



Volunteer Survey 2026



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Introduction & executive summary

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

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

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

We sent out the survey in April 2026, as an online form, and it was completed by 129 people (a response rate of 37%).

The survey data revealed that:

- The majority of respondents are befriending 2 people.
- Respondents send on average 1.4 letters/emails to their befriendeds per month.
- 49% of respondents had visited their befriended(s) in prison in the last year.
- 97% were satisfied/very satisfied with their volunteering experience (up from 94% last year).
- 95% were likely/very likely to recommend volunteering with us to other people.
- 99% were likely/very likely to continue volunteering with us this year.

Respondents also shared lots of insights into what volunteering means to them, including how they value the connections with both their befriendeds and other volunteers. You will find direct quotes expressing those views dotted through this report.

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

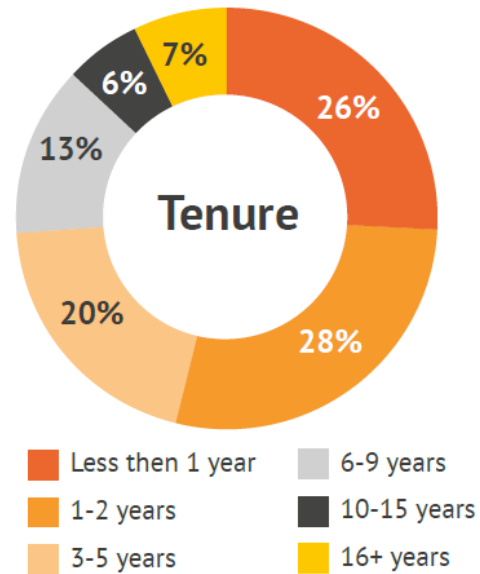
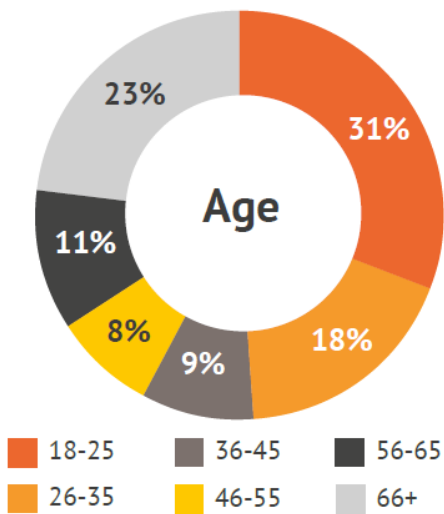
Thank you.

Lucy Ball

CEO

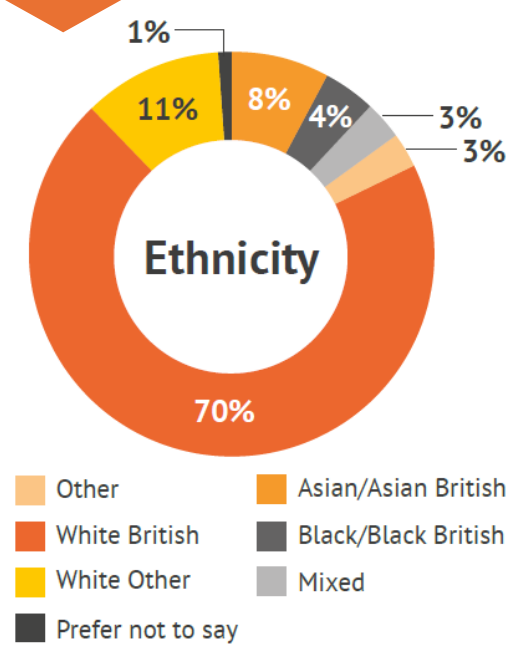
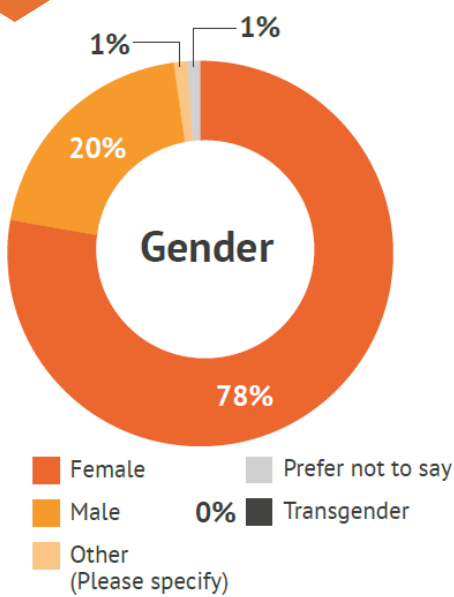
Our volunteer community in 2026

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



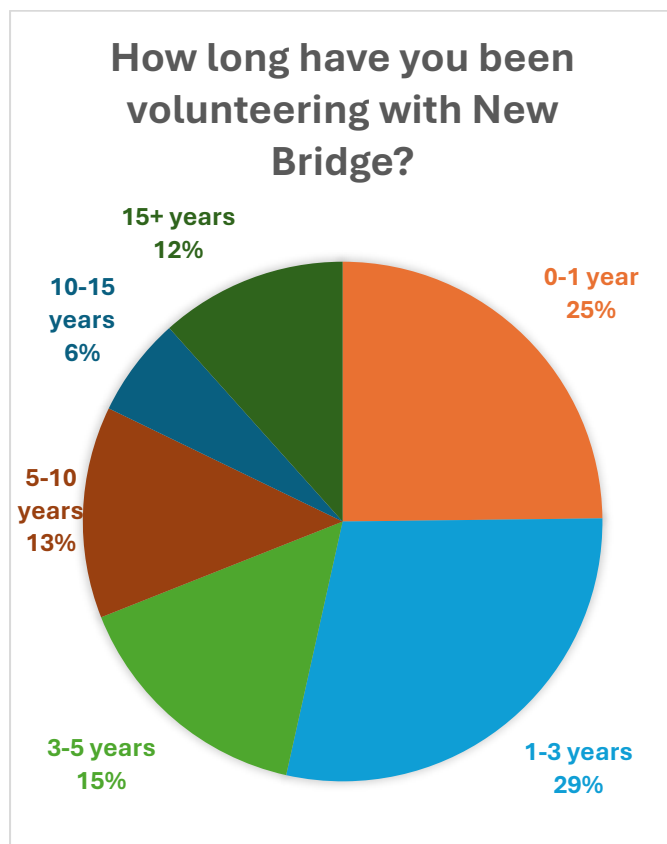
People who society writes off, writing to me, showing me that they have sensitive and understanding souls is something I take much from. I think that I have read that we have the society we deserve, and judging people by a single action clearly does no one any good. That I see so much good in the people I write to is a very positive experience

I have felt valued as a volunteer. The visit was a positive experience in a way and enabled me to learn about that process of being a visitor volunteer too. I have learned a lot about prison life for prisoners and although it's not positive the knowledge of knowing why things fail for them has given me greater understanding of a 'broken system' and how vital and life changing support New Bridge truly is



Volunteer survey analysis

129 people responded to the survey (a response rate of 37%) and the results are summarised below.

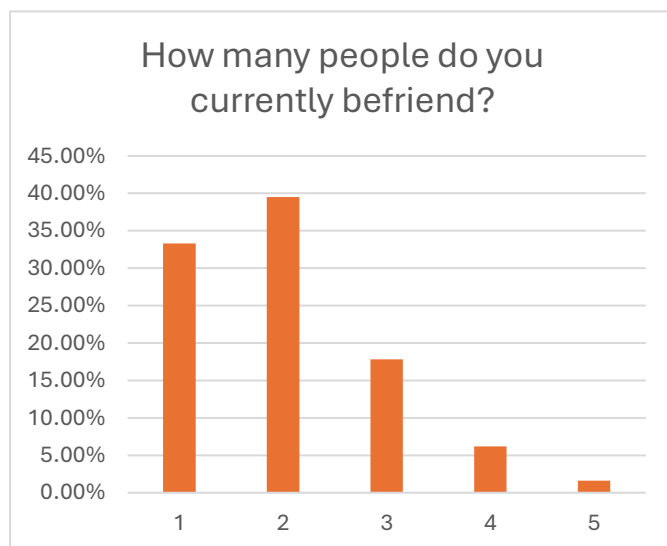


The majority of respondents joined New Bridge between 0-3 years ago, and response rates by tenure are as follows:

- 0-1 year: 59%
- 1-3 years: 42%
- 3-5 years: 50%
- 5-10 years: 29%
- 10-15 years: 47%
- 15+ years: 63%

My expectation is that I aim to befriend not to save. This is to give them a space where they can exchange peacefully whilst breaking away from their loneliness and the stigma attached to being part of the prison population

You meet people you would never ever have met and been involved with. It is without doubt the best thing I have ever done



The most common response (40%) was befriending 2 people, as per our guidance. 26% are befriending 3 or more people.

On average, respondents reported **sending** 1.4 letters/emails per month and **receiving** 1.3 (almost exactly the same rates as last year), with several adding that they prefer correspondence over the phone and by email.

Visits: Prison visits are a highly valued part of the befriending experience. Our volunteers are encouraged to visit their befriendeds up to 4 times a year, after having built a safe, bounded relationship over 6 months of letter-writing.

Have you visited any of your befriendeds in the last year?

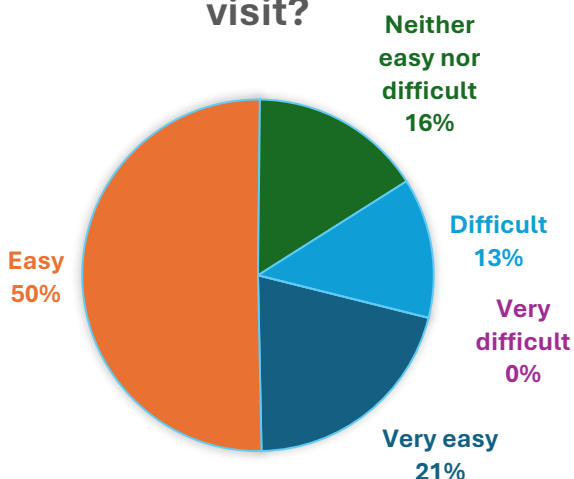


I would like to think it makes quite a lot of difference, that providing that contact, especially the visits for people who don't get visits, gives them that companionship that can be good for mental wellbeing and help them feel seen, understood, and less alone

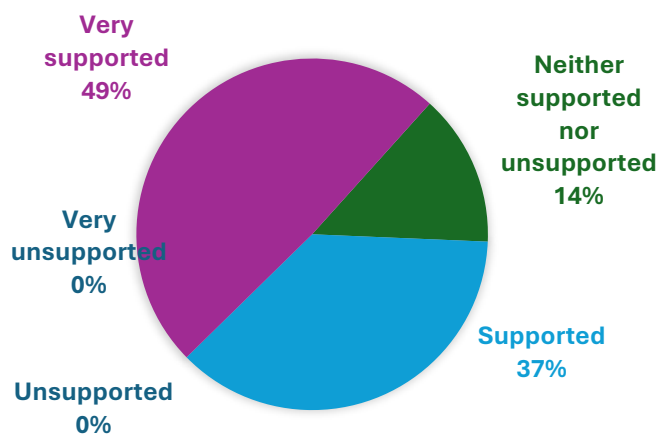
The prisoner I have befriended writes thoughtful and engaging letters and meeting him for the first time was really enjoyable - having got to know him over six months writing letters we had a lot to talk about during the visit

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

How did you find the process of booking your visit?



Did you feel supported by New Bridge in preparing for and going on your visit?

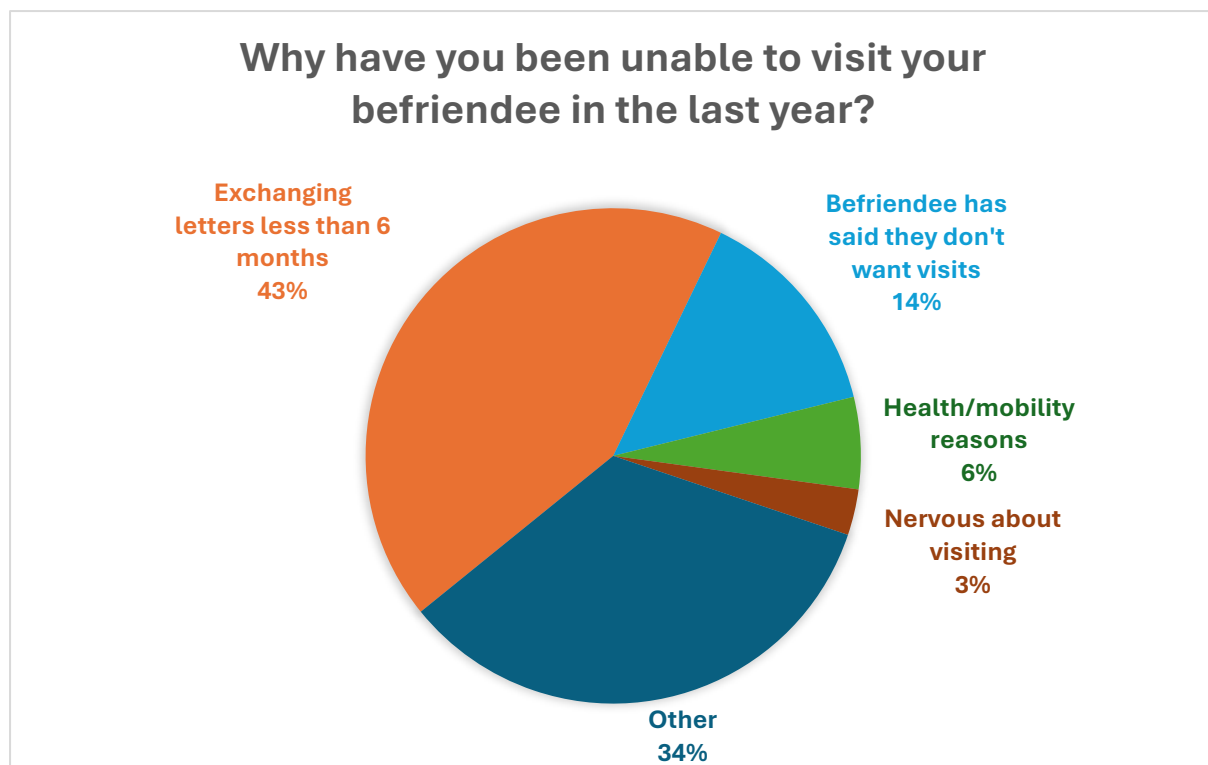


Respondents report that the visits training and various opportunities to discuss the experience of visiting with staff and fellow volunteers made them feel significantly more prepared to go on visits. Many respondents added that New Bridge staff are quick to solve any issues they have encountered.

Since I began years ago the amount of support has grown unbelievably. Thank you

The zoom training left me fully prepared as to what to expect

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



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

- Not enough time to complete admin and visit due to work, family responsibilities or travel.
- Issues with being admitted and discomfort with security vetting.

However, most mentioned being in the process of arranging a future visit.

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

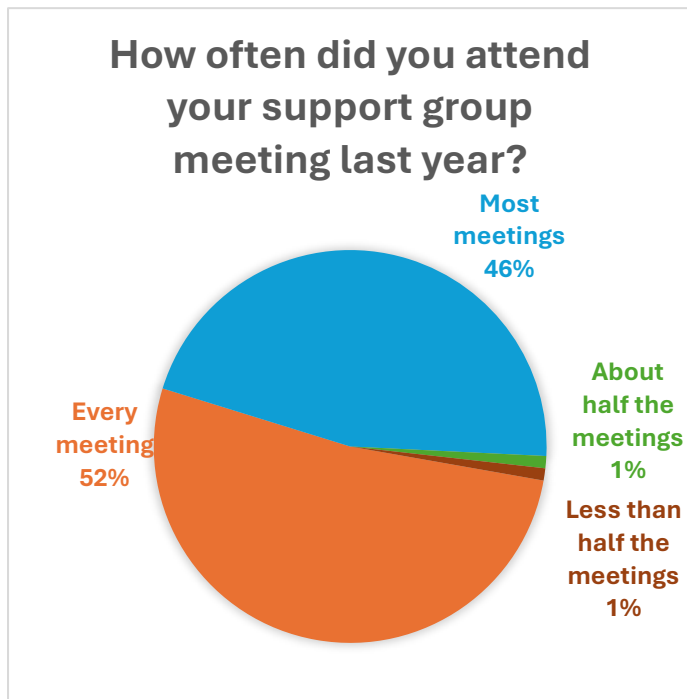
- Website forums to ask questions and give tips for visiting certain prisons; also for listing upcoming visits to arrange shared travel.
- Clearer guidance on getting onto visitor lists for particular prisons.
- Online visits.
- Further information on what kind of disability accommodations are possible when visiting e.g. mobility aids, bringing cushions for uncomfortable chairs and COVID masks.

One prisoner told me about his offences recently having been reluctant to do so in previous years. Following his disclosure he told me he was afraid I would judge him harshly and not write or visit again so was delighted when he realised this was not the case and that we at New Bridge are not here to judge him but to support

I get lots of appreciation for me, personally, but also for New Bridge. They really appreciate the friendship, the lack of judgement and the feeling of connection with the outside world

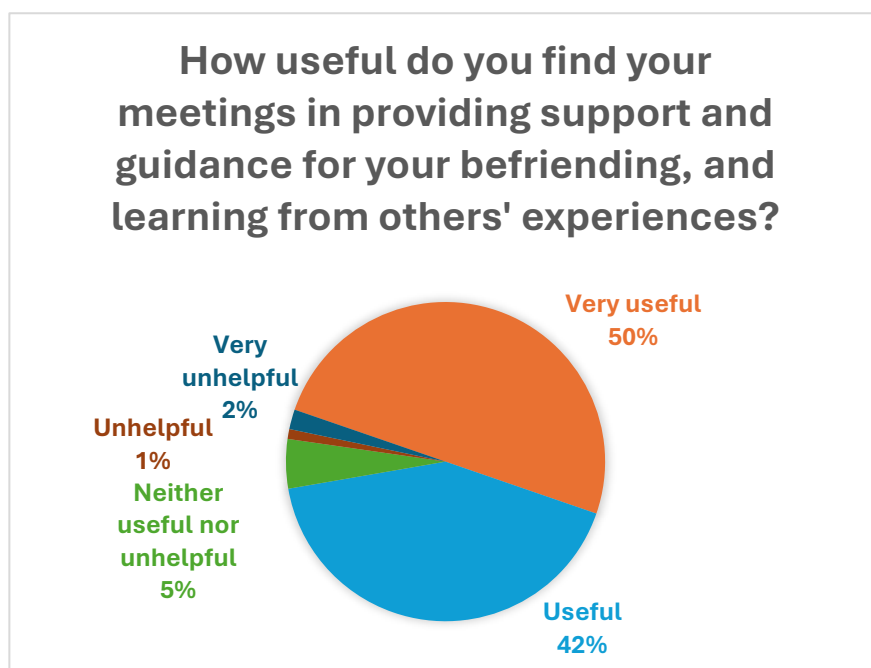
Support group meetings: All volunteers join a support group, which meets monthly to discuss each person’s befriending experience in a friendly and supportive environment where people can learn from each other. This is essential for safeguarding oversight of both befriender and befriende.

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



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

- Sometimes having to work evenings or having other meetings that clash.
- Travel issues.



My support group is really well run, supportive and non-judgmental and I also look forward to connecting there every month

The monthly group meetings are lovely really makes you feel part of a community, everyone is so nice and welcoming. It’s really interesting hearing about other people’s prisoners and getting different perspectives

I really enjoy the support groups as it's nice to have a group I can go back to and discuss any concerns that I may have

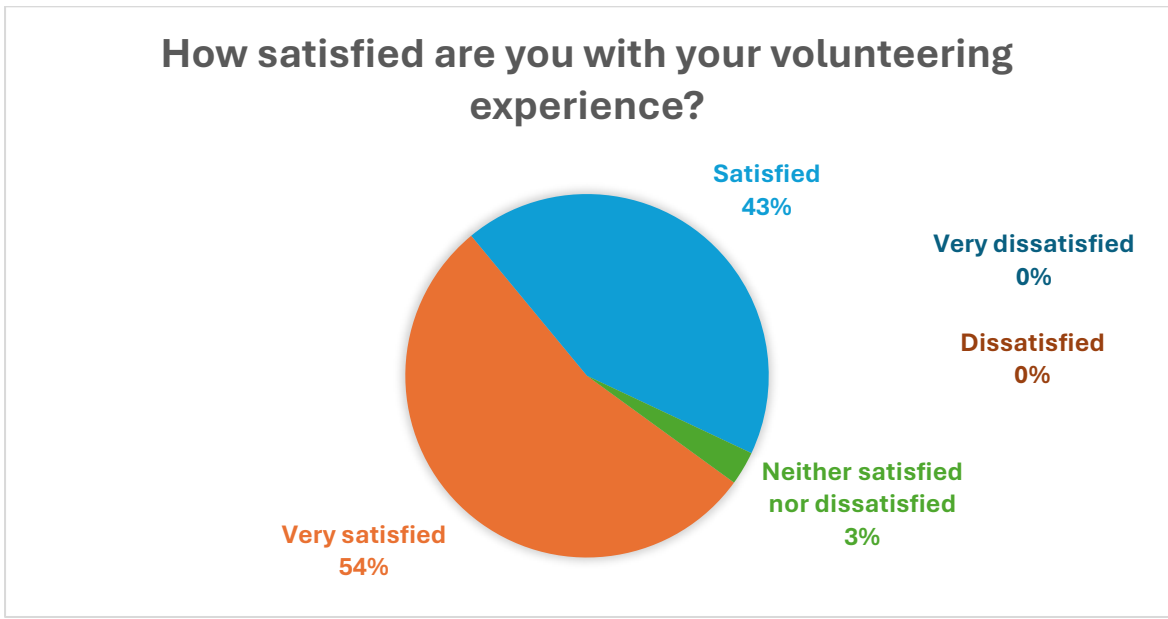
The volunteer support group meetings have been invaluable

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

- Offer occasional in-person meetings for online groups.
- Offer a focus/theme for each meeting to help guide meaningful conversation, such as developing constructive responsive skills when boundaries are overstepped.
- Reflections on how smaller groups often produce more interesting discussion.

I love the moment when I receive a letter in the post, sitting with it, reading it, and feeling totally in tune with the person on the other end. Sharing an hour or two of our lives each month is so little for the rewards that you reap from it

All three have progressed in their rehabilitation. I know there'll be lots of factors contributing to this, but from the feedback they give, I'm pretty sure that having someone they can speak to who is rooting for them, and 'on their side', through good and bad things, makes a difference



97% of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with their volunteering experience.

What is your favourite thing about volunteering with New Bridge?

The key recurring themes were:

- Bringing companionship to individuals who are struggling and feel isolated.
- Meeting interesting people and gaining insight into a system which you otherwise would not.
- Providing non-judgmental support to people in prison.

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

The key recurring themes were:

- Extra time commitment (beyond direct befriending communication) such as monthly activity reporting form and survey admin, as well as support group meetings.
- When befriendees do not write back.
- Visits list issues.
- Slow postal service.

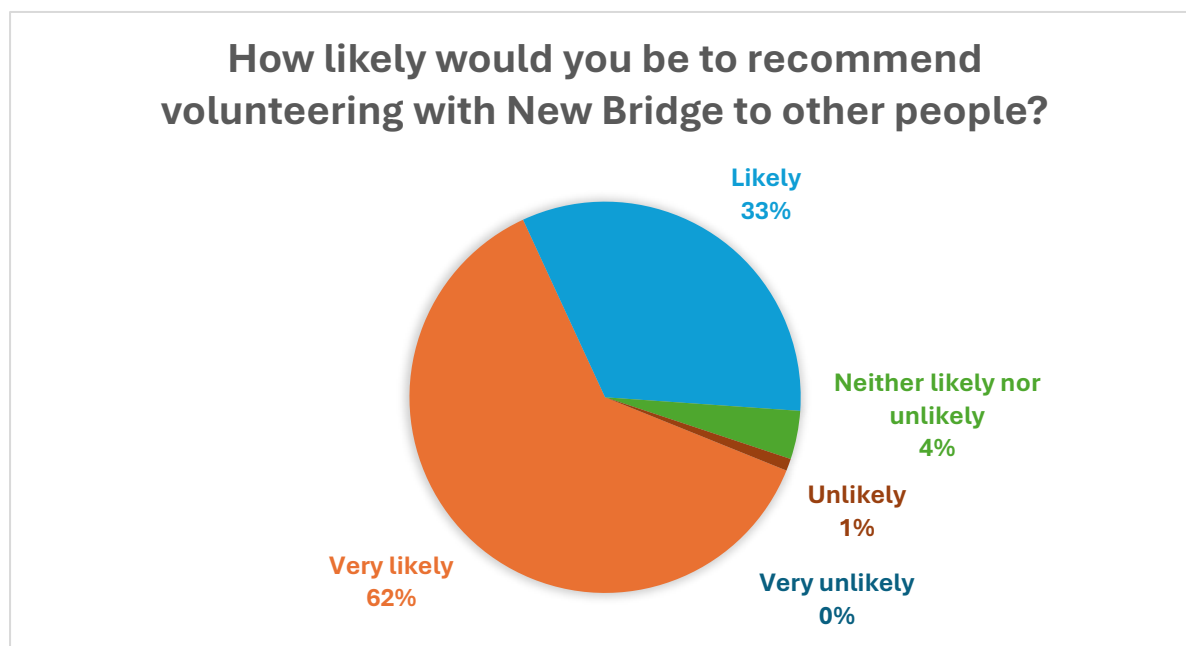
An example of a positive experience in your volunteering:

Receiving a letter which said “Thank you for the letter. It made my day when I got it. I have been smiling like a Cheshire cat all day”

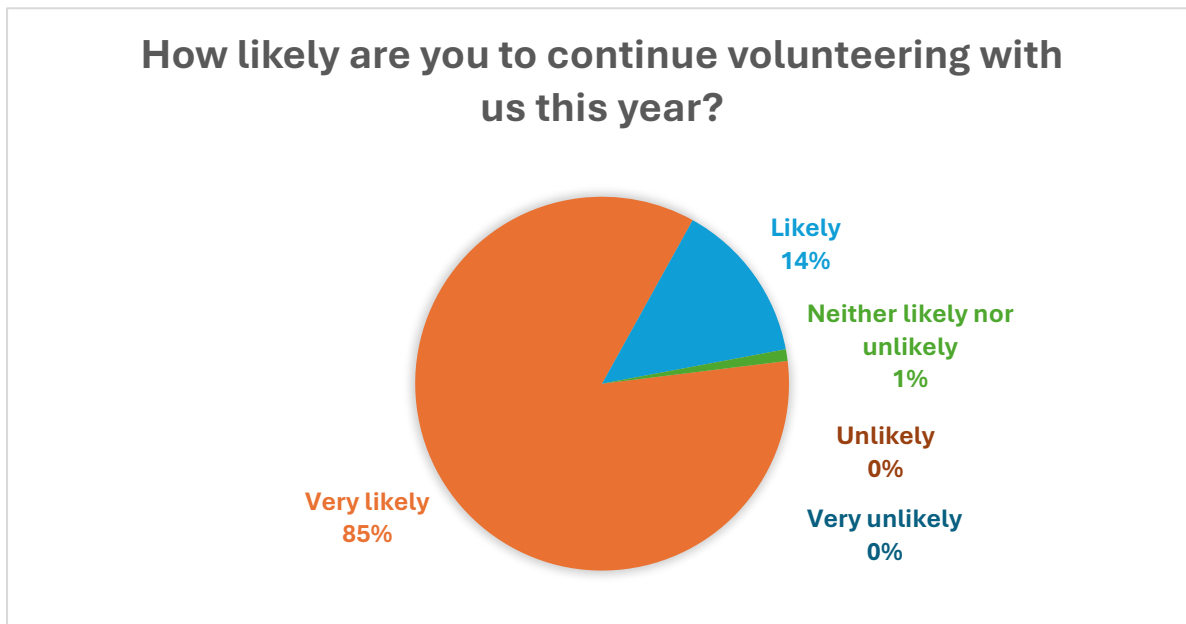
Is there anything we could do to make your volunteering more rewarding?

Key recurring themes were:

- Opportunity for more face-to-face meetings with fellow volunteers.
- Perhaps a second support group for those befriending people after release from prison.
- Provide more resources to share with befriendees, such as their rights and keeping well resources.



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



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

An example of a positive experience in your volunteering:

Hearing from my befriender about how much they appreciate our contact and how it makes them feel less alone, how having someone visit for the first time in years has helped them gain a sense of companionship that they had lost since going into custody far from home

Recommendations

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

- Ensure the visits training sessions continue to run regularly throughout the year.
- Issue clear guidance on visiting individual prisons (where possible), and disability/accessibility accommodations that can be made for visits.
- Roll out a pilot of video visits.
- Ensure all volunteers are aware of the ability to change their support group if their circumstances change and their current one no longer works for them – i.e. a volunteer whose work/study schedule changes or takes on caring responsibilities which clash with current meeting date, or a volunteer in a zoom-only who does not enjoy online meetings may be able to join an alternative group which meets in person, and vice versa
- Consider ways for support group meetings to include updates on criminal justice sector, and training/safeguarding reminders on regular/semi-regular basis
- Consider ways to provide in-person interactions for people in virtual support groups

To conclude this report, we have shared below some of the verbatim responses to three questions, since the answers were so illuminating, positive and inspiring.

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

“I hope it makes a difference, all my prisoners say they enjoy receiving my letters and appreciate the visits. Two of them like to write every week which I am happy with probably says it all.”

“Makes a difference to all, and in particular for those convicted of sexual offences, creates a sense that there are people 'on the outside' who care. Hopefully this can translate into hope, a boost in self-esteem and a motivation to avoid future harmful behaviours - ultimately leading to fewer victims.”

“I think it makes a big difference for them to have someone who isn't a family member, or someone with a direct link to them. To be able to connect without judgement and have an alternative kind of support that is lightly held. It can help them feel like them again, talking about the every day without any expectations attached.”

“I think it makes a difference. After going through a hard time recently, one befriender wrote to tell me how much he appreciated knowing I was there for him.”

“It makes a huge difference to people in prison. For some, knowing that there is someone on the outside just thinking about them has a significant impact upon their wellbeing. Never underestimate the unseen difference a volunteer has.”

“I think that my consistency, respect, curiosity and patience are impactful. That said, I think it takes a lot of time to have a sustainable and positive result with prisoners. Based on the fact that many of them experienced childhood trauma, my expectation is that I aim to befriend not to save. This is to give them a space where they can exchange peacefully whilst breaking away from their loneliness and the stigma attached to being part of the prison population.”

“A massive difference. My guys regularly tell me how much it means to receive my letters and postcards. I can see their evolution over time too, becoming more sure of themselves and growing throughout their sentence - which is absolutely not all to do with me - but having someone to bounce off of and provide reassurance I think definitely helps.”

“My befriender has said it makes a big difference, and she's very keen to get to have an in-person conversation. We are also both trans people, and she's really enjoying getting to talk to someone else who 'gets it'”

“I've learnt from my befriender's responses that it really does make a difference, they feel like they have another person to talk to about general things and seems to cheer them up when they receive letters knowing someone else is thinking of them.”

“Varied but always welcomed and shown respect. One long term prisoner I have befriended for 17 years and he has relied on me in difficult times as I have been his only visitor for significant time. Another prisoner does not have any other visitor and always shows gratitude for my time, support and effort to travel.”

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

“One of my befriendees, who is autistic like me, finds face-to-face social interaction challenging. Although we had exchanged many letters and emails, he said he would prefer not to have a visit. Then out of the blue he said he would like a visit if it were possible. Afterwards he said the time had gone really quickly, and the conversation flowed much more easily than he

had expected. When, after a couple of months. I suggested another visit, he got straight on and booked it and told me how much he was looking forward to it as a positive thing to focus on when other things weren't going too well.”

“Just this week at our support group meeting I heard a really heart warming account of someone who had gone from chronic self harming in prison to now working towards ROTL”

“To meet and support people it is unlikely I would otherwise have met.”

“I recently went to an open day at HMP Grendon. It was an interesting and, at times, moving day. I'd have never had an experience like that if I wasn't volunteering for New Bridge.”

“Volunteering has challenged to really look at myself and put the values I have regarding rehabilitation, true forgiveness and second chances, for example, into action in relation to someone who has been convicted of a very heinous crime. Though I have had internal conflict about this at times, I have come to realise that I truly care about my befriender and want to be a beacon of hope and respite for them :-)”

“Nice letters concerned about me when I said I wasn't well. Great to hear that someone has got a responsible "job" in the prison and is proud of it”

“For the two people I support/have supported, neither have contact with friends and family. It is lovely to be able to support and help someone along on their journey. I have noticed a huge change in my prisoner's mental health. He now focuses on the things he can control, and does a good job with letting other things go.”

“Going to a families visit day at a prison where I was able to interact with a number of people who do not have contact with anyone from outside the prison walls. It was a humbling and uplifting experience and one that I look forward to repeating”

“I remember attending a social day invited by my befriender at HMP Grendon and it was so enlightening! I loved it, I got to listen to several prisoners explain what they were working on in therapy and their struggles, and then to just go around and chat to people. It was very free and open, I sat between my befriender and his cell-neighbour and it was all around really interesting to be able to hear their different views and experiences.”

“Receiving a letter which said "Thank you for the letter. It made my day when I got it. I have been smiling like a Cheshire cat all day””

“Hearing from my befriender how much they appreciate our contact and how it makes them feel less alone, how having some visits for the first time in years has helped them gain a sense of companionship that they had lost since going into custody far from home.”

“One of my befrienders, W, has had a torrid time in prison. For a long time he was stuck in Wakefield, not getting any mental health support and was often in trouble - locking himself in his cell, dirty protests, in debt to other prisoners, setting fire to things, etc. He is now making really good progress in a PIPE unit, and has started to show ambition to eventually get released. He's developing more pro-social skills, and has even set up a savings account for his eventual release. He's applied to Grendon. His feedback has been that having someone who he can talk to who's not part of 'the system' has made a big difference for him. He now phones me up excited about his latest steps forward. A long way to go but there's a real chance now.”

“It has been lovely to see the young man I support really trying to better himself while inside. He has struggled but he seems to be putting things in place for when he's out later in the year. I also loved going to Downview to visit the women there. They all said they wanted more visits.”

“One befriender has changed a lot in confidence in the (almost) 3 years I have known him. Previously he was insular, withdrawn, and openly told me he plans to refuse parole as felt he had nothing to come out to. Over time, he has grown in confidence, social skills and through this has better relationships with others, which has changed his mindset around being released.”

“An ex-prisoner sent me this message "You and New Bridge volunteers are not perfect but are pretty good role models! The fact I am out and staying out is because of your consistent support'. I'm not deserving of such high praise, but this quote emphasises the impact New Bridge does have on someone's life.”

“Hearing positive feedback from Group Chair about my usefulness to a particular befriender (I think I heard that "they are lucky to have me" although this was virtually and sotto voce, so I'm not sure I was supposed to have picked that up!). I felt very proud.”

“My first interaction with my support group. Everyone was very welcoming and happy. They also exchanged a lot of useful thought and ideas that really helped me write up my first letter.”

“Pretty much every conversation I have with A is fun, positive and enjoyable, for both of us. We share bits of knowledge, funny anecdotes, updates on what we've been doing etc. It's become a valuable friendship.”

“Yes reduction in domestic violence behaviour from a Befriender which he directly related to my support.”

“I do get positive feedback from my prisoners who say that they enjoy my letters and visits and that my support makes a difference. One prisoner told me about his offences recently having been reluctant to do so in previous years. Following his disclosure he told me he was afraid I would judge him harshly and not write or visit again so was delighted when he realised this was not the case and that we at NB are not here to judge him but to support.”

“I've sent a birthday card to a current prisoner I'm befriending and they said it made them laugh and they really needed it that day”

“Visibly seeing my befriender cheer up and relax from the beginning to the end of a visit”

“One of the men I befriend was seriously depressed when we first started writing. He had just been sentenced and had a long sentence ahead of him, he was diagnosed with multiple personality disorders, and was suicidal. Regular writing and support - in both directions - allowed him to relearn that his life had value and that he mattered to people, as well as caring about numerous others in his life. We discussed him potentially asking for a prison move, which he did, and he has thrived ever since. He is now an active member of the prison community, designing and running courses to target his offending behaviour, and planning for a future (one he now believes is possible).”

What is your favourite thing about volunteering with New Bridge?

“Being able to help bring some companionship or an ear to listen to people that haven't had great experiences in life”

“Knowing that the time I spend is genuinely helpful to someone”

“The range of people I meet - not just prisoners but other volunteers too.”

“Learning how to separate the crime from the human being who has committed the crime, meeting other volunteers and staff. The low turnover of key head office staff is also very helpful and reassuring.”

“A personal feeling of happiness that I am still useful and can help another member of society who is finding life hard. The opportunity to meet and befriend people from a wide sector of society and understand their qualities, skills and aspirations.”

“Learning about new people who I would otherwise never have crossed paths with has been fascinating. Having flexibility to volunteer my time and not have to commit to a set day or time every week has been important to me.”

“Not just the prisoners (though they count a lot) I enjoy the new youngsters in the monthly groups and fostering their new career moves/graduations, and hearing about their lives”

“Sense of helping in circumstances where there is little positive in the prisoners’ lives.”

“Making a connection with individuals who have little or no social network, without judgement. I have five befriendees and we never seem to run out of things to say! I like that New Bridge volunteers are diverse and approach the role from a different angle, but with the same core values. The support groups include new and well established volunteers and we are all learning from each other.”

“The sense of support from the monthly meetings plus the wider NewBridge team - I never feel alone with a question or concern. I also love the work itself, its rewarding to feel like a few hours each month is making a difference to somebody.”

“I love being organised and learning about the judiciary system. Having an insight on how the prisons operate is highly useful. Furthermore, I enjoy reading the befriended report (although short) and their responses. Finally, I really appreciate meeting other volunteers. It is great to hear about their experiences within the context of New Bridge missions. I feel more confident about myself and I feel valued.”

“The constant personal challenge of supporting people that society usually avoid. The learning.”

“I just know it's important work. I truly believe that befriending helps reduce reoffending. Every time the government talks of building new prisons and being tough on crime, I want to deliver a lecture to explain that there is another way!”

“I feel I am making a difference. I feel valued as a volunteer. I know support is a phone call or email away if advice is needed.”

“Doing something that exposes me to a whole new world that I was previously unaware of, and it has changed my perspective of the prison system.”

“When your befriendee tells you that you have changed their life and given them hope”

“I love the interaction I have with my prisoners and group members. Knowing I am doing something of such worth is good and if I can make a small difference to someone's world then I am happy. I learn through every interaction I have, both about others and myself.”

“Having a complete unique experience writing to a prisoner and understanding that they are real people with real emotions not just what they are labelled to be. Also hearing their travel stories and fun experiences they’ve had and look forward to.”

“It's a unique way to connect with someone who needs support, in a way that is very flexible and so can be managed as part of a busy life. As well as helping a prisoner I'm also getting a lot from the befriending, learning a lot and enjoy receiving the letters.”

“New Bridge is one of the most organised and efficient charities I've worked with. I know they will reply to any query and provide sensible and clear advice.”

“It is a privilege and honour to represent such a fabulous organisation and have the opportunity to impact the lives of others.”

“New Bridge is a very empowering place to volunteer because it does not put pressure on volunteers to do more than they are able. We share the same values. As an autistic person I feel accepted and able to contribute fully. The staff team and really encouraging, caring and professional.”

“Just to say thank-you so much for all that you do to enable volunteers to make such a practical and meaningful difference to lives of prisoners. All the New Bridge team I've come into contact with have been so knowledgeable, professional and helpful. Always super responsive to queries too.”