

CONSULTATION RESPONSE: NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY JUSTICE – REVIEW

This paper was submitted in August 2026 in response to the Scottish Government's consultation [National Strategy for Community Justice: review consultation](#).

ABOUT CYRENIANS

Cyrenians is an organisation dedicated to tackling the causes and consequences of homelessness through learning from lived experience; delivering targeted services which focus on prevention, early intervention and support into a home; and by influencing changes in legislation and policy. We deliver services across Edinburgh, Falkirk and the Lothians.

As an organisation focused on preventing homelessness, we know the important role that community justice can play in diverting people away from prison, rehabilitating people and supporting them to settle in their communities, find housing, employment and engage in meaningful activities.

Many of our services support people with experience of the justice system, and we deliver specific community justice services in collaboration with local authorities, including hosting people on Community Payback Orders and delivering employability support. As part of our response to the consultation, we ran five evidence sessions with those services, and the response is informed by what is currently happening on the ground.

Given the nature of our organisation and the services that we offer, we have chosen to only respond to those aims and priority actions that have the most impact on our clients and services.

OVERVIEW OF STRATEGY

1. How would you rate the clarity and accessibility of the strategy?

Response options: Very unclear, Quite unclear, Neither clear nor unclear, **Quite clear**, Very clear.

While the strategy is relatively clear, it can be confusing that it is spread over several separate documents, including the strategy itself, the performance framework and the delivery plan. This can make it harder for stakeholders to engage meaningfully with the strategy and ensure alignment.

2. To what extent do you agree/disagree that the strategy provides sufficient information on the following aspects of community justice?

Response options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly agree.

- Explaining what is meant by "community justice": **Agree**
- The evidence that supports the role of community justice within the justice system: **Neutral**
- The strategic context, including interaction with other relevant strategies: **Strongly agree**
- How the strategy is delivered: **Neutral**
- How lived experience informs priorities and delivery: **Disagree**
- The importance of supporting victims of crime: **Neutral**
- Examples of good practice from local Community Justice Partnerships: **Disagree**

Please explain your response further:

We believe the strategy could be clearer on how lived experience informs priorities and delivery and how meaningful participation is ensured. The strategy also does not contain clear examples of good practice from local Community Justice Partnerships or provide adequate clarity around delivery at a local level, or the resources that are required to support delivery, monitoring or accountability.

Although these themes are touched upon in supporting documents (such as the performance framework and delivery plan), it would be beneficial if these points were more thoroughly addressed in the strategy itself. Similarly, the strategy does not sufficiently outline how stronger data, including longitudinal data on reoffending and other social outcomes, can help evidence the long-term impact of community justice. In addition, we feel that there should be a recognition of community justice as a whole systems approach that encourages joined up working across multiple sectors such as health, housing, policing, and family support to name a few.

Overall, the strategy leans towards being very systems, or policy, driven. A change towards more human rights and strengths-based language would be welcomed.

AIMS AND PRIORITY ACTIONS

3.1 To what extent do you agree or disagree that, taken together, the four national aims capture the most important aspects of community justice?

Response options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, **Agree**, Strongly agree

3.2 Of the four aims, are there any that you consider to be either particularly important, or unimportant, with regard to capturing the most important aspects of community justice?

The four aims are all important and capture different aspects of community justice. Elements of each aim are relevant to the work we deliver and to ensure that our clients have the best opportunities available to them.

We don't see a need to drastically change or remove any of the current aims, however national aim 1 could potentially be refined to mention prevention as well as diversion and intervention to highlight that there are always opportunities to step in earlier. Similarly, aim 4 could name wider cross-sector partnerships, in addition to community justice partners, to highlight how the strategy fits with other portfolios and better promote collaboration.

Our main concern with the national aims – and the strategy in general – is not the specific aims and priority actions, but whether these are being implemented consistently across the country. There is also a risk that some aims might get deprioritised as funding becomes an issue, for example more upstream and preventative work as mentioned in Aim 1, as budgets are targeted at more acute pressures – despite the potential for upstream work to save money in the long run.

Further, our staff spoke of the current landscape being a postcode lottery and the third sector being expected to achieve more with the same – or reduced – budgets, while plugging significant gaps in statutory service provision.

Our consultation response highlights the unique role the third sector can play in community justice, supporting individuals and strengthening community integration. While it is positive that the third sector is mentioned explicitly in some priority actions, there is need for more consistent collaboration and funding to achieve this and recognise the third sector as a key strategic partner.

4. How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 1 (Optimise the use of diversion and intervention at the earliest opportunity)?

Response options: Not at all useful, Not very useful, Neutral, Quite useful, Very useful

- Enhance intervention at the earliest opportunity by ensuring greater consistency, confidence in and awareness of services which support the use of direct measures and diversion from prosecution: **Very useful**
- Improve the identification of underlying needs and the delivery of support following arrest by ensuring the provision of person-centred care within police custody and building upon referral opportunities to services including substance use and mental health services: **Very useful**

Please explain your response further:

The feedback we received around the first two priority actions was largely positive, with our staff in one local authority reporting that they receive an increasing stream of referrals to their diversionary employability programmes, highlighting that alternatives to custodial sentences are being utilised.

As a form of diversion, our staff have found these services to be very successful. The team will work with individuals for, usually, a period of three months, before the client returns to the court. This intervention has demonstrated a high success rate for breaking the cycle of offending, with it being rare for clients to require further interaction with our services.

Staff attributed the success of this project to several factors, including the opportunity it presents for individuals to receive support from appropriate services who can work collaboratively with each other to meet their needs. By working alongside bail workers and other partners, we can address someone's needs, whilst simultaneously building their confidence and skills. This ensures they are properly equipped to enter employment and avoid further involvement with the justice system.

A recurring theme for priority action 2, was the need for an increase in mediation services within police custody (and in the justice system more widely, including prisons). For young people especially, utilising mediation to repair relationships with families or carers is a vital preventative route to avoid further offending as well as reducing homelessness risk. It offers the opportunity to assess the needs of the family as a whole and deliver targeted support to address the underlying root causes for offending at their source. Furthermore, as part of this approach we must work to educate justice services, employers, and the public that individuals may be "distressed, not disruptive".

Despite the increase they have seen in referrals, staff teams felt that diversionary options were still underutilised and that judges should be making greater use of opportunities to divert people away from custody and towards appropriate support instead. This ties into priority action 1, and the importance of consistency, confidence and awareness of diversion.

Finally, there are significant concerns that these vital third-sector services are at risk of being brought "in-house" by local authorities in the future as tighter budgets result in certain national aims being deprioritised. This would dismantle the specialised, agile networks that can make them so effective.

5. How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 2 (Ensure that robust and high quality community interventions and public protection arrangements are consistently in place across Scotland)?

Response options: Not at all useful, Not very useful, Neutral, Quite useful, Very useful

3. Support the use of robust alternatives to remand by ensuring high quality bail services are consistently available and delivered effectively: **Neutral**
4. Strengthen options for safe and supported management in the community by increasing and widening the use of electronic monitoring technologies: **Neutral**
5. Ensure that those given community sentences are supervised and supported appropriately to protect the public, promote desistance from offending and enable rehabilitation by delivering high quality, consistently available, trauma-informed services and programmes: **Very useful**
6. Ensure restorative justice is available across Scotland to all those who wish to access it by promoting and supporting the appropriate and safe provision of available services: **Neutral**

Please explain your response further:

For this question, we have specifically focused on priority action 5 as it relates to our experience of supporting those given Community Payback Orders through various community-based projects.

When discussing the effectiveness of Community Payback Orders, the most consistent feedback we received centred on the profound impact these projects have on both the participants and the wider local communities.

Feedback from project participants highlights that the empathetic support from staff and our consistently trauma-informed approach are highly beneficial, emphasising the importance of priority action 5. This creates a lasting positive impact, often resulting in individuals returning to the services as staff, volunteers or visitors years after their community sentence has concluded.

This lasting engagement is partly due to the relationship-based approach our services take when working with those serving community sentences which can have the added benefit of reducing social isolation and improving mental health. Rather than treating placements as punitive, we focus on genuine engagement and skill-building. The projects teach people the skills they might need to pursue a career in relevant fields, alongside transferable employability skills such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving and time management. Those involved in the projects will participate in meaningful activities that, where possible, will be tailored to their interests or where they already demonstrate skills that can be built upon.

The sense of ownership that clients have over these projects, combined with the positive impact that they see these spaces provide, gives them a sense of pride. Furthermore, the relative anonymity of these projects – where members of the public frequently stop to chat and admire the work without necessarily knowing if individuals are on a CPO – helps build their confidence. This pride often sees them returning, either by themselves or with family members, to check in on or show the work they contributed to.

Staff attribute their ability to safely and effectively facilitate this empowering environment to the successful strong partnership working that they have with unpaid work teams and justice social workers in their local authorities. They fed back that local authority staff put great care into ensuring that they are not referring people who may be unsuitable. This includes making sure that the environment is appropriate for the type of charges they may have, conducting thorough risk assessments, and having open lines of communications with the staff in our services to address any uncertainties. These successful partnerships ensure that our frontline teams feel equipped and supported to safely manage any potential risks. Without these positive, transparent relationships, it would be incredibly challenging for us to confidently carry out the work we do. This feedback emphasises the role of partnerships and information sharing in achieving national aim 2.

Unfortunately, some of this good practice and the resulting positive impact is undermined by the time it takes for cases to progress through the justice system due to backlogs in the courts. Examples were given of people being near the end of their Community Payback Orders feeling very positive about moving on with their lives and being able to start fresh, only for old charges to finally make their way through the system and result in more hours being added to their sentence. The effect this has on someone's self-confidence and motivation can be incredibly damaging, with clients left wondering "what's the point" when they are unable to fully move on from their past. To the general public or those who know the individual, it appears as if they haven't learnt anything from past mistakes, and the addition of further hours can be incorrectly interpreted as a sign that the individual has continued to offend.

6. How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 3 (Ensure that services are accessible and available to address the needs of individuals accused or convicted of an offence)?

Response options: Not at all useful, Not very useful, Neutral, Quite useful, Very useful

7. Enhance individuals' access to health and social care and continuity of care following release from prison by improving the sharing of information and partnership-working between relevant partners: **Very useful**
8. Ensure that the housing needs of individuals in prison are addressed consistently and at an early stage by fully implementing and embedding the Sustainable Housing on Release for Everyone (SHORE) standards across all local authority areas: **Very useful**
9. Enhance individual's life skills and readiness for employment by ensuring increased access to employability support through effective education, learning, training, career services and relevant benefit services: **Very useful**
10. Enhance community integration and support by increasing and promoting greater use of voluntary throughcare and third sector services: **Very useful**

Please explain your response further:

We believe all four priority actions are vital to achieving national aim 3, and our response shows how interlinked they are. Access to health and social care services and suitable housing are all important foundations for someone to make use of employability services and training and, eventually, get ready to move into work, which in turn supports community integration in the long run. And, at the same time, blockages in one system – e.g. housing – can act as a barrier to achieve the remaining priority actions.

While we indirectly support clients to access GPs and recovery services, we have focused on priority actions 8-10 for this question.

Priority Action 8:

Unfortunately, the universal feedback we received around the SHORE standards is that access to suitable, stable accommodation remains a critical issue.

Whilst the Scottish housing sector has faced long-standing pressures, the impact on those leaving custody has been severely exacerbated by the ongoing housing emergency. Unfortunately, knowledge across other sectors regarding housing availability has been slow to catch up with on-the-ground realities.

As a result, unrealistic expectations are being placed on local authorities, leaving many liberated individuals with no option but to reside in unsuitable temporary flats or hostel-style accommodation.

The lack of a permanent home not only hinders efforts to break the cycle of reoffending, but also severely impairs someone's ability to integrate into a community or secure employment. Our teams work with people placed in hostel accommodation and find that staff must spend significant time helping them bid for housing or apply for jobs because they lack internet access. This digital exclusion acts as a massive barrier to their progression and independence, especially for those who are not permitted to use a computer unsupervised.

Furthermore, the nature of temporary accommodation can act as a direct barrier to finding gainful employment. Rent costs can quickly become unaffordable if an occupant chooses to come off Universal Credit, meaning individuals often turn down employment altogether – or request reduced working hours to keep their income below certain thresholds – simply to avoid eviction.

Because social housing options are so limited, we must explore alternative approaches. To this end, mediation can be incredibly effective. Working with individuals and their families or partners to mend broken relationships can help ensure that, where appropriate, the family home remains a viable accommodation option upon release.

Rather than leaving individuals isolated, this approach ensures they have an immediate, established support network they can rely on from day one. However, for mediation to successfully prevent homelessness and deter reoffending, it must be accompanied by a comprehensive package of wraparound support designed to address the complex, underlying needs of the family as a whole.

This approach to repairing or maintaining relationships is particularly vital for young people. However, where returning to the family home is not a safe or viable option, shared, supported accommodation should be explored so they are not transitioning from a facility where they receive wraparound support to nothing.

Priority Action 9:

The need for comprehensive support extends directly into employability, which is a major concern for those with convictions. Many of the clients we work with express deep anxiety that they may never be able to work again. Our teams offer practical assistance to combat this; developing CVs, writing disclosure letters to open dialogue with prospective employers, assisting with budgeting (particularly regarding the difficult transition off Universal Credit, interview expenses, or the gap before their first pay), and preparing them for interviews so they have the necessary tools and skills to thrive in a role.

Unfortunately, there are still several barriers that make achieving priority action 9 difficult. Although various services exist to assist with employability, some of these have a sharp cliff edge when support must stop, leaving people feeling stranded with nowhere to turn to for help.

In addition to this, uncertainty surrounding GDPR and how convictions are disclosed, combined with recent changes to the operation of the PVG scheme, has resulted in renewed caution from employers.

Staff who deliver employability support shared that there is often “no rhyme or reason” to whether someone is barred from the PVG scheme, with there often being no obvious connection to their offence. It seems that a combination of increased caution from employers following the recent changes to PVG (meaning that roles which did not previously require PVGs are asking for them, e.g. night cleaner or warehouse worker), combined with lack of transparency about whether someone is or isn't barred from the PVG scheme, is causing confusion and frustration for people we support as well as our staff teams. Staff shared that people leaving prison would previously have been told whether or not they were barred from the scheme, whereas this is no longer the case.

The uncertainty surrounding these processes inevitably impacts on our own capacity, as staff have to spend an increasing amount of time per case assisting people with navigating these barriers and managing the resulting anxiety it causes for our clients. Because of this,

already stretched resources are diverted away from being able to directly help people with suitable training, building their skills, and progressing them into employment.

Priority Action 10:

As identified in priority action 10, community integration fundamentally relies upon the work of the third sector. Whilst it is a positive that this work is being recognised within the priority actions, we have real concerns about the nature of how services are funded; the “postcode lottery” that exists between availability of services in different local authorities; and the inherent risk of community integration being deprioritised as funding becomes an issue. Crucially, the nature of short-term funding results in many justice contracts being commissioned on an annual basis. This leads to insecurity and uncertainty for both staff and clients, as well as a sense of constantly needing to ‘reinvent the wheel’.

The third sector can often act more flexibly than statutory services (in some instances our services can be available out of hours) which helps plug gaps in support. Unfortunately, many local services that were previously relied upon to fulfil this role are disappearing or being brought in-house by local authorities, limiting their potential impact.

Fundamentally, there is a pressing need for the third sector to be recognised as a key strategic partner within the strategy, rather than an add on. The third sector’s involvement cannot be limited only to delivery, but must also play a role in the design, planning and evaluation stages of the priority actions.

Community integration needs to begin prior to release, and a major strength of having third sector organisations operating inside prisons – as with our Prison Visitor Centre Service– is the ability to build trust early on. This allows us to begin having conversations with prisoners and their families about what support is available, how they can access it, and begin the process of preparing them for the culture shock of release and re-acclimating to a changed community.

Our staff in the visitor centre fed back that because they do not wear uniforms, individuals and their families often feel more comfortable approaching them to have these informal conversations and ask questions about their housing situation or where to get assistance. This allows our staff to provide practical advice and ensure the prisoner is equipped with the knowledge and skills they need immediately following from liberation. Crucially, the presence of third sector staff can also provide much-needed consistency and a reliable point of contact or source of information in an environment where staff turnover can be high.

This consistency is equally important when people return to the community. One of our services works with people released after long-term sentences. They offer what we call “active citizenship support”, beginning prior to release through UDRs to introduce someone to what is available in the community. This includes assisting with registering

with a GP or library, helping them to find out who their local MP/MSP is, and showing them around the local area so they can see what is on offer and begin to have a sense of belonging.

Post-release, the involvement of the third sector can be crucial for navigating initial challenges that people may face, particularly over weekend periods when statutory services cannot always be accessed. As an example, this service runs Tuesday-Saturday specifically to assist those who have recently completed a long-term sentence, ensuring they are not left isolated and vulnerable during the critical weekend transition.

7. How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 4 (Strengthen the leadership, engagement, and partnership working of local and national community justice partners)?

Response options: Not at all useful, Not very useful, Neutral, Quite useful, Very useful

11. Deliver improved community justice outcomes by ensuring that effective leadership and governance arrangements are in place and working well, collaborating with partners and planning strategically: **Very useful**
12. Enhance partnership planning and implementation by ensuring the voices of victims of crime, survivors, those with lived experience and their families are effectively incorporated and embedded: **Very useful**
13. Support integration and reduce stigma by ensuring the community and workforce have an improved understanding of and confidence in community justice: **Very useful**

Please explain your response further:

We are pleased to see the strategy explicitly mention the role of people with lived experiences, although – as pointed out earlier – we believe this could be expanded upon and clarified in the strategy.

For national aim 4, we are focusing on priority action 13 as we believe that several of our projects are positively supporting integration and reducing stigma from the general public. Our projects that host people on CPOs can help to build a genuine understanding and confidence amongst the general public. The projects are based in public spaces, meaning that the local community can actively appreciate, and enjoy the benefits of, the work being done without the potential stigma of a "justice" label being attached.

Crucially, these environments offer a degree of anonymity for those completing CPOs. On the ground, there is no visible distinction between regular staff, community volunteers and unpaid workers. Members of the public frequenting these spaces will often stop to talk with those completing their unpaid hours about the ongoing work in the gardens, treating that person as an individual rather than as someone with a history of offending.

This integration is vital not only for addressing any concerns surrounding public perceptions, but also for combating the internalised stigma that many unpaid workers hold against themselves. By flipping the script to frame the sessions not as “community payback”, but as a chance to be involved in work that benefits their local area, individuals will take real ownership and pride in the projects. Many of them will bring their families along so they can see what they have been a part of.

Providing these positive, stigma-free environments is especially important given the severe impact that justice involvement can have on families of offenders, who often go to great lengths to conceal it. Families will stay engaged with our services despite the potential stigma precisely because we provide a safe, non-judgemental space where they can be open about the struggles they are facing.

This need for improved understanding and reduced stigma extends directly into the workforce. As noted in our response for priority action 9, recent changes to the PVG scheme have introduced significant barriers. The damage caused by employer uncertainty and competing agendas continues to undermine elements of our work, leaving individuals struggling to move forward.

Ultimately, addressing these barriers requires a fundamental change in culture. Public services (as well as employers and the public more broadly) must approach offending in a way that looks beyond behaviour to understand the underlying issues that led to a justice intervention in the first place. Fostering this level of shared understanding is essential to genuinely improving confidence in community justice and supporting sustainable integration.

8. Thinking about the role the strategy has in the planning, delivery and reporting of community justice services, do you think the current number of priority actions is too low, about right, or too high?

Response options: Too low, About right, Too high.

Please explain your response further:

None of the staff we spoke to believed that anything was notably missing or should be removed from the priority actions.

IMPACT

9. Which elements of the strategy do you find most useful relative to your interest in community justice?

Whilst all four national aims are relevant to our work, we do have specific interest and expertise in certain areas. For national aim 1, we are particularly interested in how the use of diversion can be increased and making sure that individuals get referred to appropriate services as early as possible.

For national aim 2, priority action 5 is particularly useful as it highlights the importance of high quality, trauma informed services and programmes which we know from our own work can be very effective.

As a homelessness prevention charity, national aim 3 is broadly applicable to all of our services, not just community justice programmes. When trying to break the cycle of homelessness and offending, the availability and accessibility of foundational services such as health and social care, as well as having stable and suitable housing, are vital. As mentioned, availability (or lack thereof) of these services severely impacts employability and community integration.

Finally, national aim 4 addresses the wider importance of partnership working, involvement of people with lived experience, and supporting integration through challenging stigma. All of these priorities fit with our organisational strategy and the work we deliver on the ground.

10. Which elements of the strategy do you find least useful relative to your interest in community justice?

We have less involvement in things like bail services, electronic monitoring and restorative justice but still feel these play an important role in the wider context of community justice.

LOOKING FORWARD

11. Taking into account the likely resources available over the next 5 years, what do you believe are the three main community justice priorities over the next 3-5 years?

Priority 1: A whole-systems approach that promotes stronger cross-sector partnership working to ensure coordinated responses and support for individuals involved with community justice.

Priority 2: Whole-family support that extends beyond the individual, recognising the role that family members can play in community reintegration and homelessness prevention, including consistent offers of family mediation.

Priority 3: Consistent and long-term funding for third sector organisations delivering person-centred and trauma response services, acknowledging them as key partners and stakeholders in community justice so that certain national aims are not deprioritised.

Please explain your response further:

We feel that these three priorities best reflect the feedback we have received from our services that have a direct involvement in community justice and, by extension, the feedback that they have received from the clients who benefit from these services. From an organisational standpoint, our learning has shown that these three areas could benefit from having a stronger strategic focus or being better embedded in the national strategy in order to achieve the national aims and priority actions.

12. Do you have any other comments on the National Strategy for Community Justice that were not captured in the previous questions?

We have no further comments on the national strategy.
