

Using frontline expertise to influence policy



Nacro and Switchback

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Supporting the voluntary sector
working in the criminal justice system

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Cover photo

A caseworker meeting with a client in a café

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Introduction

The voluntary sector working in criminal justice has extensive knowledge and experience in bringing about tangible changes in the criminal justice system.

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

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

We would like to express our thanks to Nacro and Switchback for delivering an expert seminar on using frontline expertise to influence policy. The following provides a written case study of Nacro's work on influencing resettlement policy, and Switchback's approach to campaigning and influencing. You can find an [online recording of this expert seminar on YouTube](#).

About Nacro

Nacro is a national charity committed to giving people the best chance at a second chance. It delivers services across criminal justice, housing, health, and education. Nacro campaigns for changes to policies and systems that hold people back. It speaks out for and with the people it supports, ensuring they have power over their own futures. Nacro's vision is of a society where everyone gets a second chance and the support they need to achieve their potential.

Influencing policy

Nacro believes its direct service delivery plays an important role in enabling individuals to take control of their lives. The expertise it gains from delivering these services puts it in a position to create wider change. Its frontline experience shapes and informs all its policy and campaigns work, giving it authenticity and validity.

Nacro draws on its service users, staff, and partners, listening to them to find out what is working well, what the barriers are, and what could be done to help. They seek to involve their staff and service users in a variety of ways, including:

- Conducting surveys, interviews, and focus groups
- Involving them in events, briefings, etc
- A national service user advisory board to help shape strategy and thinking.

In addition to these more formal avenues, Nacro also stressed the importance of the more informal ways in which staff, service users, and partners could be involved, such as through having conversations.

This dialogue is continuous, such as through existing advisory boards, but engagement is also arranged around specific events. As part of Nacro's new strategy, it is looking to involve its services users even further in the design and delivery of its campaigns.

Stakeholders and partners are also vital to how Nacro develops and delivers campaigns. The organisation aims to see an issue as a whole, and not just from a Nacro perspective. So, it will look at the role of other stakeholders and the challenges they are facing.

Practical barriers to resettlement

Nacro highlighted the experience of one of its service users, who was released from prison, called John. John had mental health needs and was released from prison without medications

that he needed. He had the £46 discharge grant and was then required to present himself to the council to arrange housing and apply for universal credit. He passed from the local authority to the Jobcentre with no one really wanting to take responsibility. To compound these challenges, John was released on a Friday, meaning he had very limited time to get help before the weekend.

John's experience was not unique. Nacro's frontline staff highlighted a number of similar experiences of people being released from prison for whom they were providing intensive resettlement support. This led to a focus on finding out about the practical barriers to resettlement. As part of this, they spoke to staff to find out if these barriers were common to all people leaving prison, if there were any regional differences, and other challenges. From this, they found common themes across all their services.

Friday release from prison

Nacro decided to focus on people being released from prison on a Friday. This was because it was a tangible and practical example of something making things significantly more difficult for people being released from prison, and it was something where there was a practical and straightforward solution. Nacro also found this issue gave them an opportunity to talk about a range of other resettlement barriers, such as the size of the discharge grant and people not being able to apply for universal credit until after they are released from prison.

[Nacro launched its campaign in 2018](#), which included testimony from services users, but this received a lukewarm reception from the government. As there was limited data showing the impact of Friday releases on people leaving prison, Nacro realised it needed to focus on the individual impact of Friday releases to support its campaign.

As part of this, Nacro arranged for Radio 4 to follow someone released from prison who Nacro was supporting. As part of this, they spoke to the staff member and the person being released to show how they were being passed between different institutions and were not able to get the support they needed before the weekend.

In addition, Nacro held a roundtable with the Minister at the time and service users. This enabled them to show the impact of Friday releases directly to the government. They also created a film about Friday releases to bring home the way that Friday releases impacted individuals. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) looked at running a number of focus groups on this issue, and Nacro facilitated these, enabling the MoJ to speak to people on the frontline about their experiences.

It also became important to show that other organisations were talking about this issue, as the perception that it was only Nacro discussing this was becoming a barrier to the campaign. Therefore, Nacro worked to show there was a wider group of stakeholders concerned about this issue. To do this, it surveyed frontline staff in a range of resettlement organisations and published a second report that put quotes and experiences from people

leaving prison on a Friday at its centre. This report also included frontline experiences from other organisations such as the police, health services, and homelessness agencies.

The other strength of being a service delivery organisation was that Nacro could work with their frontline teams to develop a solution that would be acceptable to the government. As part of this, Nacro investigated barriers they were facing to securing change on this issue. These included the lack of evidence on the issue and the lack of legislative opportunities to bring about change.

When the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (now the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022) was brought before Parliament, this offered something to which the recommendation could be attached. The Bill could also be used to create Parliamentary pressure around the issue, and so Nacro supported cross-party amendments in both the House of Commons and Lords to encourage action.

Other barriers included public opinion, as the government might not think the public were in support of ending Friday releases, because it would involve releasing people from prison early. To address this, Nacro did some polling to show that the policy did, in fact, have public support as people understood the impact it could have.

At the time of this expert seminar, Friday releases remain a problem, but the issue has seen inclusion in the Prison Strategy White Paper and Nacro were hopeful that the consultation on that White Paper would lead to action. The campaign also opened up a wider conversation about the barriers to resettlement, such as technology, identification, funds, etc. This recognition of the wider issues around release and resettlement was another positive outcome of the campaign.

Homelessness on release from prison

Nacro's staff raised homelessness on release from prison as the biggest barrier to resettlement. On this issue, there was data to show that people were being released from prison into homelessness, and a connection between people rough sleeping and contact with the criminal justice system.

Lots of work was done prior to the pandemic on this issue, including Clinks setting up a Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Board (RR3) Special Interest Group on accommodation, and this issue was moving up the MoJ's priorities. However, the Covid-19 pandemic really thrust this issue into the spotlight, especially through the government's 'Everyone In' campaign to get everyone off the streets during the first lockdown. Despite this focus from the government, people were still being released from prison directly into rough sleeping.

Nacro, with others in the sector like St Mungo's, did a lot of work sharing the experiences of frontline practitioners and service users with the Government to show this was happening. Nacro ran surveys of staff, carried out interviews with service users, worked with the media to highlight the issue, and worked with MPs to table questions in Parliament.

This led to the creation of the Covid emergency accommodation fund and Homelessness Prevention Taskforces (HPTs) being set up. This action during the pandemic has enabled the sector to push for longer-term action on this issue, as it solidified the link between homelessness and prison leavers.

Nacro were particularly focussed on influencing the Spending Review around this issue, which meant they needed to take a wider focus than just working with the MoJ; it also needed to influence the Treasury and the Prime Minister's Office. To do this, Nacro co-ordinated a cross-sector letter to the Prime Minister prior to the Spending Review. There have now been commitments in the Spending Reviews for temporary accommodation for people being released from prison, and funding for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities to help them access private rented accommodation.

While this has not solved the issue of homelessness on release from prison, it shows the power the sector can have in influencing policy.

Further advice on campaigns

Nacro also highlighted the importance of consistent messaging in campaigning. In meetings, they stuck to the same messages, with their frontline experience at the centre. To further support campaigns, Nacro said understanding the political context in which you are operating is key, because this will influence the tools that can be used and which will be most effective. Alongside this, it is important to remember that nobody will always get everything right first time.

When drawing on frontline experience, maintaining open and regular communication channels is critical. This helps staff to share challenges they are seeing or circumstances that are changing. Building trust with staff and service users is also key, including showing why their experience is important, providing reassurances as to how information shared will be used, and always sharing the outcomes from campaigns.

Nacro highlighted that local and regional solutions and pilots can create national change. So smaller organisations that might only be operating in a small area should not think that what they are doing cannot have a wider impact.

SWITCHBACK

About Switchback

Switchback is a small charity that supports young adult men in London to build stable and rewarding lives after prison. To do this, Switchback works through a broadly three step process: they meet people in prison about three months before release, build a relationship with them, and develop a plan for release; they then continue to provide support on the day of release, meeting Switchback trainees at probation and providing one-to-one support in a real work environment with a partner employer; and they support trainees into long-term employment which includes a period of in-work support before trainees move on.

While the three-stage process is the face of the model, the heart is based around the relationship between full-time, skilled, mentors and their small caseload of trainees. The essence of the approach is to look at all areas of life and build stability across all 10 Switchback pathways, taking a holistic approach.

Switchback supports about 70 young men each year to become Switchback trainees, having on average 16 months of contact with each trainee. It supports 55% of their trainees into long-term employment, 93% do not reoffend, and 60% reach its benchmark of real, lasting change.

Launch into influencing

Switchback initially operated solely as a delivery organisation, with its influencing work beginning in 2018. This decision was based on the level of need seen among its services users, referred to as trainees. After 10 years of service delivery, it also meant there was a good base of evidence that could be used to support influencing work. To test its influencing, Switchback produced a policy pamphlet, and made its first written submission to a Justice Committee inquiry, which led to it being called to give oral evidence. This showed that it was possible for a small organisation without a high profile to be listened to within quite a short space of time. This led to the inclusion of its aim to inspire change in its strategy in 2019.

Switchback's approach to influencing

Switchback aims for its approach to be grounded in experience. This has meant asking what the organisation's strength and expertise is, leading it to focus mostly on resettlement as this is where its experience lies. Resettlement was also identified as a key area of need by staff and trainees, as well as being an area where there was a bit of a gap in advocacy work.

Switchback also recognised that it had strengths in working with young people, working with racially minoritised people, and operating in London. It seeks to root

all its work in the expertise of its staff and trainees. It sees the opportunity for small charities lying in that combination of lived and learned experience.

Switchback believes that people who are affected by the criminal justice system are grossly under-represented in policy making. This is often even more so for young people and racially minoritised people. It sees a lot of the resistance to change in criminal justice coming down to the othering of people who are in contact with it, alongside negative narratives in politics and the media. Switchback seeks to shift this narrative by humanising and amplifying the voices of the people they work with at every opportunity.

It also aims to be radical, yet realistic. While it knows the scale of change needed is significant, and there are systemic injustices, it sees the value of practical and quick wins as part of this process. It tries to vary its approaches by influencing both policy and practice, trying different things, and seeing what works.

Relationships are also key to Switchback's work, both with its trainees and in its influencing. It has worked to build to relationships with the government and officials from scratch, working in collaboration with others, such as Clinks and the Criminal Justice Alliance.

Experts by experience

Switchback has an Experts by Experience Board, founded in 2017. This is made up of former and current trainees who meet every six weeks to discuss influencing prison policies and ways to improve the criminal justice system. It provides a forum for young men of all backgrounds to engage in constructive conversations.

Members of the Experts by Experience Board have access to opportunities to progress their learning and skills. One member has become a policy intern at Switchback and others have become Switchback mentors.

Since the board was created, it has helped to deliver training to undergraduates and run a social media campaign to raise awareness of racism in the criminal justice system. In addition, it was involved in campaigning to increase the size of the discharge grant for people being released from prison.

The vision for the future of the Board is for members to have more control over meetings, activities, and discussion of the group. It has also played a role in determining Switchback's policy priorities and has fed into to Switchback's campaign work and core delivery decisions.

Switchback's 'Reshape release' campaign

This was [Switchback's campaign to bring some work together around resettlement and release from prison](#). As part of this, Switchback rooted their campaign in speaking to trainees and mentors and Experts by Experience Board members and looking at the organisation's service

data. It has looked to take a trainee-centred approach to campaigning. In its messaging, Switchback has focused on a small number of key issues for people leaving prison, such as access to accommodation, access to a basic smartphone, and raising the discharge grant.

Challenges for smaller organisations

Initially, Switchback's work in this area was constrained by having limited resources. It began by having one part-time member of staff, but this has grown over time, bringing in a Policy Intern and a Communication and Campaigns Manager. This means the organisation must be very focussed in how it directs its quite limited resources.

It can also be difficult having a low profile and limited access to ministers, officials, and parliamentarians. In order to get round this, Switchback takes a relationship-centred approach and has used their communications in a creative way.

Where Switchback wanted to include their trainees as part of their influencing work, there were challenges in engaging them in the issues. It found that, for many young men who had just left prison, there was not necessarily a desire to help because it appeared that nothing would change. To respond to this, Switchback worked with trainees to build up their own power and influence and help them see the value of trying to bring about change. This has meant feedback to trainees has been key in involving them, so they can see the difference that their contributions are making and build their confidence.

As a small organisation, the scale of the challenges facing the criminal justice system can seem daunting. Switchback noted there was a lot of appetite to hear from smaller organisations who know the impact the system has on people and understand the solutions as well.

The logo for CLiNKs, featuring the word 'CLiNKs' in a bold, white, sans-serif font on a blue background. The 'i' in 'LINKS' is lowercase and has a dot above it.

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

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