



Befriending Service Evaluation Report 2018



HM Prison & Probation Service

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Judith Smith
Chief Executive
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By e-mail: judith@newbridgefoundation.org.uk

Dear Judith,

Re: New Bridge Befriending Evaluation 2018

Many thanks for sending me the above evaluation, which I am very happy to endorse.

It is over 20 years since I first observed the work of New Bridge volunteers supporting long term prisoners, many of whom had little or no family links and were located a long distance from home.

The dedication, commitment and enthusiasm of the volunteers had a visible impact upon the individuals they were supporting. I am, therefore, not at all surprised to see the impressive results of the evaluation.

Prisons can be very busy spaces where, despite the numbers of people, many can find them isolating and struggle to cope with the environment.

The very positive impact that prisoners report on their feelings of isolation, well-being, self-esteem and confidence is a significant achievement for the befriending service and the volunteers who provide the support.

Well done to you and all at the New Bridge on the positive outcomes reported in this evaluation. To know that your continued hard work, in a difficult environment, is appreciated by those you seek to support must be hugely satisfying.

Yours sincerely,

Al Reid

Introduction

*“When I started writing to J** I had just failed a suicide attempt by hanging myself off the landing railings. Previously I’d swallowed razors and covered myself in acid J** has supported me through my turmoil. J** really helped me mentally with his support, care and offers to visit. I’ve started eating again, started doing my bible studies and have completed numerous courses and he is very encouraging towards my reborn state of mind. J** has never pushed any subject on me, he’s very polite and asks what assistance he could offer. I do really believe if I hadn’t started writing to J** my mental frame of mind would of continued. I know I have a friend I can turn to, to speak to – a real friend I can depend on for support.” – John*

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 2018, 185 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 46% this was their first time in prison. Prior to contacting New Bridge 26% had no contact with the outside world.

97% 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 95% said that their expectation of letters had been met and that New Bridge had helped to reduce their feelings of isolation. 92% said that New Bridge had reduced their feelings of isolation and 77% believed that their emotional health and wellbeing had improved as a result of befriending.

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

“I am a prisoner of 26 years and for the last 11 years with New Bridge. It has changed my life for the future. I am looking forward to being released knowing that I will not come back to prison and I should be released in 2020” – Colin

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, New Bridge Volunteer and Criminology Lecturer at Birmingham City University who analysed the data and produced the report.

Judith Smith MBE
Chief Executive
May 2019

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.

Evaluation Aims

- 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

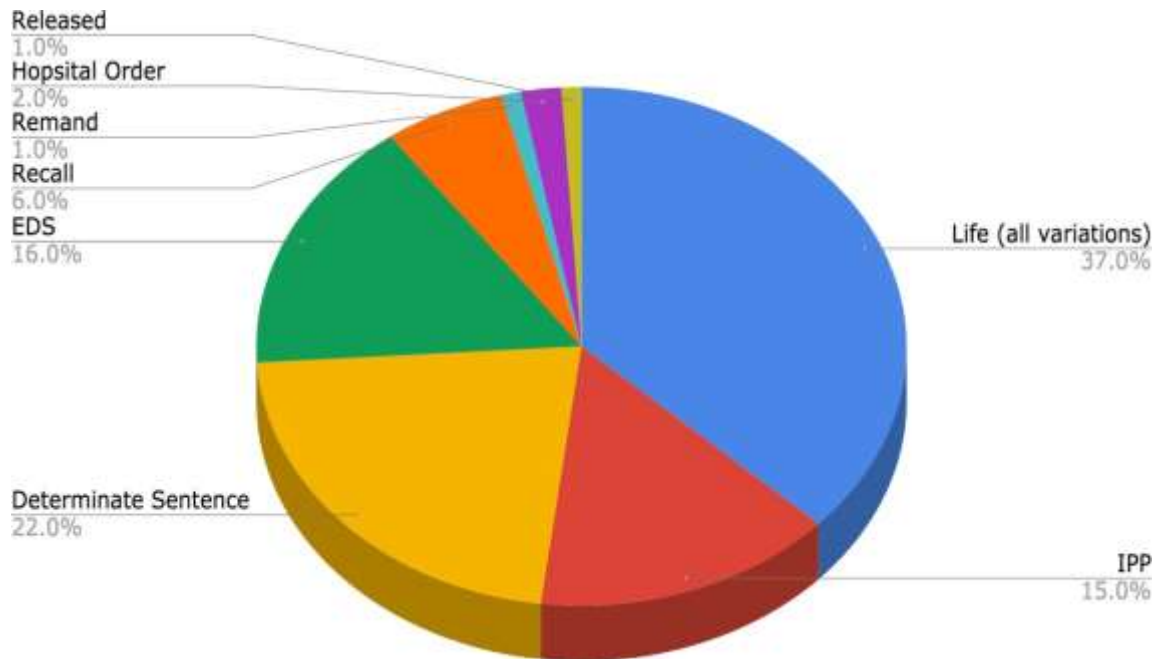
Participants

The participants in this evaluation are people in prison and youth offender institutions across England and Wales, who sought the support of New Bridge during their custodial sentence. Since applying to New Bridge some of the people that we support in prison have been transferred to a secure hospital or released into the community, they too were invited to take part. Evaluation forms were sent to all those who had been taken on by New Bridge prior to June 2018.

A total of **185 people contributed to the evaluation** (50% response rate), six 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. **For 46% this was their first time in prison.**

We asked participants what type of sentence they were serving.



The majority (52%) of participants were serving an indeterminate sentence.

This compares to only 13% of the sentenced prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2018). 37% were serving life (all variations), and, despite its abolishment in 2012, 15% were serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences. Over half of participants serving indeterminate sentences had passed their tariff date.

Although the rate of release for those serving IPP sentences has quickened in the last three years, so too has the rate of recall to custody of people considered to be breaching the terms of their release licence. In the past year alone, the recalled IPP population has grown by 22% (Ministry of Justice, 2019). As a result, the number of people serving IPP sentences in prison are predicted to rise, unless action is taken to improve support on release (Prison Reform Trust, 2018).

Determinate sentences accounted for 38% of the sample, with 16% serving an Extended Determinate Sentence (EDS) – a rise of 8% from the 2017 New Bridge evaluation. This mirrors an increase in the wider general prison population, where people serving an EDS have increased by 18% compared to the same time last year (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

Those on recall and those on remand accounted for 6% and 1% retrospectively. 2% had been transferred onto a hospital order and 1% were now in the community.

We asked participants for the length of their sentence or minimum tariff.

- 1% said less than 12 months
- 16% said 1 year to less than 4 years
- 16% said 4 years to less than 7 years
- 20% said 7 years to less than 10 years
- 20% said 10 years to less than 14 years
- 14% said 14 years to less than 20 years
- 13% said 20 years or more

New Bridge typically attracts individuals serving long-term sentences. More than four-fifths (83%) had a sentence or tariff over 4 years - 34% with a sentence or tariff 10–20 years, and 13% over 20 years. Indeed, the use of very long determinate sentences has increased dramatically over the last 10 years, this rise is in line with the increasing number of sentences imposed for sex offences (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

We asked participants for their age.

- 3% were 18-24 years old
- 8% were 25-29 years old
- 23% were 30-39 years old
- 24% were 40-49 years old
- 25% were 50-59 years old
- 13% were 60-69 years old
- 4% said they were 70 years or older

42% of participants were over the age of 50. This is significantly higher than the general prison population, where people over 50 account for 16% (Ministry of Justice, 2018). The older population 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.

Participants were asked how they found out about New Bridge.

The majority of participants (60%) said that they heard about New Bridge through word of mouth:

- 38% said that they heard about New Bridge from another resident
- 10% through the Prison Chaplain
- 8% from their Offender Management Unit
- 2% were recommended by a friend or family member
- Others said that they found out by word of mouth from a Librarian, a Psychologist, and other prison staff.

40% found out about New Bridge through advertisements:

- 24% saw an advert for New Bridge in a newspaper (Inside Time and The Sun)
- 14% said that they saw a leaflet or poster in prison
- Others read about New Bridge in a Prisoner's Handbook

We asked when they first applied to New Bridge.

- 16% said less than 12 months ago
- 44% said 1 year to less than 4 years ago
- 13% said 4 years to less than 7 years ago
- 8% said 7 years to less than 10 years ago
- 7% said 10 years to less than 14 years ago
- 5% said 14 years to less than 20 years ago
- 2% said over 20 years ago
- 5% could not remember

Participants had been supported by New Bridge for varying lengths of time. 60% of the sample had been supported for up to four years. 35% had been befriended for more than four years, with 14% 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-judgmental support; (2) contact with someone outside the prison community and family; (3) to receive regular mail and visits; (4) to talk to someone with shared interests; and, (5) help to reduce feelings of isolation.

One participant said: *"I needed some fresh conversation. I was not getting visitations and contemplated suicide as my mental health was deteriorating. I felt alone and abandoned and wanted to speak to someone who wasn't involved within the Prison Service"*.

97% said that the information they received about the Befriending Service and how it worked was easy to understand. Some commented that they appreciated the interim letters that they received from New Bridge whilst waiting for a befriender. Others said that they were impressed that they did not need to reapply when they moved prison.

"The application process was very easy to do and really straight forward."

"It was good. I was assigned a befriender really quickly."

"The application was easy to do and within weeks of my Offender Supervisor doing their part I had a letter stating that I had a befriender."

However, whilst the majority were happy about the information they received, a number of participants reported problems in gaining authorisation from their Offender Management Unit:

"The prison was very slow to react and fill in/send the application forms."

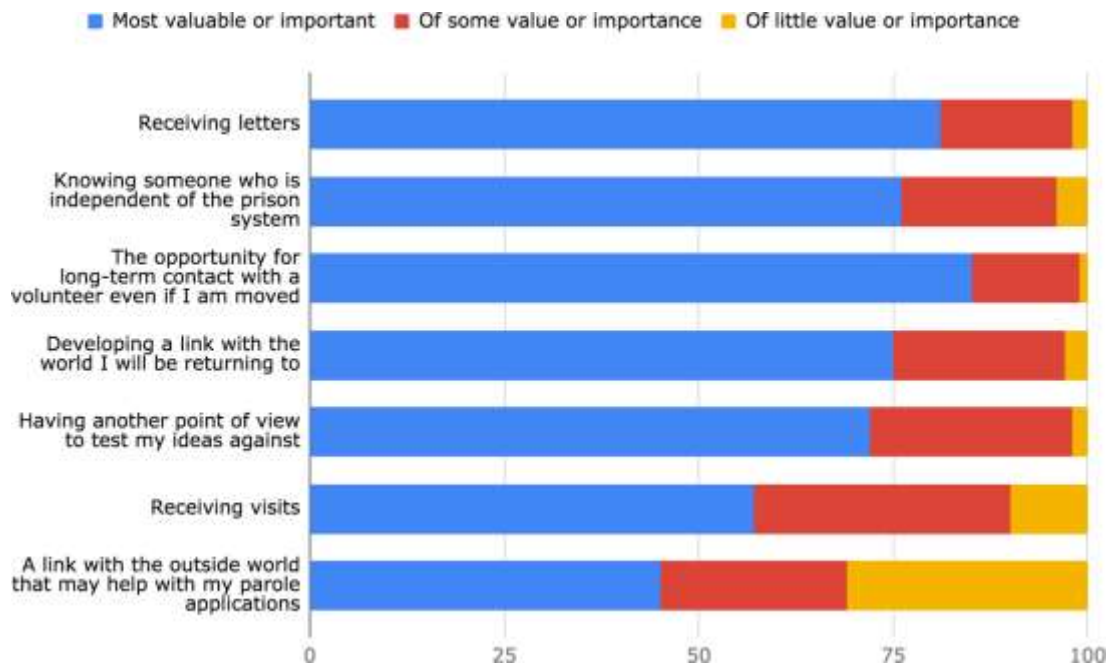
"The application process was hard work due to my Offender Manager taking ages to process the application."

In order to streamline the application process, some prisons have now assigned a staff member to authorise New Bridge application forms.

Participants were asked how often they write to their befriender.

- 5% said more than once a week
- 3% said once a week
- 18% once a fortnight
- 36% once a month
- 7% once every 2 months
- 2% once every 3 months
- 28% said that they had no set pattern

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



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

Overall, the majority of participants were satisfied that their expectations of the Befriending Service had been met or somewhat met.

- 97% said that their expectation of letters had been met or somewhat met
- 94% said that their expectation of someone outside taking a long-term interest in them had been met or somewhat met
- 66% said that their expectation of visits had been met or somewhat met

Participants said that New Bridge had positively affected their lives in prison and thoughts about the future, including:

- Reduced feelings of isolation (92%)
- Improved emotional health and wellbeing (77%)
- Boosted self-esteem and confidence (74%)
- Better understanding of attitudes and behaviours (69%)

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

- 59% said they had contact via telephone
- 55% said they had received letters
- 38% said they had a visit(s)

Prior to contacting New Bridge, 26% had no letters, visits, or phone calls from anyone outside of prison. The majority (62%) had never had a visit during their time in custody. This is considerably higher than the 16% of people in prison who said they did not receive visits in a large-scale study undertaken by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2016).

Since participating in the Befriending Service, 58% reported that New Bridge had motivated them to contact friends, family, or people from other organisations. This is particularly promising, given that relations with family and friends have proven to be vital in assisting successful resettlement (HMI Prisons, HMI Probation and Ofsted, 2014).

For those who said that they had other letters, visits or phone calls, 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 and biased. It was also mentioned that contact was often irregular or infrequent due to bad health, work and care commitments, or family living overseas. Participants chose New Bridge in addition to other outside contact because they wanted to have regular communication with someone who was reliable, honest and non-judgmental.

“I get occasional letters and visits, but they aren't frequent enough to stave off loneliness.”

“The conversations are limited, repetitive, brief, and mostly one sided.”

“My only contacts are family members who tend to tell you what you want to hear.”

Others said that they valued talking to someone independent of their social circle, as it gave them the ability to discuss things they struggled to talk about with family or friends.

“There are things I can tell my befriender that I would be uncomfortable telling family in case they worry.”

“I don't have many friends I can talk to about how I feel so having a befriender helps me a lot.”

“New Bridge gives you a true ability to express your thoughts and feelings.”

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 other people inside. They especially recommended the scheme for those who have no contact with the outside world.

"I always advise others to get in touch, as New Bridge are a life line for prisoners."

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

Harry is in prison for the first time serving a long-term determinate sentence. He sought the support of New Bridge to bring some normality and consistency to his life behind bars.

When I was first sentenced I came in with a list of names and addresses of friends who promised to keep in touch. I wrote frequently and only received one reply containing some bad news, no other replies came. After talking to an inmate who explained how New Bridge had helped him, I applied. Sometime after I received a reply saying they were looking for a suitable befriender, in the meantime New Bridge would write to keep me up to date. Since having my volunteer I have had something to look forward to. I enjoy reading his letters and hearing about his adventures. New Bridge has helped restore my faith in humanity. If I didn't have a befriender I wouldn't be as confident as I am now. My depression and anxiety would be worse, as I wouldn't have anyone to talk to. I can't thank New Bridge enough.

Darren is serving an indeterminate sentence for public protection. His tariff expired 11 years ago. Prior to writing to New Bridge, he had no letters or visits from anyone outside.

I came into prison late in life with an IPP sentence. I was told to expect to be in prison for a very long time, despite a low tariff of 21 months. This has proved to be the case. There are no relatives or friends who can or want to maintain contact, so after a couple of years of solitude I tried The New Bridge Foundation. They were able to find someone of a similar age with similar interests. My befriender visits occasionally and we get on very well, sharing an interest in history and gardening. It has been very useful to maintain contact with someone in the outside world as the years pass - it's very easy to slip into a frame of mind in which prison becomes the be all and end all of life. I have also had to battle with ill health. Prison is a lonely place for an older man with a serious illness and my befriender wrote and visited over this period, keeping my spirits up, more than he probably realises.

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

I thought I knew it all, I thought the world was at my feet, then bang it all came down, a 14 year life sentence. I soon found out who my friends were, I felt like I had no one. I didn't want to look weak, so I just shut off, blanked everyone outside, then I was alone. I was reading Inside Time and New Bridge caught my eye. I thought, you know what, I'll try it. I haven't looked back since. Me and my volunteer get on so well, she listens without judging and helps to keep me on track. My befriender has helped me speak to some family again, before I would have been too stubborn and cut them off. My volunteer helped point me the right way and look at things differently. It's mad how an outsider's view is better than someone who's known you years. Being in touch with the outside shows something is out there, people do care.

Mo is serving an indeterminate sentence, he applied to the Befriending Service over 14 years ago after losing all family contact.

My befriender has been a massive help. The visits are always interesting and my befriender certainly knows a lot. Recently I had a parole hearing, my befriender sat with me on a visit and we talked about the process and how I should sit and respond. The outcome of the parole hearing was I got my D Cat. My befriender has been a godsend, I feel comfortable talking about anything with her. It has certainly changed my perspective about wanting to be released. She has helped me focus and want to improve myself to the point that I have just started my second year of my Open University degree. My life has definitely improved having a befriender in it.

Chris was serving a life sentence when a Prison Chaplain recommended New Bridge as a way to keep in touch with the outside world. He has been supported by a volunteer for over 10 years now.

I was feeling lonely and wanted new people in my life. All I had was gang members and I decided I didn't want to associate with them no more. I wasn't in contact with my family regularly because when I was out I only had time for gang members, so I didn't think it was right for me to expect regular contact with family members, who I didn't bother with on the outside. Writing to the volunteer has helped with self-worth. I was in a gang for more than 20 years. Being around people who care about other people has rubbed off on me. I would like to help people come out of gangs and criminal lifestyles when I get out.

Ian is serving a life sentence with a minimum term of more than 20 years. This is his first time inside. He found out about New Bridge through word of mouth.

Prison can be a very unfamiliar and isolating place with many worries. To keep my family happy, I don't tell them 90% of what goes on. Fights, threats, and low moments all stay with me. New Bridge is great as a release as I can be honest with my befriender. She is upbeat and positive and getting a letter always brings a smile. At a time when I'm trying to keep up with the outside world, she lets me know what she is doing and any new experiences. A shared view on life is key and really helps create a connection that will hopefully stay no matter where I get sent. In short, it's a great service that has helped my confidence and general mood.

When asked what we could do to improve the Befriending Service the most prominent theme was around raising more awareness about New Bridge.

Participants recommended that New Bridge should be promoted to all new arrivals during the induction process. It was also suggested that more awareness could be raised about the Befriending Service through talks in prison and advertisements. Others proposed training people in prison to be New Bridge Reps to promote the Befriending Service.

"More info in Inside Time and mention it on National Prison Radio - it will help people understand more about you."

"Continuous promotion throughout prisons, using prisoners to volunteer to promote your services in and around prison, sharing their experiences and how it's helped them in and out of prison."

Many participants mentioned the potential use of emails and phone calls with befrienders as an additional support.

"It would be nice to make a phone call to New Bridge or befriender once in a while."

"The chance to use the 'email a prisoner' service or introduce voice-calling to increase contact."

Others proposed the introduction of a study partners initiative to encourage outside students to befriend people in prison who are also studying.

"Allowing befrienders who are students to become study partners with prisoners who are studying with the Open University, would be highly beneficial."

There were also some comments about creating a befriending support network for people once they are released.

References

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