



'I know that we prisoners like to moan about all non-sensical rules or behaviours of prison staff, but befriending is something different. Here we have chance to create a friendly connection, support, where we are treated humanely. That is rare in prison system. I cannot tell you how many times I read same letters or emails again and again. This gives me pleasure, happiness every time.'

Befriending Service Evaluation Report 2021

Foreword

'I do not get much post here, but always spot her envelopes and feel excited to read her letters... It is the small things in prison that add up to the whole experience and having a BF has really helped me. Through the COVID lockdown, the letter frequency increased, and this was a real help as we had nothing to do in here. It was lovely to hear from BF throughout the lockdown knowing that we and the whole country were going through similar situations, improved the bond and rapport we had together.'

The quote above is a helpful demonstration of the impact our volunteers have on the people they support, and also how volunteers stepped up to increase this level of support over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, what it doesn't make clear is that although the 'similar situation' of the initial lockdown provided the opportunity for a shared experience, people in prison continued to live under heavy Covid restrictions for far longer than the rest of society. This meant that a key part of our service – visiting people in prison – was not allowed to take place. Visits gradually started being reintroduced from March 2021, but with prisons often adopting different approaches this meant that some institutions did not admit visitors until considerably later. As we started to prepare for visits to resume with restrictions lifting, we wanted to find out about the impact these have on the people we serve, so we framed our 2021 evaluation questions around this theme. The results are clear: visits are overwhelmingly popular, providing a boost to morale and self-esteem, something tangible to look forward to, and a much-needed sense of normality.

You will see from the report that the majority of the people we support are serving longer sentences, for the most serious of crimes. These are often people who have been cut off by friends and family as a result, and face extreme isolation and loneliness. The support our volunteers provide helps people to maintain not just a social connection with another person, but also to rebuild self-esteem and develop a new sense of identity which is essential if they are to survive the realities of a long sentence and then be able to reintegrate back into normal society on release. As one respondent put it: 'I am so grateful that you allowed me to be a 'normal person' not only a prisoner'.

Sadly, we anticipate the need for our service increasing in line with the MoJ's projected rise in the number of people being incarcerated over the next four years. We will therefore continue to grow our service in 2022, seeking new volunteers to help us support more people in prison.

New Bridge would like to thank all the people who took the time to complete the questionnaire and share their experiences. We would also like to thank the Governors and staff of the 74 establishments in which people we befriend are located. Without their assistance, our evaluation would not be possible.

We are particularly thankful to Ailie Rennie, New Bridge Trustee and PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology, who analysed the data and produced the report.

This report provides a wealth of data about the people we support and their views on our service, which I hope you will find informative.

Dr Lucy Ball, CEO
April 2022

The Befriending Service

The New Bridge Foundation has provided support to people in prison since 1956. We believe fostering a positive relationship with the outside world improves individuals' emotional wellbeing and self-esteem, enabling those that have been incarcerated to reintegrate successfully into the community.

Befrienders provide support through letters and prison visits. Anyone over the age of 18 in prison in England and Wales can apply to receive support from New Bridge, and if they are moved during their sentence befriending can continue uninterrupted. Befrienders provide people in prison with non-judgmental, trustworthy and continual support, independent of the Prison Service. When people in prison have little or no contact with family and friends, New Bridge hopes to bridge the gap between prison and the outside world.

The Befriending Service in 2021

In 2021, the Befriending Service received **486 enquiries** from prisoners, a significant **increase** from previous years (*319 in 2020 and 314 in 2019*). From these applications, **239** individuals went on to **submit applications** and were **added to the allocation list**, which was, again, a notable increase from in previous years (*155 (2020) and 208 (2019)*). **232** were then **allocated a volunteer** (*229 (2020) and 252 (2019)*). As a result, there were **557 active prisoners** within the service at the year end (*compared to 565 in 2020 and 576 in 2019*).

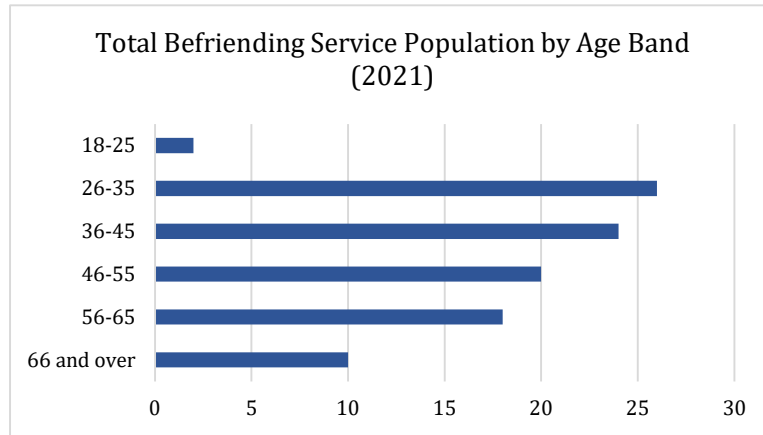
490 of the people who used our service were held in prisons in England and Wales (88%), two percent were held in secure hospitals and a further 10% had been released and were in the community (after starting their Befriending relationship inside prison or a hospital and continuing to write upon release). 95% of the currently active prisoners identified as male, three percent as female and two percent as transgender. Comparing this to recent statistics by the Ministry of Justice (2021), our population of Befriendees is largely representative of males and females in prison (96% male and 4% female (Ministry of Justice, 2021)), however, it overrepresents those who identify as transgender who, by comparison, account for only 0.2% of the prison population. Nevertheless, this is a particularly important group of individuals who are currently experiencing institutional and media pressures regarding where and how to be appropriately imprisoned. As such, the appeal for transgender prisoners to apply to New Bridge to seek an external source of support through letters, visits and phone calls may help to explain this overrepresentation.

456 of our active befriendees identified as being 'White British', which equates to 82%, five percent identified as 'White Other', 'Black', 'Asian', and 'Mixed Race' prisoners each accounted for four percent of the population, and the ethnicity of two percent was unknown. In the general prison population, however, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups are overrepresented – similar to at all other stages of the criminal justice system – accounting for 27% of the population. This is significantly higher than the representation present in those who use the services provided by New Bridge.

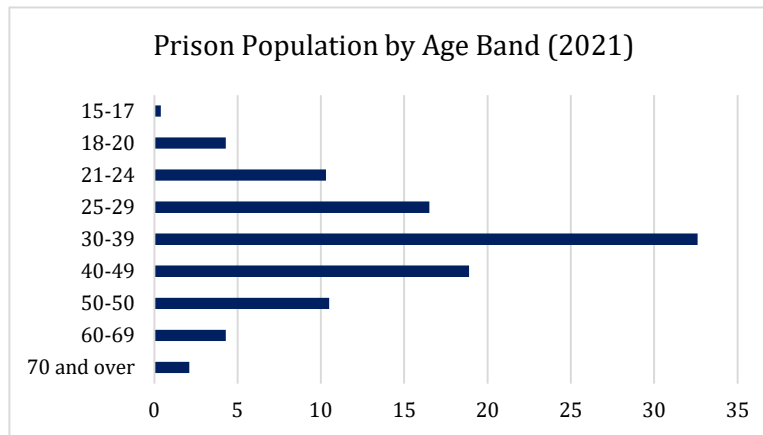
Two percent of the active prisoners were aged between 18 and 25, 26% were aged between 26 and 35, 24% between 36 and 45, 20% between 46 and 55, 18% between 56 and 65, and 10% were aged over 66 (see Graph 1 below). As such, over half of Befriendees were aged between 26 and 45. This is consistent with the general prison population in which the majority of prisoners (over 30%) are aged between 30 and 39 and a further 17% and 18% respectively are aged 25 to 29 and 40 to 49 (see Graph 2) (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Those aged 46 and over from the New Bridge population accounted for almost half of the total Befriendees (48%), whilst those aged 50

and over represented only 17% in the mainstream prison population. As a result, New Bridge supports a significant number of older prisoners who may have lost or no longer have many of their connections or members of their support networks on the outside.

Graph 1.



Graph 2.



Almost three-fifths (58%) of the individuals that use New Bridge’s services have been convicted of a sexual offence. This is significantly higher than the general prison population in which only 19% of individuals have been convicted of a sexual offence (Ministry of Justice, 2022). A further one-fifth (110 individuals) of New Bridge Befriendees have been convicted of murder, attempted murder, or manslaughter. 12% have been convicted of an offence of violence against the person; four percent for theft, burglary, or robbery; two percent for drug-related offences; two percent for arson; and three percent for other, undisclosed offences. As a result of having such a high proportion of Befriendees convicted of sexual offences, all other sentenced populations are significantly lower than the general prison population: violence against the person (30%), drug offences (16%), theft (9%), robbery (9%) and other (16%) (Ministry of Justice, 2022).

As reported in the recent Bromley Briefings by the Prison Reform Trust (2022), over two-fifths (44%) of prisoners aged 50 or older are in prison for sex offences – after this, older prisoners are most likely convicted of violence against the person (25%) or drug-related offences (8%). This may help to explain why New Bridge Befriendees has a significantly older population that are more likely to have been convicted of a sexual offence. In addition to this, being convicted of a sexual offence often has particular social consequences and what Alice Ievins (2017: 114) refers to as a moral ‘stain’. For many individuals, they may have been cast out from their families – families whom some of them have offended against – and have lost systems and networks of support, leaving them to endure their sentence alone. This is often compounded by a sense of ‘prisoner hierarchy’ in which sex offenders find themselves at, or very near to, the bottom. As a consequence, finding someone who they can connect with on the outside through New Bridge and who often feels like a source of non-judgemental support can be invaluable. This similarly

applies to those convicted of other crimes as well, but in particular those which evoke strong social disapproval, which may explain why a significant number of those convicted of murder, attempted murder, and manslaughter also use the service.

For volunteers, on the other hand, the Befriending Service received **123 applications**, which was a significant **decrease** from previous years (*215 in 2020 and 260 in 2019*). From these applications, **76 were interviewed** (*82 (2020) and 115 (2019)*) and **76 were trained** (*70 (2020) and 61 (2019)*). In total, there were **280 active volunteers** within the service at the year end (*compared to 252 (2020) and 223 (2019)*).

74% of the currently active volunteers identified as female and 26% identified as male. 214 of our volunteers identified as 'White British' (76%), 13% identified as 'White Other', three percent as 'Asian', two percent as 'Black' and two percent as 'Other'. 26% percent of the active volunteers were aged between 18 and 25, 26% were aged between 26 and 35, eight percent between 36 and 45, eight percent between 46 and 55, 10% between 56 and 65, and 24% were aged over 66.

The latest volunteer-to-prisoner ratio (dated January 2022) is 2.03 (*compared to 2.24 (2020) and 2.58 (2019)*). Currently, 130 volunteers (47%) write to only one prisoner each, 91 volunteers write to two prisoners, 42 write to three prisoners, 17 write to four prisoners, three write to five prisoners, three write to six prisoners, and two write to seven prisoners.

The Annual Befriending Evaluation

Having provided an outline on the Befriending Service more generally, this evaluation report looks to detail the responses of the 2021 Evaluation Survey which was sent out to all active New Bridge Befriendedees in prison towards the end of the year. The Evaluation Survey is not sent to those who have been released, nor is it sent to those who have been with the service for less than three months.

As a result, 415 evaluations were sent out to our Befriendedees in prison, and a total of 156 people completed the evaluation survey. This total equates to a 38% response rate (*41% (2020) and 43% (2019)*). Inevitably, some forms were returned with questions that had been left blank. As such, it is important to note that the percentages given in this evaluation are based on the number of respondents who answered each question. Missing responses are not included in the calculations.

The Annual Befriending Evaluation aims to:

- Review the experience of people supported by New Bridge
- Evaluate the impact of the service on the lives of people in prison
- Consider ways in which to improve the Befriending Service

Participants

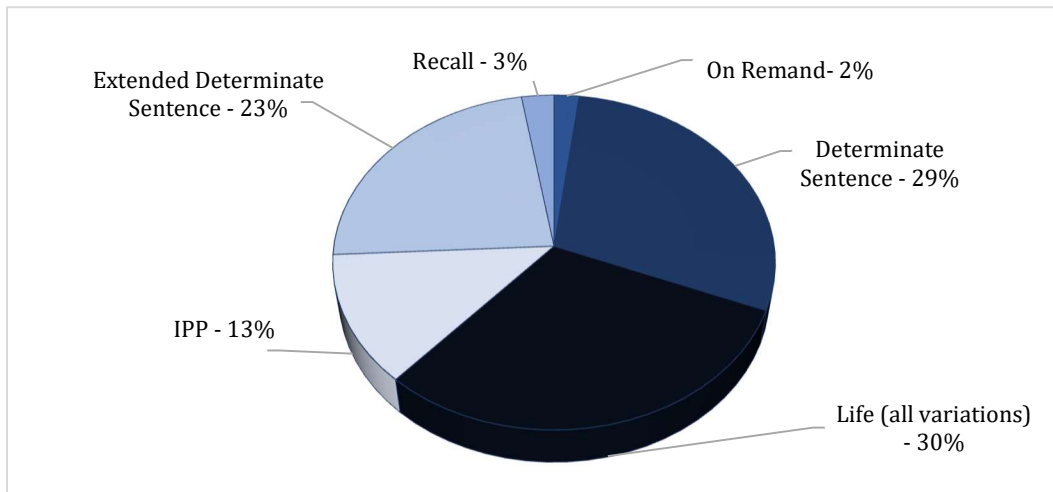
The participants in this evaluation were people in prison and young offender institutions across England and Wales, who sought the support of New Bridge during their custodial sentence. Since applying to New Bridge, some of these people have been transferred to a secure hospital or released into the community. These individuals were also invited to take part. Evaluation forms were sent to all those who were befriended by a New Bridge volunteer prior to December 2021.

Participants included people of all genders, serving predominantly long determinate and indeterminate sentences for a range of offences, including serious offences of a violent and sexual nature.

For **46% of participants**, this was their **first time in prison** (*down from 51% in 2020 and 53% in 2019*). This experience comes with particular challenges because many people struggle with their mental health in the first few months, and those facing long sentences may feel little hope for the future (Crewe et al., 2017; Styles, 2018; Wright et al., 2022).

PART 1 – Comparing the Befriending Evaluation to previous years

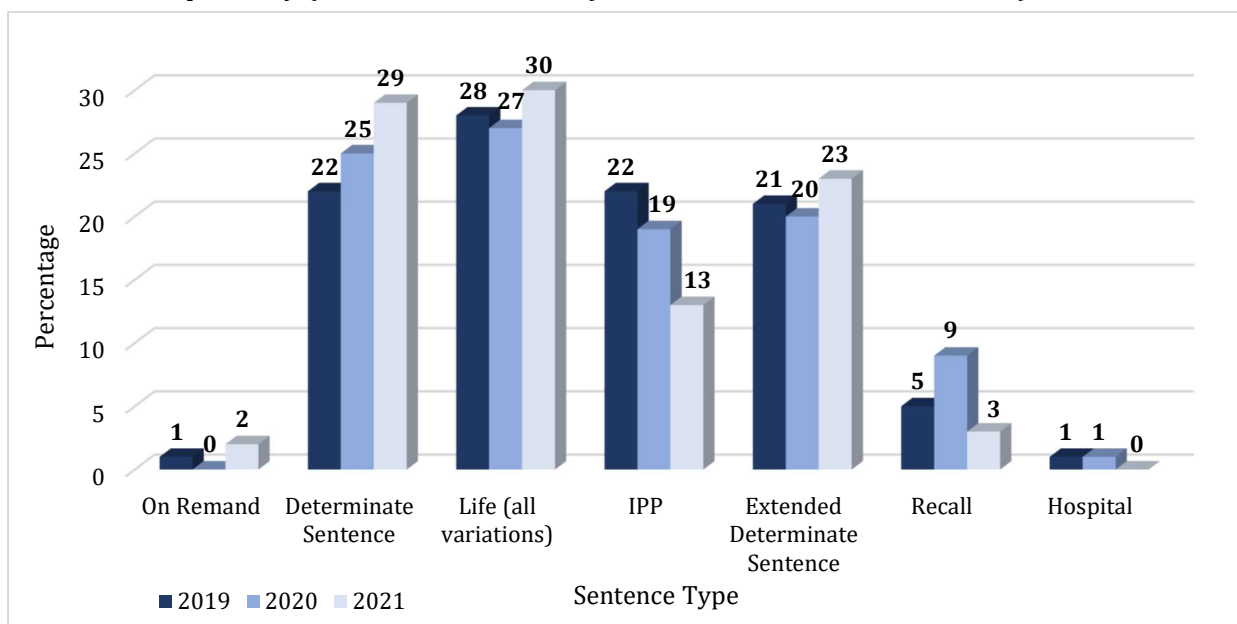
1. We asked our participants what type of sentence they were serving.



43% of all participants were serving an indeterminate sentence (compared to 46% (2020) and 50% (2019)). This compares to only 11% of the sentenced prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2022) (11% (2020) and 15% (2019)). 31% were serving a life sentence (all variations) (27% (2020) and 28% (2019)), and, despite its abolition in 2012, 13% were serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences (19% (2020) and 22% (2019)). The IPP sentence has been widely criticised for its damaging effect on psychological wellbeing, as those serving an IPP sentence do not know when, or even if, they might be released – and even if they are, they will be subject to a lifelong licence (Edgar et al., 2020; UNGRIPP, 2020).

2. 53% of participants serving indeterminate sentences had passed their tariff date (94% (2020) and 87% (2019)).

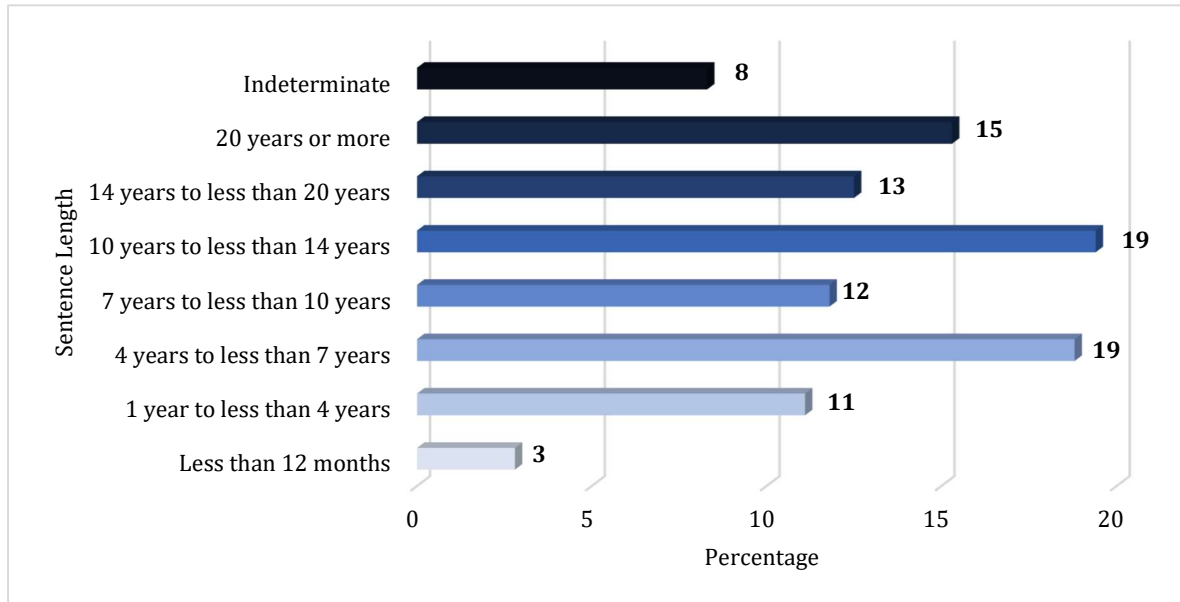
Determinate sentences accounted for around 29% of the sample, with a further 23% serving an Extended Determinate Sentence (EDS) – an increase from 25% and 20% in the 2020 New Bridge evaluation respectively (22% and 21% in 2019 for determinate and EDS sentences).



These increases mirror the wider general prison population, where people serving an EDS have increased by 10% compared to the same time last year (Ministry of Justice, 2022).

Those on recall and on remand accounted for 2% and 3% respectively.

3. We asked participants for the **length of their sentence, or minimum tariff**:

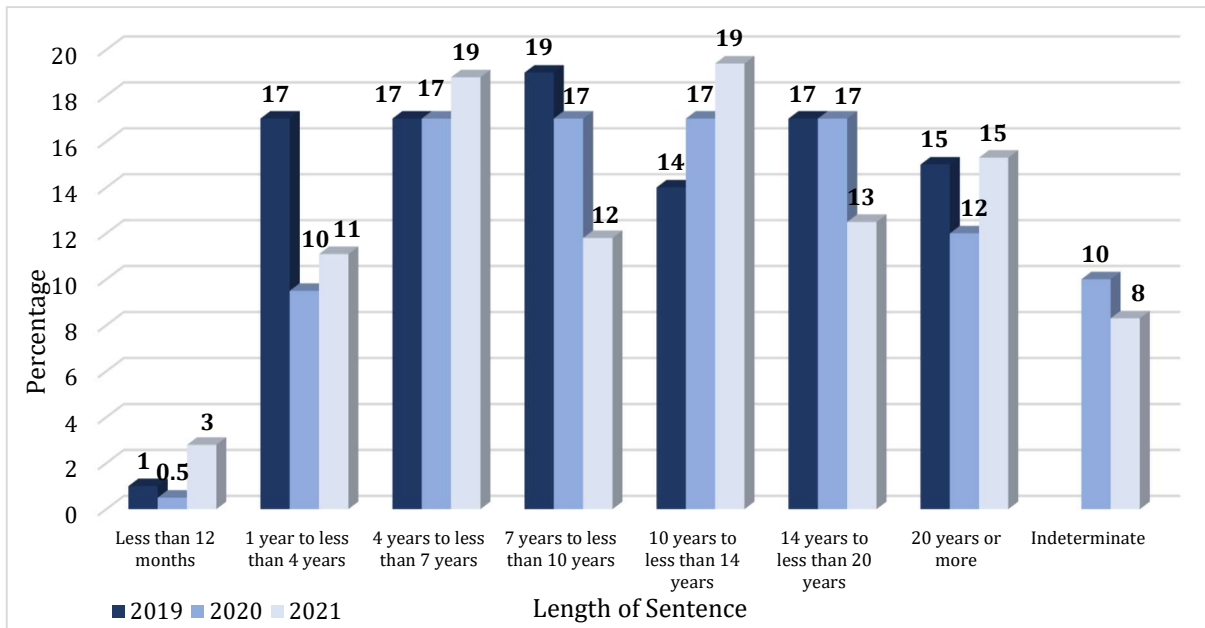


New Bridge typically attracts individuals who are serving long-term sentences: this is often due to the number who are serving sentences for life and sex offences. These individuals have often committed their offences against those known to them (Daly, 2006; Ievins, 2017), which can lead to isolation or exclusion from their family and support networks on the outside.

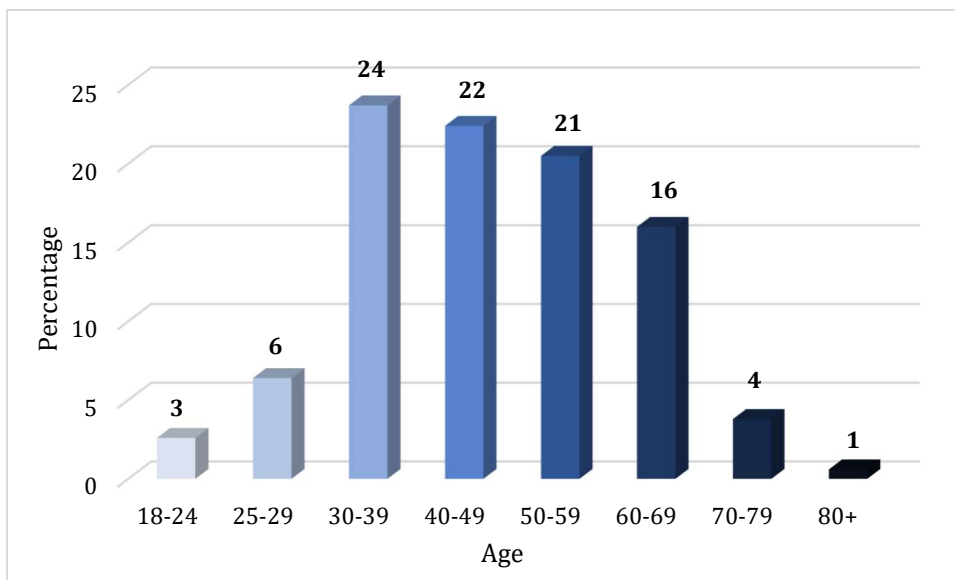
More than two-fifths (86%) had a sentence or tariff of over four years (90% (2020) and 82% (2019)). 32% had a sentence or tariff between 10 and 20 years in length (34% (2020) and 31% (2019)), and 15% had a tariff over 20 years (12% (2020) and 15% (2019)). The number of individuals receiving these longer sentences has increased since last year’s evaluation report, which is in line with the rise in tariff lengths and shift towards implementing very long sentences (see Ministry of Justice, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2022).

A large proportion of this very long tariffs can be attributed to those serving life-sentences:

- 14% had an indeterminate sentence.
- 33% had a tariff over 20 years
- 26% had a tariff between 10 and 20 years
- 26% had a tariff of 10 years or less.



4. We also asked participants for **their age**:



The ages of our participants were broadly in line with that of previous years, with slight declines in the 40-49 and 50-59 age groups from 25% and 24% in 2020 respectively (19% and 26% in 2019).

42% of our participants were over the age of 50, and this is significantly higher than the general prison population, where people over 50 account for only 17% of the prison population (Prison Reform Trust, 2022). In addition, 21% of our participants were over 60 years old and this is in comparison to only 6% of the prison population (House of Commons, 2020). Older people in prison are the fastest growing group in the prison population and have been found to be at an increased risk of social isolation in prison due to poor regimes which do not account for the physical, health and social needs of older people (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2013). This may explain a reason why New Bridge have a disproportionate number of applicants from the older demographic.

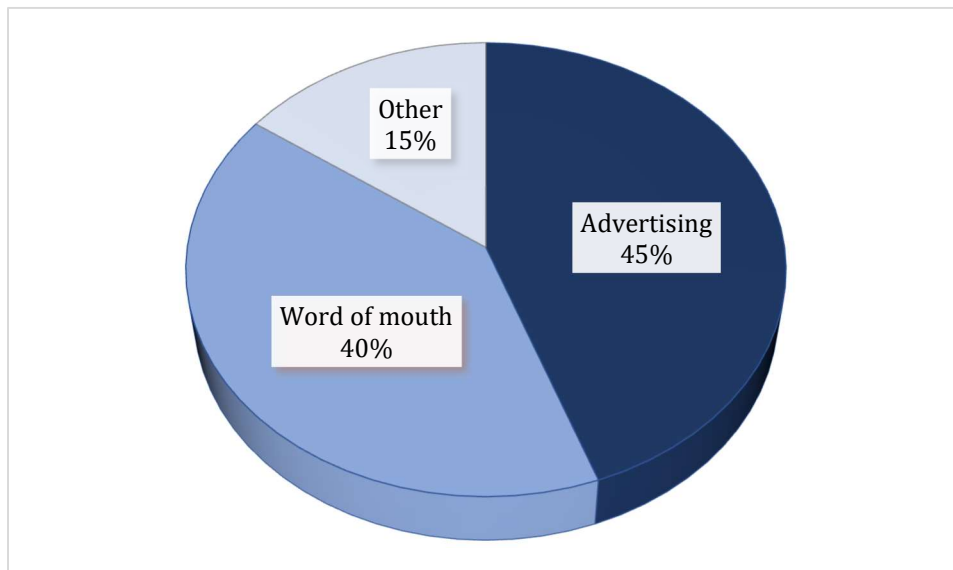
Whilst some prisons offer age-specific activities, others have little meaningful activity for those not in work, consequently those who are retired spend most of the day locked up (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2018). Any work they may have been employed in or purposeful activity they participated in has been disrupted during 2020 due to the pandemic. As a result, letter writing and corresponding with their Befriender became a way to fill the time.

5. Participants were asked **how they found out about New Bridge**.

Over two-fifths of participants (44%) said they had heard about New Bridge through advertisements, a further two-fifths (40%) found out about New Bridge through word of mouth and the remaining participants often heard through other or multiple sources.

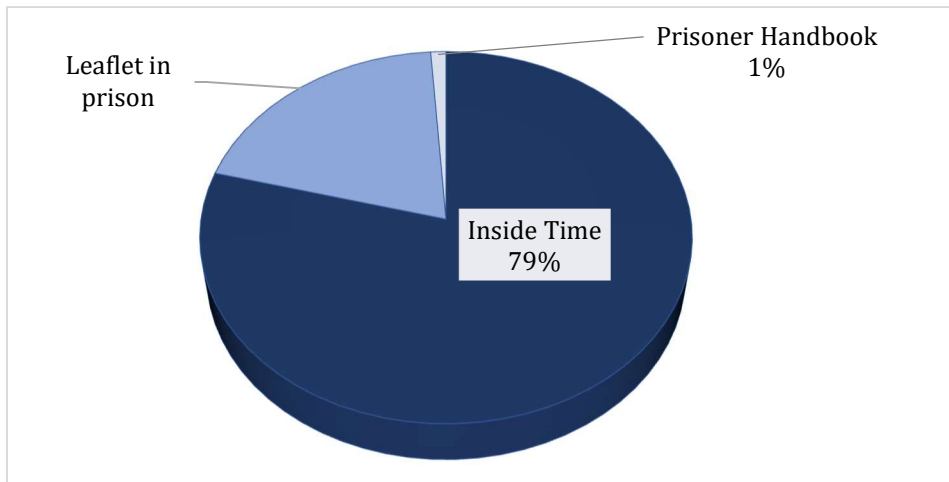
Of those who saw an advertisement for New Bridge, the most common sources were:

- 36% saw an advertisement for New Bridge in Inside Time
- 9% from leaflets or posters inside the prison
- 1 person read about New Bridge in a Prisoner's Handbook

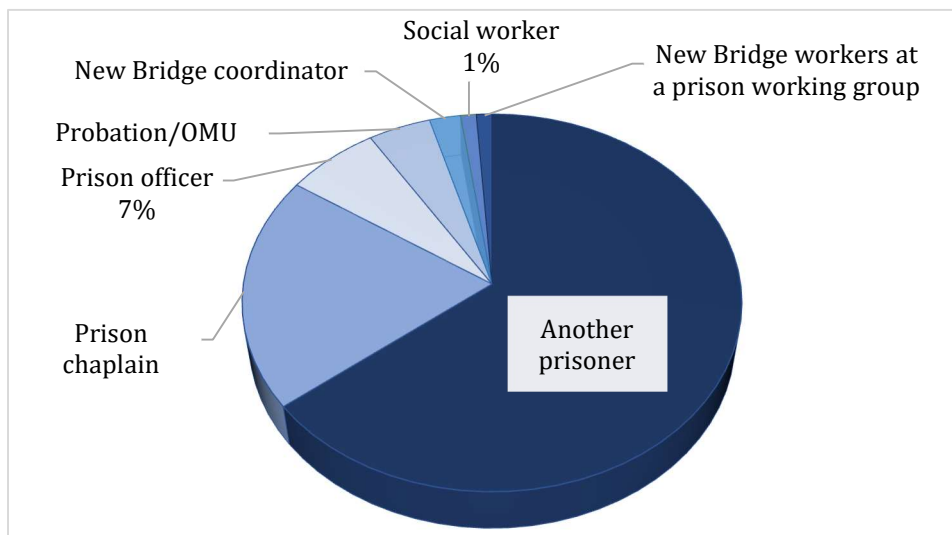


For those who heard about New Bridge through word of mouth, the majority were recommended to apply to by someone else within the prison – often another resident – often acting as a positive indicator of satisfaction with the service:

- 29% said they heard about New Bridge from another resident
- 9% through the prison chaplain
- 3% from a prison officer
- 2% from probation or their Offender Management Unit
- Others heard about New Bridge from a New Bridge coordinator (working at HMP Wymott)
- 1 person from their social worker
- 1 person met members of New Bridge at a prison working group



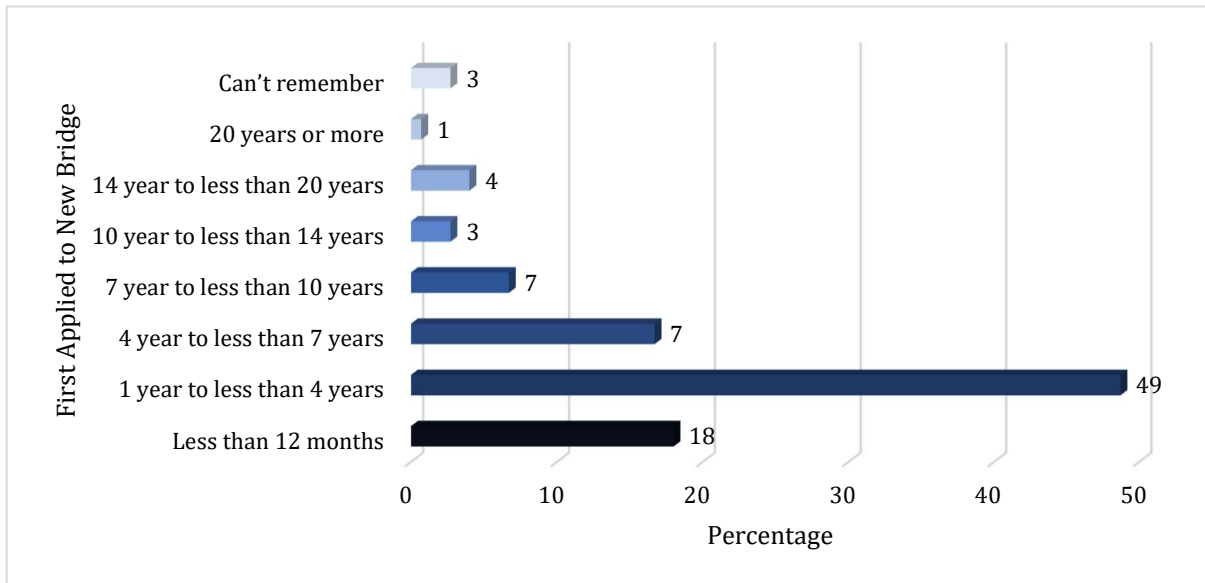
The remaining 15% of participants also heard about New Bridge from multiple sources (including both advertisements and word of mouth).



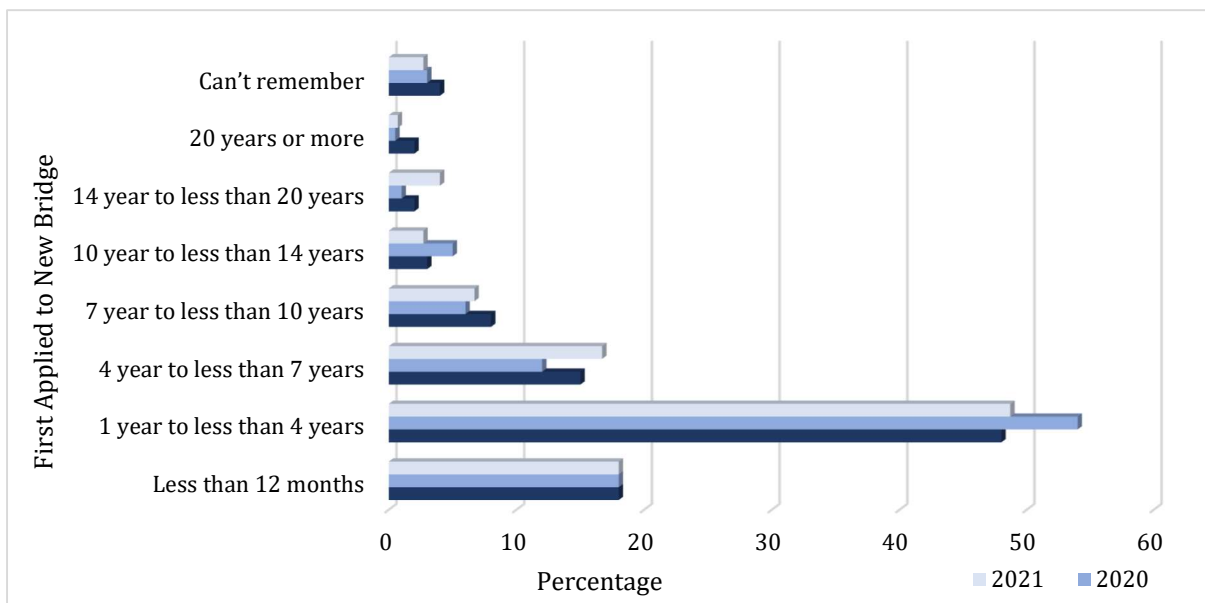
This differed from previous years in which word of mouth was the most common means of how participants had heard about New Bridge (58% (2020) and 64% (2019) respectively).

6. We asked **when they first applied to New Bridge.**

Participants had been supported by New Bridge for varying lengths of time. 67% of the sample had been supported for up to 4 years. 31% had been befriended for more than four years, with 7% having a connection to the charity for more than 10 years, and 1% for over 20 years.



Compared to previous years, the length of time people have been supported for is broadly comparable, with slightly more people being supported between four and seven years, and 14 and 20 years, than in previous evaluations.



7. When asked **why they applied to New Bridge** for a volunteer befriender, five key themes emerged:

1. Someone to write to and – in time – to visit (who shares similar interests)
2. To have contact with someone neutral and non-judgmental
3. To have contact with, and keep up to date with, the outside world
4. Because they have limited contact or felt lonely/isolated
5. To create a support network

'To understand the updates about freedom and to know what is new or has changed since being in prison. It helps my mental health to know there is a human being taking the time to write to me, especially when I was not a people's person before prison. Expectations met.'

'Wanted to correspond with someone of a similar age and interests to mine. I was hoping for both written communication and visits and this has happened. My expectations have been met and my befriender has enabled me to be a better and more confident person.'

'I wanted to get to know someone who didn't know me and would not judge me and that would allow me to be open and honest and to have someone that I could just write to and get to know them with no ulterior motives. my expectations have more than been met.'

'No visitors or people to talk to, was feeling down frustrated, lonely and isolated. Meeting volunteer and exchanging mail has exceeded expectations and made me feel life is worth continuing with.'

'I applied because I like writing and reading letters... I do have friends and family and phone them but do not receive letters (a conversation can be forgotten quite quickly but a letter you can go back to). I was hoping to continue moving forward and keep my head in the outside world. My expectations have been surpassed.'

8. 98% said that the information they received about the Befriending Service and how it worked was easy to understand (98% (2020) and 96% (2019)). The remaining two percent weren't sure, indicating that it had either been so long ago since they had filled it out or that they had received help to do it (i.e. by their offender manager) and so couldn't comment on its ease. It is worth noting that no participant said the process was difficult (in line with the previous year's evaluation).

'Really good, useful and pretty fast. Process was easy to understand and follow.'

'Easy to understand, quick, extremely friendly and life changing.'

'Quite simple and well informed. The prompt replies/updates throughout the process make New Bridge stand out over similar services. It was also nice to receive newsletters and letters from staff whilst waiting for a Befriender.'

'To start with was very slow as I had a very slow response from prison staff signing my application and this did delay and slow down the application reply.'

Participants found the process easy and straight forward. A few people mentioned that there was a long wait, others reported getting a befriender relatively quickly. Some participants mentioned listing convictions felt hard, while others mentioned their personal officer filling in the paperwork for them. Many people commented on how matching with benders with similar interests is really helpful.

Part 2 – Understanding the role of visits by New Bridge and Befrienders

We asked participants about their experience of prison visits. Due to the imposition on COVID-19 restrictions on visit over the past two years, **we asked participants to reflect on the past three years.** This included thinking about the different people who may have visited them, the number of visits they may have been on, the impact they had, and whether they wanted their Befriender to visit (again).

1. When asked about the **impact of visits**, participants described them as being hugely emotional events (before, during and after the visit itself), particularly after not having any during the restricted regimes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These emotions were often positive, providing participants with hope and giving them something to look forward to, but could also at other times generate anxiety and concern about whether visits put their families, loved ones or other visitors at risk during a pandemic. Other themes related to the impact of visits included:

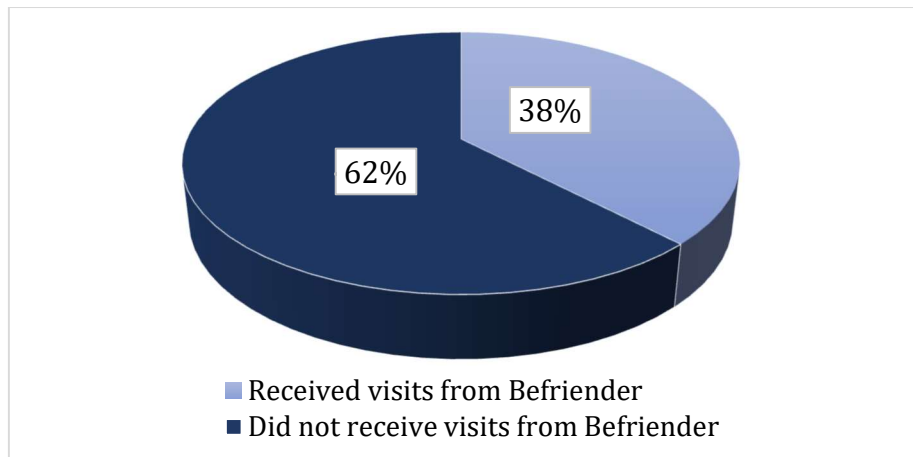
- Providing an opportunity to feel normal again (through having a conversation and regaining the opportunity for intimacy and physical touch where possible)
- Boosting morale and helping with self-esteem
- Enabling participants to see those on the outside
- Providing something to look forward to

2. We asked about **whether there were any restrictions in place for visits** in the prisons that the participants were in. In one-fifth of responses (22%), participants said there were no restrictions currently in place. A further 11% simply described 'COVID-19 regulations' or 'COVID' as the impediment to visits. Others described in more detail what the restrictions were:

- Doing and reporting a negative lateral flow or PCR test (14%)
- Wearing a mask during the visit (8%)
- Social distancing throughout visit (8%)
- No close contact/physical contact during the visit (7%)
- Restrictions in the number of visits and length of visits (8%)
- No refreshments are to be bought during the visit (5%)
- Close family only (5%)

In 12% of the responses, participants did not know if there were restrictions currently in place in their prison for visits, and – if there were – they did not know what they were. Importantly, only 2% of participants said that due to the stage of lockdown regime they were currently still in, were no visits allowed.

3. We also asked participants about **whether they received visits from their New Bridge Befriender.** The majority (62%) said that they had not received a visit from their Befriender.



4. **For those that had received a visit**, they described their visits as being very emotional events which they were often quite nervous or anxious for before they had begun but were enjoyable and uplifting throughout and afterwards. The experience of visits with a Befriender were also described as being:

- Nice to put a face (and voice) to the name
- Like seeing an old friend or family member
- A comfortable conversation with someone who you already know through your letters
- An enjoyable experience that provided a sense of normality
- Time passed very quickly

'I was so nervous at meeting her for the first time but we seemed to get on with each other straight away. The visit was a wonderful experience and it proved to me that not everyone is judgmental'

'It was wonderful, nice, warm and real friendly'.

'It was nice to meet a new person and be able to put a face to the name. They were nice, interesting, took an interest in how I was doing and were open to additional visits in the future (pre/post-Covid)'

*'The experience of my visits with L*** are joyous and uplifting as we communicate through post and its just a nice feeling to talk face to face'*

For a few participants, visits with their Befriender were described as a less positive experience. This related to a sense of awkwardness in the conversation, feelings of guilt when their Befriender would purchase them drinks or snacks from the canteen, and the emotional upheaval related to their Befriender's departure at the end of the visit. Despite these more negative experiences, these participants still wanted further visits.

5. For those that had received visits, over **91% said they wanted more visits** with their Befriender, with many stating that they had enjoyed their previous visit(s), and that they wanted to continue to develop their Befriending relationship. For many, whilst letters remained the priority, they described how they had gotten on well with their Befriender and, like in the outside world, it is nice to see and interact with people you like and share similar interests with. In addition, for many, their Befriender was often their only visitor and the only person they had contact with. As such, these visits removed a sense of isolation and provided welcome interaction.

Other reasons for wanting visits also included:

- Helped with their mental health
- Helped promote their sense of confidence and self-esteem
- Provided a connection to the outside world
- Letters were more formal, whilst visits were more causal relaxed interactions
- Removed a sense of isolation

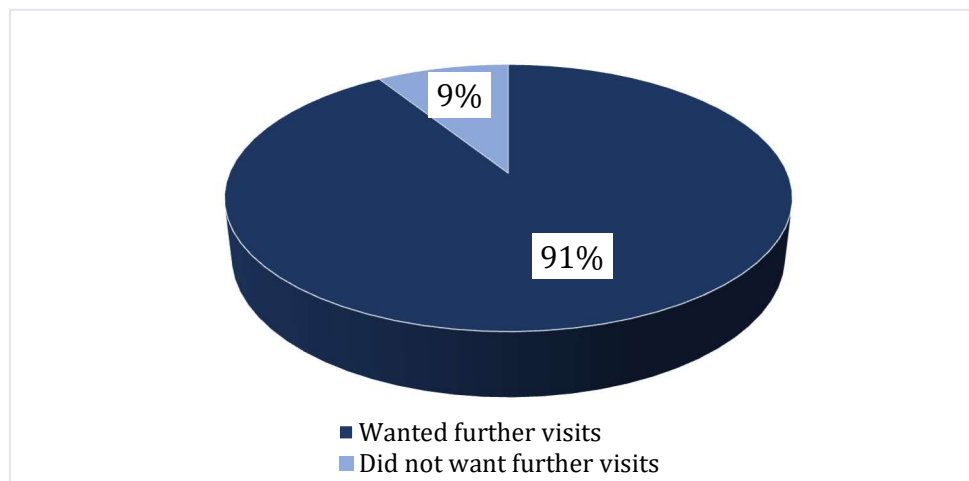
'Because it helps with my mental health and it's nice to have a friend on the out.'

'It is good to build a rapport, have a natural conversation, and sit together for a short while. A letter is more formal, whereas a conversation is less so and more relaxed perhaps.'

'I would like to think that we have become friends and are meeting as such.'

'I feel the visits are good as they do bring us into contact with our volunteers who are supportive, caring and do help with our self-esteem.'

Participants were often clear, however, that they did not want to put their Befriender under any pressure or obligation to visit, and that visits were a happy, and welcome, addition to their letter writing.



Those who had received visits, but **did not want further visits**, mainly explained this as being due to their release date as being so soon (and there not being enough time for another visit). One individual also stated that he had never received the offer of another visit, whilst another described how he didn't like visits.

'Never received one or the offer of one. I don't even get regular letters.'

'My sentence finishes in one week's time'

*'I am due for release next week so I don't want to put T*** under any other pressure. I have told him to spend more time with his family'*

6. For those who had **not received** a visit from their Befriender, over two-fifths (81%) said that they **would like visits in the future**. Whilst many said they did not want to disrupt their

Befriender’s busy life, and that they would only be interested in visits if their Befriender was willing and able, the desire to interact over a face-to-face visit was clear.

Those who had **had not received visits from their Befriender and said they did not want to in the future** often related this to their proximity to release and how they would be out in a few weeks anyway (similar to those who *had* received visits in the past but did not want further visits in the future). They also described how letters were sufficient in providing the support they needed from their Befriender.

Other themes described by our participants also included:

- Felt that they would be disrupting their Befriender’s busy lives
- Did not want to make their Befriender feel obligated to visit them
- Felt that the journey to prison was too long or arduous (for a short visit)
- Did not want to subject their Befriender to the degrading protocol of prison searches and visiting rooms
- Not feeling like they were in a place to accept visits (e.g. undergoing treatment, extremely anxious)

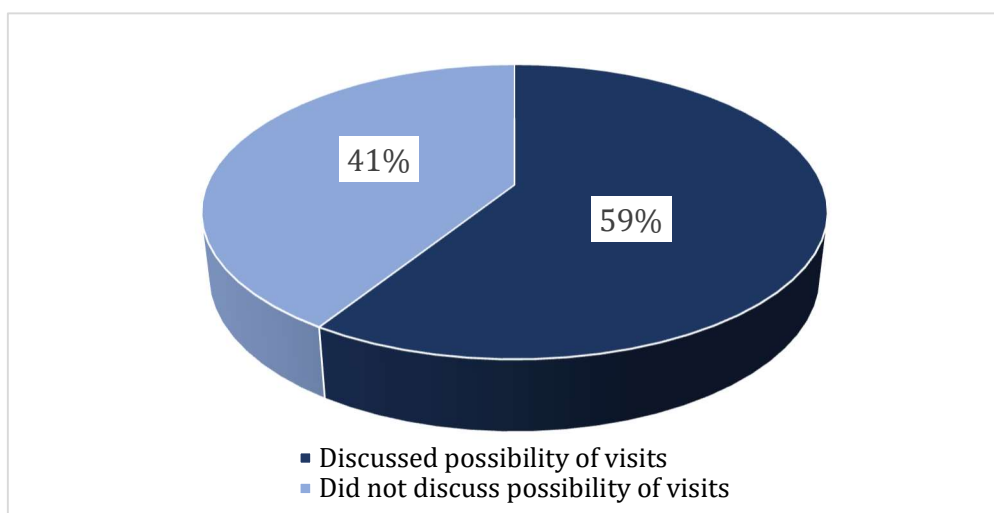
It is worth noting that only one person said that they felt like their Befriender did not seem to express an interest in visiting them.

‘She lives at the other end of the country and, hopefully, as I have parole upcoming I have a slight chance of release.’

‘I wouldn't want them to go through the degrading protocol rules just to visit me. It is not right to expect that’

‘My Befriender is 70+ and I feel it would be an arduous journey’

7. Further than this, **almost three-fifths (59%) had actually discussed the possibility of visits with their Befriender.**



However, for many, this had been before the pandemic had started and, as a result, had not come to anything. They hoped that visits were still something that their Befrienders were willing to do, but in many cases, the topic had not been raised again – as the current restrictions of visits within

the prison was often unclear or unknown. For others, communication had only started during the pandemic, and visiting was not an option due to 1) the prison's COVID-19 restrictions, and 2) New Bridge's guidelines on the writing for six months prior to visiting.

When asked about their Befriender's response to the possibility of visits, participants said:

*'A*** wanted to, but COVID put a damper on it'*

'It was discussed ages ago but then COVID happened'

'She was very happy to visit when I was ready to'

'Positive, she has just been busy. I also said that I didn't want a visit during COVID as we'd be socially distanced and have to half shout at each other'

'Most of our communication was during COVID-19 so visits were not possible'

Part 3 – Recommendations and Improvements

1. When asked if they would **recommend this service to others they had met in custody, 98% said yes**. Many participants said that they *had* already recommended the Befriending Service to other people inside. When asked why they would recommend the Befriending Service, participants said it was important for those who have no other contact with the outside world (those who have no other family or friends to write to or to visit them). The scheme was also recommended for those who were struggling with their mental health.

Other themes that were also described were:

- Helps people to improve/promotes change
- Helps with isolation and feelings of loneliness
- Provides a good form of social and emotional support, promoting wellbeing
- Gives contact with the outside world
- It's an easy to use, professional and unique service
- Provides non-judgmental support
- Helps promote self-esteem by making people feel cared about

'I would recommend the service to anyone, as it is a good outlet to talk and discuss thoughts, feelings and problems in a letter format to someone that can listen and respond with their own life experience. It is nice to build a rapport with someone who appreciates the situation you are in, without you having to keep explaining it. It is also nice to receive a visit, to break up the monotony of prison and to have a natural conversation with someone, not associated with prison'

'From my experience, New Bridge volunteers are a good support network of loving people who care unconditionally which has helped me grow and have confidence while remaining humble'

'I have already recommended to three people since being recalled and they have thanked me for helping write to more people to help them get through their time in prison'

'It gives you a sense of remaining human, someone genuine is invested in you and does not judge you because of your offence. New Bridge has given me self-belief and esteem that I had lost for so many years and I appreciate the support my Befriender has given me. I recommend it to many people'

'The Befriending people are good people and help to make us see and think of the error of our ways and helps us to be better people that like me wish to change and be a proper caring person'

'Already recommended to several people. The service is very prompt and actually achieves what it sets out to do (e.g. bring people together via a letter). Letters and communication always seem friendly and like the team at New Bridge actually care and are importantly non-judgemental to people's crimes.'

It is important to note that the few individuals who said they would **not** recommend the Befriending Service said they would not do so because they do not talk to many people or because they cannot be in contact with others – rather than because they thought the Service was not worth recommending.

2. When asked **what we could do to improve the Befriending Service**, 2/3 indicated that no change was necessary, with many suggesting the service worked effectively as it currently operated. Others, however, made suggestions for improvement, with the most prominent theme – as has been raised in previous years – centring around **raising more awareness** about New Bridge and the Befriending Service.

Participants recommended that New Bridge:

- Promote the service internally and externally
 - Advertising more widely with posters/leaflets
 - Using current service members to promote the service more
 - New Bridge to visit the prisons and promote
- Provide smoother and more frequent communication through alternative means
 - Using emailprisoner.com
 - Using Purple Visits/virtual visits
 - Using phone calls
- Increase the number of befrienders per prisoner
 - Allowing letters in primary language as well as in English
- Increase number of visits and frequency of letters
- Improve communication with or liaison with the prison service
 - To speed up the process of joining and passing post between Befrienders and Befriendees
 - To promote the service internally
- Remind Befrienders of the importance of regular contact (i.e. inform Befriender if they are busy and cannot write frequently)

'Encouraging new Befrienders to be mindful of their moral obligation to maintain regular contact. Having sporadic bi-monthly letters can impact on the positives that one derives from having 'outside' contact'.

'Well maybe do some adverts in leaflets, posters, and on the NPR (Prison Radio) and maybe on a website, like Facebook'.

'The only thing I can think of is Purple Visits. A lot of your volunteers are busy have might have full time jobs. So if you offered Purple Visits I think that would be a good way for me and others to see/speak to their volunteer'.

'How can you improve on something that brings a smile to a lonely prisoner, and friendship to someone that feels lost and alone'.

Part 4 – Befriending Experiences

Participants were invited to tell us about their experiences of their befriending relationship. Stories from seven have been presented as case studies. Pseudonyms have been used.

Kyle is in prison for the first time on remand. He describes how his Befriender has helped him to think more openly and constructively about the future and what he wants from his life.

*Well it was great for once in my life I felt normal, I knew what a smile was, what a laugh felt like. Having someone to understand you, to listen to you, asking someone how their day was and what they been up to and feel what it is like to talk to someone who don't have a crime life. It made me feel happy and looking forward to the next letter and have more laugh and having someone asking me how I am, feeling having someone in a way to help you something like giving some advice or helping you pick yourself up when you are feeling down. Having someone to forget about prison life it made my mental health better asking me what my plans are after my release and made me think I can do better than coming to jail, I should be out there having my freedom, living in my own place being with my family, my kids, having a 9 to 5 job, be able to go anywhere I want in the world and think about what I can be and who I can be and to forget about the past and think about the future that I can have and to make sure I keep on the right path and not ever go back on the wrong path without my J*** I would not be thinking of all this and not be the new person I am today so I am very grateful for everything she has done for everything she has said, the advice she is giving. I owe everything to that woman. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't of seen the light I would be looking in the dark light. If one thing I can say is everyone should sign up it will change your life for better. Thank you to J*** and to New Bridge. I will miss this a lot and miss all the banter and laughs we have had when I will be released from prison and never be coming back for good. 100% sure of that.*

Brian is serving an IPP sentence and applied to New Bridge after reading about it in Inside Time. He wanted to establish an ongoing dialogue with someone untainted by the justice system.

My current Befriender has provided a wide-ranging sharing of experiences that has helped me look at social and personal issues in a more balanced way. We have occasionally had differences of opinion but have worked through said differences in a positive way – akin to an external friendship... Regarding 'thoughts about the future', it has helped me think more as a person of worth rather than just a prisoner. Plus, having somebody you can honestly share/discuss one's ups and down with is a positive thing in my life.

Chris is in prison serving a life sentence. He hoped for a Befriender who was a similar age with similar interests and was paired with someone who he describes has enabled him to become a better and more confident person.

*Talking to H*** has given me the confidence when being out in the community on my ROTL's, enabling me to feel more positive about my future.*

James is in prison on an Extended Determinate Sentence, with a sentence of 20 years or more. He enjoys the richness of the letters he shares with his Befriender.

*I do not get much post here, but always spot her envelopes and feel excited to read her letters. It is the small things in prison that add up to the whole experience and having a BF has really helped me. Through the COVID lockdown, the letter frequency increased, and this was a real help as we had nothing to do in here. It was lovely to hear from BF throughout the lockdown knowing that we and the whole country were going through similar situations, improved the bond and rapport we had together... To carry on the connection with the outside world. I truly appreciate all the effort M*** puts into every letter as it is gladly received. We talk about everyday banalities, sport and current affairs, home and family and deeper discussions about race, gender, sexuality etc. which I have got a lot out of. I have been able to clarify my thoughts and challenge myself as well, with these discussions and I really get a positive experience from each letter and our visit. I enjoy both styles of letter, the more day-to-day and the deeper discussions. M*** also helped me to decide to send a picture into the Koestler Art Awards and I was subsequently published in a book, so I was very proud, and M*** had a big part to play with this.*

Robert is in prison for the first time serving a life sentence. He applied to New Bridge several years ago after hearing about it from another prisoner.

*My pen-pal relationship was already well developed before COVID struck. Its value increased ten-fold when the lockdown in prisons began almost 2 years ago. No one can speak for all inmates but the sense of isolation and abandonment I felt, and continue to feel, was mitigated by regular letters from the outside. At present we have reverted to COVID stage 4, and coping once again with 23hr lockdown in our cells. As well as regular, fulsome, and jam-packed letters, my volunteer S*** also sends me postcards and emails. This connection with the "real" world provides a life-line, a tenuous touch of normality in what is fast becoming isolation chambers of misery in UK jails.*

Sarah is transgender prisoner serving a Determinate sentence. She identifies as female, but is being held in a male prison and, because of this, visits with her Befriender take place in a family visiting room rather than the main visits hall.

*I am a woman prisoner and I have found P***'s visits especially helpful in that it takes me out of isolation once in every while. This is and has been important as I need human contact, I do not have access to human education or employment or any activity that is likely to bring me into contact with prisoners of the opposite sex. Exchanging emails, poems etc. has helped with battling isolation during COVID but does not replace human contact... The visits/letters have had a positive effect on my mental health. I am always delighted when I get emails/visits from D***, it always perks me up and I am very grateful for all the support he has given me over the years.*

John is serving an Extended Determinate Sentence between 14 and 20 years. He applied to New Bridge because he had no one else on the outside and now describes the close bond he has formed with his Befriender. He hopes to one day be able to give back to the service.

*Having F*** is the best friend I could have asked for and even though she is very busy with work and personal things, she still finds time every week to email and write to me and taken time out of her busy days to visit me... I would also like to become a volunteer myself and would like to help someone else.*

One participant also used his survey to write a poem for New Bridge:

Lifeline.

New Bridge.

New Bridge is a lifeline

In people's lives

It will only get stronger

As the days pass us by

To you, you are a charity

But that don't seem right,

Because to me,

You're a lifeline

Who saves people's lives.


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