



Befriending Service Evaluation Report 2017

Introduction

"I had taken courage to write and look for a friend who would be non judgemental but a person I can trust to be able to be open about my thoughts and feelings. My friendship has developed and feeling of support and care when I have in the past felt as no one would want to support me because of my offending. This has helped me to develop trusting others as I find my way and work on myself to change my self defeating behaviour. My friend is very supportive and encouraging and she's very supportive of the work I am doing to change and learn important things about myself."

Every year, New Bridge asks people in prison, who are supported by our befrienders, to participate in an evaluation of the support they receive.

In 2017, 165 people contributed to the evaluation, serving predominately indeterminate and long determinate sentences for a range of categories of offence, including serious offences of a violent and sexual nature. For 44 % this was their first time in prison. Prior to contacting New Bridge 42% had no contact with the outside world.

95% said that the information was easy to understand and some commented that they were surprised by how quickly they received their first letter. More than 90% said that their expectation of letters had been met and that New Bridge had helped to reduce their feelings of isolation. 85% said that New Bridge had improved their emotional health and wellbeing

Many described their lives in prison and the difference befriending has made to them – we have included five in this report.

"My experience with my befriender has been a very productive one, he has offered some excellent words of wisdom when I have needed them, he has helped me appreciate the little things in life and he has also been someone who I am now proud to call a friend due to his level of effort and commitment."

New Bridge would like to thank all the people who took the time to complete the questionnaire and share their experiences. New Bridge is determined to continue to grow its befriending and provide more support to more prisoners.

We would like to thank the Governors and staff of the 80 plus establishments in which people we befriend are located. Without their assistance, our evaluation would not be possible.

We are particularly thankful to Sophie Rowe and Morag Kennedy, New Bridge Volunteers and Criminology Lecturers at Birmingham City University who analysed the data and produced the report.

Judith Smith
Chief Executive

The Befriending Service

New Bridge has been providing support to people in prison for 62 years. We believe fostering a positive relationship with the outside world will improve the emotional wellbeing and self-esteem of those in prison and help them to re-integrate effectively into the community when released.

Befrienders provide support through letters and prison visits. Anyone in prison in England and Wales, over the age of 18, can apply to receive support from New Bridge; if they are moved during their sentence befriending can continue continuously regardless of where they may be moved to.

Befrienders provide people in prison with non-judgmental, trustworthy and consistent support independent of the Prison Service. For those in prison who have little or no contact with family and friends, New Bridge helps to bridge the gap between prison and the wider community.

Evaluation Aims

- Review the experience of people in prison who are engaged with New Bridge
- Evaluate the impact of the service on the lives of people in prison
- Consider ways in which to improve the Befriending Service

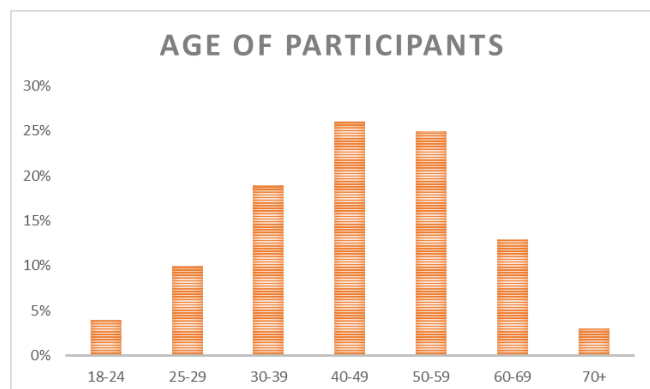
Participants

The participants in this evaluation are held in prisons and youth offender institutions across England and Wales who, during their sentence, have sought the support of New Bridge. Since applying to New Bridge some of them have been transferred to secure hospitals, they too were invited to take part in the evaluation.

Forms were sent to all those befriended by New Bridge prior to June 2017, a total of **165 people contributed to the evaluation** (46% response rate), five of which have formed case studies. Prison staff returned 4 forms indicating that some people had recently moved location or had been released. Inevitably, some forms were returned with questions left blank. As such, it is important to note that percentages mentioned in this evaluation are based on the number of respondents who answered each question. Missing responses are not included in the calculations. Participants included male, female and transgender individuals serving predominately indeterminate and long determinate sentences for a range of categories of offence, including serious offences of a violent and sexual nature (around 50% of the people befriended by New Bridge have been convicted of sexual offences).

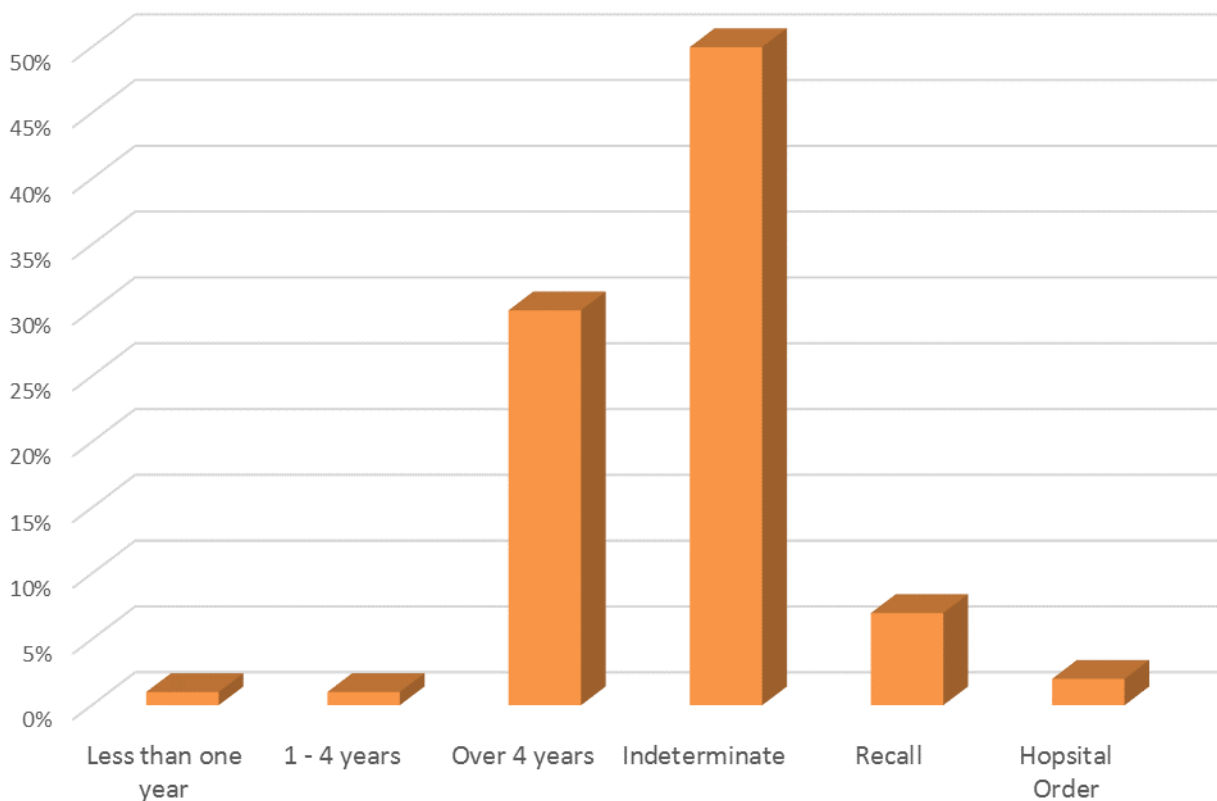
We asked participants for their age.

- 4% were 18-24 years old
- 10% were 25-29 years old
- 19% were 30 to 39 years old
- 26% were 40 to 49 years old
- 25% were 50-59 age category
- 13% were 60-69 age category
- 3% said they were 70 years or older



41% of participants in the evaluation were over the age of 50. Given that people over 50 accounts for only 15% of the general prison population (Allen and Watson, 2017), it is evident that older people are disproportionately more likely to apply to New Bridge. An increase in historic convictions following the exposure of a series of high profile sexual abuse cases, has meant on average, people in prison convicted of sexual offences are much older upon their first entry to prison. Undeniably, there can be added difficulties in maintaining contact with the outside world when charged with a sexual offence, as sex offences are often committed against a family member or close relation.

We asked participants what type of sentence they were serving.



The most frequent type of sentence being served was an indeterminate sentence. 59% of participants were serving this type of sentence, with 34% serving life (all variations) and 25% serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences. This compares to only 14% of the sentenced prison population (Prison Reform Trust, 2017), providing evidence that people serving indeterminate sentences are disproportionately more likely to apply to New Bridge.

The number of participants serving life sentences, has increased by 6% from the 2016 New Bridge evaluation. This may be due to the introduction of harsher sentences in England and Wales, such as the introduction of mandatory life sentences for those convicted of a second serious sexual assault. Also the length of time people are serving a mandatory life sentence is increasing - on average spending 16 years in custody, up from 13 years in 2001 (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). Of the 45 participants serving IPP sentences who chose to disclose their tariff expiry date, 87% had exceeded their tariff. This mirrors findings that 86% of people serving an IPP sentence in the general prison population are imprisoned after their tariff expiry date has passed (Ministry of Justice, 2017).

Determinate sentences accounted for 32% of the sample, with 8% serving an extended determinate sentence, **30% of the sample reported serving a determinate sentence of more than 4 years**, with 2% serving 14-20 years, and 3% more than 20 years. Those on recall and those serving determinate sentences of less than four years accounted for 7% and 2% each respectively. Participants who had been transferred onto a hospital order accounted for 2%. Whilst there has been a gradual decline in the number of individuals being recalled to custody, there has been a rise in the number of extended determinate sentences available for courts to impose (Ministry of Justice, 2017). The use of very long determinate sentences has increased dramatically over the last 10 years, and in the last 12 months alone the number of individuals serving determinate sentences of 14 years and more has increased by 8% (Ministry of Justice, 2017).

For 44% of our participants this was their first time in prison. This experience comes with particular challenges; many people struggle with mental health in the first few months, and those facing long sentences may feel little hope for the future (Easton and Piper, 2017). The Befriending Service plays a vital role in helping people to adapt and cope with their confinement through the maintenance of outside relationships, and preservation of self-esteem.

Participants were asked how they found out about New Bridge.

The majority of the participants (61%) said that they heard about New Bridge through word of mouth:

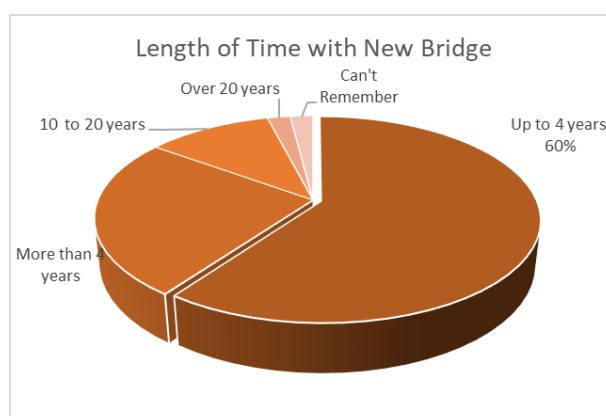
- 32% said that they heard about New Bridge from another prisoner
- 14% through the Prison Chaplain
- 7% from their Offender Management Unit
- 2% were recommended by a friend or family member
- Others stated that they found out by word of mouth, a Prison Librarian, Mental Health Staff, and other external visitors.

39% found out about New Bridge through advertisements:

- 27% saw an advert for New Bridge in a newspaper (Inside Time, Jail Mail and The Sun)
- 12% said that they saw New Bridge advertised in a leaflet in prison

We asked when they first applied to New Bridge.

- 17% said less than 12 months ago
- 43% said up to 4 years ago
- 18% said up to 7 years ago
- 7% said up to 10 years ago
- 7% said more than 10 years ago
- 4% said more than 14 years ago
- 2% said over 20 years ago or more
- 2% could not remember



Participants had been supported by New Bridge for varying lengths of the time. 60% of the sample had been supported for up to four years. 25% had been befriended for more than four years, with 11% having a connection to the charity for more than ten years, and 2% for over 20 years.

When asked why they applied to New Bridge for a volunteer befriender, five key themes emerged: (1) access to non-judgemental support; (2) contact with someone outside the prison community; (3) to hear different perspectives; (4) help with building trust; and, (5) emotional support.

One participant said: *“I wanted intelligent conversation, I wanted friendship from someone I could be vulnerable with, and I wanted hope - hope that someone could see past my crime and accept that I'm just a person. Hope that I may keep my mind active enough to avoid the worst that the stagnant alienation of prison can cause and hope that I could believe that I am worth redeeming”.*

95% said that the information they received about the Befriending Service and how it worked was easy to understand.

Participants also commented on how quickly they received their first letter. One participant said: *“I had received a prompt reply with easy to understand information, I was told of the boundaries and the value of this service. All that was stated and hoped for has been met!”.*

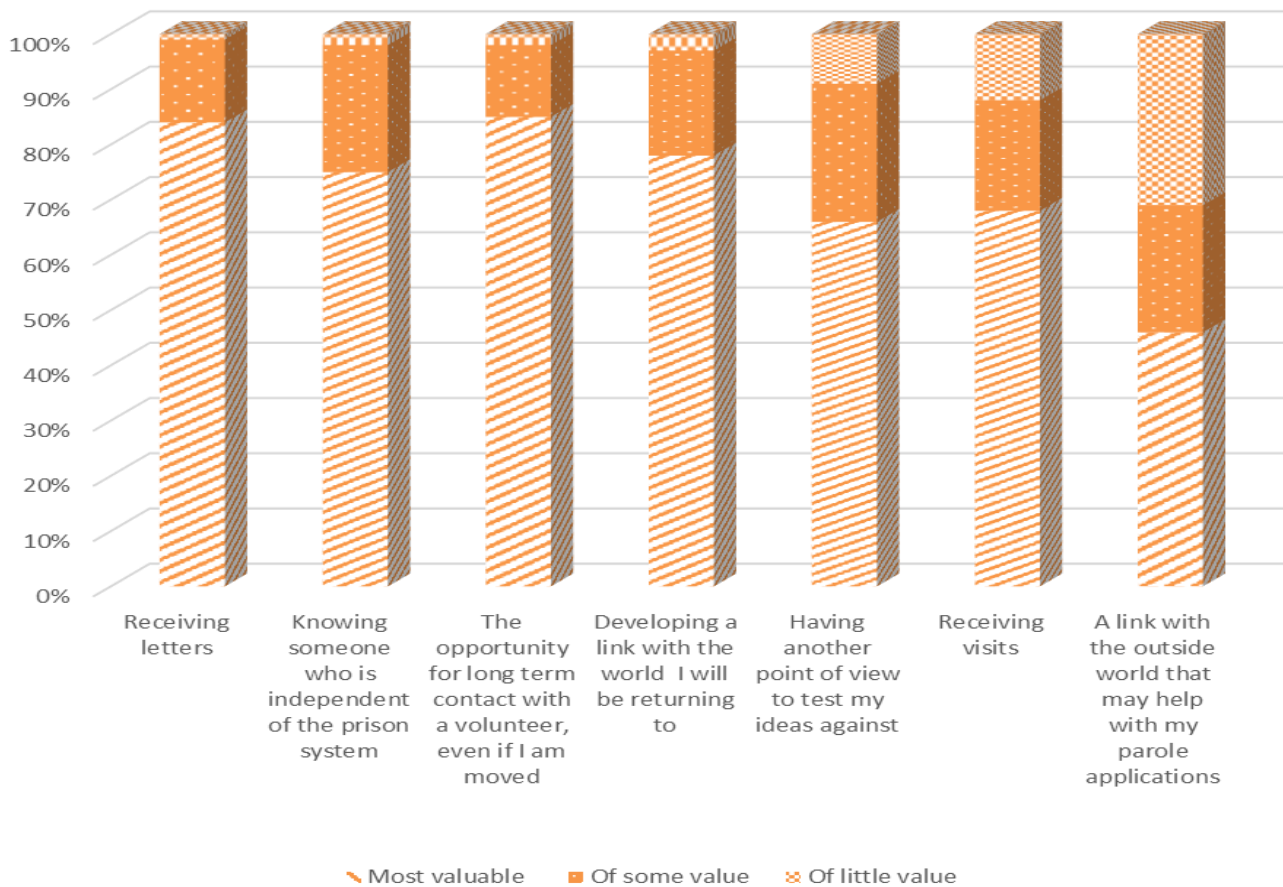
Some reported feeling anxious about disclosing nature of their offence on the application form, although these feelings were resolved once the befriending relationship started: *“When I had to disclose my offence I had mixed feelings, who would want to write to me, but I’m glad I did”*.

Others reported problems with the referral form not being passed on by their Offender Management Unit: *“I had a few problems receiving the application. It was sent to OMU and they did not forward it on. This happened twice, I only received the form once it was addressed directly to my personal officer”*.

Participants were asked how often they write to their befriender.

- 2% said more than once a week
- 8% said once a week
- 24% once a fortnight
- 32% once a month
- 6% once every 2 months
- 2% once every 3 months
- 26% said that they had no set pattern

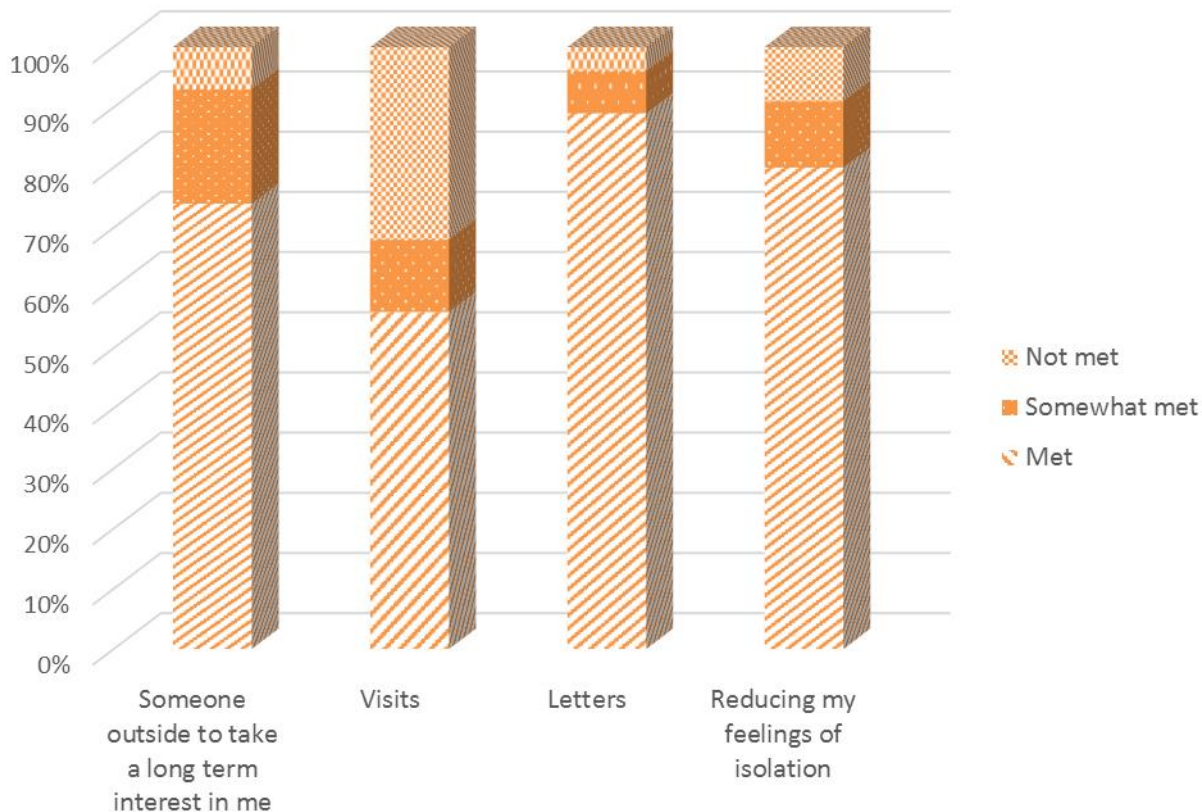
We asked participants to rate the value and importance of New Bridge services.



Receiving letters, knowing someone who is independent of the prison system, the opportunity for long term contact with a volunteer, and developing a link with the world they will be returning to were considered the most valuable aspects of the Befriending Service, with all but five participants rating them as most valuable or of some value.

It is interesting to note that some people valued letters more than face-to-face visits, and in some cases even stated that they did not wish to receive visits. 12% of participants said that visits were of little value or importance, and that 31% said the same about receiving help with their parole application.

We asked if expectations of the Befriending Service had been met.



On the whole, participants' expectations of the Befriending Service had been met or somewhat met.

- 93% said that their expectation of someone outside to take a long-term interest in them had been met or somewhat met
- 68% said that their expectation of visits had been met or somewhat met
- 96% said that their expectation of letters had been met or somewhat met
- 91% said that New Bridge had helped to reduce feelings of isolation

Of the 32% participants who expressed that their expectation of visits had not been met, 8% applied to New Bridge less than a year ago. It is probable that some volunteers are still building a rapport and are yet to visit. Many respondents said that they would like visits to be allowed more often.

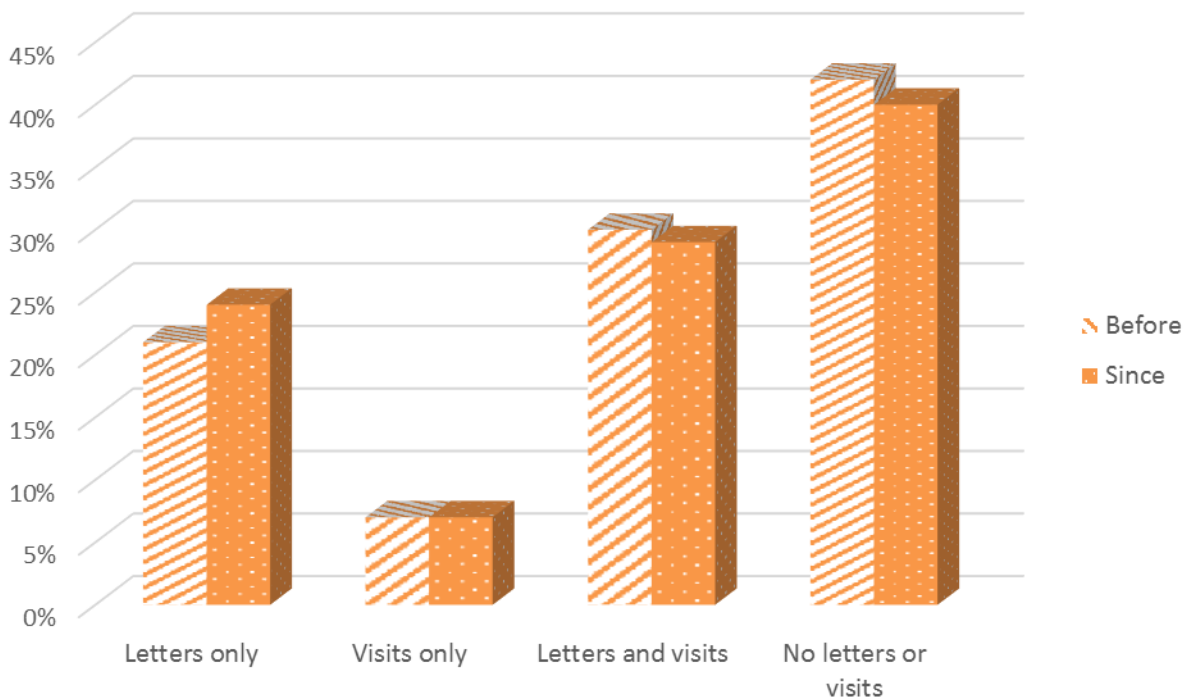
"Have your volunteer be able to visit more than 4 times a year."

"Allow a visit every 2 months instead of every 3 months."

85% said that New Bridge had improved their emotional health and wellbeing.

We asked participants if befriending had improved their emotional health and well-being and 85% said that it had.

We were asked participants if they had contact with anyone else outside prison before and since they started writing to a New Bridge volunteer.



42% said that they had no contact with the outside world before writing to New Bridge. 21% of said that they only received letters, 7% said that they only received visits, and 30% said that they received letters and visits.

As demonstrated on the graph above, participants had largely maintained contact with someone outside of prison since writing to New Bridge. Family relations have proven to reduce recidivism and aid resettlement (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2016). This finding is promising given that social ties are particularly difficult to maintain in prison.

For those who said that they received other letters and/or visit, we asked why they chose to use New Bridge as well.

Some participants said that they found support from family and friends to be unreliable, judgemental, and sometimes negative. It was also mentioned that visits were often irregular or infrequent.

"Friends can be unreliable very on and off. Family is mostly cards on special occasions."

"There's always drama with family, every visit and call something negative."

"There is a marked difference in the depth and content of the letters from my volunteer."

Some said that they valued getting to know someone new with a different perspective.

"As much as I love my children and parents I felt I needed somebody who would challenge me in a good way."

"Someone outside of family/friends is important. It gives a different perspective on life and the world."

Others said that New Bridge gave them the ability to talk about problems that they did not wish to share with family.

"So I can speak about stuff I would not share with my family from childhood."

When asked if they would recommend this service to others that they have met in custody, 98% of participants said yes!

Many participants said that they had already recommended the Befriending Service to staff and other people inside. They especially recommended the scheme for those who do not get visits or outside letters, and those who need additional support.

"I'd always advise a prisoner not to suffer alone, use New Bridge.".....

"It's good for people with nobody to write or talk to."

Participants were asked to tell us their story about their befriending relationship. Stories from five befriendees have been presented as case studies. Pseudonyms have been used.

Billy was serving a life sentence when he read about New Bridge in Inside Times. He hoped to form a friendship with someone independent of the prison system.

My experience with my befriender has been a very productive one, he has offered some excellent words of wisdom when I have needed them, he has helped me appreciate the little things in life and he has also been someone who I am now proud to call a friend due to his level of effort and commitment. He has helped me to see a future for myself which would not have been acknowledged if the New Bridge charity was not active. Not only has your service helped me to enhance my life, but it has also helped me to be in touch with an amazing, successful family orientated individual so I just want to take this opportunity to highlight how productive and happy your service has not only made me, but also countless others. Hope is hard to grasp in places such as this, but because of your platform (network) you manage to make it a realistic and achievable possibility.

Violet is a transgender woman in prison for the first time. The Prison Chaplain recommended New Bridge to Violet as her family are unable to visit because of the distance.

I am a transgender woman, having a visitor from New Bridge has helped me through even some of the darkest times I have been going through when I have faced transphobic abuse and discrimination and as a result have felt even more isolated. This service has helped me and, indeed, lifted my mood and it helps me to focus on looking forward to my next visit/letter. I am living as a woman in a male prison which is difficult at the best of times. While my New Bridge volunteer is trying to understand all this, just having a chat on a visit I find to be most helpful and uplifting.

Norman is serving an indeterminate sentence for public protection. His tariff expired six years ago. He sought the support of New Bridge for a sense of normality and for someone to talk to.

I could never have imagined that such an intelligent, knowledgeable, well read, understanding, compassionate individual - let alone someone who would voluntarily write to someone in prison convicted of Christ knows what - like me, but she did. My befriender encourages me in many different ways to better cope with all my fears and anxieties - not just about my previous cancer or it's return but the future, my life as well as the day to day stresses of unimaginable trauma of life in the British prison for a person of previous good character. My befriender has kept me in touch with common sense, decency and her support has helped my resilience, because there have been times when it was all too much. Her patience as a busy woman is remarkable.

George is serving an extended determinate sentence, he applied to the Befriending Service over 14 years ago after losing a close relative.

I didn't have anyone else to write to or to talk to. I became isolated and depressed to the point I was considering taking my own life, I was then informed about New Bridge. My befriender is around my age, funnily enough from the town I was born in, and we have a lot in common. My befriender has been there when I have down days and to be honest I do believe that if I hadn't contacted New Bridge I would not be here.

Edward is a convicted of a sex offence serving an indeterminate sentence for public protection. He has been supported by New Bridge for over 7 years.

My befriender is one of the kindest, generous, most giving person I know. He has been supporting my efforts to be released since 2009, is very sympathetic and thinks the amount of time I've served is insane thanks to the IPP. We have exchanged stories, we've written as we'd both like to be writers one day. We share similar interests in sport - football, cycling, squash and walking and are both avid fans of the England football team. We've been supportive of each other when England go out of major competitions. Before I wrote to my befriender, I thought my life as a social leper was going to be rather bleak. 8.5 years of sharing thoughts, hopes, ambitions, dreams and disappointments with my befriender has helped me to realise there are people out there who are prepared to give even sex offenders a second chance.

When asked what we could do to improve the Befriending Service the most prominent theme was around increasing the frequency of visits. One participant suggested that New Bridge volunteers could choose a befriender nearby to make visiting easier.

"Perhaps find a befriender in the prisoner's area, so it is easier for them to visit."

Others recommended phone conversations with befrienders as an additional support.

"It would be nice to phone my befriender as I don't speak to anyone other than my befriender in 3 months intervals on a visit."

Lots of people suggested raising more awareness of the Befriending Service through advertisements in prison and the community.

"Maybe advertise for volunteers in a wider range of places e.g. churches, doctors, universities, suitable publications etc. Asking volunteers to speak at events or for groups like the Women's Institute may also bring more volunteers/funding."

There were also some comments made about widening the New Bridge network via a newsletter which could be shared with volunteers and those inside.

"Some information on the outside world for inmates as an update so we are not left in dark ages."

"Encourage new befrienders - share past successes."

Some proposed introducing a new policy to allow people in prison to give something back to New Bridge.

"Let prisoners give a little back to the befriender i.e. arts and crafts. Let prisoners give back for the years of support, it is very important for offenders to give a little back."

"Maybe towards release dates to be able to send a thank you item through the office. Items like matchstick models, or 3D origami models."

References

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