

Working in Policy & Strategy in the Charity Sector

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John-Paul Wares is Policy and Strategy Adviser at the UK homeless charity Crisis (www.crisis.org.uk). He previously worked for MPs in casework and researcher roles. These positions developed the skills and experience which led to his job at Crisis.

What does Crisis do?

Crisis is a national charity focusing on homelessness. It was set up in 1967 purely as a campaigning and lobbying organisation, with no remit for service provision. This developed from 1971 when the first Crisis Open Christmas was held. Housing is a massive issue in the UK. While it is commonly understood as the more visible problem of rough sleeping, there are an estimated 380,000 'hidden homeless' staying in hostels, bed and breakfasts, or with friends and family. Many don't have access to social housing, and it is this unmet need which Crisis works to address.

The Policy and Strategy unit

The unit has four fulltime staff plus one intern. The Head of Policy and Strategy reports directly to the chief executive.

Parliamentary Affairs and Events

- Responsible for raising the profile of Crisis with MPs, providing information to MPs and briefing them on issues related to Crisis' work.
- Works with parliamentarians to get Early Day Motions tabled and particular parliamentary questions raised.

Research

- Provides the knowledge that backs up the work of the whole organisation.

Policy and Strategy Adviser

- Creates opportunities for the government to listen to Crisis
- Develops policy responses and sets out Crisis' position on government activities – such as the forthcoming comprehensive spending review.
- Liaises with government policymakers who come to Crisis for advice when developing strategies.
- Monitors and scrutinises government policy and identifies the opportunities it presents for Crisis

Policy and Strategy Intern

- A three month unpaid position. The intern produces a weekly policy bulletin which summarises developments in the government's social justice agenda, across central and local government and the devolved administrations.

Policy: the skills that are needed

- Knowledge is crucial. You need to know exactly what the organisation can do that other organisations can't, and where in the delivery of your service there are problems which the government could support through policy changes.
- Need to understand government priorities and the problems which face the sector. Building up a network of friends and partners is crucial, both in and outside of government. This involves providing support to contacts within the government, who are also pushing internally for policy changes that match Crisis' aims.
- Critical thinking. When reviewing a government white paper, for example, you need to be able to assess it critically and offer an opinion. Usually involves sharing ideas with other policy advisers in different organisations.
- Presenting a clear and persuasive argument. Civil servants have so many reports landing on their desks that they don't have time to read anything longer than 2 pages. You need to be able to condense your arguments into short but comprehensive briefings.
- Control the loop. The policy process involves many people across different organisations and within government. You need to make sure you don't exclude those who want to get involved, but also avoid over burdening people.

- Optimism. You need to be able to keep on going even when you don't achieve the results you want.

Downsides of policy work

- Closed doors. Some people just don't want to listen.
- You're there to persuade and not to deliver. You might have a two year communications plan but they may not take it on. You're not in control of the outcomes.
- The pace of change is painfully slow, especially when it requires government legislative change.
- Change is according to someone else's timetable, and has to pass through all the different stages.
- Anti-social hours. To get access to ministers you have to be available when they are. This means going to party conferences and evening or weekends events to catch them whenever you can.