

# IVAR

Institute for Voluntary  
Action Research

## Small charities and social change

### *Executive summary*

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# Authorship and acknowledgements

This report has been written by Katie Turner, Vita Terry and Marilyn Taylor, based on research carried out by the authors with Annie Caffyn, Mike Aiken and inputs from Matthew Davis and Miranda Lewis (m2 consultants).

A huge thank you to our 11 case study organisations – Agenda, Against Violence & Abuse (AVA), Asylum Support Appeals Project (ASAP), Elmbridge Rentstart, Europaia, Groundswell, Justlife, Oasis Cardiff, Switchback, Unlock, West Yorkshire Community Chaplaincy Project (WYCCP) – and all those who participated in interviews for sharing their experiences and ideas so freely and openly.

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Read the full report and the 11 case studies at [www.ivar.org.uk/social-change](http://www.ivar.org.uk/social-change)

Research in partnership with:



*Cover photo credit: Tess Seymour,  
Oasis Cardiff*

# Introduction

Advocacy, lobbying, campaigning and influencing are essential tools in the effort to tackle inequality and injustice. Small charities have a distinctive role to play in promoting and informing social change<sup>1</sup>, with an agility and a direct relationship with people at the sharp end of poverty, violence and discrimination that can be harder to achieve in larger organisations. This IVAR study builds on existing research, drawing on the experience of 11 organisations to explore the role and contribution of small charities in more depth. It asks how and why small charities are challenging, shaping and changing policy, practice and attitudes. It discusses the challenges and opportunities that they face in doing so.

Our aim is to inspire small charities involved in or considering social change work by sharing the experience of others. We spoke to 11 organisations from four fields: criminal justice; homelessness; migration; and violence against women and girls. These case study organisations had annual incomes between £50k and just over £1m. We are incredibly grateful for the rich and open insights that were shared with us, which are summarised below.

For further  
reading see  
full report  
p11–14

## Why are small charities working for social change?

There are various 'triggers' that lead small organisations to engage in social change work:

- The desire to share the weight of evidence accumulated over years of service delivery
- Increasing recognition that the barriers that they encounter cannot be overcome only through service delivery
- Findings from research they have carried out
- The development of a successful new approach that they want to share
- The availability of funding
- New policy opportunities or challenges
- A lack of infrastructure to meet the needs of the people they are supporting
- Changes in public attitudes

There are also a number of contextual challenges that affect the social change work these organisations do:

- **Political context:** Events like Brexit have drawn down resource and attention from other issues, as well as having a particular impact on, for example, migrant organisations now looking at how to support EU citizens living in the UK.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ivar.org.uk/voluntary-organisations-social-change/>; Sheila McKechnie Foundation, 2018, *Social Power. How civil society can 'Play Big' and truly create change*; Baker, L., Dayson, C., Rees, J., 2018. *The value of small. In-depth research into the distinctive contribution, value and experiences of small and medium-sized charities in England and Wales*. Commissioned by Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales.

- **Social movements:** These can create a fertile environment in which to operate, but there have been times when such movements have created challenges. For example, one organisation working on issues related to violence against women and girls remarked that: *'At the moment there's a narrative that is: "women are ok, women talk about their problems but the real problem is with men's health". That's a challenging narrative to overcome because it's very hard to talk about it without the risk of sounding like you don't care about men's health'.*
- **Working in contentious spaces:** Certain fields were described as more 'popular' or 'unpopular', which had clear implications for the tools that organisations used and their likelihood of success.
- **Threats to the independence of the sector:** Receiving public money can mean greater scrutiny. This did not appear to prevent our case study organisations from engaging in social change activity entirely. However, some took the decision not to seek or accept funding from government.

For further  
reading see  
full report  
p15–19

## What changes can small charities influence?

- **Improving individuals' access to services,** so that they get the right support when they need it
- **Empowering individuals with direct experience of the issues** to have the confidence and skill to make their own voices heard
- **Influencing the introduction or revision of policies and legislation** to reflect and respond to the nuance, detail and complexity of the issues
- **Ensuring adherence to existing government guidelines** that have previously been inconsistently applied
- **Introducing or revising practices** after being piloted and modelled by small charities
- **Encouraging a more informed public narrative,** based on facts and real stories rather than rumours

# How do they do it?

## Tools



### **Gathering evidence to inform practice and policy.**

Often this comes from the experience of front-line one-to-one advocacy and other forms of service delivery over the year, and the patterns that become apparent.



### **Offering training and consultancy to practitioners.**

Building trusting relationships is important. West Yorkshire Community Chaplaincy Project (WYCCP), for example, said that the trust it had built up with individuals from the police and the NHS meant that those organisations were now coming to WYCCP for advice and help.



**PR and promotional activities.** Disseminating and promoting their work is an important activity, especially for those who are developing new ways of working or carrying out research.



**Partnerships, networks and alliances.** These might be for mutual support, to strengthen voice, or to bring multiple voices into policy design. For example, The Refugee Council partnered with Asylum Support Appeals Project (ASAP) because *'ASAP has more immediate ready access to the client base, for case studies and so on. Although we can do that, we don't have direct contact'*.



**Influencing policy.** Engaging with local and national decision makers was seen as hugely important, with an emphasis on building relationships over time.



**Using arts and storytelling.** Creative tools can make sensitive and complex issues more accessible and understandable to people across different cultures and backgrounds. For example, Agenda's #Thisismystory campaign enables women to tell their stories in their own words, whenever they are ready to do so.



**Supporting the conversation.** Small, consistent actions, such as commenting on policy developments on social media, were sometimes just as effective as drafting a policy briefing or launching a public campaign.





*Photo credit: Switchback*

## *Working inside and outside the system*

Our case study organisations had thought carefully about whether they would be most effective working to influence change from inside or outside the system. For most of our organisations, 'the system' is a shorthand for public legislation, policies and structures that affect the lives of the people they serve and represent. Many placed great emphasis on building relationships with key people *within* the system, often over many years, in order to create confidence with those they aim to influence. In contrast, 'outsider' strategies are more public focused and combative by nature – with the aim of, for example, raising the temperature on an issue through a public campaign or challenging decisions and practices through litigation.

## *The voices of people with direct experience*

Our case study organisations demonstrated determination that the voices of the people they served or represented should be heard in any strategy to promote social change. For them, effective empowerment means:

- **Value:** Giving people with direct experience the opportunity to speak for themselves is powerful – for them, for those with similar experiences and for policy makers.
- **Variety:** There is a range of ways in which this can be achieved, from individuals with direct experience taking a lead to an organisation speaking on their behalf. Multiple factors – for example, context, timing and available resource – will dictate these choices.
- **Diversity:** Careful attention and creativity are needed to ensure that a variety of voices are heard.
- **Support:** Enabling people to represent themselves needs to be backed up with training and support. It may take time before they are ready – and some may never wish to do this.
- **Duty of care:** Organisations and those they are working with need to think carefully about whether and when it is, or is not, appropriate for people with direct experience to be in the spotlight. It may risk undue exposure, even re-traumatisation.
- **Moving on:** Organisations need to allow those who they are supporting to speak out to step back if they wish to, and to be given the support they need to do so – otherwise they can become trapped in the role of spokesperson for people with experience when they are ready to move on.





*Photo credit: Justlife*



# The challenges of limited resources

By definition, small charities have limited resources. Those who have managed to survive the recession and 10 years of austerity have found a range of tactics to make the best use out of their available resources – human and financial – but also continue to make difficult choices about where and when to focus their efforts:

- **Remain small or scale up?** Often, organisations felt that if they only had more resources, they could do more. Some of them had made the decision to scale up, however others preferred to stay small – often feeling that their ability to be *'flexible and responsive'* and *'close to the issues'* would be difficult to maintain if they were to grow beyond a certain point.
- **Risk to individuals.** Doing this work is hard. It often requires vast amounts of emotional reserves, being ready to celebrate progress and wins, but also to deal with the knocks and backward steps in progress. This is particularly the case for small organisations. *'Emotional risk I hold in myself. Because it's just me, I feel more responsibility if it goes wrong. In larger organisations, the consequences can be spread'*. Leaders need more spaces where they can come together to support each other.
- **Funding.** Accessing funding for social change work was a real challenge, some thought that funders preferred front-line services where they could see a direct link to outcomes and impact; others found it difficult to work out whether social change work would be eligible for particular funding or not. For organisations working in more contested spaces, donations were a crucial income stream. Our organisations also found flexible, core funding particularly valuable, enabling a more dynamic and emergent approach.

There are positive sides to resourcing social change, too. For many people – whether they be leaders, individuals with direct personal experience, long-standing campaigners or all of these – their role is rarely 'just a job'. Individually and collectively, they see themselves as advocates for the cause. Many organisations talked about the renewed energy and purpose that social change work had brought to their front-line service delivery.

## What can we learn?

We found plenty of evidence that small organisations can have significant ‘clout’. Sometimes this is because of their focus and expertise and sometimes because of how being small enables them to work. We have seen that they can influence change, from individual to government level. They can work alongside practitioners to influence their work, provide evidence to support a campaign, bring the voices of people with direct experience to the fore.

In our full report, we set out what we learnt about how small organisations engaging in social change work can strengthen their contribution, and how others can support them. Five of the key points were:

- **Promoting social change is a valid and valuable part of small charities’ work.** Small charities’ front-line work gives them legitimacy in speaking up. The evidence and experience they bring comes with the power of personal experience and knowledge. And both front-line staff and the people they serve often find it very motivating to know that the organisation has a voice and can make a difference in the outside world.
- **Social change work is not an add-on and needs to be resourced.** Funders concerned with making a lasting difference need to recognise that, for small organisations, front-line service delivery and social change work can’t be separated – and they both need to be resourced. One way of doing this is for funders to explicitly say they fund social change work, and to include a dedicated budget line in their application forms.
- **There are many different ways to promote social change.** It can be as small as retweeting commentaries and research through modelling new ways of working to launching a major public campaign. Every contribution has the potential to create better policy, practice and services.
- **People with direct experience need to be empowered to raise their voices and be heard.** There are many ways in which people with direct experience can drive, develop or support social change work. The priority must be for individuals to be able to make an informed choice about how and how far they want to engage with this work, and have the support they need to stay safe.
- **Larger charities and organisations providing training, resources and peer support need to recognise the value of small charities.** They bring people to the table who would not otherwise be heard and provide evidence of how policies are playing out on the ground. They may be very focused in specialist areas and thus have niche expertise.

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# The 11 case study organisations

## *Criminal justice*

- **Switchback:** works in London with young men aged 18-30 on release from prison ('Trainees'), providing one-to-one support through-the-gate and in-job training.
- **Unlock:** was set up to support individuals with a criminal record who face barriers as a result of their convictions, particularly in employment.
- **West Yorkshire Community Chaplaincy Project (WYCCP):** provides through-the-gate support for offenders released from Leeds Prison, helping them with practical matters such as housing and banking and offering emotional support to them and their families.

## *Homelessness*

- **Elmbridge Rentstart:** based in Surrey, helps homeless and vulnerably housed people to access quality housing and gain work, training or education. They support their clients to live successfully in the private rented sector, offering personalised advice and support.
- **Groundswell:** works with people experiencing homelessness around the UK to be involved in delivering solutions to homelessness – including peer research, client involvement and tackling associated health inequalities.
- **Justlife:** works mainly in Manchester and Brighton, and uses targeted, assertive activities to focus on people in unsupported temporary accommodation, particularly those hidden from the public eye.

## *Migration*

- **Asylum Support Appeals Project (ASAP):** aims to reduce destitution among asylum seekers by protecting their legal rights to food and shelter.
- **Europaia:** provides information, advice, guidance and advocacy work for the European expatriate community in Greater Manchester.
- **Oasis Cardiff:** provides a welcoming space for asylum seekers and refugees and delivers a range of projects to help them integrate into life in Cardiff.

## *Violence against women and girls*

- **Against Violence and Abuse (AVA):** is committed to ending gender-based violence and abuse across the UK by supporting survivors and challenging social attitudes.
- **Agenda:** the alliance for women and girls at risk, works to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence.



To read the full report and the 11  
case studies, visit [www.ivar.org.uk/  
social-change](http://www.ivar.org.uk/social-change)

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