



Befriending Service Evaluation Report 2019

Executive Summary

The New Bridge Foundation has provided support to people in prison since 1956. This evaluation reviews the experience of people in prison involved with New Bridge, evaluates the impact of the service on the lives of those people, and considers ways in which to improve the Befriending Service.

A total of 184 individuals contributed to the evaluation from across the prison estate, serving predominately long-term sentences for a range of categories of offence, including serious offences of a violent and sexual nature. For over half (53%) this was their first time in prison. Prior to contacting New Bridge, 28% had no contact with the outside world, and around two-thirds (63%) had never had a visit during their time in custody.

The majority of participants (64%) found out about New Bridge through word of mouth. Others found out through advertisements in the Inside Time newspaper and leaflets in prison. When asked why they applied to New Bridge for a volunteer befriender, five key themes emerged: (1) someone to talk to independent of the prison service; (2) help to reduce feelings of isolation; (3) distraction from the monotony of prison life; (4) to improve communication skills; and, (5) the joy of letter writing.

96% said that the information they received about the Befriending Service and how it worked was easy to understand. Overall, the majority of participants were satisfied that their expectations of the Befriending Service had been met or somewhat met. Participants said that New Bridge had positively affected their lives in prison and thoughts about the future:

- Reduced feelings of isolation (95%)
- Improved emotional health and wellbeing (77%)
- Boosted confidence (68%)
- Better understanding of attitudes and behaviours (67%)
- Gained motivation to contact friends, family, or people from other organisations (63%)

When asked if they would recommend this service to others that they have met in custody, 98% of participants said yes! The scheme was especially recommended for those entering prison for the first time, those who do not have family support, and those struggling with mental health.

Participants said New Bridge could raise more awareness about the Befriending Service through talks and posters in prison, as well as eye-catching adverts in Inside Time. It was recommended that adverts should make it clear that the service is open to everyone in prison, not just people who do not receive letters and visits. Many participants also suggested that email and phone contact with their befriender would improve the service.

The Befriending Service

The New Bridge Foundation has provided support to people in prison since 1956 through a national network of befrienders. At the heart of our work is the belief that having a positive link to 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, email, 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 lost hope about their future, New Bridge offers a lifeline to 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, 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 2019.

A total of **184 people contributed to the evaluation** (43% response rate) from across the public and private prison estate, six of which have formed case studies. Prison staff returned three 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 people of all genders, serving predominately long-term sentences for a range of categories of offence, including serious offences of a violent and sexual nature. **For over half (53%) this was their first time in prison.**

We asked participants what type of sentence they were serving.

Half of the participants were serving an indeterminate sentence. This compares to only 15% of the sentenced prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2019). 28% were serving life (all variations), and despite its abolishment in 2012, 22% were serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences. Of these, 87% had passed their tariff point. The IPP sentence has been widely criticised for its damaging effect on psychological wellbeing, as those serving on IPP do not know if, or when, they might be released.

Determinate sentences accounted for 43% of the sample, with 21% serving an Extended Determinate Sentence (EDS). Those on recall and those on remand accounted for 5% and 1% retrospectively. 1% had been transferred onto a hospital order during their sentence.

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

- 1% said less than 12 months
- 17% said 1 year to less than 4 years
- 17% said 4 years to less than 7 years
- 19% said 7 years to less than 10 years
- 14% said 10 years to less than 14 years
- 17% said 14 years to less than 20 years
- 15% said 20 years or more

New Bridge typically attracts applications from individuals serving long-term sentences. **More than four in five (82%) had a sentence or tariff over 4 years**, 31% with a sentence or tariff 10–20 years, and 15% over 20 years. These figures rise when looking at the tariffs of those serving a life sentence - 41% had a tariff over 20 years, 38% have 10–20 years, and 21% have 10 years or less.

For the majority 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, 2016).

We asked participants for their age.

- 2% were 18-24 years old
- 9% were 25-29 years old
- 27% were 30-39 years old
- 19% were 40-49 years old
- 26% were 50-59 years old
- 12% were 60-69 years old
- 5% said they were 70 years or older

43% of participants were over the age of 50. This is disproportionate to the general prison population, where 17% are aged 50 or over (Ministry of Justice, 2019). The older population may seek support from a befriender as they are at an increased risk of social

isolation in prison. 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).

Participants were asked how they found out about New Bridge.

The majority of participants (64%) said that they heard about New Bridge through word of mouth. More than two in five had been recommended to apply to New Bridge by a fellow resident - a positive indicator of satisfaction with the service.

- 43% said that they heard about New Bridge from another resident
- 12% through the Prison Chaplain
- 4% from their Offender Management Unit
- 2% were recommended by a friend or family member
- Others said that they found out by word of mouth at prison events and social evenings.

34% found out about New Bridge through advertisements:

- 19% saw an advert for New Bridge in the Inside Time newspaper
- 14% said that they saw a leaflet or poster in prison
- Others read about New Bridge in The Prisoner Handbook

2% could not remember how they found out about New Bridge, suggesting that they may have been in contact with New Bridge for quite some time.

We asked when they first applied to New Bridge.

- 18% said less than 12 months ago
- 48% said 1 year to less than 4 years ago
- 15% said 4 years to less than 7 years ago
- 8% said 7 years to less than 10 years ago
- 3% said 10 years to less than 14 years ago
- 2% said 14 years to less than 20 years ago
- 2% said over 20 years ago
- 4% could not remember

Participants had been supported by New Bridge for varying lengths of time. 66% of the sample had been supported for less than four years. 30% had been befriended for more than four years, with 7% 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) someone to talk to independent of the prison service; (2) help to reduce feelings of isolation; (3) distraction from the monotony of prison life; (4) to improve communication skills; and, (5) the joy of letter writing.

Participants commented on the importance of maintaining contact with the outside world that they will be returning to.

"I wanted to talk about everyday things that did not relate to prison life and have a normal conversation."

"The postcards remind me that there is life outside the walls. It kind of spurs me on to get on."

"I wanted to maintain and improve my ability to communicate and socialise with the public."

96% said that the information they received about the Befriending Service and how it worked was easy to understand.

"It was clear and easy to understand. It explained what was needed from me, the prison, and what would be done step by step".

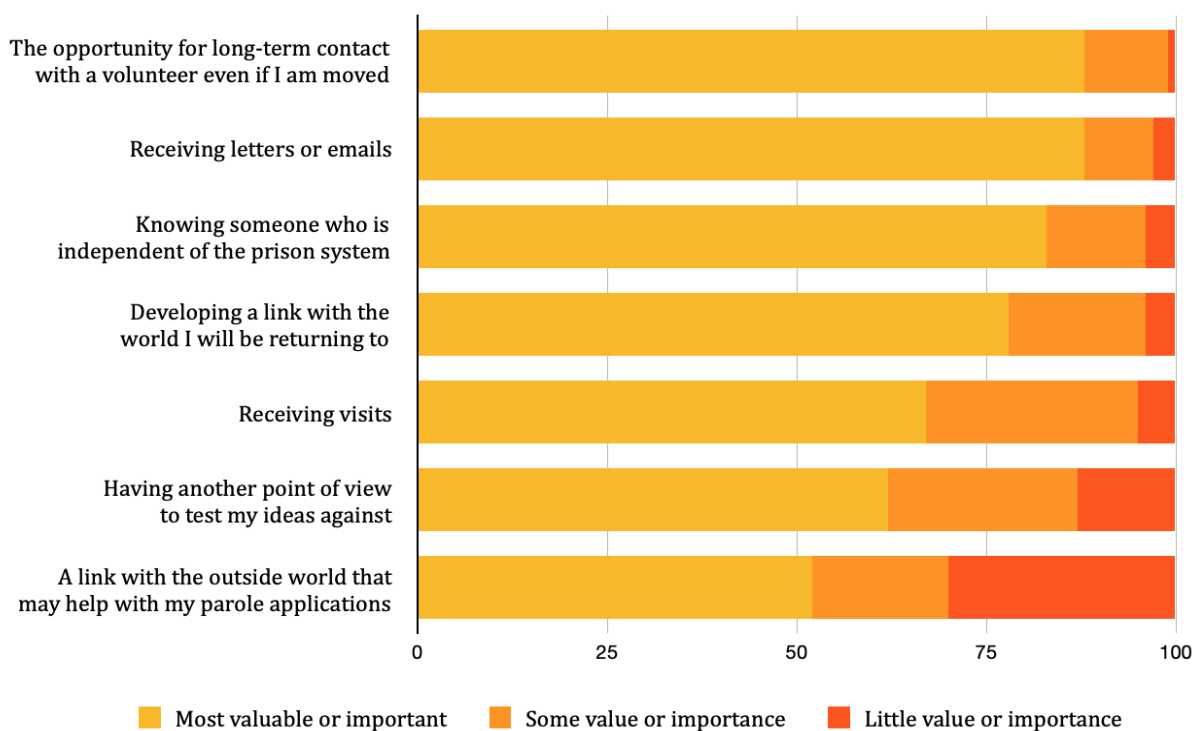
Participants said that they appreciated the updates that they received from New Bridge in the interim, whilst waiting for a befriender. Others said that they were impressed by how quickly they were put in touch with a befriender. However, some reported difficulty in gaining approval from their Offender Manager, due to staff not being familiar with the service. In order to streamline the application process, some prisons have assigned a staff member as a point of contact to authorise New Bridge application forms.

Participants were asked how often they write a letter to their befriender.

- 4% said more than once a week
- 7% said once a week
- 24% once a fortnight
- 33% once a month
- 8% once every 2 months
- 2% once every 3 months
- 22% said that they had no set pattern

The majority of participants (57%) exchanged a letter once every 2-4 weeks. 13 individuals said that they also use emails to supplement letters with their befriender, and two people said that they communicate exclusively by email.

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.

- 98% said that their expectation of letters had been met or somewhat met
- 95% said that their expectation of reduced feelings of isolation had been met or somewhat met
- 92% said that their expectation of someone outside taking a long-term interest in them had been met or somewhat met
- 61% said that their expectation of visits had been met or somewhat met. Some said that they would like more frequent visits.

Of the 39% of participants who expressed that their expectation of visits had not been met, 23% applied to the Befriending Service less than a year ago. It may be useful to note that New Bridge do not offer visits in the first 6-months, as it would not be appropriate to consider this before the befriending relationship is fully established.

Participants said that New Bridge had positively affected their lives in prison and thoughts about the future. Befriending has been found to promote transformations on many levels, including: improved emotional health and wellbeing (77%); boosted confidence (68%); and a better understanding of attitudes and behaviours (67%).

Improved emotional health and wellbeing

Before contacting New Bridge, participants typically described feeling hopeless and lonely. Participants said having a befriender had helped to improve their mental health and reduce suicidal thoughts.

"I no longer feel alone, I somehow feel the dark hole that loneliness brings is no longer there and I feel life is really worth living again."

"I used to be suicidal, a danger to myself. I'm far from that now."

"Always have an improvement to my mood whenever I receive a letter and the discussions are always mentally stimulating."

"I am more optimistic and less stressed about the outside world."

"I used to be very anxious but have improved a lot and am able to recognise the positive things in my life and have a lot to be grateful for."

"New Bridge saved my life."

Boosted confidence

The Befriending Service plays a vital role in helping people to adapt and cope with their confinement through the maintenance of positive relationships, and preservation of confidence and self-esteem.

"Since I started to communicate with my volunteer I have grown and started to believe in myself more. I feel confident and trusting of others."

"I'm more able to ask or seek advice and different points of view as a direct result of my befriender's help and support."

"I've gained confidence that I can make friends and I value friendship more now."

"In my past I found it difficult to express my emotions. I'm comfortable expressing my emotions now."

Better understanding of attitudes and behaviours

Befriending promotes communication skills and self-awareness. This in turn helps to create a more pro-social atmosphere in prison, consequently improving safety for those in prison, and subsequently the community.

"I am more open and honest with others and I feel I can talk a lot better with people."

"I'm no longer hateful, I feel human again and want to help others."

"I am able to develop trusting relationships with other people during my time in custody which I struggled with in the past."

"My views towards females was very poor before, but I was allocated to a female and my opinions have changed over time."

"It makes you look at yourself and realise how your actions hurt others."

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

- 61% said they had contact via telephone
- 56% said they had received letters
- 37% said they had a visit
- 19% said they had been sent emails

Prior to contacting New Bridge, 28% had no contact with the outside world, and around two-thirds (63%) had never had a visit during their time in custody.

Since participating in the Befriending Service, 63% reported that New Bridge had motivated them to contact friends, family, or people from other organisations. This is particularly promising, given that family ties have proven to be vital in assisting successful resettlement on release (Prison Reform Trust, 2019).

"Having a befriender has helped me to build other healthy relationships with people inside and outside of prison."

For those who said that they had other letters, visits, emails, or phone calls, we asked why they chose to use New Bridge as well.

Some participants said that they found contact from family and friends to be unreliable. Many mentioned that family are unable visit due to being held a long distance from home - in some cases overseas. Participants chose New Bridge in addition to other outside contact because they wanted to have regular communication with someone who was reliable, impartial, trustworthy, and non-judgmental.

"I hadn't had a visit in over 10 years, I was feeling cut off from the outside."

I needed somebody to be in touch with who wasn't already a friend or a family member, so they weren't connected in any way with my past."

"I am a foreign national separated from any family, this makes me lonely, especially when I see others getting visits."

"My befriender doesn't judge, whereas others might."

Others said that they valued talking to someone independent, as it gave them the ability to talk openly about things they struggled to talk about with family.

"I wanted someone to write to who I can speak honestly to, as I feel I sugar coat things to my family as I do not want to upset them."

"Just wanted to unload on someone other than family. It's been really good to be able to be 100% honest with someone."

"You can tell a stranger about any problems your having in prison as they won't worry like your family and friends."

When asked if they would recommend this service to others that they have met in custody, 98% of participants said yes! The scheme was especially recommended for those entering prison for the first time, those who do not have family support, and those struggling with mental health.

"The service offers an important slice of normalcy for the people who have little or no contact with the outside world."

"It can bring a little happiness to anyone who finds it difficult coping in the prison environment."

Participants were invited to tell us about their befriending experience. Six stories have been presented as case studies. Pseudonyms have been used.

Tony is serving an indeterminate sentence for public protection. He applied to New Bridge after losing all family contact.

Friendship has been a problem for me in my life and my views of others have been short to say the least. New Bridge has helped change my views and opinions of others, particularly my views of women. Being linked with a female befriender has given me hope, encouragement, support, confidence and understanding, along with a friendship I never thought I could have. I'd like to thank you for the chance you gave me to change and build on my problems and insecurities.

Dave is in prison for the first time serving a long-term determinate sentence. He was recommended New Bridge by another resident.

My imprisonment came as a total shock, my wife and children understandably wanted nothing more to do with me, which left me feeling abandoned. Fortunately, two other family members continued to contact me which was a great benefit, although at times I felt as though they were obliged to support me. To have someone who had no need or obligation to care about me made a great difference to my mental wellbeing and as I enjoy writing - it gave another purpose to my life. Until my befriender suggested it, I was very reluctant to have anyone visit me in prison. I was ashamed and embarrassed for anyone I loved to see me here. I also didn't want to put any of my relatives through the trauma of a prison visit. However, my befriender has visited me once and I am trying to arrange another. This has also encouraged me to reconsider allowing my relatives to visit me.

Leon is in prison serving a long-term extended determinate sentence. He hoped befriending would bring some normality to his life.

Although concept of time in prison varies from resident to resident, I can now count my sentence in months. It starts when I receive a letter, I read, I think and contemplate; then I reply and my month begins again. In the letters I receive I feel connected to a different place, an event, an occasion. It moves any negative thought and allows my mind to travel to the "before time". A time when I was free, enjoying festivals, holidays, parties. It allows me to be brutally honest with myself about who I truly am and put my thoughts and feelings on paper.

Jordan was feeling depressed and isolated when his family were unable to visit. A prison listener recommended New Bridge as a way to keep in touch with the outside world.

My experience began two years ago, I was in a bad way, mentally unstable, super paranoid about everything. I just felt hopeless. But having that someone around to talk to has really helped me to focus and get some of myself back again. And on occasions be there for other inmates who are in the position that I was once in two years ago. For a prisoner to have somebody to talk to is crucial, there is nothing worse than being lonely in prison. New Bridge helps people find some kind of belief again.

Alex is in prison for the first time. He read about New Bridge in Inside Time. He hoped to form a friendship with someone other than family.

I needed someone at the start to talk to about the stress of coming into prison, I was quite low at this point. New Bridge gave me a chance to off load how I felt back then, as there were things I didn't want to talk about with my Dad. Back at the start I didn't really see it as any more than that, as it was a dark time. But after talking in letters about how bad I felt, the theme of the letters changed. I can remember the letters at the start as can my befriender, they were very long indeed with terrible spelling and grammar. I've been told by her how much I've improved, which is noticeable even to me now. I've come a long way, I've moved prisons and my befriender has always kept in contact.

Carl is serving an indeterminate sentence for public protection. His tariff has expired. Since being in custody he has not had any contact with family or friends.

Serving a custodial sentence is never easy and the older you are the more difficult it gets, especially when it's your birthday and also at Christmas time. Since being in regular monthly contact with my befriender it has undoubtedly increased my self-confidence. Having someone to talk to by letters makes an enormous difference to me. I look forward to receiving a letter from my befriender and reading what she had been doing since we last communicated. I personally value this more than anything because I have no family nor friends to write nor speak to on the phone. To enrol with New Bridge is the best decision I have ever made. I know that in myself I am happier, more talkative, and feel more positive.

When asked what we could do to improve the Befriending Service, the majority said they were satisfied with the way that New Bridge works and recommended expanding the service to support more people in prison.

Participants said New Bridge could raise more awareness about the Befriending Service through talks and posters in prison, as well as eye-catching adverts in *Inside Time*. Others suggested information about New Bridge could be included in the prison induction process. It was recommended that adverts should make it clear that the service is open to everyone in prison, not just people who do not receive letters and visits.

“Come to visit different prisons and do presentations and finish off with a Q&A.”

“Print a story from a befriender in Inside Time and their pen friend with the benefits to both - it could inspire.”

“Improved signage, maybe more eye-catching ads in the paper, magazines, other in-prison editorials etc.”

“Routinely send forms to the prisoners using the service so they can hand them out to others in prison.”

Others proposed that email and phone contact with their befriender would improve the service. Some volunteers already use the *Email a Prisoner* service, although letter writing remains the main form of correspondence. One participant suggested: *“a phone call with your befriender before any visits to lessen anxiety and worries”*. With the introduction of secure in-cell phones and video calls across a number of public and private prisons, this may be another area New Bridge looks to expand its provision in future.

References

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