

Working with officials to influence policy





Supporting the voluntary sector
working in the criminal justice system

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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 Anna Lacey and Stephen O'Connor for delivering an expert seminar on working with officials at the Ministry of Justice to achieve policy change. The following provides a written case study of an expert seminar exploring the ways in which voluntary organisations can build and make the most of relationships with government officials. You can find an [online recording of this expert seminar on YouTube](#).

About the speakers

Stephen O'Connor is Deputy Director, Probation & Vulnerable Offender Policy. Stephen works closely with partners to support the future development of the probation service and delivery of community justice. Prior to this, he has worked in a variety of roles at Ministry of Justice from the Strategy Unit, Access to Justice and then at the Legal Aid Agency.

Anna Lacey is Deputy Director, Female Offenders and Health Policy at the Ministry of Justice. Anna is a Senior Civil Servant responsible for overseeing the policy on the health of people in the criminal justice system, including those with substance misuse issues, mental health problems and/or neurodiversity, and women in the criminal justice system. Before joining the MoJ in June 2021, Anna spent just under a decade at the Home Office in a variety of policy, programme and analytical roles, including as Principal Private Secretary to the Permanent Secretary, Policy & Strategy lead on Border Force EU Exit Readiness, and Head of Analysis and Research within the Migration Advisory Committee Secretariat.

Inside track influencing

At Clinks, 'inside track' influencing with officials is the main way that we influence policy. For more on Clinks' approach to influencing policy, [please see this previous case study](#). Some of the forums through which we carry out influencing of this sort include:

- Standing meetings with officials on thematic issues
- The [Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group \(RR3\)](#) quarterly meetings and special interest groups
- The Third Sector Strategic Partnership Board
- [The Clinks commissioning forum](#)
- [Look on our website to find minutes from some of these meetings.](#)

The role of officials

Officials are members of the civil service working for the English and Welsh government. Officials are politically impartial, independent of the government of the day and work in central government departments, agencies, and non-departmental government bodies.

The speakers began by explaining the role of civil servants. Traditionally civil servants do two things: advise fearlessly and implement loyally. They are not the decision makers of government, but they need to have the courage to advise elected ministers to make decisions by giving them the best possible evidence and insight.

Once decisions are made, it is the role of officials to implement them. Those two roles – advising and implementing – make up the bulk of civil servants' work. They are ultimately there to serve the public.

Ideas, incentives and constraints

It is important that voluntary sector organisations come to officials with ideas. While there is always an audience for good ideas, voluntary organisations should think about the incentives and constraints that ideas operate within. These include the current ministerial team and where you are on the political cycle or timeline.

The current ministerial team

What is the knowledge and experience of the political leadership at the time? For instance, some ministers come with practice background of the system. Others may not have that background but have a legal background and approach policy in a legalistic way, wanting to understand all the arguments behind a policy. It is worth checking what previous roles a minister has held, such as sitting on select committees. Voluntary organisations should think about the incentives of the people they are trying to influence at any given time.

The political cycle or timeline

The rhythm of politics is an important factor to think about when influencing government. For instance, where are you in the pending review cycle? In the months before April, departments are making decisions about the new financial year and what spending will be on. Come April, they will be thinking more about delivery for the year ahead. It is important to think about what stage of the political cycle you are to influence officials at the right time. This will depend on where they are in the spending review cycle.

What good influencing looks like

The speakers explained in detail what good influencing from voluntary organisations looks like.

Specialist knowledge

Civil servants are not always the experts on the issues they are dealing with and need to work with specialist organisations to gather knowledge and evidence. Being on hand to supply officials with specialist knowledge, evidence or impact data, is a good way for voluntary organisations to get a seat at the table. This is as much about providing solutions to problems as it is about pointing out the problems. Building an evidence base for officials will assist them in their conversations with ministers.

If you don't ask, you don't get

It is worth reaching out to officials or ministers to propose your ideas and make the best use of any forums where your ideas could be heard. Too often officials sit in meetings where attendees don't raise their hands or speak up, despite those being opportunities to suggest changes to policy. It is also worth reaching out to officials on LinkedIn to request a meeting.

Align your priorities with those of government

A great way to get your policy objectives on the agenda of government is to align your work with the priorities of the Ministry of Justice. Officials are often thinking about the following

things: value for money, an evidence base, and national evaluations. For instance, if you have a successful coaching programme in prisons, you could align it with the department's narrative of reducing reoffending by showing how the programme is successful in that regard. Find out what interventions the department is trying to deliver and show how your service would help to achieve them. Think about the resources already out there that will tell you what the government's position is on an issue and decide where your objectives fit in. For instance, Justice Select Committee sessions and reports and parliamentary questions are relevant to the Ministry of Justice.

Don't see the minister as the ultimate solution

Too often organisations see the minister as the 'be all and end all' of their influencing plans. Instead, map out all the key figures who you need to influence. Is it Ministry of Justice officials, is it the people responsible for prison activity at HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), or is it more local actors like local commissioners? Seeing the minister as the answer to everything and circumventing civil servants underestimates the role of the civil service. The minister's private office will come to the civil servants first to ask their opinion, for instance on whether to agree to a meeting. Don't forget the ministers have a huge portfolio and they can't be the experts in everything. Some are very reliant on civil servants to advise them.

Be prepared

When you have an influencing opportunity, like a meeting, come prepared with recommendations for the department. Push for specific commitments or actions to come from the meeting. You can even try to co-create the agenda with the meeting organiser ahead of the meeting, to ensure there is time to hear your proposals. Tell officials specifically what needs to change in the criminal justice system to achieve your policy aims. Your proposals should be SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound.

Relationships are key

Officials won't want to talk to people if they feel they will be chastised. Instead, it is better to take a constructive, problem-solving attitude. When officials feel they are constantly being lobbied they are less likely to want to engage.

Know your unique selling point

What makes your organisation unique? It might be your policy area, your networks, or being able to show your impact. These are opportunities to give officials something they might not already have.

Make your work visible

If you run a service, you could invite officials to visit and observe your service on the ground, to bring the issues to life. Inviting officials to come and observe your service may be a good first step for further influencing work. It will demonstrate the impact of the service as well as helping to build a relationship. Clinks can help facilitate day trips for officials to voluntary organisations.

Partner up

Partnering up with other organisations or forming coalitions can strengthen influencing work. Think about aligning with the wider network of organisations doing similar or complementary work. There is strength in numbers. Influencing work is more effective when a group of organisations or individuals are all using the same messaging.

Seek feedback

If you have presented an idea and it hasn't been well-received or picked up, ask for feedback. Sometimes ideas don't get off the ground because they aren't politically palatable, deliverable or affordable. Feedback can help you to recraft your proposals.

Play the long game

Sometimes space opens up in the policy arena for you to influence on your area of expertise. For example, on the issue of substance misuse there wasn't a lot of scope for change before the government's 10 Year Drugs Strategy brought investment to the area, along with scope for innovation and creativity. Be ready with your policy proposals for when those moments arise.

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.

Join Clinks

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

Join our network of over 600 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.

www.clinks.org/membership

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