

West Yorkshire Community Chaplaincy Project

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

At a glance

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. Annual income is just under £300,000 and they employ five staff (combination of full- and part-time), and up to 25 volunteers. They are funded by trusts and foundations, and the NHS.

Focus of the case study

This case study looks at how WYCCP uses its one-to-one advocacy support for individuals to empower them to move towards living an independent life. They also aim to influence professional practice within the criminal justice system in Leeds.

What does advocacy mean for them?

Prison chaplaincy traditionally offers pastoral support to prisoners while they are inside. WYCCP was set up to meet the need for more support for prisoners going back into the community.

WYCCP's advocacy role has grown through their key activities and has three key elements:

1. **One-to-one support for individuals to help them reintegrate into society:** This starts about three months before a prisoner's release date, and includes practical advice on matters like housing and financial support. Part of this means making individuals aware of their rights to access certain services, and also advocating for them by speaking up on their behalf to the relevant bodies to help them gain access to these services. WYCCP's approach, which is tailored

to the individual, often results in offenders who have been in and out of prison in the past successfully finishing a licence without reoffending for the first time.¹

2. **Influencing practice:** The trust built up with individuals by WYCCP means that other agencies, such as the police and NHS, approach them for help. As one worker said: 'A PCO [Police Community Support Officer] *phoned me up and said, "Do you want to come with me [on prison visit]? Because if he sees you, he's more likely to talk to you"*'. This in turn allows closer working with those agencies and provides a chance to influence professional practice. WYCCP has also tried to encourage more multi-agency collaboration, organising and Chairing multi-agency meetings in relation to specific recurring issues.
3. **Working in groups and networks:** In the early days, there was no Criminal Justice Network for organisations in the region working on criminal justice issues. On arrival in post, the present Director – who has a background in overseeing strategic networks – set up what is now known as the Crime Reduction Network, a forum for sharing best practice and looking at participants' work within the wider criminal justice context in West Yorkshire.

What's worked?

'We don't do anything that we don't think is the right thing for our service users. We work with them for as long as they want us to. I think our remit is very clear in that as far as we're able to help people who are leaving prison ... we're just there to support people in whatever way we can. We don't dress that up'.

That support is described by WYCCP as 'empowering' and 'developing independence'. Their case-by-case approach means that they can also work with individuals who may not meet other agencies' criteria.

The relationship starts in prison, which can be difficult: a prisoner may have been let down by agency workers in the past: *'they don't have a lot of trust, they don't have a lot of faith in agency workers. So our first point is to try and prove to them that we're worth their time and effort'.*

Support is tailored to each prisoner's needs and capabilities, providing them with as little or as much as deemed appropriate – no time-limit is placed on the relationship. This includes judging the extent to which WYCCP will advocate on an individual's behalf or encourage them to advocate for themselves and involves a constant dialogue between the prisoner and the Resettlement Worker. Emotional support can be as important as practical support, and knowing that a worker is 'a person of trust who will ring them when they say they will' is vital. Individuals are

¹ If an individual is sentenced to more than [12 months in prison, but less than four years](#), they may be released early on licence. 'Whilst you are on licence, there are rules you must follow. How long these rules apply for depends on the length of your sentence. If you break the rules, you'll have to go back to prison (be recalled).' – taken from <https://hub.unlock.org.uk/knowledgebase/licence-conditions/>

encouraged to recognise and take credit for their own progress and actions: *'Our hope is that eventually we can say that, "Do you know what, you're fine now, you're doing everything for yourself"'*.

Staff assess initial support needs and progress using a grading system referred to as 'spider-assessments', which allows them to monitor and document the *'incremental'* changes they see in the individuals they work with: *'You can see, you can see guys that come out of prison with no self-esteem and no confidence ... and then you can see suddenly, you know, the light starts coming back in the back of their eyes'*.

This approach is time-consuming, but the workers are very ably supported by a pool of around 25 well-trained volunteers who give up to three hours of their time a week. It allows WYCCP to sustain their commitment to intensive working with a small number of individuals, being flexible and responsive to service users' needs, and adapting in the face of a constantly changing external environment.

Challenges/what we've learnt?

Staff at WYCCP are very aware that providing one-to-one unlimited support can encourage prisoners – particularly those with complex, higher-level needs – to become over-dependent on them: *'I think the aspect of stepping away ... that's the hard part'*. The approach can affect the attitude and behaviour of other agencies as well. For example, large organisations may be contracted to work with individuals for a fixed amount of time, and end up passing their cases on to WYCCP but without any attached resource. It can also prevent other agencies from stepping in when they should. In one case, *'it was a matter of stepping back in order to create a vacuum in order for [the agency] to go [in]'*.

Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, offenders can affect how WYCCP staff are able to work. In the short term, when accompanying a service user to the housing office, or probation, *'just physically seeing you as a professional sitting with that person changes quite immediately how they [are]treated and the service that they're getting'*. However, this can make shifting attitudes and professional practice in the longer term more challenging.

WYCCP is very conscious of striking a balance between challenging bad practice and jeopardising vital relationships: *'you've got to remain professional and got to work well with other agencies for them to keep referring'*. Working in prison *'is very tricky ... we are treading such a fine line because we are an invited guest into the prison'*. WYCCP can often recommend improvements to practice on a case-by-case basis, but no more. Discussions about how to respond to observed practice in their interactions with public agencies is a standing item at WYCCP team meetings, both to ensure consistency of approach and to develop their strategy for challenging attitudes and policy. Another barrier they face is that the infrastructure is simply not in place to enable service users' needs to be adequately met on release.

Acceptance on to different forums, and juggling their resources to make the time to attend, continues to be challenging. Although they have made progress, the time required to do so means less time for the Director to spend on fundraising. It comes with the support of the board, however, not only in recognition of the expertise and knowledge the organisation has to offer but also with the aim of raising the profile of WYCCP's work.

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.