences of operating in areas with Reformed councils, where there had been budget cuts and proposed policies likely to negatively affect their work. One mentioned that there had been delays to local decision making (because of the number of new councillors in post).



THE NEW HMPPS AREA MODEL

HMPPS restructured under the 'OneHMPPS model' change programme, operating across 6 areas in England, and in Wales. The 6 areas in England are North-East, Yorkshire and the Humber, North-West, Midlands, London, South-East & East and South-West & South Central. Focus group participants had generally not seen any impact of the reorganisation, although a couple had observed the beginnings of more coordinated, area-based working in the HMPPS South-West & South Central area. Some organisations, particularly those operating in the Midlands, noted that the HMPPS areas do not always correspond with local government, health or Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) administrative areas. There were some concerns raised about the large size of the HMPPS areas, and the implications of this for commissioning (see more in section 3). An organisation in Wales felt the model raised questions about whether commissioning would look different in England and Wales, with organisations operating in both countries having to familiarise themselves with different approaches (as has happened previously).

THE ECONOMIC CONTEXT

A challenging economic climate, coupled with government spending decisions, are putting organisations under significant financial pressure. In our survey, 79% of respondents reported an increase in their organisation's running costs for the financial year 2024/25 (n=156), similar to when this question was last run in 2023/24. 4 in 10 said their costs had increased significantly. Organisations with income of above £500k were more likely to report an increase in running costs than organisations with income of below £500k (92%, compared to 62%).

Focus group participants described facing substantial difficulties in covering the costs of increased employer National Insurance Contributions (which have often not been recognised by commissioners via contract uplifts or indexation). A few said that rises in the minimum and real living wage levels had further restricted their organisation's financial capacity.

Charity Commission data analysed for our financial analysis report is further indicative of the financial pressures faced by organisations when costs rise. 39.6% of criminal justice charities reported expenditure exceeding income in their latest filing, mirroring levels in the wider voluntary sector. This suggests that many organisations have limited financial flexibility when faced with rising costs.

Inflation and the cost-of-living crisis had affected organisations in a number of ways. As well as increasing organisational costs, focus group participants reported increased pressures on the people they support (who might struggle to afford transport to services or experience increased mental ill-health, for example). A few organisations also mentioned pressures on their staff. One organisation noted that staff members were increasingly taking on second jobs; another explained that some staff needed to use some of the services that they were supporting service users to access (such as food banks) – this was creating a 'challenging boundary' for staff to navigate.

Participants also commented on cuts to statutory services and geographical inconsistencies in service provision, and their corresponding negative effects on users and voluntary organisations (see more in section 3).

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

POPULISM AND THE MEDIA

Many focus group participants were concerned about the rise of a populist narrative in the media and public discourse, and its effects on policymaking.

Participants highlighted negative media reporting around the early release schemes and around the perceived creation of a 'two-tier' justice system. They had observed media and public interest in punishment, rather than rehabilitation and an understanding of the challenges faced by people involved in the criminal justice system.

Organisations were concerned about the extent to which populism and media narratives were influencing the Government's policymaking. In this context, several were concerned that the Sentencing Bill had 'watered down' the Sentencing Review, and about the Bill's proposals to 'name and shame' people completing unpaid work as part of a community sentence – proposals that were subsequently removed from the bill due to collective sector advocacy.

Some creative and arts organisations spoke about how populism was affecting their work. They mentioned: feeling hesitant about running activities that might receive negative media attention; encountering hesitancy from commissioners and partners; and putting additional resources into their communications outputs to help minimise risks associated with negative coverage. One participant argued that some arts organisations were 'self-censoring' by restricting activities for fear of criticism. Similarly, a funder had observed some signs of populist pressures beginning to influence how voluntary organisations described their work and beneficiaries, particularly in terms of work with immigrant communities.

More positively, a few organisations involved in our focus groups had been featured in media coverage with a constructive focus on their work.

RACISM AND IMMIGRATION

Several organisations raised significant concerns around the increasing profile of anti-immigrant and racist narratives. One described feeling that social media and the movement to raise the flags 'whips the public up into a sort of negative frenzy'. Some organisations discussed the impact of such narratives on their people they support; for example, one reported that a growing area of their work was in supporting people from diverse communities in terms of their physical and psychological safety.

GENDER

Almost all of our research took place before the publication of the Government's violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy in December 2025. A couple of women's organisations raised concerns about signs of a 'dilution' of the VAWG agenda via an increased focus on the needs of women and children (including boys); one noted that a local authority in the area in which they operated was consulting on changing the terminology of VAWG to 'violence against women and children', and that corresponding queries were being raised about the importance of having specific services for women and girls, in some cases. Conversely, another organisation noted 'a really strong agenda around violence against women and girls' in an area in which they were operating.

A few women's organisations mentioned that they, and their commissioners, had been navigating the effects of the Supreme Court ruling on the definition of 'sex' in the Equality Act on their organisations. One reported having encountered a lack of clarity from the probation service around the implications of the ruling for support for transgender women. Another described feeling 'on the back foot ... trying to muddle our way through'. A couple of organisations said that they had received negative or challenging communications querying how their organisation was responding to the ruling; one of these had received phone calls from people using derogatory comments about transgender people.

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: FRIENDS, FAMILIES AND TRAVELLERS

Based in Brighton, Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) is a leading national charity working to end racism and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and to protect the right to pursue a nomadic way of life. Since April 2023, FFT, with the support of the Barrow Cadbury Trust, has explored issues faced by Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities in the criminal justice system. In February 2025, FFT published its landmark report 'Trapped in the Turnstile'. The current 2-year project, 'Raise the Bars', again finds FFT visiting prisons across England and Wales, speaking with Gypsy and Traveller men and women, with the aim of coproducing a set of guidance toolkits. The guidance kits aim to improve inclusion and understanding in order to promote successful engagement with people from Gypsy and Traveller communities, and ultimately help to reach more positive outcomes throughout the CJS journey.



**FRIENDS,
FAMILIES &
TRAVELLERS**



**Barrow
Cadbury
Trust**



3. CHALLENGES & BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

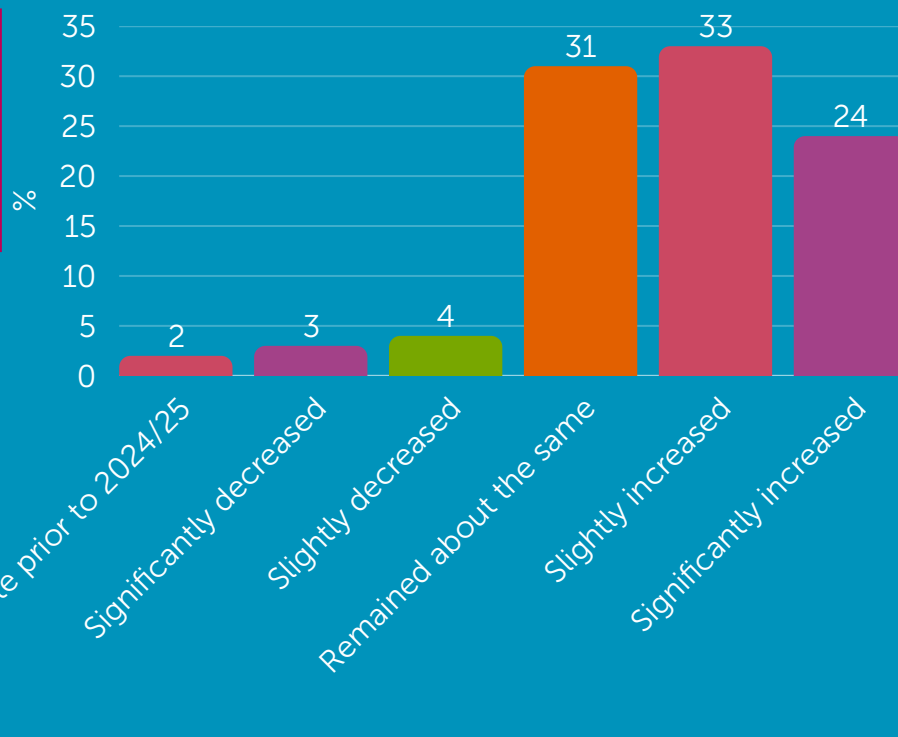
CHALLENGES & BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Organisations have been facing a range of challenges – from increased demand for services and increased complexity of service user need, to difficulties in delivering in prisons, including vetting-related issues, and challenges in securing – and delivering within the constraints of – funding. This section unpicks the main challenges and barriers to success that we heard about in our survey and focus groups.

MORE DEMAND FOR VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS' SERVICES

Many organisations continued to see an increased demand for their services – something we also saw in our last State of the Sector survey, two years ago. In this year's survey, 57% of respondents reported engaging more new service users in 2024/25 than they had in the previous year (n=156).

Figure 2: Comparing the financial year 2024/25 to 2023/24, how has the number of new service users engaged by your organisation's criminal justice work changed?



57%

engaged more new service users

Many focus group participants who had experienced increased demand linked this to the Government's early release schemes. A few participants mentioned running waiting lists to access their support.

USERS PRESENTING WITH MORE, AND MORE COMPLEX, NEEDS

In our survey, 77% of respondents reported that the level of need amongst people they support increased over the course of the 2024/25 financial year. 74% reported increased complexity and 66% increased urgency of need in the same time period (n=151). Given that many organisations work across multiple and complex activity areas (see our separate financial analysis report), it may be that the impacts of these increased service user needs on organisations are multiplied.

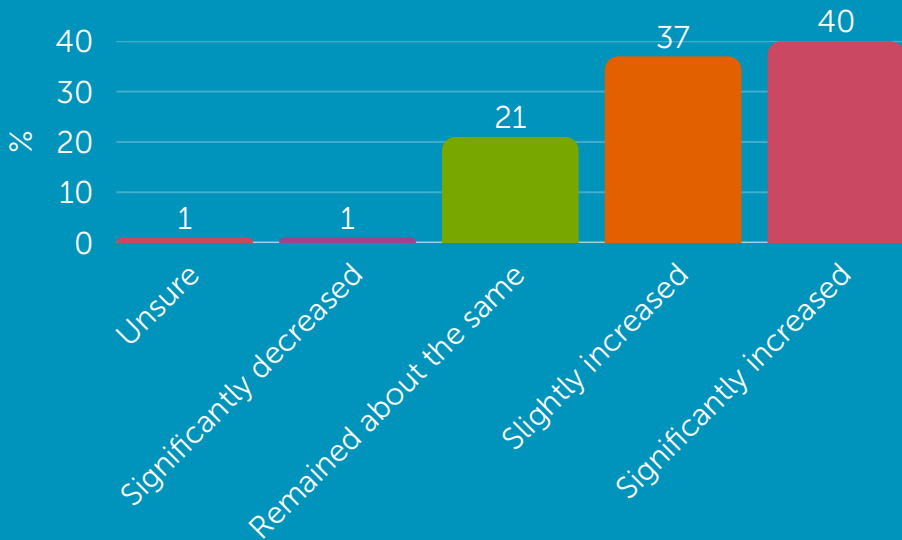


Figure 3: Over the course of the 2024/25, how has the level of need amongst the people you support changed overall?

In focus groups and open survey responses, we heard about an increase in need related to housing, mental health and neurodivergent conditions. A few organisations also mentioned increased need related to substance misuse. In addition:

- Women’s organisations in our focus groups highlighted the multiple complex needs and circumstances faced by many of the women they support, including experiences of poverty, domestic abuse, trauma and children being placed in care.
- An organisation working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people reported that some members of those communities had seen some of their traditional employment (for example, scrap metal dealing) become criminalised because of increased legislation around it. The same organisation also reported that people were often criminalised in situations where they sought to resist significant discrimination against them.
- A participant working with young people with multiple needs, including many from global majority communities, was concerned that many had missed opportunities for additional support, especially if they had been excluded from school. The same participant had concerns about how these young people were supported to transition from children’s services to adult services.
- An employment support charity noted an increase in the number of the people they support who had sexual convictions, for whom it was more difficult to find work.

GAPS IN THE WIDER SUPPORT LANDSCAPE

Focus group and survey respondents commented that there were significant gaps in terms of wider support and provision for the people that they were working with. These included a lack of accommodation and insufficient support focused on resettlement and meeting needs related to mental health and neurodivergent conditions. Problems had been exacerbated by the increased number of people being released from prison under the early release schemes.

Many focus group participants said there was a lack of appropriate accommodation available for the people they support, particularly for women in terms of a lack of gender-specific accommodation. A few organisations mentioned other specific problems with housing, including poor living conditions and cost. A couple in the North West reported a lack of availability of small properties. Several also said that people were being released from prison without accommodation to go to. Unsurprisingly, organisations reported implications for their work: it was difficult to help users find accommodation, they were spending a lot of time on housing-related work and they were finding it challenging to help people without secure accommodation progress in other areas of their lives.

Focus group participants also commented on people being provided with insufficient support around the time of their release from prison. Examples given included insufficient engagement from probation teams, a lack of employment support, and inadequate planning and communication around the implications of release for family contact. A few organisations themselves providing support at or before the time of prison release said the early release schemes had made this difficult: releases made earlier than planned and at short notice meant they had not always been able to give optimal support. Several participants argued that gaps in resettlement support were contributing to high rates of people being recalled to prison.

Several organisations flagged concerns about the effects on people in prison of regimes that keep people locked up for long periods, expose people to violent environments and do not provide adequate support. One said:

“

‘THE HUMANITY SEEMS TO BE DRAINING OUT OF THE SUPPORT WITHIN SOME OF THE ESTABLISHMENTS’.

”

Another mentioned that family contact is often seen as 'a privilege within the prison estate', with family visits cancelled if people in prison are deemed to have behaved unsuitably.

A few organisations noted a lack of culturally-appropriate support for the diverse communities they worked with. In some cases, they linked this to a lack of funding for projects and organisations working with diverse communities. An organisation working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people further noted that the bracketing of these groups under one 'umbrella' acted as a barrier to meeting the needs of the distinct communities within it.

STIGMA

A few organisations spoke about stigma experienced by people involved in the criminal justice system, and their difficulties in accessing some education and employment opportunities as a result. Organisations did note some progress in employers' willingness to recruit people with convictions, however.

ORGANISATIONS PROVIDING MORE, OR MORE INTENSIVE, SUPPORT TO MEET USER NEED

Focus group participants described spending more time working with individual service users and supporting people with issues beyond their organisation's usual remit. They did this so they could effectively respond to need, including in circumstances where other support was unavailable.

Several women's organisations delivering under statutory contracts continued to support women after the women's support period covered by the contract had finished because they felt that the contracted support period was not long enough to meet many women's needs. They provided this additional support to women through their other service provision, funded by other means.

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: IT'S NOT YOUR BIRTHDAY BUT...

It's Not Your Birthday But... centres the power of inclusion through creativity to support wellbeing, health, belonging, and connection. Their work happens wherever people are, including in prison, probation and community settings. Co-creation and collaboration are central to their practice and much of their work improves the places and spaces we work in through creativity. They make art with purpose where the ideas come directly from participants, and multiple voices are layered not reduced. Their trauma-informed, strengths-based approach builds trust and ownership, so any co-creation has integrity and builds confidence and emotional health for all those involved.



DIFFICULTIES IN DELIVERING ACTIVITIES IN PRISONS BECAUSE OF PRESSURES IN THE SECURE ESTATE

Many focus group participants working in prisons had experienced difficulties in delivering their work. They reported that it was hard to maintain a stable cohort for group activities or to continue engagement with certain people because of the churn in prisons due to the early release schemes or efforts to manage overcrowding. Prison staff shortages and pressures also caused problems. Some organisations dependent on support from prison staff – because those staff escort people in prison to organisations' activities, for example – had seen their delivery disrupted. A couple mentioned having difficulties in engaging with prison leaders because of staff turnover in senior roles or because of the other pressures leaders were managing.

A few organisations reflected that delivering in London prisons was, typically, more difficult than delivering in prisons in other areas. They had variously observed higher prison staff turnover, greater pressures on prison staff, limited delivery space for activities and prison buildings in disrepair in London. One noted that, as a result of re-rolling, people in prison in London were often those with the highest levels of need.

MOVEMENT ACROSS GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS IS ADDING TO USER NEED AND DEMAND ON ORGANISATIONS

Some focus group participants highlighted the movement of people across areas – because of prison transfers or as a result of a limited supply of appropriate accommodation in the community (particularly for women) – as a challenge for the people they support, their organisation, or both.

Organisations working with families highlighted difficulties when people were moved to prisons or accommodation away from their home areas and family and support networks. These moves had a negative effect on families' ability to maintain relationships; they often resulted in less frequent family visits to people in prison because families could not afford to travel the distances involved.

A couple of organisations noted that it could be particularly difficult for people to access mental health services if they moved between areas; one of these additionally highlighted difficulties in accessing drug and alcohol services.

A couple of participants spoke about the movement of people introducing new work demands to their organisations. One had needed to do extra work to identify onward support options for people in prison from geographical areas the organisation was not familiar with. Another had seen additional work to help families stay in contact with imprisoned family members who had been moved away.

THE VETTING PROCESS IS CAUSING SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS

Reflecting last year's State of the Sector research findings, the length of time taken for the completion of voluntary sector staff vetting was one of the most frequently reported barriers in our focus groups and in open survey responses. Several organisations specified that they had experienced wait times of between three and six months, with some colleagues still waiting. Some organisations reported losing candidates that they wanted to employ because of the delays. Others said that the long wait times limited their capacity for delivery or increased workload for other staff. Some, additionally, noted inconsistencies in vetting processes.

Two lived experience-led organisations were hesitant about applying for vetting for staff. They variously had concerns about application timescales, a perceived likelihood of not passing and the emotional implications for staff of being asked to relive past experiences through the application process. One noted that this was a barrier to them delivering work under contract (which they were otherwise keen to do).

A couple of organisations had concerns about forthcoming changes to vetting processes for staff with lived experience, noting uncertainties around how HMPPS proposals would 'play out in practice' and difficulties in managing processes around which parameters were changing.

There was some indication of a more positive experience for organisations in the North East. Of three organisations who reported recently seeing vetting completed more quickly, two were in the North East. Another organisation delivering in different areas said processes in the North East were smoother than in other areas.

CHALLENGING WORK AFFECTS STAFF WELLBEING, WHILE LOW SALARIES CAN MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO RETAIN STAFF

As we have seen, demand for services and complexity of user need have both increased, with 59% of survey respondents engaging more new service users in 2024/25 than in the previous year and 74% reporting increased complexity of user need over the course of the 2024/25 financial year. However, the recruitment of staff and volunteers does not appear to have kept pace: 53% of respondents said their number of paid staff had increased in 2024/25 compared to 2023/24 (n=130); 45% reported an increase in volunteer numbers over the same period (n=118).

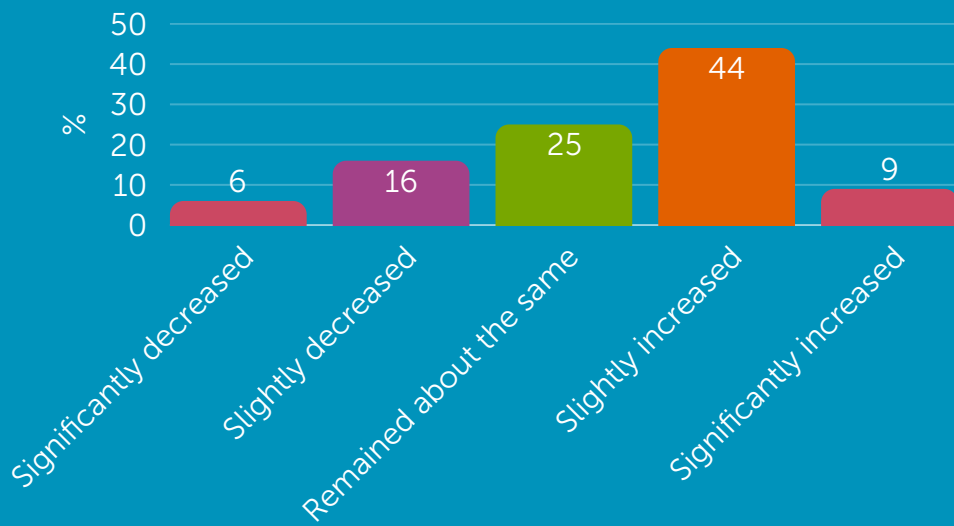


Figure 4: Comparing 2023/24 to 2024/25, how has the number of paid staff working at the organisation changed?

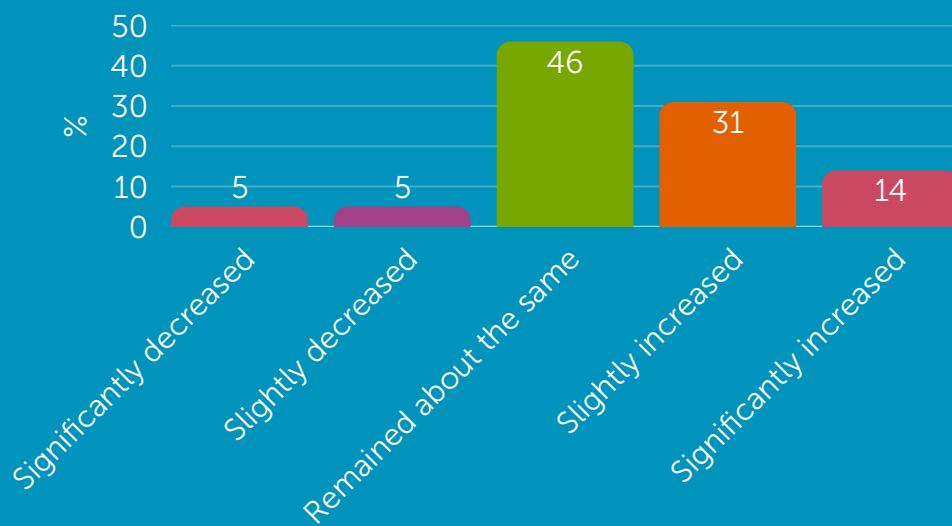


Figure 5: Comparing 2023/24 to 2024/25, how has the number of volunteers supporting your organisation changed?



Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that many organisations report placing additional demands on existing staff. 40% of our survey respondents had responded to the level, complexity or urgency of need of their service users by having staff take on larger caseloads (n=155). Several focus group participants said staff wellbeing had been affected by having to work more intensively and to support service users through trauma.

Some organisations also reported difficulties in retaining staff. Focus group participants explained that this was because they couldn't afford to pay higher salaries or because of job uncertainty linked to insufficient notice around delivery contract renewal (see more later in this section). A few commented that staff had left for statutory sector jobs with higher salaries, permanent contracts and better working conditions.

DIFFICULTIES IN WORKING WITH A PROBATION SERVICE UNDER PRESSURE

While acknowledging that probation practitioners continue to be under significant pressure, some focus group participants and survey respondents highlighted challenges they had experienced in working with probation, including risk management and communication. There were also some concerns around the services being offered by probation to service users.

In focus groups, three organisations commented on how risk was managed when they were, or had previously been, working with probation. One observed that Probation Reset had left their organisation 'holding the risk' of working with vulnerable service users, when they would previously have had support from probation colleagues. A second was concerned that probation referrals did not share some important historical information about service users and their offences, leaving their organisation's staff at risk. A third noted that probation workers were not always attending relevant meetings in the community.

Four organisations referred to perceived shortcomings in the probation service's communications. They mentioned:

- Poor communication from the centre to local probation teams around the SDS40 early release scheme and which people in prison were eligible.
- Difficulties in getting an information sharing agreement set up between probation and their organisation.
- A lack of consistency in how probation teams are informed about voluntary organisations' projects and in how they make referrals to them.
- Pro-forma letters sent to service users that they felt could be expressed more supportively and sensitively.

Three organisations mentioned concerns around the quality and nature of probation support. Of these, two felt that there was inconsistency in the service provided to service users depending on the skills of the individual probation officer assigned to them. Two noted their concerns about the nature of the accommodation or living arrangements that probation teams would accept for service users.

A few organisations mentioned other negative implications of Probation Reset (in addition to that related to risk referred to above). They noted that: the reset had increased their workload because it gave a shorter timeframe for their organisation to complete work within; user support needs could not always be met within the allocated timeframe; they sometimes lost service users who would 'disappear' without their CRS engagement being enforced through probation; and once on reset, men are no longer entitled to support around connecting with their family, even if they request it.

Other organisations noted more positive experiences in working with probation (see section 5).

ORGANISATIONS' EXPERIENCES OF CHANGES IN FUNDING LEVELS ARE MIXED

In our survey, just under half (46%) of respondents said their overall level of contract or grant funding for services had increased when comparing the 2024/25 financial year with 2023/24 (n=146). A significant minority (28%) said their funding level had fallen. Smaller organisations (income under £500k) were more likely to say their funding level had fallen than larger organisations (39%, compared to 22%).

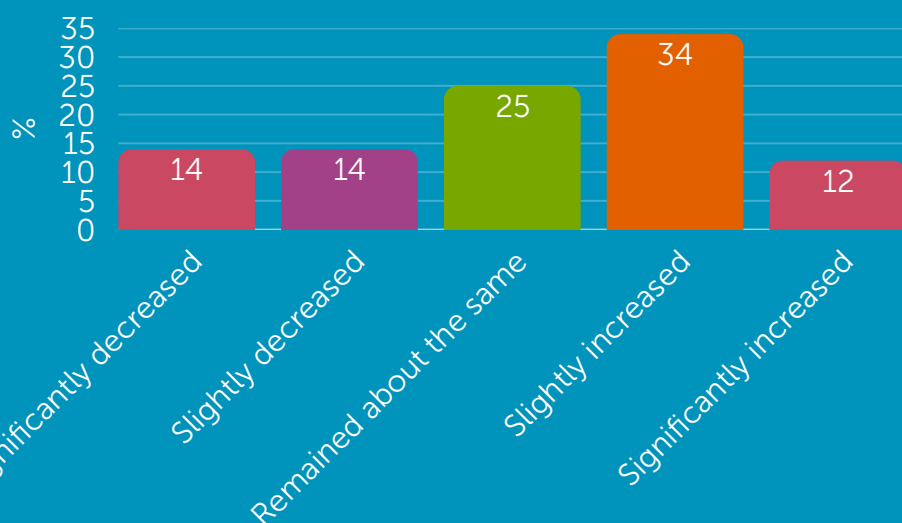


Figure 6: Comparing 2024/25 with 2023/24, how has the overall level of contract or grant funding for your service(s) changed?

FUNDING FROM TRUSTS AND FOUNDATIONS AND STATUTORY FUNDERS ARE BOTH IMPORTANT TO ORGANISATIONS, BUT TRUST AND FOUNDATION FUNDING – IN PARTICULAR – CAN BE DIFFICULT TO SECURE

When asked to select their single largest source of income, 41% of our survey respondents chose grants from trusts, foundations or other charitable organisations, while 38% chose government/statutory contracts (n=160).

We carried out further analysis by size of organisation for this question. There is a clear size gradient: the larger the organisation, the more likely its largest income source is government/statutory contracts. For organisations over £500k (n=89), government contracts become the largest income source. Among those with incomes of £1,000,001–£10,000,000 (n=22), around 58% report government contracts as their largest income source. For those over £10,000,000, this rises to around 89% (n=16).

89%

of organisations over £10m rely most on government contracts

Charity Commission records (please see the financial analysis report for further details) support this pattern: income and public funding in the sector are highly concentrated, with the top 10% of charities receiving more than 90% of contract income.

Smaller organisations show the opposite pattern, with grants from trusts and foundations much more likely to be their largest income source. For organisations below £500k, an average of around 62% cite grants as their main income source. This falls to about 22% among organisations over £500k.

The large majority of survey respondents (83%) applied to charitable trusts and foundations for funding in 2024/25 and 53% applied to the National Lottery. The most commonly reported application targets for statutory funding (contracts, grants or both) were local authorities (55%), Police and Crime Commissioners (40%), HMPPS (38%), health commissioners (34%), the Ministry of Justice (34%) and individual prisons (28%) (n=154).

Figure 7: What is your organisation's largest source of income?



Success rates were lower among those applying for charitable trust and foundation grants (where 26% of survey respondents received more than half or all of the grants that they applied for, n=128), than among those bidding for contracts (where 53% secured more than half or all of the contracts they bid for, n=59) and government grants (where 49% did so, n=71).

Survey data suggests that it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure trust and foundation funding. In our 2023 survey, 42% of respondents reported securing more than half of the grants they applied for (compared to 26% this year). Many focus group participants were finding it more difficult to secure trust and foundation funding because of the amount of competition faced when applying. In our focus group of funders, it was noted that smaller, regional (outside London or other bigger cities), and grassroots organisations struggle for visibility and access, especially under invite-only or proactive funding models. The narrowing, and in some cases targeting, of funder priorities is also leading to access challenges for some organisations.

We note that competition for trust and foundation funding may continue to worsen following the abolition of PCCs, as we can anticipate that there will be more demand for trust and foundation funding.

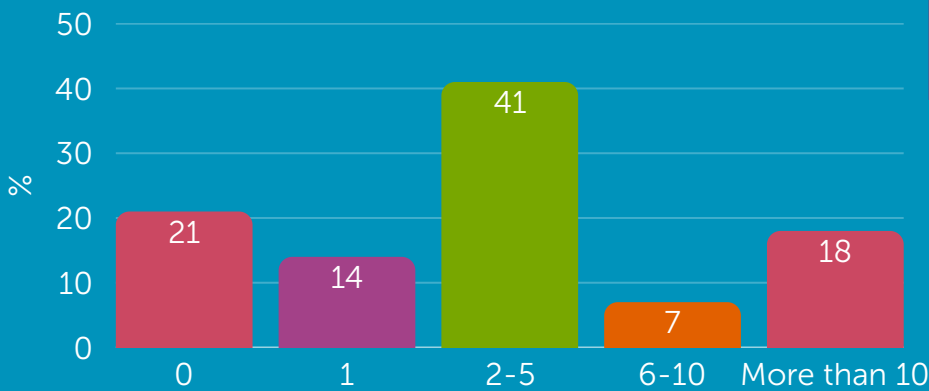


Figure 8: How many contracts did you bid for in 2024/25?

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: BACO



BACO has been operating since 1973 working in three of Buckinghamshire’s four prisons and with Probation Officers and Youth Justice Service teams across the county of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The charity awards small grants to support people making positive changes to their outlook and behaviour and to reduce the risk of reoffending upon release. Similar grants are awarded to people rebuilding their lives in the community and to vulnerable young people identified as being at risk of committing crimes.

STATUTORY COMMISSIONING AND PROCUREMENT PROCESSES CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS TO ENGAGE WITH

COMMISSIONING OVER LARGE GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS RULES OUT MANY VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS FROM CONTRACT DELIVERY

In our focus groups, organisations explained that when commissioning lots covered large geographical areas, many smaller organisations were unable to bid for statutory contracts. A few mentioned that some recent or upcoming statutory commissioning was based on very large areas, or on areas that were larger than they had been previously. Several organisations raised concerns about whether the large size of the new HMPPS areas (see section 2) would lead to more commissioning across large areas. However, one organisation noted a positive development in the Ministry of Justice's community services, which are now commissioning based on smaller geographical areas.

STATUTORY PROCUREMENT AND APPLICATION PROCESSES ARE ONEROUS, PARTICULARLY FOR SMALLER ORGANISATIONS

Many focus group participants spoke about spending substantial amounts of time engaging with complex procurement and application processes in an effort to secure statutory contract or grant funding. They had grappled with pre-application frameworks and portals, attended time-consuming market engagement events and submitted lengthy tenders and applications. Several flagged that the requirements were particularly difficult to meet for smaller organisations struggling with capacity or without specialist bid-writing expertise. These included, though were not restricted to, small by and for organisations working with global majority communities and other groups, and organisations working at community level.

There were concerns about the implications of smaller organisations not being involved in contract delivery, including a loss of local expertise and of quality in service delivery.

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: THE WALLICH

The Wallich is the largest third sector provider of homelessness and housing support services in Wales. They are strongly committed to the principles of harm reduction when working with people who use substances. They have developed a protocol with Welsh Police Forces which enables them to operate a number of residential services where clients are able to use some substances in their rooms, with harm-reduction support and advice from staff



EXPERIENCES OF APPLYING FOR FUNDING FROM PRISONS AND PCC'S ARE MIXED

Organisations had mixed experiences in applying for funding from prisons; some had been successful, while others reported that limited prison budgets meant funding was difficult to secure even when there was appetite from within a prison for them to deliver. There was some indication in the data that organisations' experiences may vary by prison; one organisation commented that prisons differ in terms of what they commission and how much they want to involve the VCSE sector, while another argued that whether or not an organisation secured prison funding could be quite 'random', based on relationships and 'being in the right place at the right time'.

A few organisations talked about securing funding from contracted prisons, with two saying that they had found it easier to do so than to secure funding from HMPPS-run prisons. One had had a more difficult experience with a contracted prison relating to agreeing delivery costs around their activities and described working with these prisons as 'a new complex landscape for us to navigate'.

Several focus group participants, particularly those delivering learning or arts programmes, had concerns around how proposed cuts to education budgets in prisons would affect their work.

Available data suggests that experiences in securing PCC funding may vary significantly by PCC area. 40% of our survey respondents had applied for PCC funding in 2024/25. In our focus groups, a couple of participants mentioned that PCC funding was important to their organisation, or to the criminal justice voluntary sector more generally. However, several others had struggled to engage local PCCs with their work.

STATUTORY FUNDING OFTEN DOESN'T FULLY COVER COSTS

In our survey, respondents reported significant problems with the value of the statutory contractual and grant funding they had received:

- Only a quarter (25%) achieved full cost recovery on all the services they delivered under contract or sub-contract in the financial year 2024/25 (n=75).
- 58% think the level of funding provided under their contract(s) is not adequate to deliver their service to a high quality (n=79). 31% reported the same for government grants (n=71).
- More than half (56%) said their contract extensions have not come with adequate financial uplift to meet inflationary rises in costs (n=72). 53% reported the same for government grants (n=59).
- Just under half (46%) think the financial terms of their contract(s) are not sustainable (n=79). 35% reported the same for central and local government grants (n=69).

In our survey, organisations reported taking the following actions as a direct result of not achieving full cost recovery for a contract in the financial year 2024/25 (n=64):

- Subsidising the shortfall using their own reserves (67%)
- Subsidising the shortfall using other funding sources (64%)
- Reducing overhead costs – for example, staff (33%)
- Reducing or closing services (22%).

Respondents tended to respond more positively when asked about their grants from charitable trusts and foundations – although, even here, one in four felt that their grant funding was not adequate to deliver their service to a high quality (n=128).

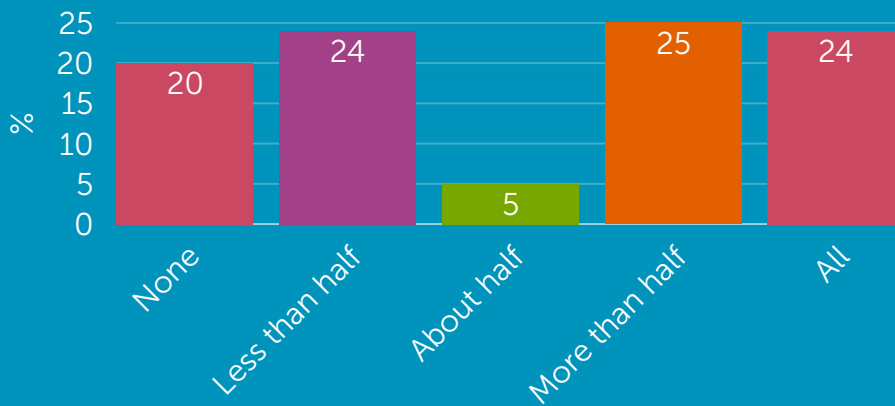


Figure 9: On what proportion of the services you delivered under contract or sub-contract in 2024/25 did you achieve full cost recovery?

Figure 10: Thinking across all of your contracts, to what extent do you generally agree or disagree with the following statements?

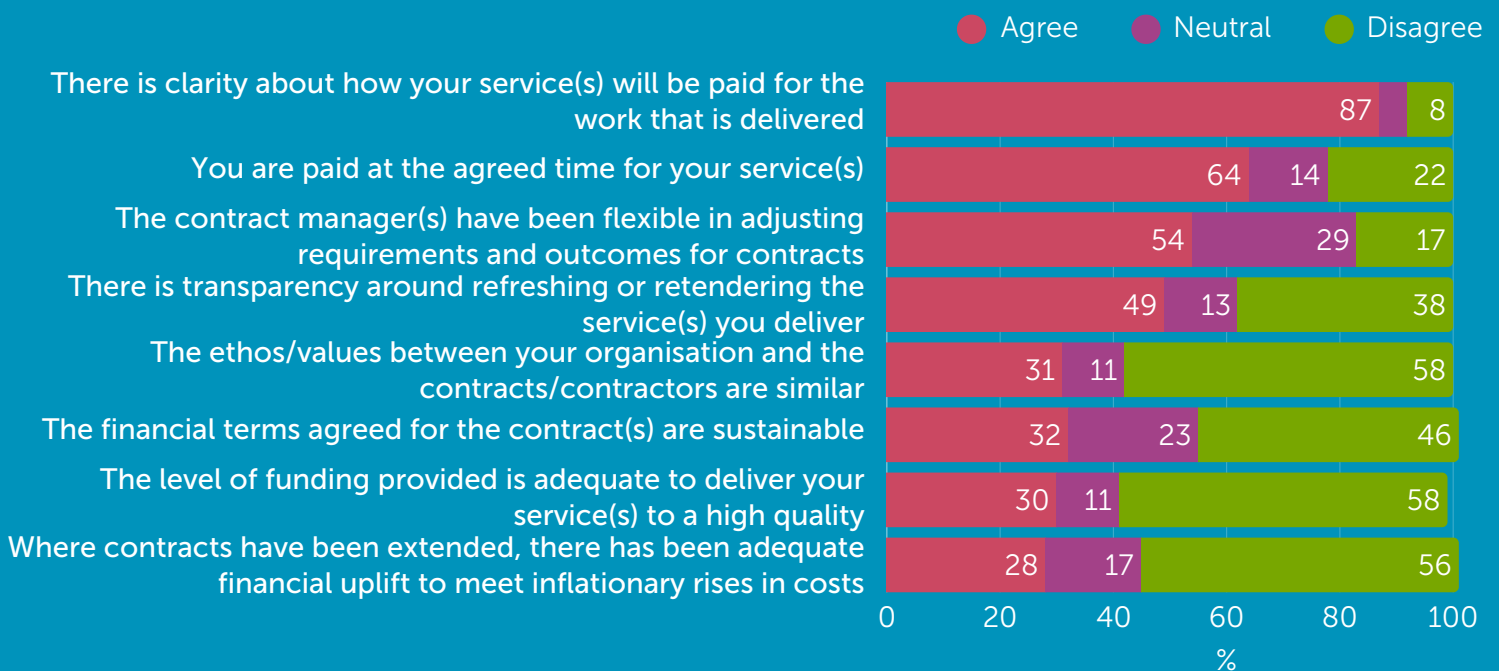


Figure 11: Thinking across all of your grants from charitable trusts and foundations, to what extent do you generally agree or disagree with the following statements?

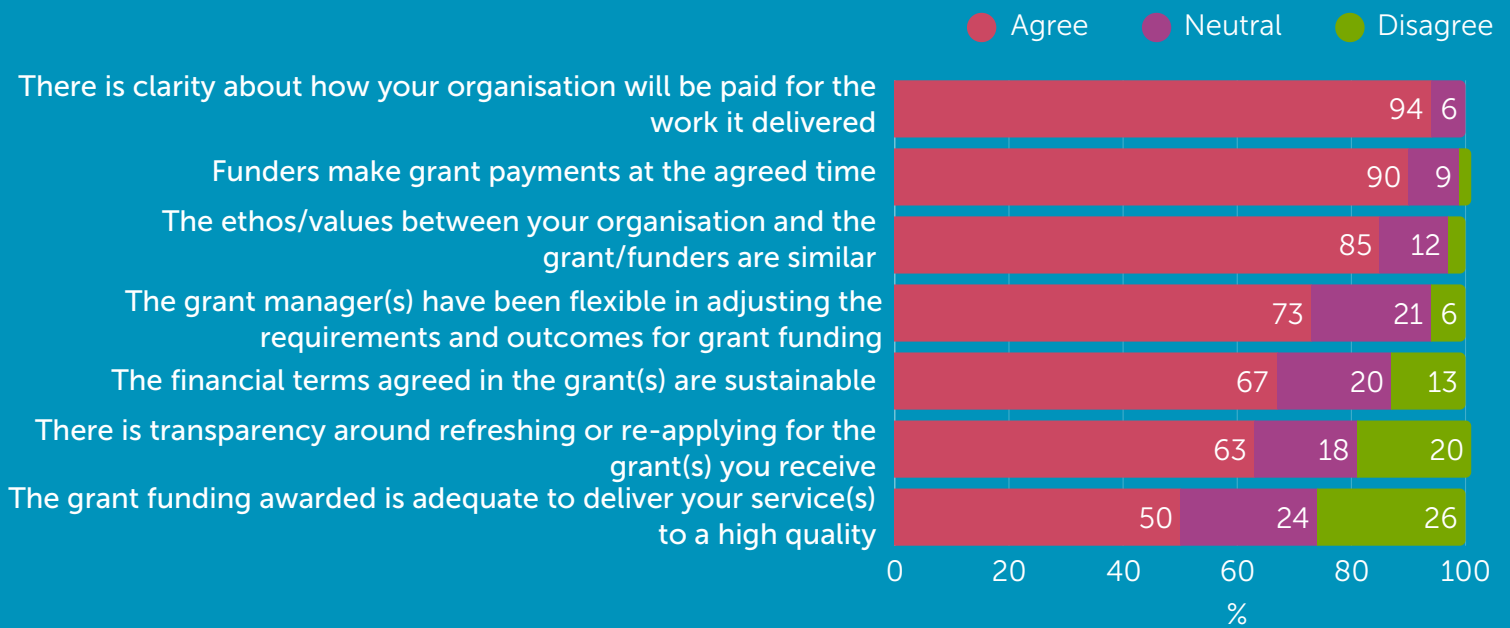
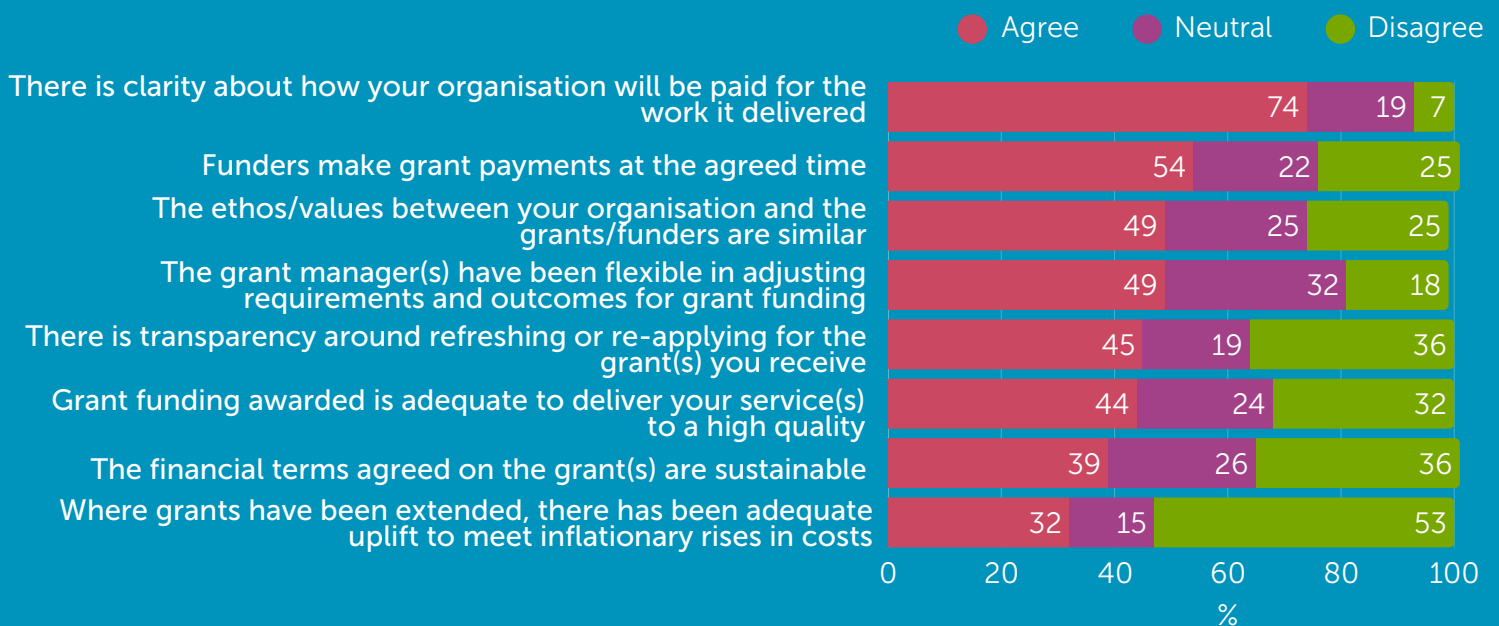


Figure 12: Thinking across all of your government grants, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



FUNDING IS OFTEN PROVIDED FOR SHORT PERIODS, AND PROCESSES FOR EXTENDING FUNDING ARE NOT ALWAYS CLEAR

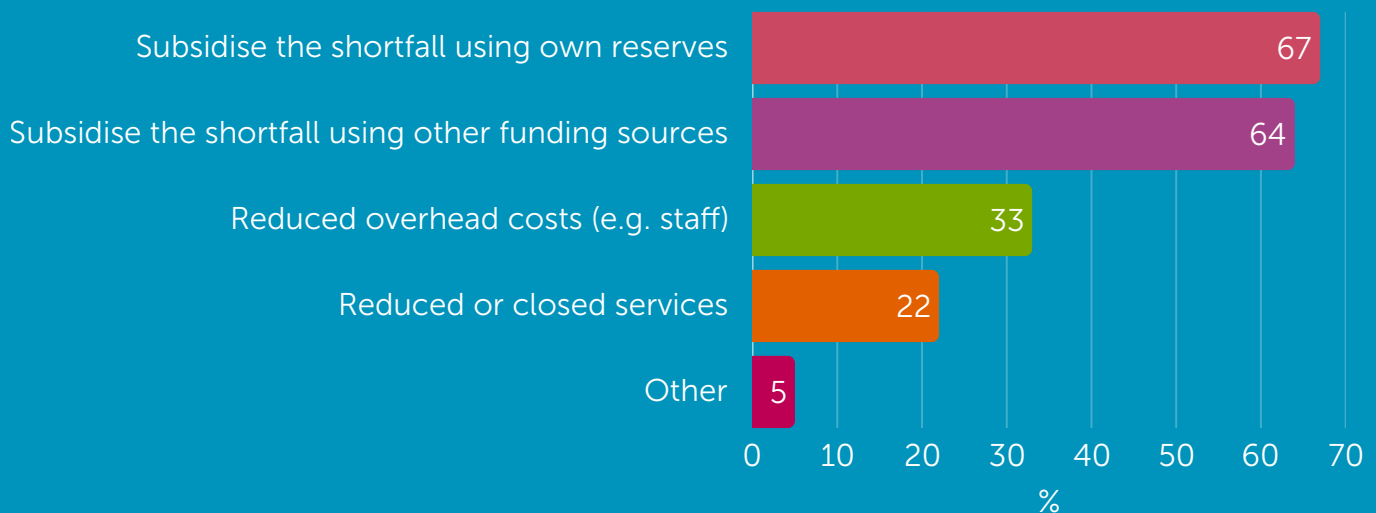
Many focus group participants reported struggling with short-term funding periods (of two years or less, where specified), which made it difficult to plan and deliver consistent services and necessitated substantial, ongoing work to apply for more funding. As one organisation told us:

'there's that constant kind of chasing your tail for what's the next funding pot and what's the next funding source, and where does that come from?'

Many were frustrated that funders appeared most interested in (or actively prioritised) funding 'innovative' work, and were much less inclined to provide ongoing funding to services over the longer term – including in situations where those services had demonstrated clear impact in their pilot phases. One summarised: 'we've got lots of opportunity to start things, but not lots of opportunity to sustain things'.

Organisations are also experiencing problems in terms of agreeing funding extensions. In our survey, only 49% of respondents with contracts (n=79), 46% of respondents with central or local government grants (n=68) and 63% of respondents with charitable trust and foundation grants (n=129) felt there was transparency around refreshing or retendering the service they deliver (or refreshing or reapplying for the grant they receive). Focus group participants described hearing about whether funding would be continued at a point close to the end – or sometimes after the end – of their contract or grant period. In our November and December 2025 focus groups, several were waiting to hear whether contracts and grants would be renewed for the period from April 2026.

Figure 13: Have you done any of the following as a direct result of not achieving full cost recovery for a contract in 2024/2)?



Some focus group participants additionally described losing staff because uncertainty around whether funding would be renewed meant their organisations were unable to provide job security.

CONTRACTUAL DELIVERY REQUIREMENTS DON'T ALWAYS SUPPORT THE ACHIEVEMENT OF OUTCOMES FOR USERS

Several focus group participants indicated that statutory contracts did not always allow voluntary organisations to work in effective, outcomes-focused and values-led ways.

They referred to contracts as: being inflexible and restricting delivery; having KPIs which felt like 'box ticking'; including outcome targets that were not meaningful for service users; and setting unrealistic delivery targets (for example, the 12-week timescale for service users to move on from CAS-3 accommodation). One participant was concerned that upcoming commissioning opportunities would require their organisation to become an 'enforcement agency', required to report on points that could lead to user breaches and recalls.

A few participants spoke about not bidding for contracts because they would not allow them to deliver as they wanted to; they did not want to change delivery models that work (for users and their organisation's staff) in order to come in within budget.

FUNDING IS NOT ALWAYS EFFECTIVELY TIED TO NEED

In our focus groups, a few organisations queried the allocation of some statutory funding, noting that it did not always appear to be effectively aligned with the needs of individuals from certain groups or geographical areas.

In terms of geographical areas, two organisations (one in the North East and one in the South West) queried why funding for some services was tied to an area's population size, rather than to measures such as its crime or reoffending rates.

In terms of specific groups, three organisations observed that commissioners often appear to focus attentions on specific groups, funding work with those groups before moving on to others. They argued that this can make it difficult for delivery organisations to run sustainable services and to effectively respond to people's needs.

IMPACT MEASUREMENT IS CHALLENGING AND UNDER RESOURCED

Several of our focus group participants described challenges in resourcing evaluation, impact measurement and reporting – in terms of both time and money. A couple mentioned that delivery staff were spending significant amounts of time meeting funder data and reporting requirements. One organisation said its keyworkers were inputting data into nine different case management systems.

Organisations reporting more positive experiences had accessed support or collaborated with others: one had secured funding for a database (several years ago); another had had their work evaluated by a university at no cost to them; and a third said that the National Women's Justice Coalition had been a helpful way for women's organisations to have a 'unified voice', communicating together about the effectiveness of the way they offer services.





4. FINDINGS: GOOD PRACTICE AND SUCCESSES

FINDINGS: GOOD PRACTICE AND SUCCESSES

In spite of the challenges faced, our research uncovered many examples of resilient organisations working effectively to respond to need. Many focus group participants spoke about achieving success through partnership and coalition working, meaningful involvement of people with lived experience and trauma-informed practice.

UNDERTAKING A RANGE OF WORK TO RESPOND TO USER NEED

In response to the level, complexity or urgency of their service users' needs, organisations completing our survey had undertaken a range of efforts to adapt or improve their delivery. These included improving staff skills through training (48%), working more flexibly with service users (46%) and developing new services (45%) (n=155).

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: 3PILLARS PROJECT

3Pillars Project is a sports-based mentoring charity working within the criminal justice system, built on three pillars: Exercise, Ethos and Education. Alongside rugby, 3Pillars' works beyond the pitch with a coaching based mentoring model that supports mindset, decision-making and behavioural change. 3Pillars are currently working in partnership with the Prison Reform Trust to deliver a programme tailored for Neurodiverse participants and are cofunding a PhD review of their work with Loughborough University examining Race, Masculinity and Class within sports based interventions.



Figure 14: How has your organisation been responding to the overall level, complexity, or urgency of need of those accessing your services?



SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: THE 180 PROJECT

The 180 Project is a unique full-time resettlement programme that incorporates functional fitness, group therapy, education and life skills. Currently at HMP Lancaster Farms, men on the programme live together supporting each other within a culture of health, well-being, emotional growth and accountability.



INCREASING WORK WITH PARTNERS AND COALITIONS

Many survey respondents reported increasing their partnership working to respond to service users' needs. 56% had increased partnership work with other voluntary organisations and 43% with statutory services.

In our focus groups, organisations highlighted the benefits of working with partners, including delivery organisations and commissioners. Several described how their partnership working with other delivery organisations benefitted service users because it meant that they could help service users to access appropriate support. Others noted that building good relationships with prison and probation staff (at senior and frontline levels) facilitated their work.

Several organisations had valued the opportunity to be involved in sector coalitions or collaborative exercises, such as HMPPS, MoJ's boards and engagement groups, the National Women's Justice Coalition and collaborative working to inform the CRS commissioning model.

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: ANAWIM

Anawim provides trauma-responsive, holistic support and advocacy for women in Birmingham, empowering them to reach their potential. New Chance is a specialist diversion programme for women across the West Midlands, delivered in partnership with West Midlands Police. The partnership brings together Anawim, Black Country Women's Aid, Kairos, Changing Lives, and Green Square Accord. This approach not only prevents women from entering the criminal justice system but also gives them the opportunity to address the underlying causes of their offending, reduce the risk of reoffending, and avoid further disruption to their lives.



INVOLVING PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

In our survey, organisations reported involving people with lived experience in a variety of ways (n=156). Most commonly, they reported:

- Consulting with people with lived experience about the design and delivery of their services (77%).
- Having people with lived experience in their staff team (68%) or as trustees or senior leaders (58%).
- Providing training or support to enable people with lived experience to contribute to their organisation's work (54%).

Figure 15: We're interested in understanding how your organisation involves people with lived experience. Which of the following statements apply to your organisation?



A few mentioned challenges in involving people with lived experience – in addition to those around vetting (see section 3). For example, one organisation said it could be difficult to involve their service users experiencing the most disadvantage.

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: NATIONAL WOMEN'S JUSTICE COALITION

The National Women's Justice Coalition (NWJC) is a feminist coalition of 26 specialist women's organisations working to improve outcomes for women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system. Since its establishment in 2021, the coalition has combined lived, learned and professional expertise to demonstrate the value of the Women's Centre Model, evidence the need for sustainable funding, and influence justice policy that reduces the stigmatisation and criminalisation of women. Key achievements include launching the Women's Services Map, the UK's first directory of specialist services for women in the CJS, and establishing a National Voice & Advisory Panel, which provides a national platform for women to contribute their lived experience expertise to inform policy recommendations, strengthen our evidence base and shape public discourse to drive the systemic change we need.



In our focus groups, a few organisations said that commissioners increasingly recognised the value of involving people with lived experience in commissioned services. However, a couple of others noted that people with lived experience were not involved in policy making in a meaningful way. A participant from a lived experience-led organisation commented: 'it's like we're just there to say that we've been to prison, our actual opinion and thoughts don't seem to matter too much'. Funders reflected that due diligence around past crimes can create dilemmas for funders.

DEVELOPING THEIR TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

Several focus group organisations stressed the importance of their organisation working in a trauma-informed way, with a couple noting that they had focused more on this approach recently. One organisation observed that there was more focus on trauma-informed practice in services for women and queried whether this approach could be applied more to work with men. Similarly, another argued that men were often seen as 'risks to be managed' and were often left without adequate support.

WORKING WITH FUNDERS

While organisations reported a range of problems with the funding landscape (see section 3), we also found evidence of positive working and relationships between funders (particularly trusts and foundations) and funded organisations. For example, 85% of survey respondents in receipt of trust and foundation funding said the ethos/values between their organisation and the grants or funders were similar (n=131), while 73% said grant managers had been flexible in adjusting the requirements and outcomes for grant funding (n=121).

Some focus group participants spoke about perceived benefits of devolved commissioning. A couple mentioned that commissioning priorities in Greater Manchester had been helpful for smaller organisations and for arts organisations (although a third felt that commissioners had not yet had the courage to 'do things differently').

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: OUT THERE

Out There is a Greater Manchester charity that supports families through one of the most challenging times of their lives, when a family member goes to prison and after. They aim to reduce both the practical and emotional impacts of imprisonment on the wider family including children and young people. The charity is led by people with lived experience, and this and its values underpins the work it does. More widely it works in partnership with other charities working in the criminal justice system through its Hub space in Old Trafford.



There were some positive comments about commissioning in Wales. One organisation observed that commissioners and providers want services to 'feel Welsh', while another noted that Welsh commissioners were taking a 'fresh approach', wanting to see more partnership working. However, organisations also mentioned that partial devolution in Wales meant there could be a lack of clarity around leadership and decision-making responsibilities. One also noted that organisations working in Wales and England sometimes had to familiarise themselves with different commissioning approaches on each side of the border, which could be difficult.

Other positive comments from funders and voluntary organisations about relationships between them related to:

- Co-commissioning of services.
- Access to 'funder plus' support.
- Being able to have a dialogue with funders about the value of contracts/grants, which sometimes led to securing more funding or contractual uplifts.
- A voluntary organisation working with a commissioner to co-design and then deliver a service to a group that the organisation had identified as being in need of support.
- Pooled funds across multiple funders.

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT: JUNCTION 42

Junction 42 exists to see the lives of people in prison and their communities visibly transformed by hope. They deliver in-person services in the North-East including engagement, faith, and through-the-gate mentoring. Their Stories of Hope in-cell packs and media are used by 92% of prisons in England and Wales. They have also created a 12 week in-cell creative curriculum designed for those who aren't accessing work or education in prison.





5. FINDINGS: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

CONCERNS ABOUT FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

One in four survey respondents (25%) felt unconfident or very unconfident about their organisation's financial sustainability over the next two years (n=138). A further 31% felt neutral (neither confident or unconfident).

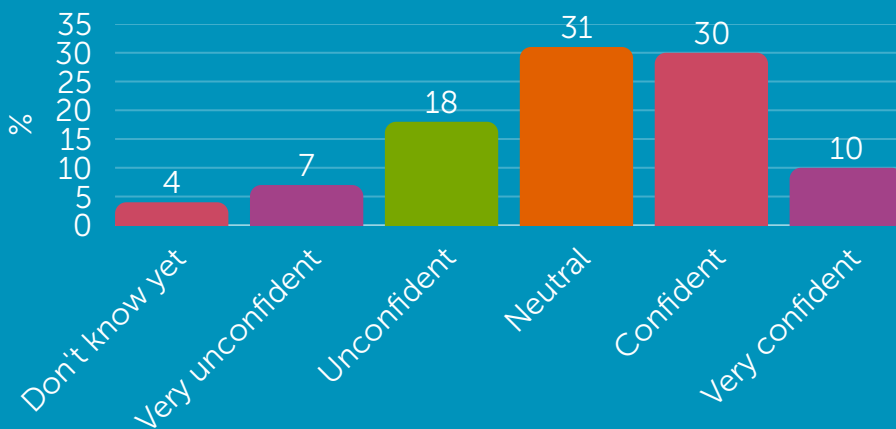


Figure 16: How confident are you about your whole organisation's financial sustainability over the next two years?

FUTURE RISKS

When asked about likely future risks to the sector, focus group participants discussed their significant concerns around a lack of available funding.

Many organisations spoke specifically about risks around current Probation CRS commissioning processes (to note, these will now be called Community Support Contracts). Some explained that the proposed contract sizes meant that only large organisations would be able to bid to become prime, lead providers, with limited opportunities for smaller organisations to be involved. Others had concerns about their core work falling into the scope of CRS contracts, anticipating that they would struggle to secure other funding for it should they not be commissioned under CRS. Individual participants also noted risks around CRS in terms of a proposal that uplifts would not be considered in spite of the planned long contractual delivery periods; a potential for the use of payment-by-results contracts; and an insufficient focus on mental health.

Beyond funding, other risks identified by organisations included:

- The rise of populism and its impact on vulnerable people.
- Needing to adapt to policy changes such as police and crime commissioner reforms, and the potential for an associated reduction in funding
- The use of technology – such as facial recognition and in predictive policing approaches – in a way that embeds racism or other forms of discrimination.
- Difficulties in undertaking work in prisons because of the challenging operating environment there.
- The effects on users of some planned legislation, including the treatment of 18- to 25-year-olds under the Police and Crime Bill, and the likely impact on vulnerable women of planned legislation covering assaults on retail workers

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Notwithstanding the challenges the sector faces, many focus group participants were able to identify grounds for optimism.

When asked about opportunities for the sector, several organisations reiterated their positivity about some government proposals and activities, including the Sentencing Bill (now Act) and the establishment of the Women's Justice, while cautioning that the former would need to come with significant community investment. In Wales, one organisation was hopeful that a Welsh government bill mandating prevention work could reduce some of the pressure on their organisation.

Other identified opportunities for the sector included: CRS contracts (in spite of the risks outlined above); getting involved in activities linked to the National Year of Reading; linking in with the digitalisation roll-out in prisons (for example, by providing courses for people in prison); and using technology to train practitioners to better understand the different communities they work with.

Despite the challenges set out in this report, our survey found that respondents envisaged opportunities to make a range of changes to secure their organisation's long-term financial sustainability. Most commonly, they planned to develop new services (60%), deliver more services in partnership (53%), expand an existing service (47%) and better use technology (36%) (n=138).

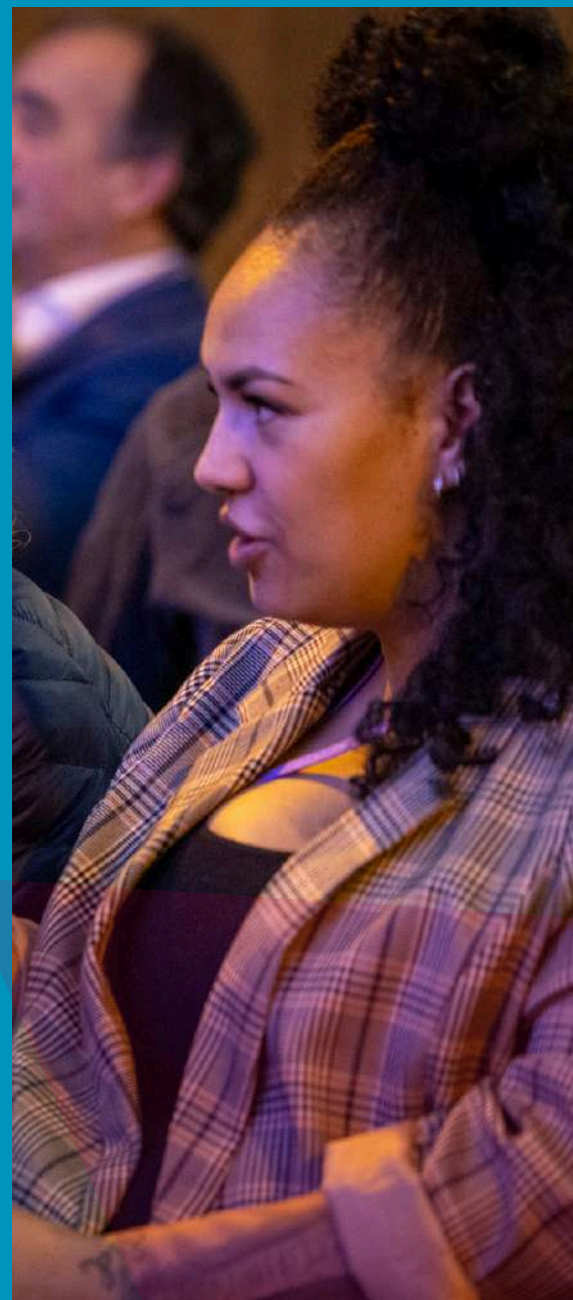


Figure 17: How has your organisation been responding to the overall level, complexity, or urgency of need of those accessing your services?





6. THE FUTURE SUPPORT NEEDS OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus group participants identified a range of ways in which action from others could help their organisations to thrive. They described necessary changes in funding, and in policymaking and systems. This support has been grouped into a range of themed recommendations, developed by Clinks.

FUNDERS – STATUTORY AND CHARITABLE:

Many focus group participants proposed recommendations for funders, both statutory and charitable trusts and foundations, designed to better support their work. The most common recommendation was for the provision of long-term funding, ensuring that it is for three years or longer to enable the provision of sustainable support. Several organisations also highlighted the need for more core funding to be available as well as an urgent requirement for full cost recovery on contracts. In our funders' focus group, charitable trusts and foundations echoed these recommendations.

Several organisations explored how smaller organisations should be supported to access funding, including through funders setting longer tender lead-in times to mitigate capacity constraints for smaller organisations and to encourage larger organisations to build partnerships with smaller organisations. This increased partnership working would also allow for greater collaboration in terms of the sharing of best practice and expertise regarding funding bids.

Finally, several organisations suggested that funders could better involve voluntary organisations in planning for commissioning – for example, through co-designing services or by considering the history of prime and local providers when making decisions around commissioning lots.



COMMISSIONING - RECOMMENDATIONS:

To note, Clinks has developed these recommendations by building on the information gathered throughout this project and through additional engagement with the sector.

FUNDING

- Increase the availability of multi-year, unrestricted grant funding to support the sustainability of voluntary organisations and the services that they deliver
- Increase the availability of co-commissioned funding pots, with funding designed to address multiple and overlapping needs
- Embed indexation into all future government contracts to ensure that contract values reflect the cost of delivery
- Embed full-cost recovery into commissioned contracts for voluntary organisations
- Provide additional notice on whether funding is being renewed, while utilising contract extensions when there is a gap in provision
- Additionally, consider the implementation of policy whereby contracts are automatically renewed if no decision is made within a set period before expiry
- Incorporate flexibility into payment by results contracts to allow for staff sickness or leave, or any vetting-related challenges
- Ensure accessibility for smaller organisations when seeking to secure HMPPS-funded grant opportunities

COMMISSIONING MODELS, DEVELOPMENT AND PROCESSES:

- Reduce the geographical size of commissioned contracts and grants and commission them at a local level, wherever possible, providing resources and commissioning responsibilities at a local level. This would enable funding to be tailored specifically to local needs and priorities
- Changes in probation models implemented through Reset and Impact should be reviewed to ensure they reflect women's distinct circumstances and need. Evidence has shown that women must have time to build trust and confidence so that all needs can be disclosed. Support must therefore be provided over appropriate durations and commissioned service delivery should reflect this
- Mandate a percentage of commissioned contracts for small, specialist organisations
- Enable greater voluntary sector involvement in the co-design of commissioning opportunities to ensure that services better reflect the realities of frontline delivery
- Establish voluntary-statutory mechanisms to allow for the co-production of outcomes frameworks to be embedded in all future commissioning opportunities
- Extend tender 'lead in' times to mitigate capacity constraints for smaller organisations and extend the timeframe for notification regarding future funding decisions

GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNICATION:

- Establish and improve communications and engagement routes that clarify, and provide transparency on, potential funding routes for voluntary organisations, including on the Dynamic Purchasing System and spot purchasing/sub-contracting opportunities via the Prison Education Service
- Increase collaboration between charitable trusts and foundations, statutory and corporate funders to ensure more pooling of resources, sharing of best practice, and to enable a greater understanding of need
- Establish regular engagement forums for statutory funders and charitable trusts and foundations to foster dialogue on collaboration on the funding needs of the voluntary sector
- Increase opportunities for statutory-voluntary collaboration in order to foster a greater understanding of voluntary sector service delivery; to be achieved through creating opportunities for statutory representatives to visit more voluntary services
- Streamline existing systems and process via which voluntary organisations engage with statutory stakeholders in the delivery of commissioned contracts

SUPPORT NEEDED FROM POLICY MAKERS:

In addition to the funding recommendations set out above, this section covers the support required from policymakers which, inevitably, includes funding asks. Many organisations focused on the need for funding service delivery at different stages of the criminal justice system, including (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Community-based support to cater for the provisions within the Sentencing Act and the increased demand this will place on voluntary sector organisations
- Early intervention work for a range of groups, specifically: families impacted by the criminal justice system; women, in order to provide support before they reach crisis point and need becomes very complex, and to include mental health support for women experiencing high levels of trauma; and young girls from South Asian communities (an organisation reported noticing an increase in numbers from this community coming into contact with the CJS).
- Long-term support for young people with multiple needs, and for support for young people who may have missed accessing support for those needs in the past
- Community projects to help keep children safe and divert them from involvement in crime
- Support people in contact with the criminal justice system into sustainable employment
- Increased statutory funding of arts provisions within prisons

Other organisations called for structural changes to existing systems or to mitigate against the impact of policy changes. The following recommendations were developed following these discussions and include recommendations relating to the impact of significant policy developments discussed earlier in the report.

TO BUILD ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE INDEPENDENT SENTENCING REVIEW AND THE SUBSEQUENT PROVISIONS WITHIN THE SENTENCING ACT:

- As recommended in the Independent Sentencing Review's final report, increase funding for the voluntary sector to support the greater numbers of people who will be accessing services in the community
- The Ministry of Justice to provide a timeline for implementing the Independent Sentencing Review recommendation to launch a public awareness campaign on sentencing

TO SUPPORT IN-PRISON DELIVERY:

- Publish national guidance on the new vetting framework and ensure consistent implication of the framework to reduce the barriers faced by voluntary sector staff in accessing prisons and people in prison
- Improved coordination of voluntary organisations working in individual prisons, embedding learnings from previous voluntary sector coordinator roles

TO SUPPORT IMPROVEMENTS TO COMMUNITY PROVISION:

- Establish a consistent process via which voluntary organisations can communicate with the probation service, incorporating greater access to information sharing
- Establish minimum standards of resettlement support, regardless of locality, to ensure that there are no gaps in provision for people coming out of prison
- Establish funding streams that enable voluntary organisations to build on existing best practice in supporting people into sustainable employment



TO BOLSTER SUPPORT IN BOTH PRISONS AND IN THE COMMUNITY:

- Evaluate existing provision and support for racially minoritised communities in contact with the criminal justice system and establish an engagement forum with the voluntary sector to co-produce policies designed to address their disproportionate representation
- Develop culturally-competent services within prisons and probation, supported by the development of training packages to upskill staff on issues of cultural and religious differences
- Evaluate existing arts provision within criminal justice and community settings to support the case for increased funding; to include incorporating arts and creativity within inspection reports to better support the case for the value of arts provision with prison leadership
- Review the process whereby families can claim funding to facilitate the visitation of a family member in prison. A reform process should ensure that the money is available immediately, as opposed to having to be claimed back
- Ensure greater consistency in equalities work in statutory commissioning services, including staff training.

ENGAGING THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT:

- Establish local governance structures that implement the Civil Society Covenant's core principles, including incorporating voluntary sector expertise in policy development at the earliest possible opportunity



STAFFING:

Participants highlighted the ongoing challenges faced by voluntary organisations in being able to retain skilled staff, as well as being able to cope with increased costs as a result of government policy and wider external factors. The following recommendations seek to address these challenges:

- Commit to creating a formal placements and secondments scheme between HMPPS and commissioned VCSE organisations to build mutual understanding and share expertise; supported by incorporating the expertise of small, specialist organisations into a co-design process
- Extend shared reflective practice sessions to promote wellbeing and shared learning across sectors.
- Create more coordinated pathways into the PQiP programme, including placements within VCSE services, and explore the viability for a national lived experience pathway for roles in probation



CLINKS – ADVOCATING WITH AND ON BEHALF OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE VOLUNTARY SECTOR:

Several focus group participants gave unsolicited positive feedback on support they had received from Clinks, variously commenting that they felt valued by Clinks, found Clinks staff approachable and appreciated the opportunities for collaboration provided by Clinks' networks and other activities. Some reflected positively on being able to hear the views of other organisations during the research focus groups. For transparency, it should be noted that many of those involved in our research were Clinks members. They may, therefore, have been more likely to give positive feedback.

The following recommendations are focused on how Clinks can improve its offer for its members and the wider voluntary sector. They have been informed by the engagement undertaken for this year's State of the Sector research. As a result, Clinks will:

ADVOCACY



- Continue its advocacy on behalf of and with the criminal justice voluntary sector, developing additional avenues for engagement designed to platform the voices and expertise of the sector, with a specific focus on small, specialist organisations
- Reinforce its thematic focus on the arts and creativity by increasing opportunities for the sector to engage with decision makers

- Strengthen its engagement routes with specialist organisations led by and focused on racially minoritised people
- Create forums for Clinks members based in Wales and working in Wales to engage in advocacy relating to the upcoming Senedd elections and to influence UK Government policy with an impact on Wales
- Support the sector to establish cross-sector alliances, partnerships and coalitions



COMMUNICATIONS

Continue to update the sector on upcoming and emerging issues so that they are kept up to date on key policy and operational changes

Strengthen its communications dedicated to celebrating the work of the sector, providing further opportunities for small, specialist organisations to utilise Clinks' digital channels, and to increase opportunities for the sector to feed into Clinks' annual conference



Utilise its digital channels, including its refreshed website, to provide greater clarity on Clinks' support offer along with examples of previous, successful support

COLLABORATIVE WORKING



- Explore the viability of scaling-up existing models for collaborative working and coordinating the work of the sector, including the voluntary sector coordinator model in HMP/YOI Isis
- Utilise its new directory of services to support the mapping of in-prison, voluntary sector initiatives to foster increased, sector collaboration

- Focus attention on voluntary sector capacity building





APPENDIX

LIMITATIONS

- We had hoped to conduct survey sub-group analysis to explore the experiences of different cohorts, including by region and by organisational focus (for example, family, arts, women's and racial justice organisations). However, for several sub-groups the number of respondents was too small to support reliable or meaningful analysis.
- For example, only 6 organisations worked solely in Wales, and there were 10 organisations focused solely on racial justice. While many respondents worked across England and Wales, or on racial justice alongside other issues, this limited our ability to extract conclusions for some sub-groups. Running thematic focus groups helped mitigate against this.
- There is some overlap between survey respondents and focus group participants.
- Clinks shared the survey and focus group invitations with their networks. Reach beyond the Clinks membership base was limited: 87% of survey respondents were members of Clinks. Several focus group participants were already closely involved with Clinks in an advisory capacity.

OUR APPROACH TO SURVEY ANALYSIS

There were 160 unique complete responses to our survey, which we used for analysis. We removed 5 duplicate entries, where more than 1 respondent had completed the survey from the same organisation. We retained the open-ended responses here.

In two additional cases, the duplicate respondents came from national organisations but had provided substantively different perspectives (one at a national level and one at a regional level). Because these responses reflected different contexts, we retained both. We will reiterate in future surveys that only one response per organisation should be submitted.

For a response to be considered sufficiently complete for analysis, respondents had to have at least passed the profile questions. Some questions had fewer than 160 responses; we include the number of responses for each question ('n=') where we refer to survey data throughout this report. We also removed N/A responses where appropriate.

ABOUT THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The survey sample was a mix of those whose main purpose was to work in criminal justice (56%) and organisations with some users or services within the criminal justice system (44%), n=159.

Organisations worked with a range of service users at different stages of the criminal justice system. The most common stages were:

- In the community – under probation supervision, having served a custodial sentence (80%)
- In the community – with a past conviction (73%)
- In prison – preparing for release (70%)
- In prison – serving a sentence (68%)
- In the community – serving a community sentence (68%).

Most organisations engaged with service users from a wide range of backgrounds and needs. The most common demographic groups and needs worked with included:

- Women: aged 26-49 (79%), aged 18-25 (77%) and aged 50 and over (73%)
- People with substance misuse problems (eg. drugs, alcohol) (78%), people with mental health needs (77%), people with neurodivergent conditions, including acquired brain injury (75%)
- Men: aged 26-49 (74%), aged 18-25 (71%) aged 50 and over (69%)
- Racially minoritised people (69%).

Some organisations also provided specialist services or services to a specific cohort. This included:

- Women: 28% of respondent organisations' main purpose was to provide services for women, and 41% provided a specific service for women within a broader remit.
- Ethnicity: 6% of respondent organisations' main purpose was to provide services for racially minoritised people, and 50% provided a specific service within a broader remit.
- Families: 11% of respondents' main purpose was to provide services for families, and 35% provided a specific service within a broader remit.
- Lived experience: 30% of respondents' main purpose was to provide services for those with lived experience, and 47% provided a specific service within a broader remit.
- Older people: 10% of respondents' main purpose was to provide services for older people, and 43% provided a specific service within a broader remit.

The sample of organisations involved in the survey was a mix of larger and smaller organisations, with 43% having incomes below £500,000.

Figure 18: What was your organisation's total annual income in the last financial year?

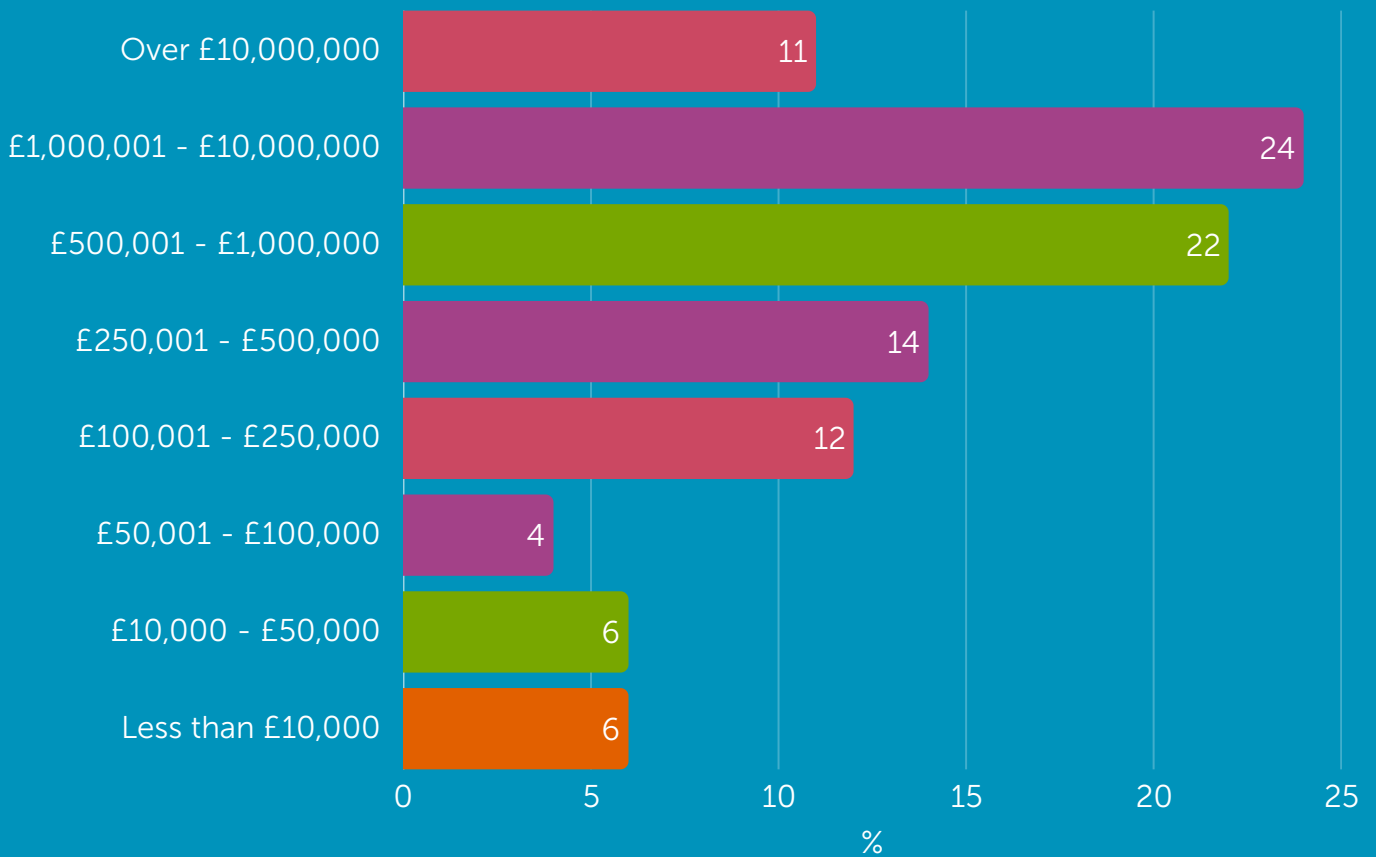
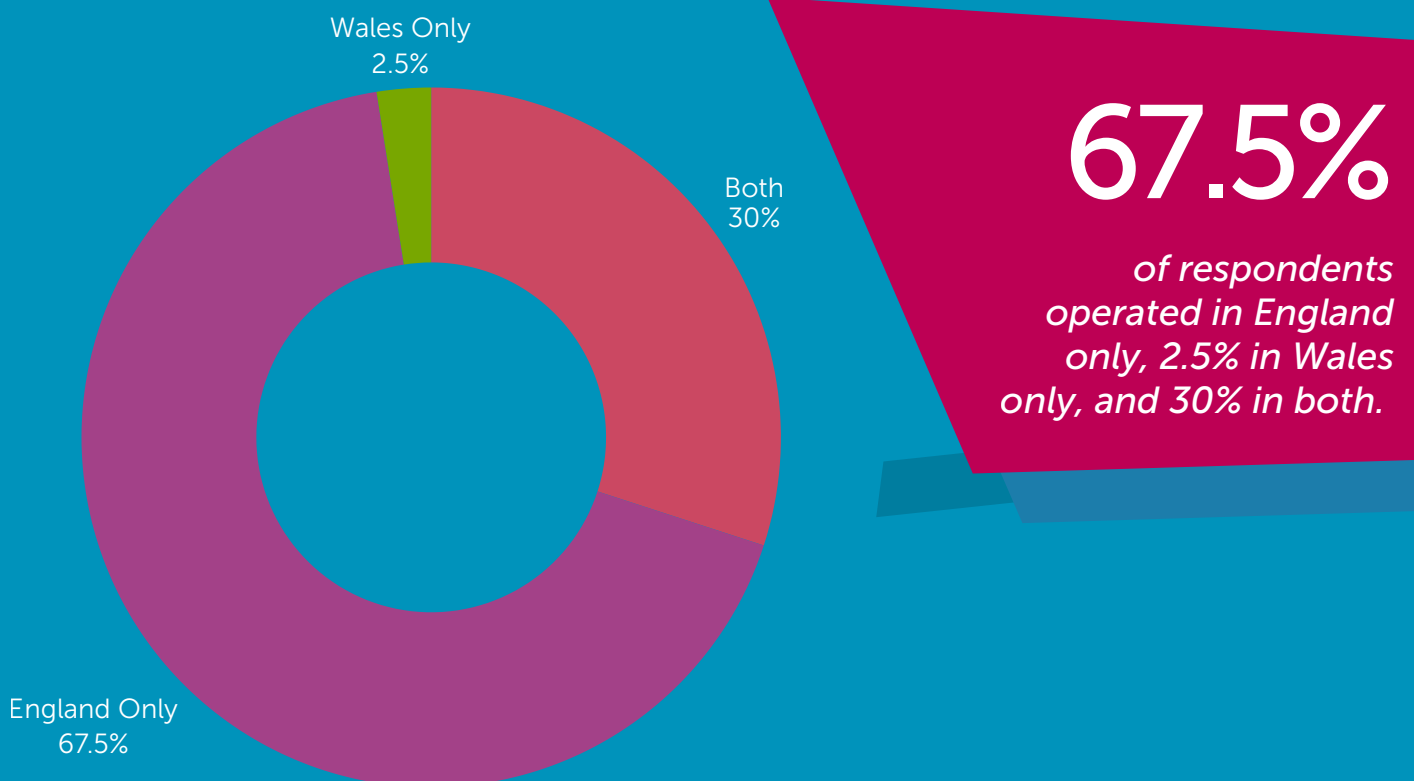


Figure 19: Does your organisation operate in England and/or Wales?



Organisations were most likely to operate at a local level (40%), national (35%), or, with a smaller proportion, on a regional (25%) level.

They worked across the HMPPS areas:



South East & East (49%) and South West & South Central (48%) were the most frequent responses.

Organisations had varied primary areas of work with service users. The most common types were:

- Emotional support (62%)
- Attitudes, thinking and behaviour (54%)
- Mental health (49%)
- Advocacy (47%)
- Mentoring / befriending / coaching (45%)
- Education, training and / or learning in the community (40%)

At various points in this report we compare findings to the 2023 published research. Across both years, the respondent profiles are broadly similar. Organisations in both cohorts work across multiple stages of the criminal justice system, engage with a wide range of demographic groups and needs, and provide diverse services. Minor differences appear in the levels of engagement across specific criminal justice stages and the proportions working with particular demographic groups, but the overall composition of the responses are similar between 2023 and 2025 (although 2025 shows slightly higher reported support for neurodivergent people (75%) than 2023 (53%)).



Supporting the voluntary sector
working in the criminal justice system

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.

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