

Switchback

Case study: Small charities and social change
Field: Criminal justice

At a glance

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; they have 15 full- and part-time staff. Funding is a mix of donations, legacies and investments, and annual income is just over £500,000.

Focus of the case study

This case study looks at the organisation's transition from being solely focused on delivering services to getting involved in influencing criminal justice policy and practice.



What does advocacy mean for them?

The motivation for moving into influencing from their primary role of support was twofold: a recognition that the barriers to their Trainees were beyond what Switchback could tackle within their service provision work, and a desire to share what they had learnt through 10 years of service delivery.

Their core activities are: one-to-one support to build stability across all areas of life and reduce reoffending; providing a platform for Trainees to talk about their experiences and propose their solutions for change; influencing policy and practice; and gathering and feeding in evidence about individuals' experiences of the criminal justice system and how it can be improved. During the case study, Switchback was going through the process of honing where they wanted to focus their social change efforts.

Reoffending rates are very high among young men. The primary interest of probation services is to stop them from reoffending, *'telling them what they shouldn't be doing, not what they can do'*. And although there were good schemes inside the prisons, there was nothing to join up the dots after release. Young men can find it difficult to ask for help, but having a trusted ally both sides of the prison gate has dramatically reduced reoffending among Switchback Trainees.

Trainees themselves inform and carry out influencing work. They have written and posed questions for the Prisons Minister at an event hosted by Switchback, and acted as spokespeople on the issues to the media and others: *'None of you have been through the criminal justice system, so your information is no good because you haven't been through it . . . You can say you can understand it, but you can't'*. (Trainee) Current and previous Trainees make up the Experts by Experience (EbE) Board, which informs the organisation's strategy and provides support for new Trainees. It is hoped that this Board will in the future be represented on the main board.

One of the organisation's most significant contributions in its first year of influencing work was providing oral evidence to the Justice Select Committee in Parliament on the failings of the probation system, including inconsistencies in release dates for individuals due for release on tag (Home Detention Curfew). Switchback and other contributors to this process were successful in called-for changes being agreed, and they have since observed that these individuals are now more often being released on time, while a broader consensus has been reached to scrap and replace the current probation model.

What's worked?

The influencing work was possible because Switchback examined their own data and the experience of staff and Trainees. Reviewing their work over the last eight or nine years allowed them to put together a matrix of *'Things that were obstacles to success for young people in the system'* and also *'Things that were obstacles to small charities'* operating in the criminal justice space, e.g. access in the prisons.

Switchback was at first hesitant in asking their Trainees to talk or give evidence about their experiences because their primary focus has to be on rebuilding a life after release. However, when they spoke to Trainees, they realised that having the opportunity to tell their story in their own words was extremely important to them. Balancing the right support and environment while engaging them in these processes is something they take very seriously, particularly as many have incredibly complex needs, so they did not involve Trainees who were in the early stages of receiving support.

When they first started their influencing work, Switchback assumed that *'we would not have much potential for influence and sway on a more national level, because of our size'*, but the Prisons Minister Q&A proved otherwise. An invitation followed to give evidence to an enquiry being led by the Justice Committee, *'So in the end we ended up spending more of that part of the year forging relationships and contributing towards more national policy level work than on the prison level'*. The evidence they gave on the inconsistencies and failings in practice within the probation system was heavily quoted in the Committee's final report which helped push the government to renationalise probation. Since then the Home Detention Curfew (HDC) policy has also changed and Switchback has seen improvements in adherence to HDC release dates. To Switchback, although they appreciated this was not solely their doing, this was evidence of the fact that, *'The strength of your policy and influencing is only as good as what it's based on ... our direct experience of working with young people'*.

Switchback feels that working within existing power structures and building good relationships with decision makers within the prison system has given them more of a voice. Spreading their focus between direct service delivery and influencing work has also had some unexpected benefits. For example, raising the profile of the work has brought a new energy to the organisation as a whole, and a positive effect on working practices more generally. They now feel confident opening themselves up to the press, and their higher profile has attracted individuals to the Board who can contribute to their influencing work.

Challenges/what we've learnt?

Influencing for, with and by beneficiaries can be an extremely empowering opportunity for individuals to build new skills and access new networks, and it can help ensure that the solutions sought directly reflect the experiences of young adult prison-leavers. But Switchback has found that the service-user engagement is more nuanced than some might expect:

'Ideally I'd love our EbE board to manage itself, to share the Chairing, for them to come up with the agenda and for them to have a far deeper role in what the board does and how it's integrated into the organisation. But jumping straight into that is ... I don't know how you would even do it or if it's sensible. So we're trying to gradually introduce that over time'.



Switchback is also very conscious that Trainees who are encouraged to take part in influencing work should not feel that their goodwill is being exploited – or that they 'owe' it to the organisation. They need to feel that this is *'an opportunity for them to influence positive change for other people in the system, grow their networks, learn and experience new things'.*

As Switchback is a small organisation, all staff are involved in all elements of its work by degrees – *'some things that are sticky and unresolved may resolve themselves'* – and having inbuilt

opportunities to step back from day-to-day operations and observe the bigger picture has also improved their practice.

Switchback realised that, without challenging some of the many barriers in its way, it could no longer do delivery work successfully. Since then, the organisation has been on a gradual journey from piloting a few different approaches to influencing work to now giving equal weight, in a [2019-21 Strategic Plan](#), to both service provision and influencing work. To achieve a successful transition, all the organisation's stakeholders – service users, delivery staff, trustees – have played, and continue to play, an integral part. They have found that this move has had an unintended, positive impact on the organisation, giving it a new energy.

Switchback felt that lobbying for change within the prisons could jeopardise their relationships with the prisons, without which they would not be able to do the work that they do, but so far it has not posed a significant risk. The key seems to be building good relationships beforehand. *'I think that there is quite a wide spectrum within that to still be critical and to still challenge practices and to still call them out when they're wrong, but doing that in a way that is not antagonising people'.*

This is the case study of one of 11 organisations we spoke to 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.

The case studies are part of IVAR's study *Small Charities and Social Change*, which 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.

The report and case studies can be found here
www.ivar.org.uk/social-change.