

City Bridge Trust – Monitoring Visit Report

Organisation: New Bridge Foundation	Grant ref: 10589 (assessing officer Clare Thomas)	Programme area: Improving Londoners' Mental Health\nd) Prisoners, ex-prisoners & other in the Criminal Justice System
Amount, date and purpose of grant: 30/06/2011: A grant of £30,000 (3 x £10,000) towards the costs of a London 'Through The Gate' befriending service subject to a financial update for 2011/12.		
Visiting Grants Officer: Ciaran Rafferty, acc by Mrs Littlechild	Date of meeting: 11 th December 2012	
Met with: Chris Thomas (CEO) and Pauline Austin (Volunteer Director)		
1. Introduction to the organisation: New Bridge Foundation (NBF) was set up by Lord Longford in 1956 with the aim of creating links between prisoners and the community and where the initial focus was to reduce the isolation of vulnerable prisoners. Nowadays it's chief aim is to help prisoners keep in touch with the outside world and to help prepare them to rejoin it. The current CEO has been at NBF for seven years.		
2. The project funded: The grant was awarded in June 2011 and commenced straight away as it was for a general contribution to the costs of an existing project – a “through the gate” befriending scheme targeting prisoners on short-term sentences (ie less than 1 year). The specific aims of this project were threefold: to improve the mental health of those prisoners; to increase their chances of employment once released; and to reduce their likelihood of reoffending.		
3. Work delivered to date: The approach is for NBF to recruit, train and support volunteer befrienders who will then be allocated to particular prisoners. The volunteers have to make a formal application to become befrienders and they are vetted as to suitability etc and to ensure a good match. They will visit prisoners in prison and will establish a relationship which will continue post release in order to help the resettlement process. The volunteer's role is one of befriending, not of professional support (where this is needed then referral to specialist agencies/individuals will be provided). Prisoners lives or circumstances are often quite chaotic so more than one volunteer befriender may be required in order to meet their needs. Volunteers have to make an initial commitment of a minimum of 18 months. Throughout their period of service they will be required to attend a range of training and group meetings which are essential to sharing knowledge and best practice and for mutual support. The prisoners are usually recommended or referred to the project by the Offender Management staff as the aim is to support those who most need it (ie with mental health issues and/or little family support).		

4. Difference made:

Measurement or determination of improvement in prisoners' mental health is usually provided by the volunteer befriender. (They are taught things to look for and to make a record of each contact though NBF is currently looking at improving the systems for this.) Prisoners need help to prepare to live back in the community again and, whilst in prison, may have lost some of the skills and abilities to fend for themselves (if they ever had them in the first place). To this end NBF maintains very good links with Jobcentre + and volunteers will accompany them to interviews, etc. Most of the evidence presented as to the impact of the work is in the form of detailed feedback or case-study information. Since the grant commenced there has been in excess of 70 referrals with approximately half of these receiving volunteer support. Presenting mental health conditions included schizophrenia, stress, depression and anxiety.

The project has helped those released to find or return to suitable accommodation and to begin the process to find employment. Those in need have also been assisted to access appropriate mental health services.

In its monitoring report to the Trust NBF has stated that a large proportion of those assisted through this project had no friends or family in the UK and so no support to resettle and/or to address their mental health needs apart from through this scheme.

NBF raised the impact of some policy/practice issues – eg the hugely damaging effect of indeterminate sentencing (citing one person who has been in prison since 2005 on this basis and who has written in despair). Another aspect has been the increasing number of prisoners who are ex-Service people.

5. Grants Administration:

CBT's management of the grant and reporting systems has been fine. For the organisation they have found it a tough year to sustain income. They realise that there is generally more competition for decreasing funds whilst regular donors are also struggling to maintain their level of support. They will reduce costs where they can (eg have fewer group meetings, etc). (It was suggested to the organisation that closer links with other prisoner/resettlement charities might be of benefit in order to share best practice and to avoid any possibility of duplication.)

6. Concluding comments:

NBF has been around long enough to know its territory well and it was clear from our conversation that it understands the underlying issues (eg of sentencing policy, post-release support) which affect levels of re-offending. It is a member of the Criminal Justice Alliance, where it would hope to influence policy, and of Clinks (the support body for voluntary sector agencies working with offenders). It works closely and productively with the Offender Management Service and, with this project, is clear about its duty to provide professionally managed and delivered volunteer support of a high quality.