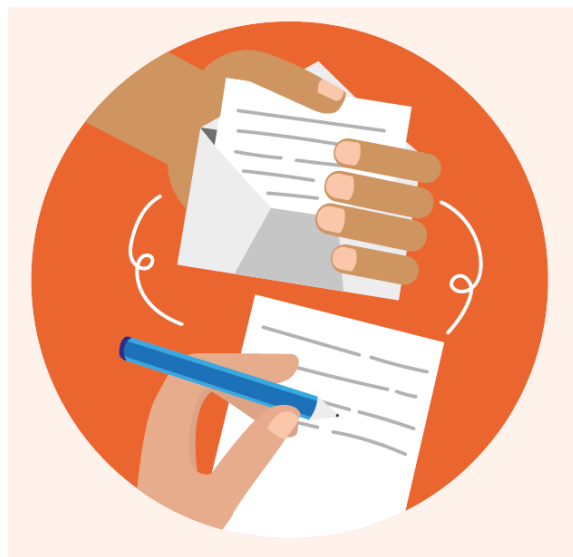




# Volunteer Survey 2025



**“I have felt very touched by my prisoner's willingness to be so open with me, to share so much of himself with me through letters. And I really enjoyed the experience of meeting him in person. I feel volunteering for New Bridge gives me the opportunity to give back to society a little, having received so much support from others in the past.”**

## Introduction & executive summary

We know that the people in prison who our volunteers befriend value their support enormously. Every year our Service Evaluation is packed full of quotes from people expressing their gratitude, and also describing the change their volunteer's contact has brought: improvements in mental health; a better perception of themselves and their place in society; a renewed feeling of being able to get through their sentence; a brighter hope for their future.

Exploring the views of our wonderful volunteer community is also very important to New Bridge. We wanted to find out about how they experience their volunteering role and the support we offer. We hoped to explore whether there were things we could do to improve the experience, and to hear some of the stories about the personal impact that befriending has had.

We're pleased to share the findings of the survey in this report.

We sent out the survey in March 2025, as an online form, and it was completed by 209 people (a response rate of 68%). We are delighted that so many of our volunteers responded to the survey (which far surpassed last year's response rate of 30%), providing useful feedback and sharing many positive stories about their experience.

The survey data revealed that:

- The majority of respondents are befriending two people in prison
- Respondents send on average 1.4 letters/emails to their befriendees per month
- 46% of respondents had visited their befriendee(s) in prison in the last year
- 94% were satisfied/very satisfied with their volunteering experience
- 95% were likely/very likely to recommend volunteering with us to other people
- 99% were likely/very likely to continue volunteering with us this year

The hugely positive impact which New Bridge as a whole has on isolated people in prison is down to the individual compassion and commitment of each person who gives up their time to volunteer. We are hugely grateful to every single befriender.

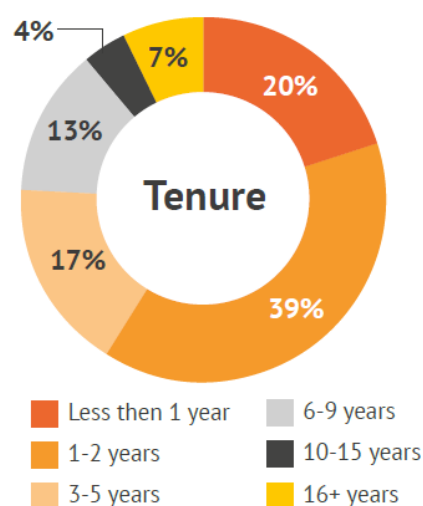
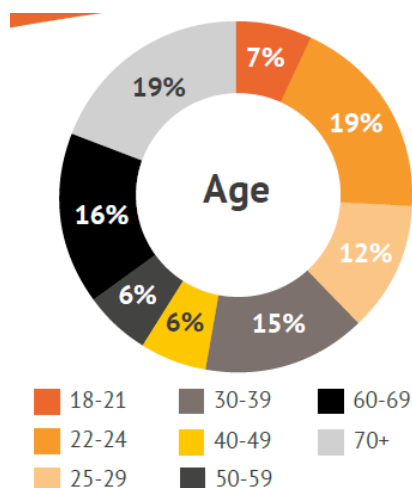
Thank you.

Lucy Ball

CEO

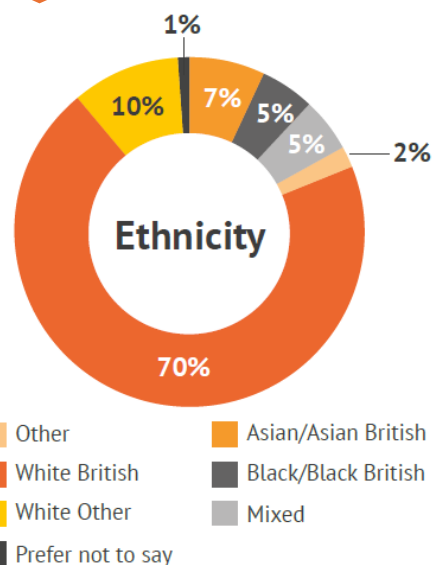
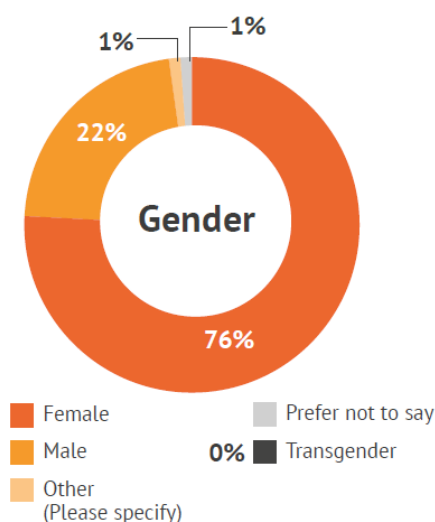
## Our Volunteer community in 2025

Before reviewing the results of this year's survey, we have provided an overview of the current demographic make-up of our volunteer community.



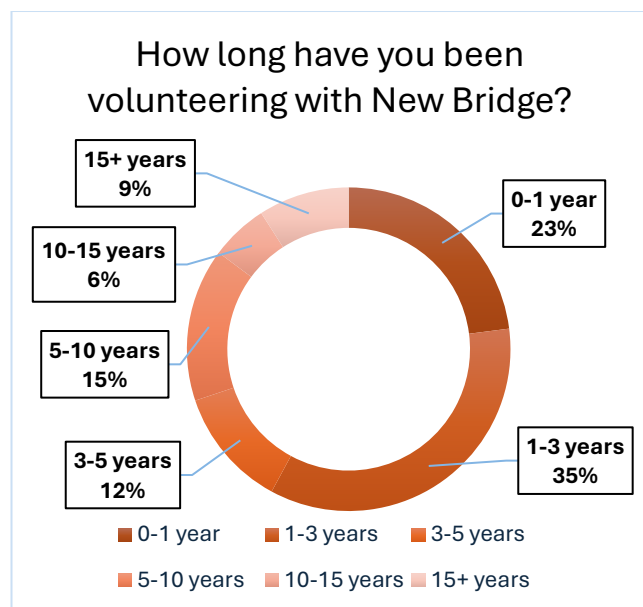
While I like to think I am making a positive difference to the prisoners I have befriended, I have been surprised at how beneficial it has also been to me. It has definitely made me feel good about myself and I genuinely look forward to the visits.

I hope my interest, support and lack of judgemental attitudes means my prisoners feel they are not totally rejected by society and that they can have a worthwhile, positive future. I hope the difference I make to their lives, however small, encourages them away from a dark past to a brighter, better life.



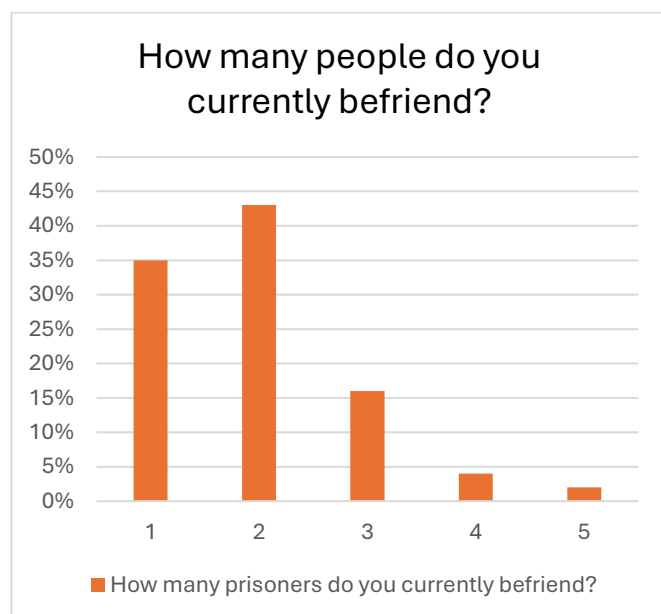
## Volunteer survey analysis

209 people responded to the survey (a response rate of 68%), and the results are summarised below.



The majority of respondents joined New Bridge between 1-3 years ago, and response rates by tenure are as follows:

0-1 year: 75%  
 1-3 years: 61%  
 3-5 years: 69%  
 5-10 years: 62%  
 10-15 years: 100%  
 15+ years: 79%



The majority of respondents (43%) are befriending 2 people, as per our guidance.

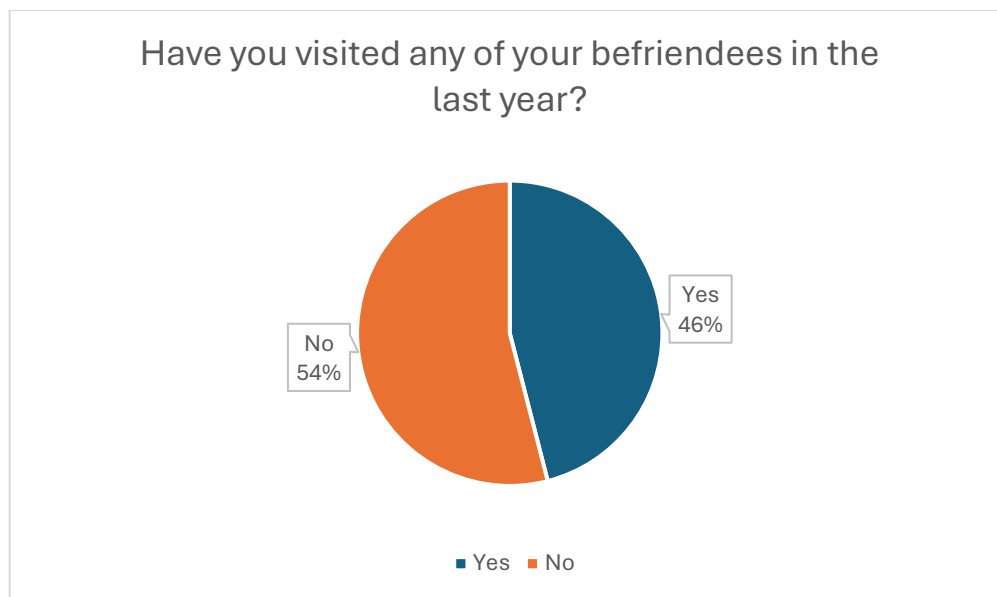
The majority of the 35% of people only befriending one person are still in the first year of their volunteering with New Bridge.

22% are befriending 3 or more people.

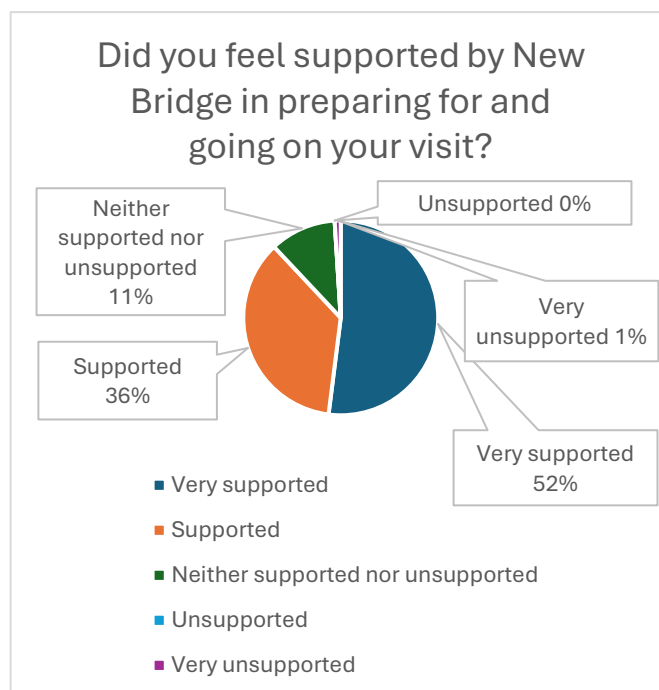
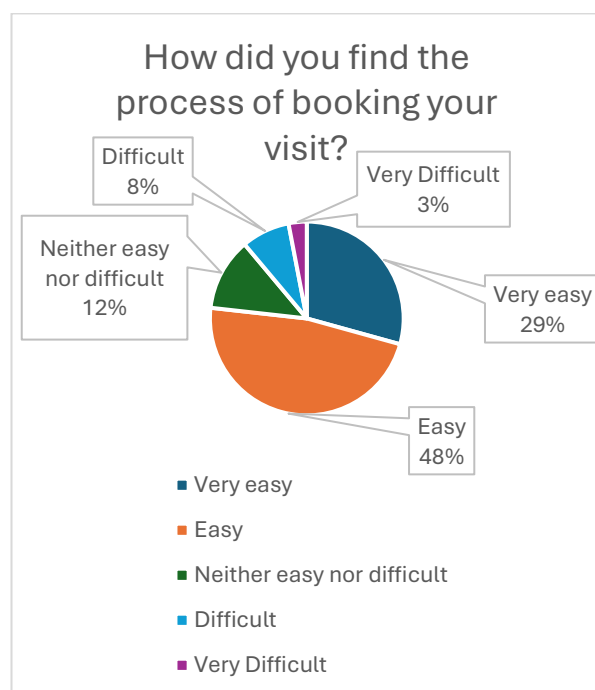
On average, respondents reported **sending** 1.4 letters/emails per month, and **receiving** 1.2 (the same rates as last year).



## Visits

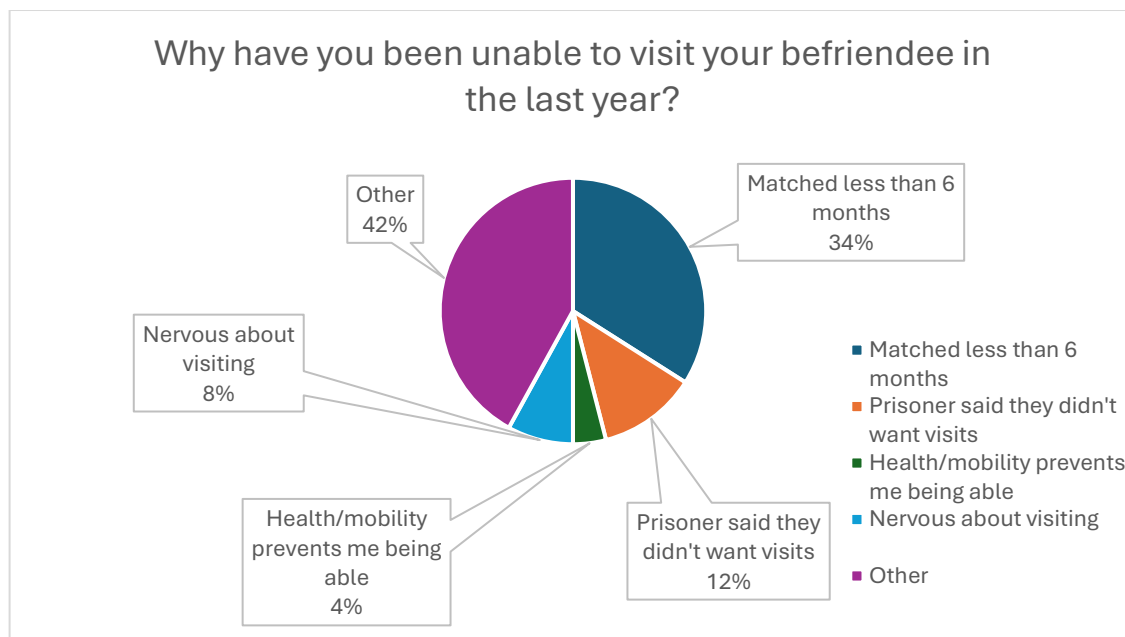


For the people who reported that they **had** undertaken visits:



Respondents report that the visits training (especially hearing from other volunteers who had recently gone on visits) helped them feel more prepared, and that staff were swift to respond to any queries or requests for ID cards. However there was some frustration noted where there had been a particularly long delay or additional complication in getting added to a befriender's visitors' list.

For the people who **had not** undertaken visits:



For respondents who selected 'other', the most common issues were:

- Being very busy with work/study/family and not having time to make visits
- Befriender having recently moved prisons, partway through organising to visit
- Difficulties with prisons' processes for being added to visitors' lists

When asked if we could do anything to make it easier for these volunteers to make visits, respondents suggested:

- Roll out video visits as an alternative
- Lower the threshold for being able to claim expenses for overnight stays for travel to prison visits
- Hold more regular visits training sessions
- Share more positive experiences of other volunteers' visits to help reduce anxiety

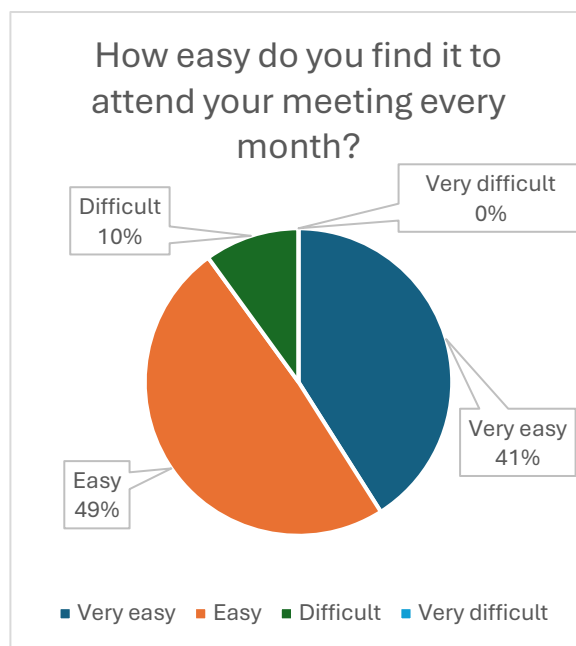
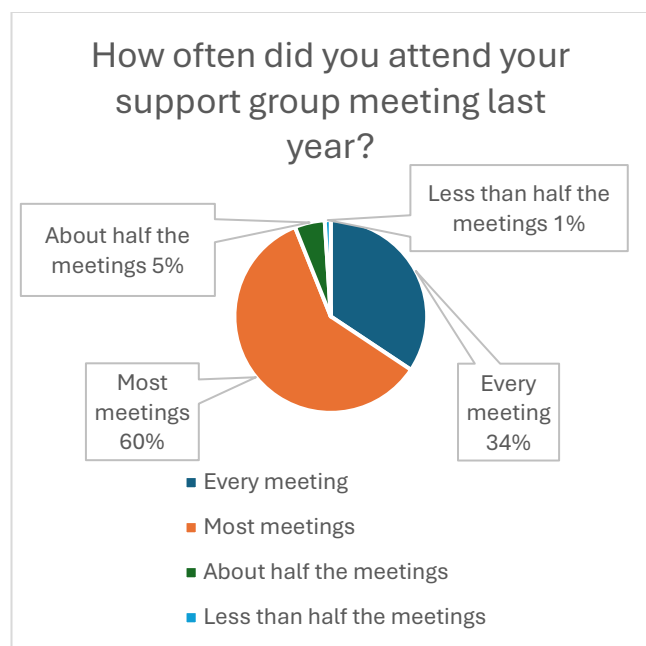
When I visited my prisoner, he was escorted to the table where I was sat and was just so shocked that I had actually turned up to see him. He was stood for about 2 minutes just in silence, and then the biggest smile took over his face, saying "you actually came!?" I was the first person who had visited him in over 10 years, and I could really see how much of a positive impact this had on him

Having a befriender who finds written communication very difficult, I was not really looking forward to visiting him for the first time because I thought we would have a little to talk about. How wrong I was. Two hours flew by and it was the most engaging visit I have ever done.

## Support group meetings

Every New Bridge volunteer joins a Support Group, which meets each month. Group members attend and discuss their befriending (with a case-management style approach) in a friendly and supportive environment, providing the opportunity to raise concerns or seek guidance from the group's Chair (a staff member or experienced volunteer).

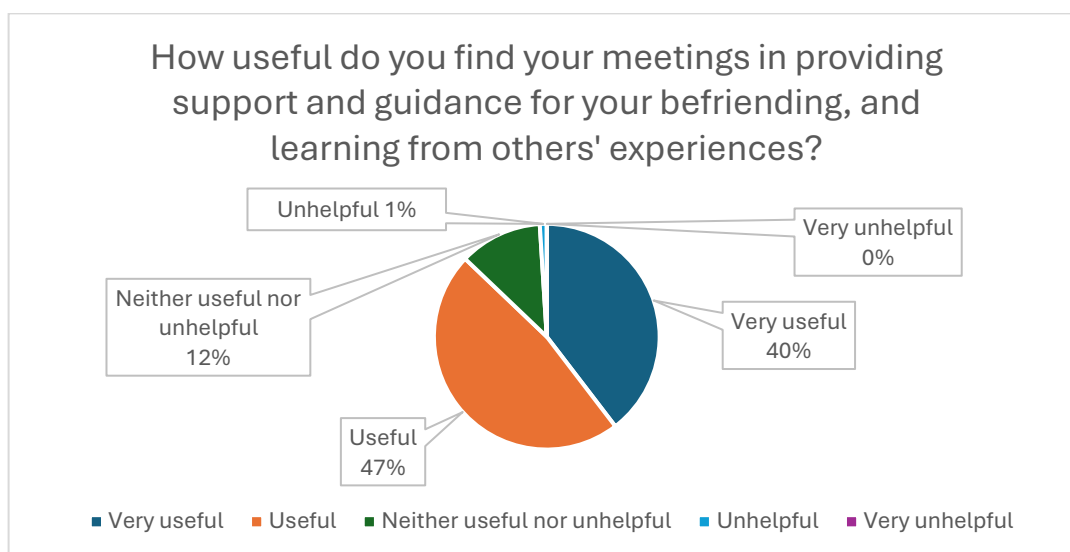
We asked volunteers to self-report how often they attended their support group meetings last year:



For people who selected 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to attend meetings each month, we asked why this was the case. Respondents reported:

- Shift work making it difficult to always be available
- Very busy personal life
- Evening uni lectures which can clash with meetings

**I just always feel inspired after support group meetings hearing about the amazing work that other people are doing**

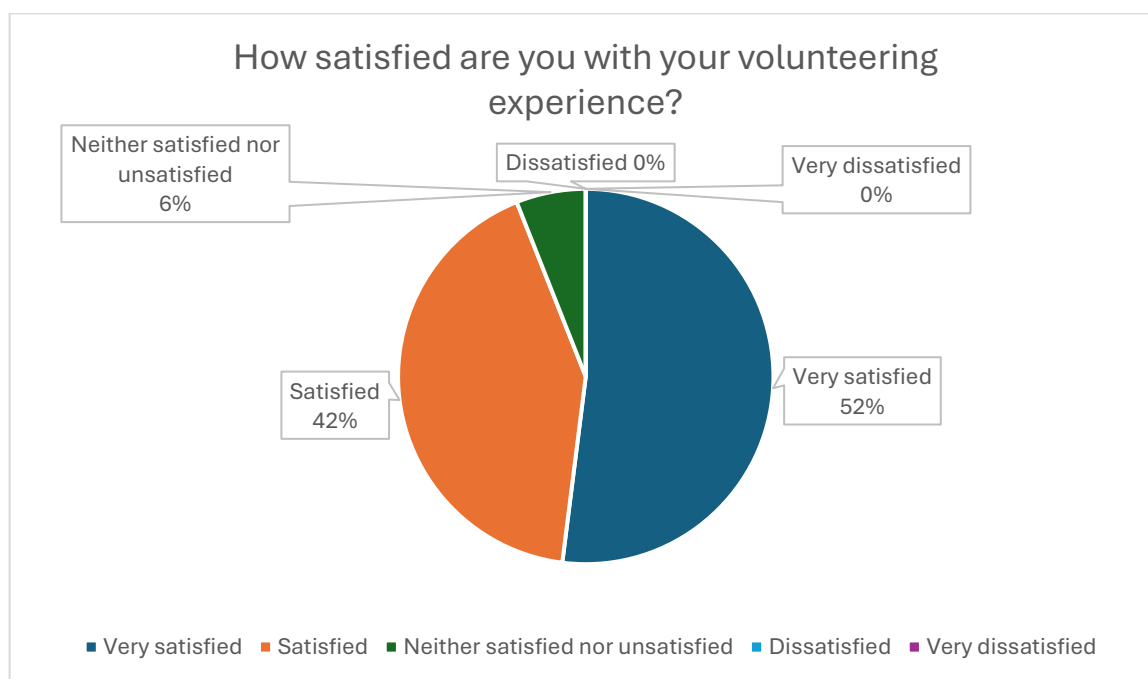


We asked respondents if there was anything we could do to make the meetings more useful to them. The key recurring themes were:

- Get former prisoners to come along and speak about their experience
- More time for discussion on prison-related topics (separate from befriending updates)
- Meetings are particularly useful for new volunteers and help them get up to speed
- Offer some in-person meetings for virtual groups
- Taking minutes to share afterwards

The whole process of coming on board with New Bridge was really supportive and inclusive. Communication is also good within the organisation.

Being told by an about to be released prisoner how much better he feels for the future, how much I have helped change his life coupled with that he thinks he would still be in prison without my support



94% of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with their volunteering experience.



## What is your favourite thing about volunteering with New Bridge?

The key recurring themes were:

- Making a difference to people who are often ignored/shunned
- Meeting new people
- Attending the annual volunteer conference
- Receiving letters
- Working with like-minded volunteers
- Learning about the realities of life in prison
- Going on prison visits
- The flexibility of the role fitting around my life

One prisoner at Stafford where they get the chance to order cake on their birthday chose to order cake 3 weeks early so he could share it with me at my visit

## What do you find most frustrating about volunteering with New Bridge?

They key recurring themes were:

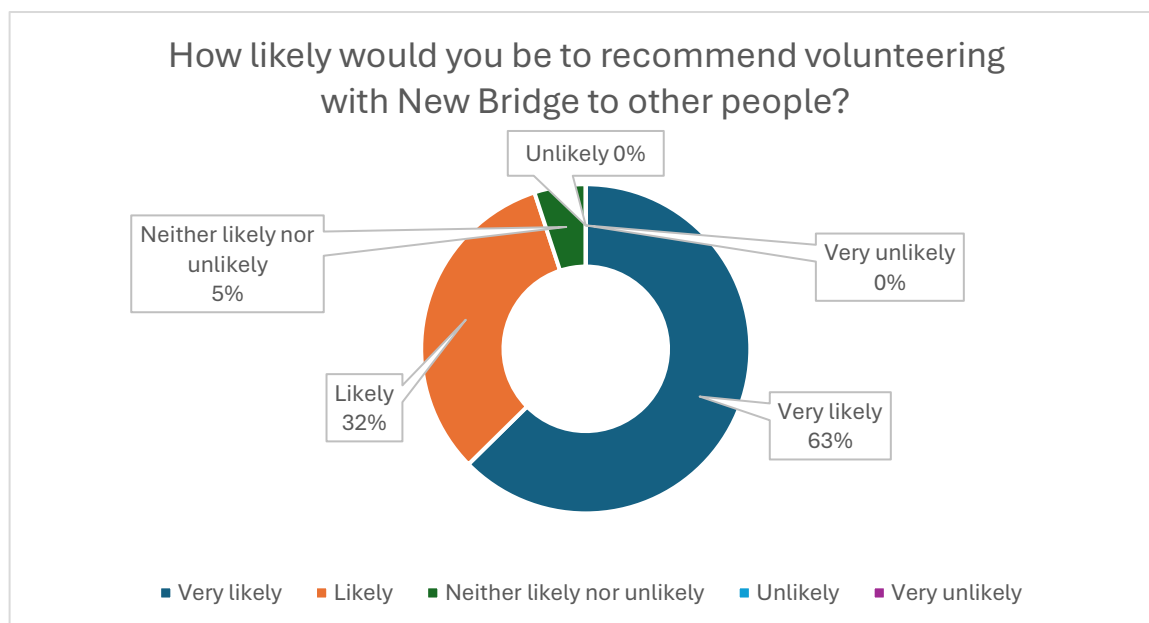
- Slow postal service
- Not being able to help befriendees more
- When befriendees occasionally stop writing with no warning
- Difficulties booking visits
- Attending monthly meetings when I don't have concerns to discuss
- Attending monthly meetings during very busy times in my personal life

## Is there anything we could do to make your volunteering more rewarding?

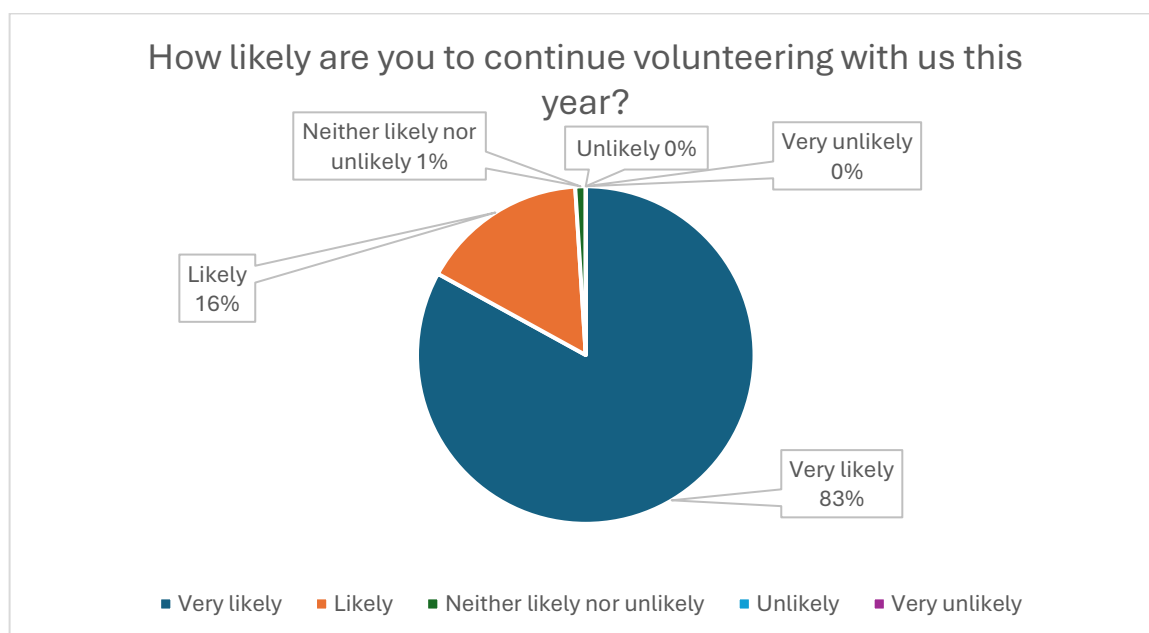
Key recurring themes were:

- Offer more options for in-person support group meetings
- More opportunities to connect with other volunteers beyond those in my support group

I sent a birthday card to one of my prisoners and he wrote back saying thank you for the card and that I was the only person who bothered to remember his birthday. It was a positive experience, but I also found it quite sad, but I'm really pleased I sent him one. It must be difficult enough being isolated in prison, never mind being abandoned by everyone on the outside.



95% of respondents are likely or very likely to recommend volunteering with New Bridge to other people



99% of respondents are likely or very likely to continue volunteering this year.

I've been on 5 visits (including a social day) to see one of my befriendees and each one has been incredibly positive. He taught me a new type of chess, and (on the open day) made a speech to the visitors/prison community about his behaviour and what had gone wrong - it even made one visitor cry! I've been very impressed by his willingness to analyse his own thoughts and feelings, and discuss them with me, a stranger. I get to see all the ideas and hopes he has for the future, and that's a very privileged place to be.

## Recommendations

The key recommendations as a result of the feedback received in this survey are:

- Run a video calls pilot
- Share stories with volunteers of others' positive prison visits experiences
- Consider ways for support group meetings to include updates on criminal justice sector, and training/safeguarding reminders on regular/semi-regular basis
- Share any opportunities to attend prison open/social days
- Signpost volunteers to new research and upcoming public events on criminal justice
- Ensure the visits training sessions continue to run regularly throughout the year
- Review expenses policy regarding prison visits
- Ensure all volunteers are aware of the ability to change their support group if their circumstances change and their current one no longer works for them – i.e. a volunteer whose work/study schedule changes or takes on caring responsibilities which clash with current meeting date, or a volunteer in a zoom-only who does not enjoy online meetings may be able to join an alternative group which meets in person, and vice versa

**To conclude this report, we have shared below the verbatim responses to two questions, since the answers were all so illuminating, positive and inspiring that we didn't feel able to cut any out.**

## How much of a difference do you think your volunteering makes to the people you support?

"I believe it helps a lot, especially when the prisoner has no other contact from outside, and also when the prisoner is moved from prison to prison."

"Prisoners' feedback has been that it is a lifeline and gives a focus on something positive"

"I believe both my prisoners value the letters I write. They both write long and interesting replies (one less often than the other) and are particularly grateful for the Christmas and birthday cards I sent them. I may be deluded, but I think they enjoy the contact."

"I think it makes a substantial difference. I received a letter only this morning from my befriendee saying he looks forward to my letters and I am his only outside contact."

"Definitely a lot, it really helps with loneliness men don't often want to discuss"

"I would like to think it makes an enormous difference. If it didn't, I don't think they would bother writing as they wouldn't be getting anything from it."

"Huge difference . My prisoner has no-one from the outside to hear them or even share things with which I think is important and a basic human right , regardless of their crime."

"It makes a huge difference for 3 out of the four. The fourth is a bit ambivalent about the whole thing - I don't really know why he asked for a volunteer. He seems suspicious of my (ie the NB volunteer)'s motive!"

"Absolutely massive; often we hear that they wouldn't have managed without us; we bring normality into their lives"

"A lot. Positive attitude towards them has really boosted their confidence that they are worthwhile people."

"It depends on the individual, for some it is a real lifeline and provides a thread of hope of a return to some sort of normality; for others it may only be a passing time filler."

"A lot - I have a good relationship with all three of my prisoners. We've been in contact for about five years each, and the longer the time period the stronger the bond. Each of them, in different ways, is quite isolated, so I think they appreciate having someone who is reliable and there for them when they need to talk to someone outside of their immediate dramas"

"A lot. My prisoner has no other connections to the outside community and I appreciate that if I didn't not write to him he would struggle to feel connected at all."

"I know that my prisoner says that he is a different person since our befriending and he is more able to cope with his sentence because he looks forward to letters and visits now"

"I once saw a letter from a prisoner (survey feedback to NB office) and was flattered and surprised how my help was appreciated"

"Huge difference, both my prisoners have mentioned that my support is what keeps them going some weeks and that it's evident I really care about them which is nice as they don't always feel the same support from close family and friends."

"It definitely made a difference when he was in Cat B & C. Possibly less so now he's in Cat D & going out to work & meet with family & friends."

"But there's a lot of pain inflicted by 'the system' - both actively and passively - that we can go some way to reducing or at least helping to take out the sting."

## **Can you share an example of a positive experience you have had in your volunteering?**

"Being sent thank you cards saying I have helped them during dark times"

"Sharing of embroidery and knitting ideas. One person I write to is an embroider for Fine Cell"

"I have had paintings sent to me to say thank you"

"I send postcards of places I have travelled and he says it is a great way for him to get glimpses of the world as he is not going to get to"

"Recently one of my prisoners is going through a sex change and I was pleased that she felt talking/writing to me about it had helped"

"Supported one man for so many years. I saw him transformed from Institutional Hospital state to a person who could conduct a social conversation, gain independence and now live in his own home etc etc"

"It is a symbiotic relationship and I have learnt much from the exchange of letters. Amongst other subjects we discuss vegetable and annual planting plans and I am not sure many other prisoners or officers would be as interested as I am in what they both produce in their horticultural departments. On my visit to North Sea Camp I was able to see all the planters and hanging baskets that my prisoner had

produced for the local town of Boston. It was very impressive. And on the Isle of Wight Steve has doubled profits from the sale of his veggies!”

“One prisoner was released after nearly 40 years inside, following a whole life order and two previous recalls. He was very anxious about returning to the 'real' world but I spent a lot of time writing and visiting him for about 14 years and on release we set up email contact and he would email me very regularly, twice weekly in the early days, to ask simple everyday questions. This has resulted in him establishing an independent life, is generally happy and coping well without any further recall or issue with his Probation Officer.”

“One of my befriendees was able to be released from prison as our letters proved he could positively interact with the community”

“My prisoner hadn’t heard from me for several weeks , it turns out he did not receive a letter I had sent . So he reached out to New Bridge to check in on me . I sent my next letter, he replied saying how he was concerned about me as not heard for sometime.”

“Being told how important a visit is. Being told how much a Christmas email meant.”

“It’s also lovely to receive birthday and Christmas cards.”

“The person I wrote to shared his feedback from a review he had with me; he was very proud of the feedback and wanted me to see it. I was very proud of the progress he is making. He has said to me that he is very proud of making a Platonic relationship with a woman and this has helped him move forward with building healthy platonic relationships with others”

“In December I really enjoyed meeting my support group in person for a lunch to celebrate one volunteer’s retirement (Bryan). It was lovely to get to know people a bit better.”

“Meeting fellow befrienders with whom I felt I had a 'connection'; Doing something I had never anticipated doing but something that has opened up a path into an area I previously knew next to nothing about.”

“One of mine is released. I offered to “let him off the hook” writing to me if he wanted - and he replied that in his new world of uncertainty, it was very important for him to have “my support” for his mental wellbeing and please could we continue to correspond.”

“I befriended a prisoner for about 10 years before his release. He was settled for 4 years and then recalled after reoffending. His first thought was to contact me via the NB office and he said 'I can't believe you still want to support me after what I've done. I've let you down but you're still there for me.' That's what we do.”

“Going to see a befriender on a social day and them proudly showing me artwork they'd done”

“One of my prisoners moved a long way away but I still visit him but he put in for a move south again on compassionate grounds because he was frightened he would lose me. I was very touched.”

“Phone communications with Peter on the occasion of him hearing the good news of recommendation for release following his parole hearing. I was the only person he could share this news with outside prison, since his Dad had passed away just three months earlier.”

“Networking with new people in our group which is run by a fabulous chair.”

“Receiving my first letter was a very positive experience.”

“My first visit of any type to a prison took place at the end of 2024. I met one of prisoners I had befriended. My befriender stated how important it was and was very grateful for being recommended to New Bridge by the prison authorities. Our meeting lasted 2 hours and could have easily have carried on for a further 2 hours. It was mutually rewarding.”

“Because we are a similar age its enjoyable sharing past trips and adventures - I think it gives Neil a chance to dream of travelling once he is released. It certainly makes me appreciate my freedom - I think it is a two way thing. We also share a few laughs in the correspondence which is nice. Neil often thanks me and looks forward to my letters.”

“Attending the annual conference i.e. connecting with other volunteers.”

“Finding a group where I experience respect and diversity, having struggled in a previous group that felt resistant to change or self-reflection and governed by a central 'hard core' of volunteers which I failed to permeate.”

“I sometimes mention my dog in my letters and one of my correspondents asked for a photo. I was able attach a photo (of just my dog) very easily. It meant so much to him. He told me that it had put a smile on his face all day and that he had had it printed and it is now by his bedside (my dog is pretty cute!).”

“Being able to share the successes of each of my prisoners - visiting one the day after he got the news he was going to be released on parole and seeing his emotion; visiting another on his day release and being able to go for a coffee in a coffee shop; being phoned by my other befriender when he received the news he was moving to a PIPE unit which he'd been wanting for ages.”

“Lots of examples but worth mentioning that at the meeting last night I quoted a bit from Martin's letter and told the others about the incredible improvement in his language and literacy levels that I believe have been exclusively derived from our communication since 2016.”

“Receiving a letter from a prisoner thanking me for continuing to write and visit him following our first visit. Meeting for the first time following his release and being free to sit in a cafe, have a meal and just be 'normal'”

“Having been asked to be my prisoners next of kin.... which if course was not allowed bit I found it very comforting that my prisoner trusts me enough to at least ask in the first place.”

“SM invited me to his prison's social day - it was fantastic! I spent several hours going around chatting with prisoners about their experience and with other charities. I got to see the layout of his wing. He was able to do a speech and reflect on his behaviour, and overall it was a really positive day.”

“one prisoner said he had stopped self harming due to our correspondence.”

“I have felt very touched by my prisoner's willingness to be so open with me, to share so much of himself with me through letters. And I really enjoyed the experience of meeting him in person. I feel volunteering for New Bridge gives me the opportunity to give back to society a little, having received so much support from others in the past.”

“One of my befriendees makes models out of matchsticks - in written communication I regularly praise him for having such a passion for this activity and being so talented. On one particular visit he was allowed to bring out a train carriage that he had made, purely from matchsticks. I felt the sense of pride that it gave him being able to show me his work.”

“Visiting Koestler exhibition and seeing prisoner’s art contribution on the wall – and being able to report back to them”

“For me, the positivity comes from the small changes in my befriender's behaviour. His recognition or acknowledgement of any problematic behaviour and the subsequent changes he makes to this behaviour. For example, in our last phone call, my befriender discussed an incident where one of the other men in the prison got aggressive with him due to the result of a game. Previously, my befriender would have retaliated aggressively but instead he used words to try and mitigate the situation so that his good behaviour record was not tarnished. This is positive progress. I always ensure to praise him for this kind of behaviour as its important to me that he is thinking before acting.”

“One prisoner said he would not have committed his offences if he had known me in his earlier life”

“During my correspondence with one of my prisoners we always talk about art. Recently, he send me a doodle and asked on my thoughts on it (what kind of meaning i see behind it) and asked if he could keep sending little doodles like this on a piece of paper to brighten up my busy life with colour and i thought it was truly amazing that someone who has never even met me wants to brighten up my day like this as much as i do to him through volunteering!”

“My first visit with one of the men I befriend was a majorly positive moment in mine - and my befriender's - journey with New Bridge. Unsure of how to identify him, or how the experience would go, when he walked in and I saw the smile on his face, it had made the whole journey worth it. We talked non-stop for two hours and left knowing more about each other than we had managed to communicate in six months of writing. It was such a wonderful experience.”

“Just how friendly the prison staff and other visitors are, when we are herded through on visits. There is no sense of judgement, these are human beings we are visiting. For me also I have found it is just a matter of writing month after month - I don't have to write the most exciting letters, it is a matter of just being there to connect with another human being - we all have far more in common with each other than we expect.”

“One of my befrienderes was going through a tough time mentally and she said that she felt like she could only open up to me because the prison didn't care about her but I did. She said that just being able to vent was more support than she ever received in prison and she was thankful she had someone who cared and listened”

“Not receiving further letters or contact from a released prisoner.”

“The implied trust given by my prisoners in sharing their burdens.”

“An invitation to his graduation ceremony (when released) from one prisoner who has been awarded his masters degree.”