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Information sheet for staff working in prisons – England and Wales

New Bridge, founded in 1956, creates links between people in prison and the community. New Bridge befriends people in prisons throughout England and Wales through a network of volunteers who write to and visit them. Our intention is never to forget the victims of crime but to prevent more people from becoming victims. New Bridge is a non-campaigning organisation.

As you know, many people in prison do not receive letters or visits but most need someone to talk to - someone they can trust, who doesn't label them, talks straight, stays in touch and doesn't make unrealistic promises. New Bridge Befriending provides support whilst individuals serve their sentences by establishing and maintaining contact through regular letter writing and visiting.

Although many organisations maintain contact between people in prison and the wider community, New Bridge Befriending is different for three main reasons:

1. New Bridge is not a pen pal scheme - our befrienders both write and visit;
2. New Bridge befrienders are attached to the individual not the prison and, therefore continue to provide support through moves to different prisons;
3. New Bridge befrienders are carefully selected and trained before starting to befriend anyone and our monthly support group meetings provide all befrienders with supervision and peer support.

New Bridge Befrienders

Our befrienders come from all walks of life and from various backgrounds and all share a common desire to help people. Their offer is one of patience, warmth, understanding and dependability and they are good listeners.

We only accept applications from those over 18 and, in addition to a completed application form they have to provide two references. Following a fairly rigorous interview process, those successful attend a two-day training course followed by two support group meetings before their befriending role commences. We do welcome applications from people with criminal records but they must be at least two years clear from Probation supervision or release from prison.

Volunteers commit to befriending for at least three years and are encouraged to befriend at least two people. We expect them to write fortnightly and visit once every 3-4 months (after they have exchanged letters for about 6 months).

Newly trained befrienders all join a New Bridge Support Group. New Bridge currently has 19 support groups in England and Wales. The support group meetings provide a vital forum for befrienders to discuss the people they are befriending and to offer each other guidance and support. All New Bridge befrienders are accredited by us every year and their continued accreditation is dependent upon their regular attendance at support group meetings.

New Bridge reimburses all reasonable expenses volunteers incur while befriending.

How befriending works

Any adult in any prison in England or Wales is eligible to apply for a New Bridge Befriender. We welcome requests for a befriender in all circumstances but sometimes our support is more attractive to those who are vulnerable and isolated or who have limited or no contact with people in the outside world. These may be people who are sentenced for the most serious offences or who are serving lengthy, life or indeterminate sentences.

When someone requests a New Bridge Befriender we ask their offender management unit to complete, with them, and return our verification form which details the index offence, sentence length, previous convictions, DOB, hobbies /interests and risk factors to be considered.

On receipt, we add the person's details to our list of those waiting for New Bridge Befriender (and in the meantime maintain a regular contact through letters and cards). New Bridge Befrienders make their selection from the list in liaison with their group chair at support group meetings. We encourage selection based on shared interests and similar age.

All letters are exchanged via the New Bridge address and our befrienders never give anybody money or gifts nor do they divulge their address, phone numbers or personal details. Further, they will never accede to any requests to contact friends or family. Befrienders always contact people in prison with a view to visiting after about six months exchanging letters. That said, some people decide they don't want visits and this is their choice.

"The rights and responsibilities of New Bridge Befrienders are clearly laid out in its policies and procedures which were compiled following extensive consultation with Prison Security Staff. New Bridge Befrienders must act accordingly in order to protect themselves, prisoners and prison security as well as their fellow volunteers and the reputation of the organisation. These comprehensive procedures provide all prisons with the confidence to make full use of this highly commendable service." Michael Spurr, Chief Executive - NOMS