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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A vision for academic and third sector collaboration in (criminal) justice

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Abstract

In this article we sketch a vision that might guide academic and third sector collaboration. We do so by drawing on a project that involved collaboration with a range of stakeholders, in order to stimulate ongoing discussion about how academics and the third sector might work together to seek positive change. Our findings show that there are keenly felt challenges, but also a sense of resilient optimism. A key finding among our stakeholders was a sense that there is an absence of an overarching shared vision, which was experienced by many of our respondents as consequential. Therefore, in the spirit of constructive provocation we set out such a vision, which was collaboratively developed with our respondents: opening a dialogue, rather than providing a conclusive position.

KEYWORDS
impact, penal policy, penal reform, third sector

1 | INTRODUCTION

We find ourselves, at the time of writing, in a period of sustained reflection among third sector and academic organisations, about the state of criminal justice and their role in bringing about constructive change. In England and Wales, the prison system is at breaking point (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2023). The probation system is similarly facing foundational questions about its future (HM Chief Inspector of Probation, 2023). Questions about the ability of the criminal justice system even to begin to meet its stated obligations to victims and other stakeholders, are

pressing (see, e.g., Baird, 2022). The challenges of grappling with, and seeking to change, a criminal justice system so bound up in ongoing crisis and scandal – and even how to conceptualise such a task – remain immense (Annison & Guiney, 2023).

In this article we report on a collaborative project we have undertaken with a range of stakeholders, in order (we hope) to stimulate ongoing discussion about academic and third sector collaboration. We set out our stakeholder respondents' perceptions of context, challenges and opportunities. We engaged with many key stakeholders within the academic-third sector community. We make no claims to universality: inevitably, some of the groups we engaged with reflected our areas of specific interest or prior collaborative focus. We found that there are keenly felt challenges, but also a sense of resilient optimism.

A key finding was that there is an absence of an overarching shared vision, among those in the academic and third sector, which was experienced by many of our respondents as consequential. Indeed, McAra (2016) has argued that: 'a shared vision is a prerequisite of engagement and impact' that might lead to positive change (p.784). Therefore, in the spirit of constructive provocation – opening a dialogue, rather than providing a conclusive position – we sketch out in this article a proposed vision that might guide relevant stakeholders.

Our article is organised as follows: first we survey debates in the literature regarding academic and third sector collaboration, and its context. We then provide information about the project on which this article is based. We present our key findings in two sections. First, we provide a detailed account of stakeholders' perceptions of current challenges and opportunities. Second, we sketch a vision, and related to this, note a number of opportunities which we identified through our work. In conclusion, we argue for the value of a shared vision (accompanied by the fostering of ongoing pluralistic dialogue) in support of sustained reflection on the pursuit of 'things that take longer'.

2 | EXISTING THINKING ABOUT ACADEMIC AND THIRD SECTOR COLLABORATION, AND ITS CONTEXT

To discuss academic-third sector collaboration is, in part, to intervene in decades-long debates about the actual and desirable relationship between differently-positioned reform actors. It is also to build upon a now well-told history of shifts across the decades in England and Wales, regarding the efforts of pressure groups to achieve policy influence.

Ryan's (2003) *Penal policy and political culture in England and Wales* argued that, despite a position of considerable influence (for some organisations) in the middle decades of the 20th century, by the early years of the 21st century it was possible confidently to state that: 'the penal lobby has been, if not wholly marginalised, at least repositioned to the periphery of an increasingly complex policy making process' (Ryan, 2008, p.3).

The influential pressure group that Ryan had in mind was the Howard League for Penal Reform, which was the embodiment of 'the acceptable pressure group' (Ryan, 1978); involved alongside a small number of academics in informal conversations with the 'platonic guardians'[1] developing Home Office penal policy in the 1960s–1970s (Loader, 2006, p.566). (While at the same time radical groups who, in the eyes of supportive academics such as Ryan, offered genuine alternatives, were sidelined by power-holders.) Anthony Bottoms noted in 1980 the 'uncomfortable truth' that 'none of the considerable array of penal pressure groups now has much influence on Home Office policy' (Bottoms, 1980, p.90).

Loader and Sparks (2011a) have more recently reflected upon the 'successful failure' of modern criminology, where there has been an explosion of (mostly undergraduate teaching-driven)

departments devoted to criminology and a related proliferation of scholars who identify as 'criminologists' (rather than 'sociologists', 'lawyers' and so on). At the same time, the ability of researchers and academics to influence policy can now be described, at very best, as variable and attenuated.

That said, there are accounts of at least limited success.[2] For example, while pressure groups are not central to Jones & Newburn's influential analysis of policy transfer dynamics in the 1990s (from the US to England and Wales),[3] where they are mentioned it is because the authors argue that groups such as the Prison Reform Trust and NACRO 'provided important limitations to the extent of policy transfer and helped to shape particular policies in distinctive ways' (in relation to privatisation efforts: Jones & Newburn, 2007, p.70) and targeted briefings having 'a significant effect on the eventual shape of the legislation' (in relation to 'three strikes' measures (p.102)).[4]

More recently one can observe similar dynamics around the discredited indeterminate imprisonment for public protection (IPP) sentence (Annison, 2015), where a targeted collaboration between academics and the third sector was able to propel arguments for the abolition of the sentence (Jacobson & Hough, 2010). That said, the efforts to have its considerable lingering effects addressed have become increasingly Sisyphean (Annison & Condry, 2022).

In terms of the context in which such collaborative efforts operate, David Garland (2021) has depicted the tenor of public and policy debates around criminal justice in the present cultural moment thus:

> If one person re-offends while on parole, populists insist that parole should be abolished. If one person re-offends while out on bail, bail reform should be abandoned. Penal populism sets the liberty interests of offenders at zero, and entirely disregards the harms of aggressive policing and punishment. For a humane, penal politics – indeed for a liberal society – this kind of thinking is a disaster. (p.272)

While specific interpretations of our current times are subject to ongoing debate (see, e.g., Wacquant, 2011, pp.438–439), it is undoubtedly the case that contemporary criminologists face the latest version of a recurring dilemma: 'how to reconcile the competing claims of autonomy and engagement, knowledge production and social relevance' (Loader & Sparks, 2011a, p.16). These considerations take place, Loader and Sparks (2011a) suggest, in a context in which debates around crime and criminology have become 'heated up', whereby 'contemporary criminology is shaped by, and seeks to shape, a world in which security questions have become paramount; a world where crime and punishment tend – albeit unevenly – to assume more prominent and contentious places in political cultures and social relations of contemporary societies' (p.17).

The third sector similarly faces considerable challenges. It is diverse (Roth & Saunders, 2024), comprising 'voluntary, charitable and non-governmental organisations' (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2012, p.1). The sector varies in size, history, remit and mission (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2012, p.2). And, as Maguire, Williams & Corcoran (2019) note: 'owing to its huge diversity, general conclusions about developments in the voluntary sector are notoriously difficult to draw' (p.444).

An important contextual dynamic is also the rise of lived experience; the growing force of the assertion 'nothing about us without us', the view among organisations that lived experience must be at the heart of debate and actions in relation to criminal justice. The increasing pressures on funding, and a growing demand to demonstrate 'impact', has made debates about the role and influence of the academic and third sector more acute.

'Mainstream' academics have found themselves bemoaning the extent to which they have had 'distressingly little impact on the course of public policy toward crime and criminal justice'

(Currie, 2007, p.175). At the same time, they can find they are held responsible for the legitimation of the dominant criminal justice paradigms that they seek to resist (Coyle & Schept, 2018).

Similarly, third sector organisations have found themselves cast variously as credible, powerful forces for change (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2012, p.3; McAleese, 2019); prone to 'mission drift, whereby the values and objectives of [third sector organisations] change to align more closely to government or partners' agendas, to win contracts and provide services' (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2012, p.2); and service delivery providers who risk 'obscuring deep problems and delaying much-needed change' (Tomczak & Bennett, 2020, p.637).

Existing literature depicts a variegated landscape which, among difficulties, has also seen some successes in particular areas. For example, in relation to women and the criminal justice system, the 2007 Corston Report on women's imprisonment was widely regarded as a landmark development (Annison, Brayford & Deering, 2015) and signalled the increasingly sympathetic cross-party 'hearing' on these issues. More recently, the Ministry of Justice Women's Strategy (Ministry of Justice, 2018) (formally the 'Female Offender Strategy') has embedded key priorities which align with long-standing goals of campaigning organisations, including fewer women entering the justice system, fewer short custodial sentences and better outcomes for women on release (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

Feminist critiques of criminal justice and law, academic scholarship coupled with campaigning activity, have a long history and have been a vital part of these developments. Key to this has been the research by activist academics with close connections to the grass roots women's refuge and sexual abuse survivor sectors. This includes the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) at London Metropolitan University, the Research Centre on Violence, Abuse and Gender Relations at Leeds University and the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at Bristol University. They have, with others, engaged in decades of graft in order to secure a relatively high public profile for violence against women and girls. Women in Prison was founded in 1983 jointly by academic, Professor Pat Carlen, and activist, Chris Tchaikovsky (who herself spent time in prison in the 1980s), and has engaged in ongoing campaigning work in this domain.

Nonetheless, one is confronted with a multitude of ways in which the justice system continues repeatedly to fail women who are victimised and offend (Baldwin, 2023); we have arguably seen from the state the proliferation of 'words not deeds' (Paradine, 2023). Recent Victims Commissioner, Vera Baird, has spoken out about the backlogs and delays in the court system, the 'dire state of rape investigations and prosecutions' and the 'inadequate' legislative measures proposed by government (Baird, 2022). Although there have been recent declines (some linked to the pandemic), the female prison population is double that of 30 years ago (Prison Reform Trust, 2023). Despite sustained campaigning, pregnant women and women with babies continue to be imprisoned (Baldwin, 2022; Minson, 2020).

This summary suggests a landscape of challenges and opportunities, where for decades criminal justice policy and practice has tended to diverge sharply from many academic and third sector actors' normative visions. Dangers of third sector co-option, of 'penal drift', have been joined by opportunities for more fruitful academic-third sector collaboration and a more central role for people with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

3 | OUR PROJECT

In early 2023, an opportunity emerged for us to develop a small collaborative project. This project, supported by the Higher Education Innovation Fund,[5] sought to explore how academics and

charities might collaborate better, in order to achieve progressive change. It addressed three central questions:

1. What is working well in academic/voluntary sector partnerships?
2. What barriers exist to better achieve collaboration?
3. What positive changes could realistically occur?

The project was motivated by our sense, from the positions of our respective experiences, roles and networks, that this was a timely moment to engage in reflective discussions about these matters. Anecdotally, we sensed that there was desire for an opportunity to reflect on fundamental questions about purpose, and related questions about the means by which a better future might be achieved. Equally, we were curious about each others' worlds. The collaboration was an opportunity to ask 'why?' in relation to many systems, processes or assumptions that had become taken for granted. We suspected that some reflection on this, as we attempt here, would hold wider value.

We relied on our existing networks in order to identify and engage with stakeholders; embodying in some senses a combination of 'opportunity' and 'snowball' sampling (Noaks & Wincup, 2004). Our past roles and relationships meant that this 'sample' comprised a considerable amount of the 'population' of key third sector organisations working in the criminal justice, and penal reform, space. That said, some of the groups we engaged with, naturally, reflected our areas of specific interest or prior collaborative focus.

The project consisted of a number of elements. First, we held relatively informal stakeholder discussions with a range of individuals who currently hold, or recently held, relevant roles including leadership of third sector organisations, academics who have engaged with the third sector, and others who have operated in this space, including funders. We obtained university ethics approval for the conduct, recording and analysis of these discussions.[6] Respondents were advised in writing that these discussions would formally be treated as research interviews (with notes taken, and where possible recorded and transcribed). Consent was provided verbally by respondents at the start of each discussion. We conducted 25 discussions in total.

Second, we held a collaborative workshop at the University of Southampton, which brought together 20 stakeholders.[7] (This was preceded by a smaller pilot workshop at the same institution, involving five stakeholders.) These included leaders of relevant organisations, academics and university staff engaged in impact and knowledge exchange activity. Participants received in advance a short briefing '*Growing hope and power*' (Paradine & Annison, 2023), which sketched our sense of our emerging findings and invited responses to them. The workshop was centred on active discussion about, and collaborative sketching of, the development of a 'strategy tree' (a structured process for thinking about vision and resulting objectives, and the operative context).[8] Participants were advised that notes were being taken of the discussions at the workshop, and that these insights and participants' contributions to the development of a 'strategy tree' and elements therein, would be utilised in subsequent academic outputs.

The analysis we present here of our stakeholder discussions and collaborative workshop activity is intentionally impressionistic (Boswell & Corbett, 2015). By this, we mean we engaged in a form of interpretive analysis particularly focused on understanding the 'feel and mood' of our respondents (Boswell & Corbett, 2015, p.219), seeking to capture a sense of the zeitgeist at the time of our project. Our method was centred upon reflexive interpretation: after each discussion, the author conducting it (we conducted each discussion one-to-one) produced notes that captured the most striking areas of discussion and views therein. The authors reviewed each others' notes regularly, meeting to reflect on potential emerging themes, common threads and areas of divergent

opinion. Our thematic analysis of our data initially anticipated key themes from contributions to the literature including Paradine (2023), Hucklesby & Corcoran (2016) and McAleese (2019). These meetings were also opportunities for the authors to reflect on their own reaction to the discussions, and the emergent normative ideas therein.

We developed an initial output from the project, a short briefing paper targeted at third sector leaders and other stakeholders that sought to present some of the key ideas emerging from the activity (Paradine & Annison, 2023). The ordering of our process also constitutes part of our method: we sought further feedback by stakeholders on this initial briefing. While not treated as formal data, these responses helped to strengthen our confidence in the validity of our findings, via a 'process of reflexive, iterative reconfirmation' (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010, p.207) that is integral to interpretative studies' methodological underpinnings. Here, we expand upon those ideas: fleshing them out, providing greater detail on our underlying findings, and exploring a wider range of emerging issues.

4 | ROOTS AND SOIL: STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CURRENT CONTEXT, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

We observed an awareness of the complex context faced in terms of politics, risk, limited resources and lack of systems to connect academics and charities. Stakeholders were acutely aware of the backdrop of a system in crisis and of the looming general election, with the arena of crime and justice increasingly prominent as a 'political football'. One charity leader, therefore, considered that the role of the third sector over recent years should be reflected on more positively: a case of 'ground not conceded and disaster avoided'. In this vein, this respondent resisted what they feared risked becoming a tendency to drink from a generalised 'trough of despair'.

Another context specific to the criminal justice sector is risk aversion about working in prisons and people with a history of offending, particularly by politicians and officials. There was a deep sense of sadness about the terrible tragedy at Fishmongers Hall when two young people, Jack Merritt and Saskia Jones, were murdered (Chief Coroner, 2021). Reflections were shared, in part, about the negative impact this tragedy has had on initiatives with similar aims to those of the University of Cambridge Learning Together Programme.

In addition, despite the idealised notion of the academic life (featuring ample time to mull over the big issues and ideas of the day), we found that charity leaders were, in fact, acutely aware of the poverty of time and 'space to think', coupled with a battle for scarce resources. One charity leader reflected:

> Academics are overstretched. They don't get rewarded for getting things out there. There are mixed views of the [Research Excellence Framework (REF)'s] focus on impact as it's seen as just more pressure on academics.

Another was critical of the academic environment:

> Academics should be pushing boundaries of thought and ideas, challenging existing work and feeding through to those who can put ideas into practice. This doesn't happen often … The individualization of academics with short term contracts, massive teaching burden and [employment] precarity inhibits the ability to be critical and experiential thinkers.

As is often the case in cross-sector partnerships, it was felt that there was too much reliance on individuals, rather than 'baked in' systems which bring the worlds of academics and charities together. Several stakeholders identified a key 'missing link' as the loss of the Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate,[9] which was seen as producing research which was strategically connected, impactful, transparent and accessible. Others were concerned about academics' perceived 'hesitation in working with charities seen as "too woke" or "too loud"'.

Participants in this project recognised the differences between academics and charities, and that these represented complementary strengths: the academic's understanding of evidence, impartiality and expertise in observation, analysis, generating and using data; charities' access to 'on the ground reality', getting things done, delivering services and experiencing first hand the complex impact of systems failures, what works and what doesn't as well as expertise in campaigning.

We also heard much good news about partnerships for change. Over the years there has developed a growing weight of multidisciplinary evidence and overall 'the argument' has been largely won on some specific areas, such as the need to address root causes of women's offending, including the overlap with experience of abuse and trauma as a child and an adult.[10] It is implementation of this change that remains the key issue:

> Getting this in policy is difficult but possible. There is the political problem of spending so much on prison, but there is institutional cowardice. Money will be the deciding factor in some of what will happen.

There was recognised to be evidence over decades of cross-party support for policy change nationally, especially embodied in the diligent work of the House of Commons Justice Committee. Co-production and the impact of lived experience were recognised as increasingly prominent strands of funded research.[11] Welcomed also was there being now well-established academics with direct experience of the criminal justice system. Trusted sources of information (such as the Prison Reform Trust Bromley Briefings) and for academic contributions (e.g., the *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*) were highlighted. It was also recognised that economic cost/benefit analysis was being used more prominently by charities, as a means by which to campaign for change (Women in Prison, 2022; Women's Budget Group, 2020).

Some of the most hopeful messages we heard from stakeholders were that while there is so much still to be done, change is possible. Reducing children's imprisonment over the last two decades came up a number of times, described as the 'single most successful evidence-driven change', alongside the more recent campaign successes of achieving an end to Friday prison releases and government and local investment in women's services (including women's centres), delivered by specialist charities run 'by and for' women.[12] There was a sense that investing in long-term partnerships can pay off – like the universities and police forces partnership hosted by the Open University, Centre for Policing Research & Learning.[13] One stakeholder commented on the value of appreciative enquiry and 'catching people doing good' as an important theme of research.

Participants identified five main challenges, with counterpoint opportunities.

1) Competition, risks of partnership and power of independence

The competition for scarce resources, including the limitations on charities accessing funding for policy and research work, has resulted in a 'chilling effect' on partnerships and the sharing of ideas:

> There's scrapping over the same resources and over access to politicians and policy makers and media. There's not much done in partnership – only specific small things. As an outsider [to the sector before starting their current post] I thought there'd be more collaboration.

Generally there was reported a lack of collective understanding of who is doing what, which in the context of competitive attempts to seek funding, could see duplication of effort or initiatives that run counter to one another:

> There isn't a good picture across universities of who is doing what. I sometimes feel [the unexamined consensus views are] very out of date, like negativity about privatization and prejudices that are obvious in the research question.

However, the independence of charities and academics – from the state and from each other – was seen as a vital 'first principle' for partnerships that elevate the power of evidence to deliver change:

> Being genuinely evidence-led involves disagreement and challenge and it's healthier to disagree. A vibrant sector will have disagreement – it will not be monolithic.

One stakeholder told the story of an evaluation which had started in an academic institution but then been taken 'in house' to a large charity's research department. The study reached the desk of the relevant minister who opened the meeting with researchers by asking whether this was a case of 'marking your own homework'. This was experienced as a 'great lesson in the pitfalls of bypassing academic institutions'.

This illustrates the need for charities to make the most of opportunities provided by academic independence. Charity leaders could imagine more productive relationships, but one observed:

> Academics are not always respecting of campaigners and can 'look down their nose' on them as agenda-driven and not interested in evidence or using it properly. We need mutual respect on both sides.

At the same time, some respondents recognised that academics who did engage in values-driven research (what some might term 'activist research') could find themselves 'dismissed as ideologues' by government or other powerful stakeholders.

There was an understanding that 'reputations of campaigning leaders can be damaged by exaggeration, and familiarity can breed contempt'. Some stakeholders argued that:

> If you are a charity working in prison and believe you are doing good then you also have a vested interest in reform, rather than systems change … Huge [delivery-focused] organisations are not campaigning and that is a real problem.

There is power in diversity of perspectives with academics and charities providing each other with 'ammunition' taking slightly different 'lines' and avoiding a 'too close' association which can result in loss of credibility. It was seen as important to thriving partnerships:

> … not to try to dilute the strengths and appreciating tensions alongside shared goals and values, but the different perspectives are usually for the good.

This links to the partnership risks of 'group think', monolithic agreement and bland messaging which is dangerous and counter to the generation of research knowledge.

2) Time and investing in the 'long game'

It was recognised that it is a significant challenge to enable the 'speeds' of both sectors to align: academic work often being perceived simply to 'take too long'. Equally, while charities could enable mutually beneficial access (for empirical research, or assisting subsequent engagement with stakeholders), some expressed concerns about a lack of realism by some academics about the demands that time-consuming and resource-intensive research could place on charities. A lack of budget for meaningful participation, such as contributing to advisory groups, was a source of real frustration. Accompanying this is a belief that the traumatic nature of some research enquiries in this space means that follow-up support for participants is too rarely budgeted for.

Stakeholders commented on a lack of collective memory by both charities and academics, resulting in a cycle of 'reinventing the wheel' and leaving vital gaps in research knowledge. Charity stakeholders did not feel they currently have power to influence research agendas or to direct academics to where their skills are needed most. One contemporary example given was research on assaults on emergency workers and how this tends to focus on the frequency and harm of such offending, rather than the root causes and solutions (see Ratcliffe, Kimmons & Gibbs, 2022).

What came through in our discussions was a determination among charity leaders to ensure that now is the time to invest in the 'long game', including planning ahead for an evidence base upon which a reimagined future can be built. This means new systems and new partnerships:

> In these partnerships you need to recognize it won't all go your way. Need to start small to build trust and credibility. Building partnership is easy, sustaining it is the challenge.

3) Need for knowledge we can use

Linked to the criticism of academic research as risking being 'too slow and lofty', that there is still too much academic jargon and a need to make research knowledge more accessible and digestable:

> There's a precision to academic language that isn't helpful. 'Praxis' [a term used in our initial project communications] is an example and I sometimes shudder at obfuscatory language: I don't know what you mean and I don't have the time to work it out.

Not all respondents agreed on this point. One wondered 'why is academic output dismissed so casually' when 'plenty of voluntary sector types spend endless hours getting their heads round commissioning documents and government policy papers'.

There was frustration among stakeholders about articles being behind paywalls, especially frustrating when a publication had been well-promoted but then could not be read in full. There was equally a sense of overwhelm by charity leaders saying: 'I feel I'm missing out' and 'volume

means you can't keep up with meta-analyses let alone anything else'. This speaks to some of the issues found by a 2016 review which concluded that for policymakers and practitioners, university research is the most trusted form of evidence, but also one of the least often utilised (Shucksmith, 2016). The 'bridges' provided by brief targeted summaries (like pieces created by, or hosted on, the Russell Webster blog site) were considered valuable.

There was an understanding that the academic working environment often obliges individuals to 'move on' to the next research project, leaving evidence falling at the hurdle of implementation because there is no one pushing it. Initiatives like the Open University hosted Centre for Policing Research is an example of a partnership initiative that tries to give research a 'leg up' over that implementation hurdle through close working with police forces.

A strong belief was expressed that a broad conceptualisation of knowledge needs to take hold. That 'evidence' needs to be understood holistically: quantitative and qualitative data (underpinned by appropriate paradigms and frameworks), alongside other perspectives such as the ideas and experiences of people with lived experience of the justice system. There was a perception that often it would be 'the numbers' that are the focus of public communications about research, while it is stories that 'really change hearts and minds'.

4) Interrogating and embracing failure

There was concern shared about a lack of commitment to interrogate failure and learn from it, and a lack of 'safe space' in which to do so. Perhaps unsurprisingly in this context, Hucklesby and Corcoran (2012) found in their own discussions with third sector organisations a decade ago, that:

> whilst the value and contribution of [third sector organisations] to the criminal justice system was acknowledged, it was also recognised that many assertions about its effectiveness are not substantiated by robust or verifiable research. (p.4)

Stakeholders commented that evaluations 'rarely say things don't work or unpick failure':

> Do universities feel pressure to 'filter' evaluations? Primarily evaluations are seen as PR products not learning. Sometimes negative findings don't see the light of day.

5) Unexplored differences in visions and values

There was also a strong theme in our discussions of 'faultlines' in this space between charities' respective values and that potentially conflicting theories are not being properly explored. A lack of physical space for gathering together was noted as an important issue in itself, perhaps also contributing to this lack of dialogue. One stakeholder expressed frustration at there being 'lots of avoidance' going on. One example was given:

> There isn't enough engagement on punitive elements of hate crime campaigning among otherwise progressive thinkers, so it is a hidden and unexamined issue. Charities that are opposed to carceral approaches tend not to 'touch' this. Equally, violence against women and girls is [often seen as] too risky and complex.

There was a widespread desire better to resist the criminal justice system as being treated as the 'help gateway'. And, relatedly, to emphasise relevant root causes, and the role of wider social issues such as housing and education.

At the same time, some stakeholders were frustrated that speaking explicitly of 'abolition' was widely resisted, in their view because abolitionism was misconstrued as a negative – 'having no prisons' – rather than involving a more holistic reimagining of a different future. One shared the pessimistic view that 'we have so comprehensively lost the argument' in relation to the use of prison, and insufficiently engaged in collective examination of why. In a comment that embodies a possible answer to this question, one stakeholder considered that both 'reformism' and 'abolitionism' were 'busted flushes', with the sector required collectively to develop a renewed, compelling vision that spoke to modern times.

Debates around abolitionism were one of several faultlines identified in our discussions. Alongside abolitionist/reformist approaches (which can be as much about presentational as substantive strategy), also discussed were carceral and anti-carceral arguments particularly in the context of feminist debates (see, e.g., McGlynn, 2022; Shelby, 2022). In addition was the unhelpful distinct categorisation – and clear dividing lines – between organisations supporting victims, and those focused on supporting people with an offending background.

There were concerns aired that many charities and academics in the sector shy away from making clear oppositional statements, against power holders and most obviously the government, as regards prison, harm and punishment. This was described by one stakeholder as 'learned cowardice' and another as 'learned helplessness'. One stakeholder reflected on the rare exercise of power by 60 foundations and trusts uniting in an open letter co-ordinated by the Association of Charitable Funders (ACF)[14] to challenge the government's position on institutional racism in response to the report on race and ethnic disparities, and that it is 'regrettable this isn't done more'. (There are echoes in such debates of Ryan's (1978) work on pressure groups in the 1970s.)

Some stakeholders expressed the view that it was academics primarily who should be leading the debate on particularly febrile topics: utilising their academic freedom to take more risks than might be possible for some third sector organisations.[15] Recent instances of academics seeking to grapple publicly with issues such as those relating to gender and criminal justice, have seen some academics resigning specific posts or leaving academia entirely. It is therefore understandable that many academics think twice before accepting an invitation to venture into such 'deep waters'.

For the reasons and dynamics discussed above, it was considered by many that while individual organisations often had ambitious visions and missions, there was a sense that collectively there is insufficient focus on 'big vision' systems change. A lack perhaps of a real sense of the 'place to be desired' (Young, 1992). One experienced charity leader reflected:

> I'm struck by the learned helplessness concept and we can be really guilty of that in the sector with waves of 'this is impossible'. Part of getting out of that is being realistic about vision and where we can take this work together. Academics want to make a difference … We need a clear idea of what we want to achieve and clearer pathways.

It is to this provocation, to questions of meeting some of these challenges, to which we now turn.

5 | SKETCHING A VISION AND A MISSION

In this project we wanted to respond directly to this key challenge identified by stakeholders that: 'The big vision is where we fall down every single time'. We used a Strategy Tree model to conceptualise the potential for a shared cross-sector and cross-organisational language, vision and plan to build the evidence for a future justice system that works for people affected by, and working

in, it. Full details of the resulting Strategy Tree and its component parts are available (Paradine & Annison, 2023). Here, we focus on the 'vision' and 'mission' components of future actions.

1) Shared vision and plan

The working vision we settled on, collaboratively developed through our workshops and informed by our stakeholder discussions, is as follows:

> A trusted, evidence-based, community justice system which reduces crime and harm, addresses root causes of offending and ensures everyone feels and is safe, treated equitably, and able to thrive.

This would, in turn, be supported by a mission, to achieve this vision:

> People with lived experience, charities, academics, policy makers and practitioners work together and challenge each other to grow, share & disseminate all forms of evidence to re-imagine, re-design and create the vision.

In the course of this project, we realised that one of us (the third sector leader) was more comfortable with the notion of a truly *shared vision*. The other author (the academic) found this mindset more challenging. For the third sector leader, this perhaps reflected an acculturation into a collaborative mindset, an approach of collegiality and mutual support particularly influenced by feminist arguments for prioritising the collective over the individual (Naffine, 2002; Smart, 1976). For the academic, this may, in part, reflect a default habituation towards criticism and deconstruction, but also reflects a pluralistic impulse: a desire to ensure that space is afforded for the exploration of a range of positions (Loader & Sparks, 2013), albeit within a range of acceptable moral boundaries (Guiney, 2023).

We therefore emphasise that we offer this vision and mission as provocation for debate, rather than finalised statements: Would these work for you, for your organisation? Would they help your organisation to understand where it 'fits' within the wider sector? Might it also help academics in conceptualising reasons for engaging with third sector organisations, in what specific ways, and on what terms?

Notwithstanding our points of disagreement, we are in firm agreement that we must orient ourselves to 'things that take longer', a phrase uttered a decade ago by campaigner Ellen Pence.[16] She was a well-known leader of the blueprint Duluth model of Coordinated Community Responses addressing domestic abuse, and introduced a tool to better understand how power and control are used in different ways to perpetrate abuse. Few people have demonstrated better the effort to combine evidence, activism and dedication to long-term change. A few weeks before her death from cancer in 2012, an interviewer asked whether she had any reflections on the things she might have done differently. She said she wished she had understood the longevity of the struggle and would thus 'have done things that took longer to do'.

2) Leading role for people with lived experience of the justice system (offending, or being harmed by crime) with a map of research and evidence modelling people's journeys through the justice system

There was a strong view that the more proactive inclusion of lived experience as a key source of evidence needed to be built on as the foundation in any partnerships between charities and

academics. One practical suggestion was for a map of research to 'model' people's journeys through the system, in a way to dislodge a tendency to become preoccupied with the system itself.[17] This could include the perspectives of those who commit offences, and people and organisations harmed by offending.

This could support a better understanding of where individual research 'fits' together; including evidence about what initiatives have not worked as intended – all connected to the reality 'on the ground'. A view shared was that such a tool, based on a philosophy which looks at harm from the perspective of those directly experiencing it, could help break the counter-productive dichotomy of offender/victim which fails to adequately reflect the complexity of the system or of people's lives and agency.

3) A platform to share research questions and highlight gaps in knowledge

The suggestion was made that any 'map' of evidence should enable charities to 'post' research questions and highlight gaps. There was real excitement about how a platform like this could be 'thrown open' to engage staff on the ground and people with lived experience to engage in building research of the future. Research participants felt that openly sharing research questions would help prevent duplication because it would surface existing 'answers' and engagement from researchers who had already addressed particular questions, or were in the process of doing so.

This has some alignment with arguments about improvements to the 'impact' context in which universities increasingly operate. Relevant recommendations made in an intervention by Smith et al. (2020) include establishing universities as 'anchor institutions' in their locality, rejecting crude or simplistic classifications of 'excellence' (which can often ignore or even denigrate the local), and encouraging knowledge synthesis and collaboration (Smith et al., 2020, pp.200–203).

There are related tensions, however, that should not be overlooked. Academic researchers are not a homogenous group, nor is there a single desirable role that they might play. Being a 'scientific expert' compared with a 'social movement theorist' (see Loader & Sparks, 2011a) involves different conceptions of the role and relationship with wider stakeholders, many of which do not align easily with the implicit notion that risks emerging from the above discussion: namely that the role of research is to provide an 'answer' to an already-identified 'question'. And that this, in turn, straightforwardly will result in beneficial policy or practice 'impact'.

There is also an interesting dynamic apparent, which flows from this: a tacit view that there ought to be a division of labour when it comes to the respective input and legitimate role of researchers and organisations. Yet often coupled with an expectation that all collaborators will be working towards the same overall goals. While this may be the case, as we explore a little more in the conclusion, there is far from widespread agreement that these are suitable or sustainable underlying assumptions.[18]

4) Sustainable funding models

Inevitably the precarity of, and competition for, funding facing charities and partnerships came up as a key barrier to change:

> We need a learning culture. But the way the charity system is designed it creates competition: dog eat dog. Unrestricted funding creates a more collaborative culture.

This is one change that charity stakeholders felt they had little influence over, yet changing the short termism and funding cycle would make a big difference:

> Funders are interested in academic evidence, but there is a lack of space to consider it in depth due to demand and day-to-day pressure. There is a trend towards more evidence-led funding and alignment to academic institutions, with funders seeing themselves as active members of civil society.

Funders, commissioners, policymakers and politicians of all parties have the power to create systems which see unrestricted funding of at least three to five years as standard and embed open learning about failure.

Fransman and Newman (2019) speak to these issues, arguing, inter alia, for a greater recognition by funders of the long-term, relational nature of meaningful collaboration; contrary to the commonplace incentivisation of 'the rapid development of short-term project-based partnerships':

> … Allocating sufficient time to develop and manage relationships, responsive context-analysis, collaborative (re)design, critical reflection and more formal learning/training and concluding research in a way that will maximize evidence-use and ensure sustained collaboration. (p.540)

5) Creating public and private spaces to share and generate knowledge and have the difficult conversations, especially about failure and conflicting values

Underpinning these practical ideas are the deeply complex communication challenges inherent in this area of social change. There is unique benefit of meeting 'eye-to-eye' when exploring divergent views, including on punishment, visions and values relating to reformist and abolitionist perspectives, and finding a way of 'sharing voice with victims'. One stakeholder said:

> We won't move the narrative until we work with victims. We need to listen to their pain and make recommendations about resolving this pain.

There were some encouraging examples given of promising spaces including development of peer action learning sets[19] and initiatives to engage the public in evidence-building.[20] In terms of ensuring robust interrogation of challenges, our respondents' views connect with Smith et al.'s (2020) argument that there is a pressing need to 'create spaces in which valiant failures are celebrated and learned from' (p.203).

6 | CONCLUSION

In exploring academic-third sector collaboration, one must engage with the fundamental material context in which such collaborations are, or can be, developed, fostered, undermined or actualised. We have explored these issues above, identifying perceived challenges as well as potential opportunities.

What are academics and third sector organisations to do? Tomczak and Bennett (2020) describe the tensions and challenges inherent in the third sector's engagement with issues of criminal justice thus:

> Voluntary sector criminal justice involvement will always be at risk of deflecting attention from problems of poverty and social justice, and obscuring the need for political action. Normative attention is required by administrative executives, but it is also necessary for voluntary organisations themselves to clarify their choices and values and attempt collective action where public services are found wanting. (pp.652–653)

McAra (2016) suggests that there is value in understanding the criminologist (or other academics operating in this field) as a 'cultural worker: one who operates as a (critical) commentator on the nature and function of punishment in contemporary society, one who has the capacity (and aspiration) to transform the tropes through which crime and punishment are read and understood', while equally recognising that their own 'knowledge and understanding are filtered via the particular temporal and spatial locale within which she or he is located' (p.767). This makes reflexivity a central task (Armstrong, Blaustein & Henry, 2017).

Uggen & Inderbitzin (2010) have argued that public scholarship does, or should, aspire: 'to produce and disseminate knowledge in closer contact with the individuals, communities, and institutions that are the focus of its study' (p.725).[21] Many academics studying matters of crime and justice would agree with the overall thrust of their argument, albeit with potentially sharply contrasting views on precisely how such a view might be operationalised (see, e.g., Liebling, 2015; Loader & Sparks, 2011a, ch. 3; Nelund, 2014).

In some regards, we should not overstate our confidence about the direct positive impact academics or the third sector might have on penal change. McAra (2016) has rightly cautioned that: 'even where academic discourse directly influences political dialogue and debate and flows into policy, the extent to which this in turn shapes the performance of criminal justice institutions is highly variable' (p.784).

But we should not take this caution too far. Academics and third sector organisations can, and clearly do, make 'moral blindness' to the nature, failings and harms of the criminal justice system more difficult (Liebling, 2015). Further they can, and do, ameliorate the worst effects of the penal system on those affected by it, or indeed assist those whose needs in the wake of experiences of harm are not met by the criminal justice system.

In our research discussions, we found a deep commitment to, and hunger for, powerful and lasting partnerships between academic and third sectors which ensure it is evidence (in a variety of forms) and lived experience, rather than dogma, that shapes social change. We found a desire to reflect more upon a shared vision that could help to orient groups and individuals to what Ellen Pence once called 'things that take longer'.

We have thus sketched a vision, and a mission, that might guide thinking about achieving this. We provide these statements in a spirit of constructive provocation. We seek to contribute to a dialogue, rather than providing a conclusive position. The means by which debates are conducted relating to visions of a better future – fostering respect, openness, collaboration and pluralism – are as important as the substantive positions which might be achieved.

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ENDNOTES

[1] A term used to denote people who held, inter alia, an organising 'belief that crime and penal policy should be developed by administrators and strategic practitioners on the basis of expert knowledge and opinion' (Loader, 2006, p.565).

[2] See also Wilson's (2001) historical exploration of the dynamics around penal activism among policy networks.

[3] Here meaning pressure groups seeking penal reform or abolition; think tanks advocating for neo-liberal and neo-conservative penal policies were more visible and influential.

[4] Ryan (2008) similarly emphasises that in his view, things would likely be even worse but for the efforts of 'progressive lobby groups' (p.26).

[5] The Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) is a UKRI initiative that supports knowledge exchange between higher education providers and the wider world that benefits society and the economy. See: https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/our-main-funds-and-areas-of-support/browse-our-areas-of-investment-and-support/higher-education-innovation-fund/ [Accessed 19 April 2024].

[6] University of Southampton Ethics Approval Number 80036.

[7] This project itself confronted one of us (Annison) with an interesting challenge about the specific role of the academic. His role in the project sat ill with traditional understandings (or perhaps an artificially narrow stereotype) of the scholarly task being to bring objective knowledge to a debate, and no more. Rather, the role was far more 'diplomatic' (after Latour; see Turner, 2012): seeking to bring together stakeholders from a range of relevant perspectives to reflect upon their vision, mission, objectives and the implications therein. Of course, some academics routinely engage in such a role, see, for example, Hucklesby and Corcoran (2012).

[8] Robert Laycock, Yes We Can Community CIC. See: https://www.yeswecan.community/ [Accessed 19 April 2024].

[9] A Research and Analysis division of the Ministry of Justice exists, which would argue that in fact it is a central 'part of the Ministry of Justice's ambition to put evidence at the heart of the justice system'. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ministry-of-justice/about/research [Accessed 19 April 2024].

[10] See Ministry of Justice (2023).

[11] For example, the Prison Reform Trust 'Building Futures Programme'.

[12] On investment in women's services, see National Women's Justice Coalition at: https://wearenwjc.org.uk [Accessed 19 April 2024].

[13] See: https://www.open.ac.uk/centres/policing/ [Accessed 19 January 2024].

[14] See: https://www.acf.org.uk/acf/Newsfeed/2021/April-21/Commission-on-Race-and-Ethnic-Disparities-response-from-foundations-to-the-Prime-Minister.aspx [Accessed 19 April 2024].

[15] This perhaps connects in with now-outdated notions of 'tenure', which presume that academics essentially enjoy jobs-for-life; as well as relating to more principled notions of the role of the public academic (Loader & Sparks, 2011a).

[16] From *Interview with Ellen Pence*, 29 March 2010. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZeppoVr5f0 [Accessed 1 May 2024].

[17] One example of a criminal justice specific Research Map is that maintained by the College of Policing. See: https://www.college.police.uk/research/projects [Accessed 20 April 2024].

[18] On this issue, see Loader & Sparks (2011b).

[19] For example, Action Learning Sets run by infrastructure charities like Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK).

[20] For example, Transform Justice Court Watch London.

[21] See Giacomantonio et al. (2024).

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