

"I feel you have found me someone who talks to me, asks how I am and does not judge me. This was a big step in life for me to contact New Bridge. To have support while I am in custody is a big thing. I am also grateful and thankful that there is an organisation out there for support.

Thank you for finding me a volunteer befriender."

# Befriending Service Evaluation Report 2020

#### Forward

This evaluation is markedly different from our previous annual surveys. 2020 was the strangest year for many of us and we wanted to explore with the people we befriend how Covid 19 had affected them and whether New Bridge's impact on their lives had helped them through the severest of lockdowns. Both the quantitative data and the qualitative reporting in this evaluation demonstrate that our support was both proportionate and very necessary.

Confined to their cells for 23 hours a day and curbs placed on education and therapy sessions, the pandemic took its toll on both staff and people in prison. In order to contain the spread of the virus, prisons across the country enforced strict lockdown rules and all visits were halted. A report in February 2021 by the Prison Inspectorate found that while the stringent measures had effectively suppressed the illness and helped avoid a scenario akin to Public Health England's projection of what might happen in prisons, it came with the cost of "profound" damage to the mental wellbeing of inmates. Prisoners felt "chronically bored and exhausted" and bereft of a sense of purpose, the report says, and were not having enough social interaction.

We introduced "phone befriending" as an alternative to visits, encouraged all our volunteers to increase their level of contact with their befriendees and invited New Bridge trustees, staff and supporters to write letters, cards and emails to everyone in prison. We produced word searches, quizzes and puzzles for volunteers to use and the response was massive:

"Showing solidarity far and wide in times such as these is testament to your caring nature at New Bridge. I really value what you do" – L, HMP Grendon 01/05/20

"Many thanks for your letter and card. I appreciate all the support from everyone at New Bridge. You all do amazing work to support all of us. It does mean a lot to me to know that people care and its very assuring during this difficult period for everyone" – M, HMP Oakwood 11/05/20

"Thank you for all that you guys do in making my time in here more comfortable to deal with. I know I can speak for others as well who have received letters and cards from you. It was a truly lovely surprise for me and very nice of you" G, HMP Swaleside 04/05/20

"I would like to thank you and all those at New Bridge for the help and your letters to us inmates in prison. Your letters bring great comfort and are gratefully received by us all. Thank you" T, HMP Rye Hill, 04/05/20

I commend this report to you and hope that you will find it interesting and informative.

Judith Smith MBE Chief Executive June 2021

### **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 206 individuals contributed to the evaluation from across the prison estate, (an increase of 12% year on year) serving predominately long-term sentences for a range of categories of offence, including serious offences of a violent and sexual nature. For over half (51%) this was their first time in prison.

The majority of participants (58%) found out about New Bridge through word of mouth, with 41% hearing from print (Inside Time or a leaflet). This would suggest that participants who have signed up in the last year found out about the service via print, but analysis of the data shows that, of those that signed up in the last 12 months, 63% found out through word of mouth. When asked why they applied to New Bridge for a volunteer befriender, five key themes emerged: (1) Someone to write to; (2) Making a friend; (3) A way of improving themselves; (4) To have contact with someone neutral & non-judgmental (5) Something to do.

98% said that the information they received about the Befriending Service and how it worked was easy to understand. The other 2% said they weren't sure. No one said the process was hard. 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 their thoughts about the future. 67% said that having a befriender has helped to understand their attitudes and behaviour, and 62% said having a befriender had improved their confidence.

Participants found that the befriending service was highly important to:

- having someone taking a long- term interest (85%)
- reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness (79%)
- helping to maintain mental wellbeing (75%)
- helping to pass the time (67%)

When asked if they would recommend this service to others that they have met in custody, 99% of participants said yes! The scheme was especially recommended for those who do not have family support, and those struggling with loneliness.

Participants said New Bridge could raise more awareness about the Befriending Service through talks and posters in prison. Many participants also suggested that email and phone contact with their befriender would improve the service, as well as being able to write to more than one befriender.

### 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 selfesteem, encouraging those that have served their sentence to reintegrate successfully into the community.

Befrienders provide support through letters, email, phone calls and visits (although there were very few visits during 2020). 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.

### The Annual Befriending Evaluation Aims to:

- review the experience of people supported by New Bridge
- evaluate the impact of the service on the lives of people in prison during the Pandemic
- 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 were befriended by a New Bridge volunteer prior to December 2020.

A total of **206 people contributed to the evaluation** (which was 18 more people than in 2020) – a 41% response rate against 43% in 2019 - from across the public and private prison estate, six of which have formed case studies. 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.

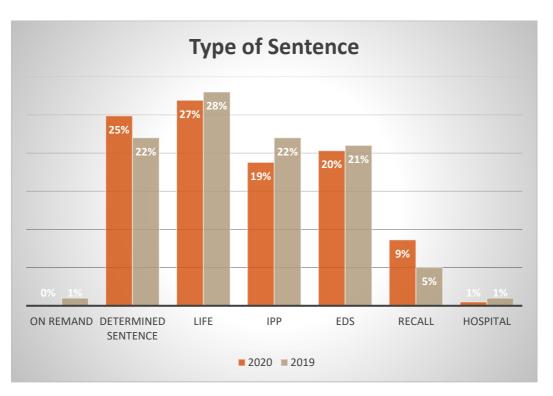
**For over half (51%) this was their first time in prison. (53% in 2019).** This experience comes with particular challenges because many people struggle with mental health in the first few months, and those facing long sentences may feel little hope for the future (Easton and Piper, 2016).

### Part 1 - comparing our evaluation in 2020 with that of 2019

#### We asked participants what type of sentence they were serving.

**46%** (2019 50%) of the participants were serving an indeterminate sentence. (Life and IPP) This compares to only 11% (2019 15%) of the sentenced prison population (Ministry of Justice, June 2020), 27% (2019 28%) were serving life (all variations), and despite its abolishment in 2012, 19% (2019 22%) were serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences. Of these, 94% (2019 87%) had passed their tariff point. The IPP sentence has been widely criticised for its damaging effect on psychological wellbeing, as those serving an IPP sentence do not know if, or when, they might be released.

Determinate (determined & EDS) sentences accounted for 45% (2019 43%) of the sample, with 20% (2019 21%) serving an Extended Determinate Sentence (EDS). Those on recall and those on remand accounted for 9% (2019 5%) and 0% (2019 1%) retrospectively. 0.5% (2019 1%) had been transferred onto a hospital order during their sentence.

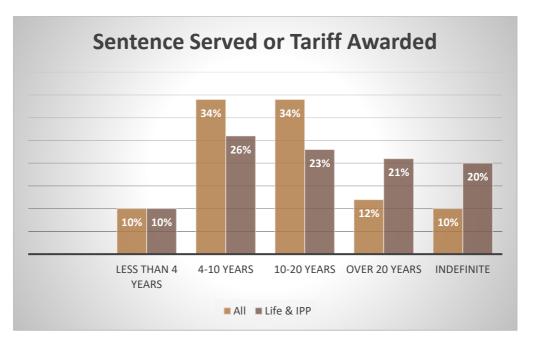


### We asked participants for the length of their sentence (or minimum tariff).

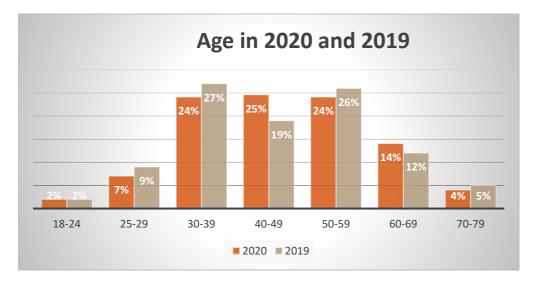
- 0.5% said less than 12 months (2019 1%)
- 9.5% said 1 year to less than 4 years (2019 17%)
- 17% said 4 years to less than 7 years (2019 same)
- 17% said 7 years to less than 10 years (2019 19%)
- 17% said 10 years to less than 14 years (2019 14%)
- 17% said 14 years to less than 20 years (2019 17%)
- 12% said 20 years or more (2019 15%)
- 10% had Indefinite sentences

New Bridge typically attracts applications from individuals serving long-term sentences. **Nine out of ten - 90% (2019 82%) - had a sentence or tariff over 4 years.** 34% (2019 31%) with a sentence or tariff 10–20 years, and 12% (2019 15%) over 20 years. These figures rise when looking at the tariffs of those serving a life sentence:

- 20% had indefinite sentences,
- 21% had a tariff over 20 years
- 23% have a tariff between 10–20 years,
- 36% have a tariff of 10 years or less.



**We asked participants for their age,** which were broadly in line with ages given in 2019 apart from an increase in the 40-49yr bracket of 6%



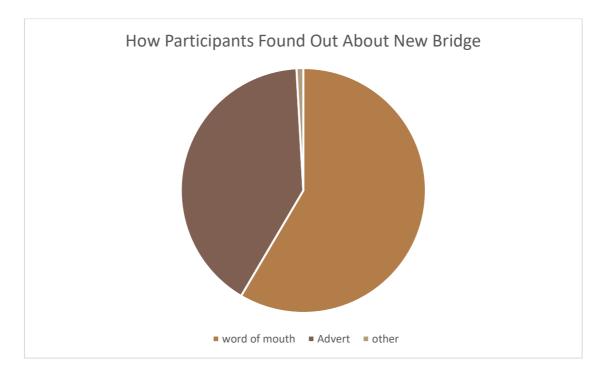
- 2% were 18-24 years old
- 7% were 25-29 years old
- 24% were 30-39 years old

- 25% were 40-49 years old
- 24% were 50-59 years old
- 14% were 60-69 years old
- 4% said they were 70 years or older

**42% of participants were over the age of 50.** This is disproportionate to the general prison population, where 16% are aged 50 or over (Ministry of Justice, 2020). 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). All of which has been disrupted during 2020 due to the pandemic.

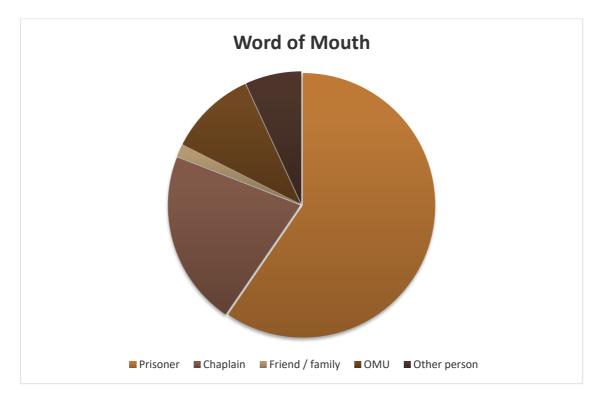
### Participants were asked how they found out about New Bridge.

Most participants - 58% (2019 64%) said that they heard about New Bridge through word of mouth, 41% (2019 34%) found out about New Bridge through advertisements, 1% did not specify how they found out about New Bridge



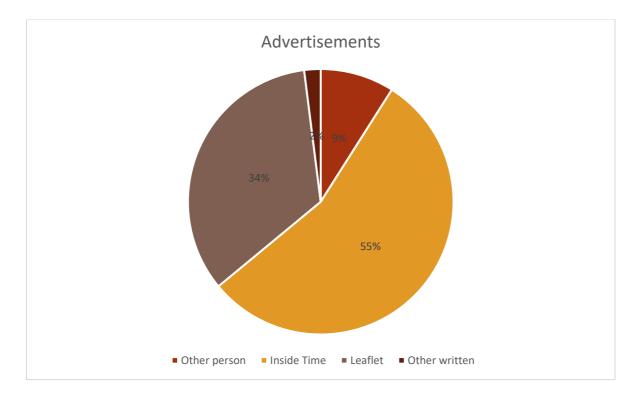
Of those that found out through word of mouth, 35% were recommended to apply to New Bridge by a someone else in prison - a positive indicator of satisfaction with the service.

- 35% said that they heard about New Bridge from another resident (2019 43%)
- 13% through the Prison Chaplain (2019 12%)
- 6% from their Offender Management Unit (2019 4%)
- 1% were recommended by a friend or family member (2019 2%)
- Others said that they found out through other key workers, including probation program tutor, librarian, and family project workers



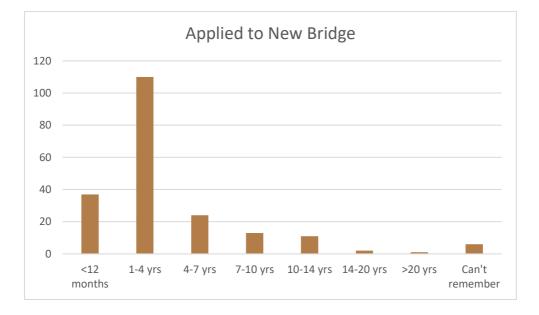
41% found out about New Bridge through advertisements:

- 25% saw an advert for New Bridge in the Inside Time newspaper (2019 19%)
- 15% said that they saw a leaflet or poster in prison (2019 14%)
- 1 participant said they found out through writing to the press



### We asked when they first applied to New Bridge, 72% had applied in the last 4 years

- 18% said less than 12 months ago (2019 18%)
- 54% said 1 year to less than 4 years ago (2019 48%)
- 12% said 4 years to less than 7 years ago (2019 15%)
- 6% said 7 years to less than 10 years ago (2019 8%)
- 5% said 10 years to less than 14 years ago (2019 3%)
- 1% said 14 years to less than 20 years ago (2019 2%)
- 0.5% said over 20 years ago (2019 2%)
- 3% could not remember (2019 4%)



Participants have been supported by New Bridge for varying lengths of time. 72% of the participants had been supported for less than four years. 24% had been befriended for more than four years, with 7% having a connection to the charity for more than ten years, and 0.5% for over 20 years.

When asked why they applied to New Bridge for a volunteer befriender, five key themes emerged: (1) Someone to write to; (2) Making a friend; (3) A way of improving themselves; (4) To have contact with someone neutral & non-judgmental; (5) Something to do.

"I can write and be myself knowing my letters are secure."

"My hope was to build a friendship and I am very pleased that my expectations have been met as I have an amazing volunteer who writes to me and visits."

"I was feeling isolated and lonely. I hoped to be able to build some form of friendship. It has worked very well"

"To build and maintain positive relationships with people outside prison; keep up and improve communication skills; meet new people that are good and supportive; do something different to grow as a person." "I enjoy letter writing. My family are all estranged."

"For someone I write to who will not judge and it has exceeded my expectations."

"I wanted to talk to and make friends with someone different who did not judge me on my past. I can definitely say New Bridge did NOT disappoint"

**98% (2019 96%) said that the information they received about the Befriending Service and how it worked was easy to understand.** The remaining 2% weren't sure, perhaps indicating the information was filled in for them by their offender manager. It is worth noting that no participant said the process was difficult.

"Simple, precise and easy to follow"

"It was explained well, very clear process"

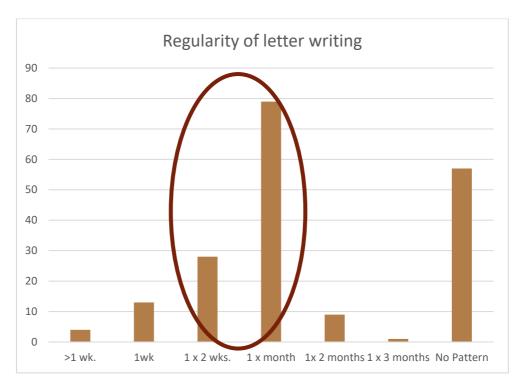
"Easy to apply, letters full of information about befrienders and what I should expect when receiving letters and writing back"

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

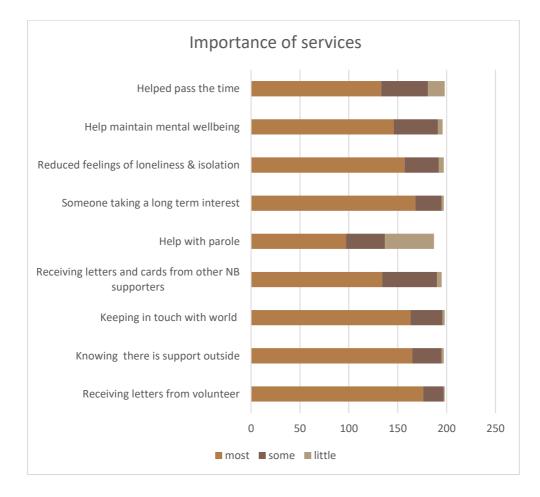
### Participants were asked how often they write a letter to their befriender.

- 2% said more than once a week (2019 4%)
- 7% said once a week (2019 7%)
- 15% once a fortnight (2019 24%)
- 41% once a month (2019 33%)
- 5% once every 2 months (2019 8%)
- 0.5% once every 3 months (2019 2%)
- 30% said that they had no set pattern (2019 22%)

The majority of participants (56%) exchanged a letter once every 2-4 weeks. 35 individuals said that they also use emails to supplement letters with their befriender, and 4 people said that they communicate exclusively by email.



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



### Part 2 – New Bridge, people in prison and Covid - 19

# We asked the participants how the Covid-19 restrictions imposed on prisoners, affected their mental and emotional wellbeing?

The majority (circa 80% of participants) said that they have been severely affected and those that said they have not been affected stated reasons such as, being a key worker, in an open prison / hospital, being used to isolation, and not having visitors before covid, as reasons they were not affected.

For those that said it affected them, the majority reported that being locked up for 20-22 hours a day has had a huge impact, many stating suicidal thoughts and self-harming.

Other mentioned lack of activities to break up the time (gym, work, chapel), and having no visitors as reasons they had been affected.

Participants mentioned an increase in:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Claustrophobia
- Social anxiety / awkwardness
- Self-harm
- Suicidal thoughts
- Weight (due to inactivity)

There was also mention of participants being worried about family members and struggling with the death of family members. Other participants mentioned the similarity of being locked up, to being in lockdown in the outside world, and felt empathy. The pandemic has also delayed some people's release / parole dates, increasing anxiety.

"It has been hard to cope as we have been restricted and can't do anything"

"My mental health has gone downhill"

"Tested me to the limit, I have a sister with dementia, and I haven't seen her since March"

"Tt has been annoying with no gym and no education, but I guess it isn't meant to be easy"

"Worried, saddened, depressed about Covid"

"It has affected me a lot as I am unable to work"

# We asked whether their befriender had helped them to manage their emotional health and wellbeing since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic

- 84% said yes
- 13% said they weren't sure
- 3% said no

# We asked what other ways New Bridge befriending has supported them during the Covid-19 pandemic. The key themes that emerged were:

- receiving Christmas and birthday cards as well as letters from New Bridge staff, trustees and supporters
- receiving activities and quizzes
- being cared about
- receiving extra letters / additional befriender

"She thinks about me and actually cares about me, she writes and keeps me going and send brilliant activities"

"Giving a purpose (even to plan to write a letter for that day), look forward to reading and receiving letters, look forward to hearing about befriender's life and activities, as it is a form of escapism here."

"Being written to by someone outside who is also experiencing the isolation of a lockdown and the downside of life, whilst also demonstrating the benefits of positivity and hope."

"The newsletter that you sent from time-to-time helps. With my befriender, I feel that I have a friend"

"I receive birthday and Christmas cards from New Bridge which is nice. Even before I had a dedicated befriender, I still received a letter from a New Bridge."

Visiting has not been possible during the Covid-19 outbreak, when asked whether this has mattered to participants it was a fairly even split.

- Yes 46%
- No 54%

Of those that said it didn't affect them, the reason given tended to be that they hadn't had visits before Covid-19. For those that said yes, the main themes were:

- they said visits are a real highlight and missed them
- they felt more disconnected from the outside world
- feeling uncared for and lonely
- increased boredom
- affecting mental health

"Feel lost and of no value"

"In almost 9 years of being in jail, I've not had a visit, it would be nice to eventually get a visit"

"Really bad mental health and thoughts of suicide"

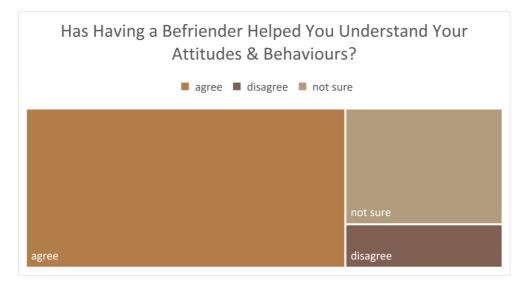
"It makes me think back to before I had a befriender and how different times were"

There was also an acceptance and understanding that people on the "outside" were in a similar position, and of prioritising befrienders safety.

"It has made me more understanding of the circumstances of what everyone is battling through. I know how difficult it is for everyone in the country, due to the pandemic and I am hopeful for the future"

### Part 4 - New Bridge's impact on people in prison

When asked if the participant's befriender had helped them understand their attitudes and behaviours 67% agreed, 9% disagreed, 24% were not sure



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.

### Key themes that emerged are having someone who listens, hearing a different viewpoint and learning tools to help deal with difficulties

"I used to try to commit suicide on a regular basis, but L\*\*\* helped to stop this by caring and thinking about me."

"I have been become a better person and helped me stop self-harming"

"I have suffered for many years with trust issues and being completely open with families I am thankful for my befriender and his understanding and ability to assist me in overcoming my issues"

"I have become more understanding/tolerant by learning and talking/sharing feelings that used to cause me problems. I recognise my issues earlier and challenge my thinking and behaviour. I use the learned skills I have picked up and do in-cell work from self-help books and practice what works for me"

"I am not single minded anymore. If I had a crossroads in life, I now know there is more than one way to tackle the obstacle, such as asking for help."

"Having a pen-pal is amazing. He has helped by getting me to think first. Take a problem and split it up and deal with the bigger problems first"

*"My befriender has allowed me to reflect on my past behaviour and encouraged me to seek help for the future."* 

"I have more knowledge of myself thus greater understanding of this world I am living in and what I am supposed to do."

### When asked if the participants confidence had improved due to contact with their befriender



- 62% agreed
- 14% disagreed
- 24% weren't sure

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.

*"With receiving letters from a befriender, my confidence has grown stronger and healthier to overcome all types of illnesses and to fight on with the treatment needed."* 

"Not just since Covid-19, but since I have had a befriender, I have the confidence to write letters. Before I came to prison, I would not have attempted to write a letter. Now I write lots of letters, which I must do to keep things up to date."

"I am not afraid to ask for help now. I also know that I have the confidence to tackle any obstacle, without immediately avoiding friends and family."

"I am more at ease with myself and others around me. I keep myself strong knowing that there is someone out there who gives up their time to help my time."

"I used to self-isolate, but she helped me to try and get out of bed and use my time wisely."

"Gives hope that things change, and the country and this situation will change, by talking through issues it helps resolve in my mind."

When asked if they would recommend this service to others that they have met in custody, **99% 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 their mental health.

When asked why they would recommend the service the key theme was:

• It supports those who don't have contact with family

Other themes mentioned were:

- helps people improve / change
- helps with isolation and pass the time
- helps with emotional and mental wellbeing
- gives contact with the outside world
- helps people feel cared about
- it's an easy to use, professional service

"Making connections with people who are not criminals is a way to learn about your true self. You also see that people are generally of good heart"

"Because it's good to have someone support you when you feel alone"

"All the volunteers and staff working at New Bridge do a great job to help us and take time to keep in contact with us"

"It's a great service and support"

*"It's a brilliant service, which can bring a bit of normality back to what can be a horrible experience"* 

"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 asked what New Bridge could do to improve the service, over half the comments indicated no change needed and approximately 20% made suggestions, the themes that were given are:

- Increase or allow visits including purple visits / virtual visits
  - Increase / include phone calls
- Speeding up the process
  - o To join
  - To pass post between inmates and befrienders
- Frequency of letters, or number of befrienders per prisoner
  - Letters in primary language as well as in English
- Promoting the service internally and externally
  - Advertising more widely with posters / leaflets
  - $\circ$   $\;$  Using current service members to promote the service more
  - New Bridge to visit the prisons and promote
- The rules are prohibitive / clearer understanding of how to make friends within the rules

### Part 3 - Befriending experiences

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

Lee is serving an Extended Determinate Sentence between 14-20 years. He applied to New Bridge because he wanted someone to get to know the real him, someone that didn't judge him on his past.

One of the best things about New Bridge is that they do not just palm you off with a random person. You are given someone with similar interests so that gives you plenty to talk about and debate. I have been in prison for 5 years and still have many years before my first parole. My befriender has been a blessing for me; times are really tough now and like most people around the world, I have recently lost family and friends from Covid. The only way I can deal with this is to shut the world out and that is what I did. After some time, I felt like I have let my befriender down by not replying to any letters, so I sent her very short letter apologising and explained my situation. She just helped me more than she will ever know. This set me on the path to trying to pick myself up and heal. In the past, my befriender has given me amazing advice and help. She had made me realise that it is not too late to change my life. She gives me hope that I can get out and live a decent life and try to do all the things I have always wanted to do. I am still not at 100%, and I am not sure if I ever will be but having my befriender [P\*\*\*] makes things a lot easier, bearable and gives me something to do with my time.

Nick is in prison for the first-time serving Life. He was recommended to New Bridge by a friend or family member as he wanted someone new to talk to.

The lady I write to is called  $M^{***}$ . We have been writing to each other for some time now and it has been a great experience. Some days if I am feeling a little bit down it always happens that I get a letter from  $M^{***}$ . She always tells me what is going on in the world and she is so witty, she never fails in making me laugh. I am looking forward to seeing her when visits are allowed. This service has given me hope with my future to have someone who believes in you and is non-judgemental. It gives you a confidence boost and makes you aware that people do care about you no matter what has happened. This has given me the confidence that I might be able to be friend a prisoner at a future time. The covid-19 has not affected me so much just not having visits. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone at New Bridge - you are all amazing

### Rodney is in prison serving a determinate sentence. He enjoys writing and receiving letters and hopes to make a friend.

I look forward to my letters, replying helps pass a bit of time too.

## Steve is in prison for life, he heard about New Bridge from another prisoner, and he enjoys letter writing, he has found his dementia worsening recently.

My befriender, R\*\*\*, is articulate, intelligent, and has a social conscience, which is a total contrast to my day to day and encounters in jail! All his letters vary in content ranging from books and jokes to very civil disagreements over world politics and the future of Mankind. I enjoy his well-constructed letter so much I often find myself re-reading them weeks later

### Simon is in prison for the first time. He heard about Newbridge from the prison Chaplain, he wanted a friend to talk to, that wouldn't judge him.

My new befriender, 0<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, has been amazing. When we made contact, she was very nice, warm and friendly in her letter. I felt free and comfortable to talk about the circumstances surrounding my conviction. She has been kind and understanding even asking me how my appeal was going. O<sup>\*\*\*</sup> has written to me regularly even sending me cards from where she has been on holiday to. She has always asked after my welfare and how I am.

Eric is serving an extended determinate sentence of over 20 years. He applied to New Bridge as he wanted to keep in touch with the outside world and make a friend, receiving letters uplifts him and has improved his confidence.

The experience has been very uplifting and exciting in anticipating when the next letter will arrive. My confidence has grown knowing that there are still good people out there and it has given me enough confidence to seek as much help as I can get for when I am released and what type of work I can do to keep me out of trouble. It gives me pleasure to be able to talk to someone who has the same interests and to seek out hobbies that can fit into a schedule, so you can get by each day. It gives you the focus and concentration to follow the rules. It has changed that each unit is segregated from the others even we are separated from upstairs. We are locked up 22 hours a day (if you are not working), but it has helped me to spend more time writing letters, which I never did before. Talking to people about all types of subject has made me a better person so I would like to thank New Bridge for the confidence they have brought out in me and how she has befriended me when in need to seek help and advice. So, thank you again! Congratulations on the good work you are doing - thank you for all your support.

### References

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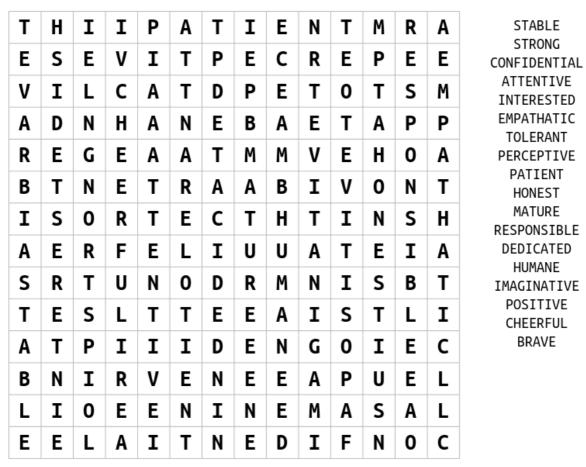
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Prison Reform Trust (2019) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, Winter 2019*. London: Prison Reform Trust.

#### **Evaluation Author - Laura Hamblyn**

Laura graduated from Leeds University and, during her career, worked for the Home Group as their Strategic Business Development Manager. She was appointed by New Bridge to carry out this independent evaluation on our behalf.

**Date of Evaluation** June 2021



### Befriending Volunteer

Play this puzzle online at : https://thewordsearch.com/puzzle/1538454/



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