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**Imagining more than just a prisoner:
The work of Prisoners' Penfriends**

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Imagining more than just a prisoner: The work of Prisoners' Penfriends

Executive Summary

1. Prisoners Penfriends is a small charitable organisation that facilitates and supervises letter-writing between prisoners and trained volunteers. In the light of current resource pressures on the prison system and a recent rise in prisoner suicides, it is timely to examine whether this befriending project may be able to contribute to the well-being and rehabilitation of prisoners.
2. This research project set out to gather and analyse the views of prisoners and volunteers about the work of Prisoners' Penfriends, particularly its impact on prisoners' well-being and on their feelings about life after release from prison. The views were gathered through telephone interviews (volunteers) and through questionnaires (prisoners and volunteers).
3. The research reveals that, although Prisoners' Penfriends volunteers come from a wide variety of backgrounds and geographical areas, they are typically well-educated females over the age of 50. Volunteers take a thoughtful and considered approach to their work, attempting to tailor their correspondence to the needs of prisoners but, in turn, benefiting from the work, finding it satisfying, intellectually interesting and enjoyable.
4. Volunteers show great confidence in the detailed and complex security procedures used by Prisoners' Penfriends to keep them safe. Their training gives them a good understanding of the purpose of the scheme's rules and volunteers report that they are closely supervised and supported through any difficulties. Prisoners appear to understand the need for safety rules too. Although a small number find the restrictions uncomfortable and would prefer to be able to enjoy greater openness with their penfriend, these prisoners, in common with the others, are highly positive about the scheme overall.
5. Prisoners who participate in the scheme are typically male, serving long or indeterminate sentences and many have little or no contact with anyone else outside prison. Typically they sign up to the scheme for relief from isolation (whether friendship and support or simply 'contact with the outside world') or to get some distraction from prison life. It is rare for women prisoners to participate in the scheme.

6. A few prisoners join the scheme in order to improve their social or communication skills. Although no prisoners mentioned having seen improvements in these skills as a consequence of their letter-writing, there is some evidence that volunteers may be seeing improvements in prisoner literacy through the scheme. It is possible that prisoners may not be well placed to see improvements in their own skills. This aspect of the scheme needs further research.
7. Prisoners write in emotional terms about the benefits they receive through their relationship with their penfriends, namely,
 - a. Relief from isolation
 - b. Positive changes to self-identity
 - c. Distraction, interest and self-expression
 - d. Happiness
 - e. Raised hopes for life beyond prison
8. Existing research suggests that, in offering these benefits to prisoners, the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme is likely to improve prisoner well-being by providing a caring and committed listener to help prisoners through their life in prison. The scheme is also likely to raise prisoners' chances of successful rehabilitation, through connecting them with the outside (non-criminal) world, through providing someone who accepts them as more than just 'an offender' and shows belief in their capacity for change.
9. The research reveals two key areas for further enquiry: the reasons why women prisoners rarely engage with the scheme and the impact of the scheme on prisoner literacy. The organisation also faces a significant challenge at present in growing the scheme to provide more prisoners with the benefits described in this report, without compromising the safety and quality of the service. This will require additional funding.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Prisoners' Penfriends is a small charitable organisation, which recruits and trains volunteer letter-writers, matches them with prisoners who are seeking a penfriend and then facilitates and supports the exchange of letters. The organisation's website states that the service *'makes it possible for volunteers to write safely to prisoners, giving friendship, hope – and a reminder of the outside world.'*
- 1.2. Comments on the Prisoners' Penfriends' website from participants and patrons suggest that contact between prisoners and volunteer penfriends may contribute to two significant issues facing prisoners and those who are responsible for them, namely prisoner well-being and rehabilitation.
- 1.3. This independent research project set out to examine the work of Prisoners' Penfriends to see if the scheme can play a role in addressing these important issues, looking in particular at the motivations and attitudes of volunteers, the management of risk during the process and, most crucially, the impact of the scheme on participating prisoners.

Report structure

- 1.4. The report begins by considering the context to this research and identifying the research questions (section 2). This is followed by a brief account of the research design (section 3). Section 4 summarises the history of the Prisoners' Penfriends service and explains how the scheme operates. Section 5 considers the volunteers in more detail, in particular their motivations for getting involved, their approach to the prisoners and what they get out of the work. Section 6 deals with the motivation of prisoners in accessing the scheme and the impact of the scheme on prisoners' welfare and their attitude to their future release. Section 7 discusses the crucial issue of safety, before the report's conclusions are set out in section 8.

2. Research context– the importance of social ties in prisoner well-being and rehabilitation

- 2.1. This section discusses the existing research, which demonstrates that social ties can play a crucial role in improving prisoner well-being and the prospects of rehabilitation.

Prisoner well-being

- 2.2. The challenges facing the prison system in promoting prisoner well-being have been highlighted by Ministry of Justice figures which demonstrate that last year 82 prisoners committed suicide, the highest number since 2007.¹ These figures have given particular urgency to the search for ways in which to provide greater support to prisoners. The prison system is under enormous pressure as significant staff reductions take effect while the prison population increases² and it appears that this has contributed to a deterioration in prison safety.³
- 2.3. It is not only the risk of suicide that is causing concern but also wider issues relating to prisoners' mental health and well-being. A Ministry of Justice study found that 49% of female and 23% of male prisoners were suffering from anxiety and depression, as opposed to 19% of women and 12% of men in the general UK population.⁴ The solutions to these problems are complex and most are beyond the scope of this study but research indicates that prisoners with mental health problems report that they need 'someone to listen.'⁵ This simple form of support through listening is an important factor in preventing prisoner self-harm and suicide⁶ and yet finding such a 'listening ear' may be difficult. Many prisoners, particularly those serving long or indeterminate sentences, will have little contact with their families. Approximately 30% of prisoners who take their own lives had no family contact prior to their deaths.⁷
- 2.4. Research suggests that prison staff are unlikely to fulfil the listener role in the way that prisoners need,⁸ whether through lack of time caused by resource constraints or through lack of trust and empathy between the prisoner and staff member. The lack of continuity caused by prison moves is also likely to impede the building of trusting relationships between staff and prisoners and to impede voluntary prisoner support systems which rely on face-to-face contact, for example, prison chaplains and prison

¹ Howard League for Penal Reform. (2015) *Suicide in prison*. Media release. Accessed 22/1/15 at <http://www.howardleague.org/suicide-in-prison/>

² Howard League for Penal Reform. (2014) *Breaking Point: Understaffing and overcrowding in Prisons*. Research Briefing Paper. London: Howard League for Penal Reform

³ Ninth Report of the House of Commons Justice Committee 2014/2015. (HC117) *Prisons: planning and policy*. London: HMSO Para. 102

⁴ Ministry of Justice. (2013) *Gender differences in substance misuse and mental health amongst prisoners*. London: Ministry of Justice at p19

⁵ Durcan, G. (2008) *From the Inside*. London: Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health at p58

⁶ Borrill, J., Snow, L., Medlicott, D., Teers, R., and Paton, K. (2005) *Learning from 'Near Misses': Interviews with Women who Survived an Incident of Severe Self-Harm in Prison. What Makes a Difference?* The Howard Journal, 44(1): pp. 57–69

⁷ Ministry of Justice. (2010) *NOMS Safer Custody News* Jan/Feb, accessed 22 January 2015 at <http://iapdeathsincustody.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/NOMS-Safer-Custody-News-January-February-2010.pdf>

⁸ Borrill, J. et al (2005) (see above) at p64

visitors. In this context, it is possible that the provision of support, mentoring and friendship through a prison letter-writing scheme may contribute to prisoner well-being by offering someone to listen to prisoners in distress. The penfriend relationship can ‘travel’ with the prisoner throughout the prison system. In addition, the writing and receiving of letters may act as a welcome distraction from prison life and contribute to prisoners’ social and literacy skills.

- 2.5. There has been little previous research on prison letter-writing schemes. The most relevant research was conducted on behalf of another small prisoner befriending service, the New Bridge Foundation.⁹ The key difference between that charity and Prisoners’ Penfriends is that New Bridge combines letter-writing with prison visiting. The New Bridge report found that participating prisoners reported that the service helped to improve prisoners’ well-being through reducing feelings of isolation,¹⁰ improving contact with others in the community¹¹ and improving prisoners’ self-esteem and confidence¹². However, the research report did not disaggregate the letter-writing aspects of the New Bridge Foundation work from the visiting.
- 2.6. Against this background, this project set out to canvass the views and experiences of prisoners and volunteers on how the Prisoners’ Penfriends scheme impacted on prisoners’ experiences of life in prison.

Rehabilitation

- 2.7. Research indicates that the process of an offender turning away from offending (‘desistance’) is influenced by factors external to the offender as well as internal, psychological factors.¹³ Fundamental to the internal factors influencing change is a change in self-identity. Maruna¹⁴ describes prisoners developing ‘*a coherent, pro-social identity for themselves.*’ Giordano *et al*¹⁵ have described this as the offender ‘*envisioning and begin[ning] to fashion an appealing and conventional ‘replacement self’.*’ In terms of external factors, research indicates that hope and the support of others play a key part in these processes.¹⁶

⁹ The New Bridge Foundation. (2012) *Foundations and Futures*. London: The New Bridge Foundation.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p18

¹¹ *ibid.* p16

¹² *ibid.* p16

¹³ LeBel, T., Burnet, R., Maruna, S., and Bushway, S. (2008) ‘*The Chicken and Egg*’ of Subjective and Social Factors in Desistance from Crime. *European Journal of Criminology* 5(2): 131-159 T.

¹⁴ Maruna, S. (2001) *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association Books

¹⁵ Giordano, P., Cernkovich, S. and Rudolph, J. (2002) *Gender, Crime and Desistance*. *American Journal of Sociology*. 107: pp999-1002 at p1001

¹⁶ McNeill, F. and Weaver, B. (2010) *Changing lives? Desistance research and offender management*. SCCJR project report No. 03/2010: p17

2.8. These ideas are reflected in the Ministry of Justice's summary of evidence on reducing reoffending,¹⁷ which set out the key research evidence on the reduction of re-offend including nine key factors in desistance. Of particular relevance to volunteer schemes in the support of prisoners are the following factors influencing desistance:¹⁸

- '*Hope and motivation*' – determination to change one's life and confidence in the prospects of success
- '*Having something to give to others*' – feeling empathy with others and finding a way to contribute to society
- '*Having a place within a social group*' – feeling connected to a non-criminal community
- '*Not having a criminal identity*' – seeing oneself more than just an offender
- '*Being believed in*' – being supported by others who communicate a belief that the offender has the ability to change and has something to offer society.

2.9. It is clear from this list how crucial connections with those in wider society (the non-criminal 'outside world') are likely to be in establishing these desistance factors. A prisoner, particularly one serving a long sentence, who has no contact with those outside prison will find it difficult to see a place for him or herself in the wider community and may find it difficult to find ways to contribute to society, to see him or herself as more than an offender and this may impact on the prisoner's ability to build the necessary confidence and determination to change his or her life. Those who have visits from supportive non-criminal family and friends will be at an advantage¹⁹ but such support will not always survive a lengthy sentence or repeated experiences of prison.²⁰

2.10. Clearly those who work in prisons and in probation have an important role in encouraging these desistance factors but the resource and staffing constraints bearing on these services at present may make it difficult for professionals to devote the time needed to achieve the required relationship. An additional challenge for professionals working with prisoners is the difficulty in maintaining continuity of relationships. As discussed at paragraph 2.4 above, those who need to meet with prisoners face to face will find it difficult to maintain relationships when prisoners

¹⁷ Ministry of Justice. (2014) *Transforming Rehabilitation: a summary of evidence on reducing reoffending* (second edition). Ministry of Justice Analytical Series. at p8

¹⁸ The other four factors relate to getting older & maturing, family & intimate relationships, sobriety and employment (*ibid.* at p8)

¹⁹ *ibid.* at p5

²⁰ Webster, C., MacDonald, R., and Simpson, M. (2006) *Predicting Criminality?* Youth Justice 6(1):7-22 at p13

are moved between prisons (as they inevitably will be, particularly if they are longer-term prisoners) and after release. Evidence shows that for a mentoring relationship to be successful, in preventing re-offending it should ideally start in prison and last beyond release.²¹

- 2.11. Crucially there is likely to be a benefit from the prisoner engaging with volunteers who are 'normal' members of the community who can '*offer a fresh non-professional outlook that represents an acceptance of the [offender] but with the 'man (or woman)-in-the-street's' view.*'²²
- 2.12. The potential rehabilitative impact of prison letter-writing schemes has received little previous attention from researchers. The New Bridge Foundation study found that in addition to the prisoner welfare improvements, prisoners reported other benefits, which were likely to have an impact on rehabilitation, namely, a more positive sense of personal identity and positive challenge from the volunteers about the prisoners' attitudes to life and the future.²³ It is likely that the same rehabilitative benefits would accrue to users of the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme but, due to the combination of visiting and letter-writing in the New Bridge work, this needs further targeted research.

Research Questions

- 2.13. Prisoners' Penfriends has previously attempted to assess its service by asking participating prisoners and volunteers to complete feedback forms. The responses given in these forms were generally highly positive but, as the organisation recognises, many prisoners appear to use these forms to thank the organisation and their penfriend. In consequence it is possible that prisoners may be inclining their responses towards the positive. As a consequence, although the researchers have had sight of the material gathered by the organisation from these feedback forms, they do not form part of this research report.
- 2.14. In the light of the existing research, this project set out to consider prisoner and volunteer accounts to assess whether Prisoners' Penfriends may contribute to prisoner well-being and rehabilitation. It was also considered important to examine the participants' views on the training, supervision and safety precautions offered by the organization. A crucial aspect of any scheme which engages volunteers to work with offenders is the extent to which volunteers can be protected from any risks

²¹ Ministry of Justice. (2014) *op. cit.* p28

²² Thomas, T., Thompson, D. and Karstedt, S. (2014) *Assessing the impact of Circles of Support and Accountability on the re-integration of adults convicted of sexual offences in the community: Final report.* University of Leeds, online at: <http://www.law.leeds.ac.uk/research/projects/assessing-impact-cosa>

²³ The New Bridge Foundation (2012) *op. cit.* p17

posed by the offenders. Historically, for this reason, the Prison Service has been understandably cautious in allowing volunteer schemes to access prisoners and this has to some extent slowed the development of the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme. By accessing volunteers' accounts of their training, supervision and support, it is possible to assess the safety systems engaged by the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme.

- 2.15. The following research questions were identified:
- A. What motivates prisoner participants in the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme?
 - B. What motivates volunteer participants in the scheme?
 - C. What is the impact of the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme on
 - a. Prisoner experience of imprisonment?
 - b. Prisoners views of their life after release?
 - D. How are potential risks mitigated?

3. Methodology

- 3.1. The impetus for this research was an approach by the director of Prisoners' Penfriends, Gwyn Morgan, to the Criminal Justice Centre at the School of Law at the University of Warwick. The organisation was interested in accessing independent research evidence about the efficacy of the Prisoners' Penfriends service with a view to providing more information on the scheme to potential funders. Professor Jacqueline Hodgson, Director of Warwick Law School's Criminal Justice Centre agreed to carry out an independent research review and identified a researcher. A small amount of funding was generously provided by the Allen Lane Foundation to support the research, supplemented by a small sum from the Criminal Justice Centre. However both the research funding and the researcher's available time were limited and this necessarily limited the scope and design of the research project (for example, making it impractical to travel to prisons to conduct face-to-face interviews).

Accessing prisoners' views

- 3.2. Because the research involved accessing serving prisoners it was necessary to obtain consent from NOMS (National Offender Management Service) National Research Committee and this was granted. Given the researcher's time and funding limitations and potential access and safety difficulties in accessing prisoners and ex-prisoners, prisoners' views were canvassed by means of questionnaires, a copy of which can be seen in the Annex. A pilot telephone interview with an ex-prisoner informed the drafting of this questionnaire. Care was taken in drafting to ensure that, while giving due opportunity for prisoners to articulate their experiences of the scheme, the questions did not direct prisoners towards particular issues of concern. Questions

were typically non-directive and open ended e.g. *'Why did you apply for Prisoners' Penfriends – what did you hope to get out of it?'*

- 3.3. These questionnaires were sent into prison with a covering letter from the researchers, which explained the nature and purpose of the research project and addressed issues of confidentiality. The envelopes were addressed and sent by the director of Prisoners' Penfriends to avoid the need for personal data about the prisoners to be released to the researchers.
- 3.4. It was anticipated that the lack of access to stationery and stamps might limit prisoners' responses so, in order to get the best possible response rate without compromising confidentiality, prisoners were asked to place the questionnaire in a sealed envelope but then return it to Prisoners' Penfriends with one of their letters to Penfriends. The researchers' letter offered assurance to prisoners that their questionnaire would not be read by Prisoners' Penfriends staff.
- 3.5. Questionnaires were initially sent to 40 serving prisoners (in five prisons) and five ex-prisoners but shortly thereafter further funds and researcher time became available and NOMS gave consent to expand the research to all prisoners who participate in Prisoners' Penfriends (113 prisoners). There was an excellent response rate, with 58% of the prisoners surveyed returning a completed questionnaire.

Accessing volunteers' views

- 3.6. Although interviews with volunteers did not carry the same access and safety difficulties as prisoner interviews, travel time and costs still made face-to-face interviews impractical. In the circumstances, volunteers' views were canvassed through a combination of semi-structured telephone interviews (with interviewees selected at random from those who had offered to be interviewed) and questionnaires. The first three interviews were treated as pilots and informed the drafting of the interview schedule and the questionnaire (both of which can be found in the Annex). Interviews were recorded and transcribed.
- 3.7. At the time the fieldwork was conducted there were 51 volunteers at Prisoners' Penfriends. Of those 51 volunteers, 35 (69%) took part in the research project, 22 volunteers filling out a questionnaire and 13 volunteers being interviewed by telephone.

Limitations of this research

- 3.8. Despite initial concerns that prisoners might find it difficult (or not be inclined) to give full answers to questions about Prisoners' Penfriends in the form of a questionnaire, this does not appear to have been a problem and, as this report will show, prisoners have given detailed and rich accounts of their experiences. Clearly, any conclusions from this research can only be based on the accounts and perceptions of the scheme's participants and there has been no testing of those accounts to see whether the reported benefits have in fact materialised. However, there is no obvious reason why those who were interviewed and completed questionnaires would give false accounts of their experience of the scheme and the combination of the excellent response rate and remarkable consistency between accounts gives some reason for confidence that the accounts are accurate.

Notes

- 3.9. In quoting from questionnaires some light editing has been applied to remove minor grammatical and spelling errors in order to improve fluency, achieve greater equality between prisoners and volunteers in the presentation of their accounts and to remove distracting errors.
- 3.10. Prisoners and volunteers often call each other 'penfriends'. For clarity, in this report offenders are referred to as 'prisoners' or 'ex-prisoners' and volunteers are referred to as 'volunteers'.
- 3.11. In this report all names of volunteers and prisoners and other identifying information have been changed (for example, where a quotation from a volunteer contains information that might be recognisable to the volunteer's penfriend). Volunteers and prisoners who participated in the research have been given reference numbers and these are used when referring to these responses. Prisoners are referred to as 'he' throughout because all prisoners who responded to the research were male.

4. The Prisoners' Penfriends scheme

- 4.1. Prisoners' Penfriends has its origins in a project set up by the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) in the early 1990s when volunteer letter-writers were matched with prisoners and the PRT office used as a forwarding address for the exchange of letters. In 2003,

Prisoners' Penfriends took over the project and became a registered charity and company limited by guarantee.

4.2. The permission for the charity's operation was given by the Prison Service, following the successful outcome of pilot projects, in HMP Wandsworth and HMP Downview, in 2004.²⁴ Full operation began in 2005, with the following limitations:

- although all prisons, except juvenile establishments, could take part in the scheme, the governor of each establishment had to give the organisation specific permission to recruit prisoners;
- there was to be no advertising in "Inside Time";²⁵
- no one under 21 could take part;
- all prisoners in the scheme had to inform their correspondents of their offences;
- no sex offenders were allowed to take part; and
- there was to be no national advertising for volunteers.

4.3. The scheme has expanded as a result of visits by the organisation's director to individual prisons although some of the prisons visited refused to take part. A total of 64 prisons have agreed to join the scheme, but ten of these have now closed. The organisation reports that, in many of the prisons which agreed to participate in the scheme, those working in the prison do not co-operate in advertising the scheme or encouraging prisoners to join it. As a result, some operations have fallen dormant and further visits have been necessary. Even then, in some cases, Prisoners' Penfriends has found securing any kind of co-operation to be a difficult process. Of the 54 prisons mentioned, only around 30 are actively co-operative.

4.4. Recently, in an attempt to improve this situation, the organisation has enlisted some volunteer penfriends to liaise with the prisons in their region. Four visits to prisons have taken place, during which volunteers have been given the opportunity to meet prisoners and tell them about the scheme.

4.5. The ban on writing to sex offenders was reversed by the National Offender Management Service – by a decision at the Ministry of Justice at ministerial level – in November 2013. This followed two successful pilot programmes, at HMP Whatton and HMP Usk, which, in turn, followed a scheme whereby volunteer penfriends wrote to released sex offenders resident in Langley House hostels. All six prisons housing exclusively sex offenders are now active in Prisoners' Penfriends and are amongst the

²⁴ The background information in paragraphs 4.2 to 4.5 was provided by the director of Prisoners' Penfriends.

²⁵ 'Inside Time' is the newspaper which is distributed within prisons

institutions where there is the most co-operation. In addition, following the success of the 2013 pilots, an email to prisons was sent out from NOMS, recommending the scheme. Some prisons then made contact with Prisoners' Penfriends, inviting them to visit.

- 4.6. Management data provided by Prisoners' Penfriends indicates that, at the time of writing, 130 serving prisoners and six ex-prisoners are active in the scheme.²⁶ 64 volunteers are currently active.²⁷ The Prisoners' Penfriend scheme operates in 52 prisons. Over the life of the organisation, 870 prisoners have used the scheme and 16,982 letters have been exchanged.²⁸

Recruitment of participants

- 4.7. Most prisoners find out about the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme from the prison chaplaincy (31%), from posters on the Wing (26%) or from another prisoner (18%). The organisation reports that, as a result of the individual negotiations which are necessary to persuade each prison to take part, there is no uniformity of application procedures but, in all cases, the prisoner's application, including a revelation of his offence, is checked by those working at the prison. In some cases, this leads to the prison deciding that a prisoner is not suitable for the scheme. Prisoners' Penfriends accepts all prisoner applications which are approved by the relevant prison although, if a prisoner writes seeking a romantic relationship or misunderstands the scheme in some other way, he is asked to re-consider his application.
- 4.8. Prisoners were asked why they thought their fellow prisoners had not signed up to the scheme and 24 prisoners (37%) suggested that this might be because their fellow prisoners were unaware of the scheme. They were also asked to suggest improvements to the scheme and, although half of prisoners could not suggest any improvements, 9 prisoners (14%) responded saying that the scheme should be publicised more widely. It seems clear, therefore, that if access to the scheme is to be widened the organisation needs to be permitted by the Prison Service to publicise it more effectively. In response to the specific question about how best to publicise the scheme, the most popular suggestions from prisoners were more posters (34 prisoners) or advertisements in Inside Time (18 prisoners). Other suggestions were using leaflets, appointing prisoner representatives to spread the word about the

²⁶This figure has increased since the research was undertaken, when 113 serving prisoners and five ex-prisoners were active in the scheme.

²⁷ This figure has increased since the research was undertaken, when there were 51 active volunteers.

²⁸ Management data provided by Prisoners' Penfriends on 31/3/15

scheme, promoting it during the induction process or through libraries or the education service. Five prisoners stipulated that efforts should be made to extend publicity to outside the prison chaplaincies whereas two suggested using the chaplaincy to promote it.

- 4.9. Most volunteers (43%) find out about the scheme through an advertisement or article, with half of these learning about Prisoners' Penfriends through the Magistrates' Association Magazine. Although 26% are recruited through word-of-mouth (with existing volunteers and other organisations referring on suitable individuals), 16% found the organisation through an online search. Overall, around half (16 of the 35) volunteers who responded came to the work through their previous paid or unpaid work within the criminal justice system. Owing to the small size of the organisation and the sensitivity of its work, there has often been a waiting list of willing volunteers who the organisation did not have the capacity to train, match to suitable prisoners and supervise. However recent expansion means that Prisoners' Penfriends is now looking for new volunteers.

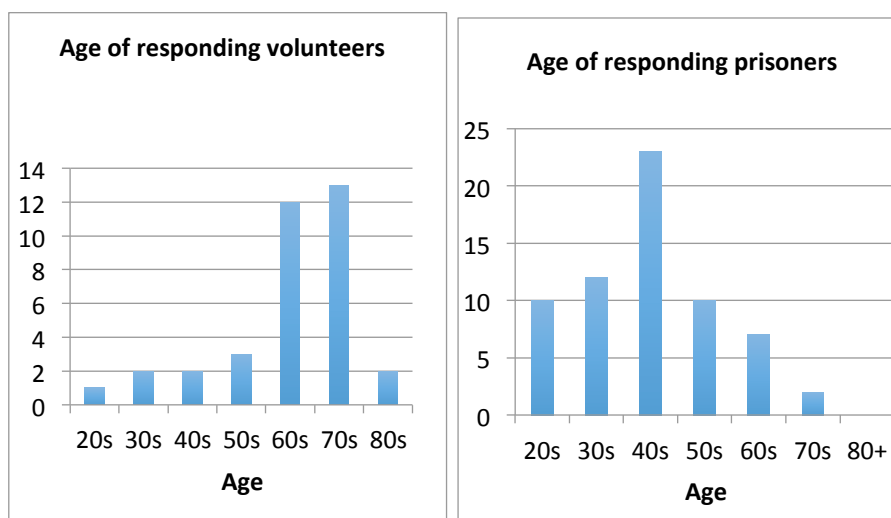
Who are the participants?

- 4.10. All of the prisoners participating in the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme at present are male. Although the organisation has sought to recruit female prisoners to the scheme (running one of the original pilots in a women's prison) this has seen little success. Around 30 women prisoners have enrolled on the scheme since it was established but this has only rarely led to extended correspondence. Because this research project only accessed prisoners who had participated in the scheme, the data cannot explain why women prisoners choose not to seek a penfriend. Experienced prison officers have suggested to the director of Prisoners' Penfriends that women prisoners are more likely to have a network of friends and family supporting them from outside.
- 4.11. Most of the prisoners who use the Prisoners' Penfriends service are serving very long or indeterminate sentences.²⁹ 32% of responding prisoners were serving life sentences and 29% were serving indeterminate sentences for public protection ('IPP sentences').³⁰ Only 12% of prisoners who responded to the questionnaire were serving sentences of less than five years (and only three prisoners were serving sentences shorter than two years).

²⁹ More detailed data on the length of sentences is included in the Tables at the end of this report.

³⁰ Sentences of imprisonment for public protection were abolished by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 but this Act did not apply retrospectively to the prisoners who were already serving IPP sentences. These prisoners can be detained after they have served their tariff until the Parole Board is satisfied that it is safe to release them.

- 4.12. It is striking that so many prisoners on the scheme are serving IPP sentences as research indicates that the frustration suffered by IPP prisoners can create significant difficulties for prison safety, stability and resourcing.³¹ If the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme can assist at all in improving the well-being of these IPP prisoners and reducing frustration then this could have a positive impact on the wider prison population and prison staff.
- 4.13. Media reporting of those who write to prisoners has often focused on lurid accounts of women who form romantic relationships with serious offenders. This may help to explain the suggestion in some research that professionals who work with offenders can be suspicious about the background and motivation of those who choose to volunteer to work with offenders.³² For that reason it was important to gather information relating to the background and motivation of the volunteers. This material demonstrates that volunteers come from different areas of the country, have different backgrounds and have worked in different sectors or professions. Most volunteers (78%) are women³³ whereas all of the responding prisoners were male but none of the prisoners expressed any comment or complaint about this and only one volunteer said that this might be a problem. The data also reveals some other interesting patterns in volunteer background.
- 4.14. The two graphs below show the differing age ranges of the volunteers and prisoners.



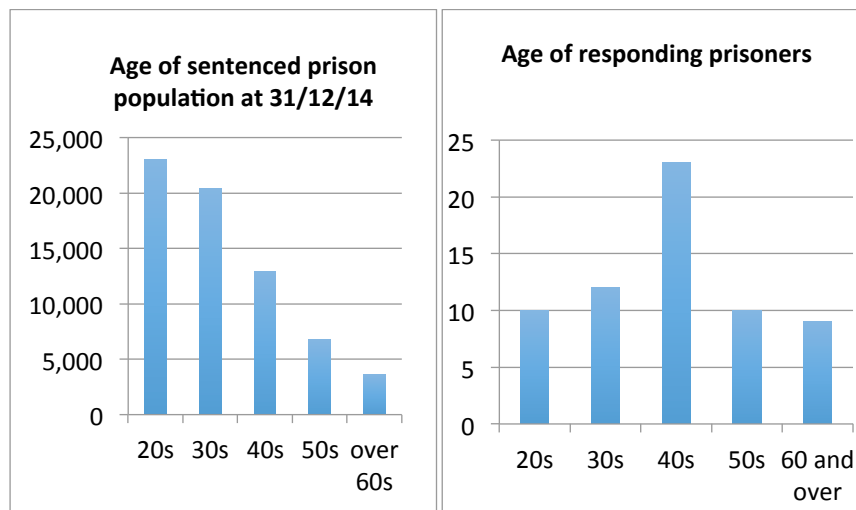
³¹ Howard League for Penal Reform (2013) *The never-ending story: Indeterminate sentencing and the prison regime*. (Briefing Paper) London: Howard League for Penal Reform at p4

³² Thomas (2014) *op. cit.* p156

³³ Data provided by Prisoners' Penfriends indicates that, at the start of this research, 40 of the 51 volunteers were women.

- 4.15. It can be seen that the prisoners tend to be younger than the volunteers and are most commonly in their forties, with a substantial number in their twenties and thirties. Volunteers tend to be older people with 89% of volunteers who responded to the questionnaire aged 50 or above and only one in his/her twenties.
- 4.16. Volunteers and prisoners do not appear to perceive age differences to be a problem. Some prisoners mentioned that their penfriend was older than them but this was presented as a benefit. One prisoner said that the age of his penfriend inspired him to look positively on the future because hearing about what she is doing in her life *'gets me thinking about the kind of things I may be doing when I reach 70.'* Another said that his penfriend had a happy fulfilling life and *'didn't start it until her 30s. It gives me hope I might get the same.'* One volunteer, too, suggested that being older was an advantage as it left him better equipped for the role while another said that her penfriends did not seem to mind her age - *'I think both of them know that I'm decrepit!'*
- 4.17. The following charts compare the age of responding prisoners against the age of the sentenced prison population at 31st December 2014.³⁴ It will be seen that the prisoners who responded to this research tended to be older than the general sentenced prison population and that the predominance of younger people in prison is not reflected in the sample. The differences may to some extent be the result of a different pattern of age range in prisoners serving sentences of different lengths (e.g. it is possible that prisoners in their 20s tend to be serving shorter sentences) or alternatively that, as long-term prisoners age within the prison system, they become more isolated and therefore more likely to seek support from organisations like Prisoners' Penfriends. It is also possible that younger prisoners are less likely to want to write letters or to have contact with volunteers. This research cannot determine which, if any, of these explanations is correct.

³⁴ Sentenced prison population statistics taken from Ministry of Justice (2014) *Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: July to September 2014*. London: Ministry of Justice.



- 4.18. The volunteers tend to be highly qualified and most hold, or have retired from, a professional or caring role. Nine of the 33 volunteer respondents (25%) had worked in the criminal justice system. Of those nine, six volunteers were magistrates, two police or fraud investigators and one volunteer had worked in the probation service. Another quarter of the volunteers who responded had a background in teaching (two being former head teachers and one a former school inspector). Seven volunteers (20%) had worked in caring roles: three as a nurse, three as a disability worker, and one as a care assistant in a residential home.
- 4.19. Of the remaining volunteers, four (11%) worked in administrative support roles and three (9%) worked in business or management with one such volunteer owning their own business. In addition, two volunteers had formerly held advisory roles (Citizens Advice Bureau; barrister). Other volunteers' jobs included chef, journalist, fashion designer, actress, library assistant, publishing and an IT systems analyst. Some volunteers, e.g. magistrates, listed more than one profession or sector. While volunteers often referred to their career background as relevant or helpful to their work for the organisation, others saw the requirements of the role as more mundane: *'Someone who's interested in sport I think! No I think an open mind... And cheerful.'* (V24)
- 4.20. Volunteers tend to be committed to the scheme over long periods of time. Despite recent expansion of the organisation meaning that a number of volunteers are relatively new to the organisation (with 14% having been writing for less than a year), of the 35 volunteers who responded to the questionnaire, 34% have been writing for 9 years or more and the same proportion had been writing for 5-8 years.

The life cycle of a penfriend relationship

- 4.21. When first making contact with a prisoner, volunteers are given a list of the prisoner's interests and tailor their initial letter to attempt to include the prisoner's interests. Volunteers explained that there can be very different patterns of penfriend relationship with some prisoners writing a few letters before appearing to lose interest but others becoming firmly established as regular correspondents and a relationship between the penfriends developing:

'...some of them don't last long I mean sometimes you write, and then all of a sudden it just disappears. And Gwyn says well they seem to have given up or don't want to write anymore so you accept that. And some of them you get a good sort of correspondence going...' (V28)

- 4.22. The number of prisoners who stop writing after the initial few letters means that typically a volunteer will have had a number of penfriends during their work for the organisation but that many of them will have been short-lived. Four of the 35 volunteer respondents had written to 11 or more prisoners. When prisoners cease to respond to volunteers' letters the organisation does try to encourage the correspondence to continue. Every month, the director checks through all the correspondences to see if there are any gaps. Where the prisoner has not written for a while, enquiries are made as to his whereabouts and, if the prison lets the organisation know where the prisoner is, a letter is written to encourage him to write again. A similar "nudge" is used on the more infrequent occasions when the volunteer has failed to write for a number of weeks.³⁵ However if a prisoner fails to respond to these efforts, there is little that the volunteer or the organisation can do other than to accept that the arrangement has run its course.

- 4.23. When a penfriend relationship becomes established, there can be a sustained period of regular correspondence between the volunteer and the prisoner, often throughout the prisoner's sentence. All but one of the 65 prisoners who responded said that they planned to continue writing to the penfriend throughout their sentence (the lone prisoner who had stopped said this was because he had hoped for a romantic relationship with his penfriend and so he was disappointed to have been allocated a male volunteer). The difference between volunteers' experience of many prisoners failing to pursue the scheme after the first few letters and the prisoners' expressed intentions to continue to write is likely to reflect the fact that the prisoners who took time to respond to the questionnaire were less likely to be from the group of

³⁵ This information about the organisation's processes was provided by the director, Gwyn Morgan

prisoners who fail to commit to the scheme. Despite this, most of the prisoner respondents were new to the scheme; (63%) had so far been writing to their penfriend for less than a year and 45% of them for less than 6 months. The longest penfriend relationship reflected in the prisoner questionnaires was nine years.

- 4.24. Prisoners and volunteers were asked about how often they wrote to their penfriend and the responses indicated that the overwhelming majority of participants wrote to their penfriend between once and twice a month. This would mean that most participating prisoners would be either receiving or writing a letter at least once a fortnight. The longest period between letter-writing was said to be 6 weeks (this period was mentioned by one volunteer and one prisoner only) although a small number of volunteers and prisoners said that the frequency of their letter-writing varied according to when they received a response.

Continuing to write after release

- 4.25. Six of the volunteers talked about a third stage where the penfriends would continue to write to each other after the prisoner had been released but they describe how this relationship naturally ‘fizzles’ or ‘fades’ out as the ex-prisoner would become more involved in their lives outside prison.

‘...as they are released there is always the excited letter which tells about going and says I want to keep up this relationship, I want to tell you about my life outside but of course you never hear from them because life takes over quite understandably so whilst I would be fascinated to find out what happens to them of course I never do.’ (V26)

‘It has always faded out, where it’s clear from...the last letter that it’s not something his heart’s in.’ (V29)

- 4.26. These volunteers’ accounts of contact fading after a prisoner’s release mirrors the management data from Prisoners’ Penfriends which indicates that it is very rare for a prisoner to sustain contact after prison. Prisoners’ Penfriends allows such contact to continue (although, for safety, this must continue through the usual Prisoners’ Penfriends channels) but this occurs only rarely. Of the volunteers who responded, V12 was continuing to write to two ex-prisoners and V23 said that he planned to do so.

- 4.27. However, volunteers do not see this fading of contact as a ‘breakdown’ of the relationship or a failure but as part of a natural life-cycle of the penfriend relationship and ‘as it should be’. Unusually, one volunteer (V30) described how, after the prisoner’s release and the penfriend relationship had faded out, the ex-prisoner re-

contacted Prisoners' Penfriends, 'after quite a long gap' to re-establish contact with the same volunteer again because the ex-prisoner was experiencing health problems.

- 4.28. There is a striking contrast between both the limited number of prisoners sustaining contact after release and the volunteers' acceptance of this, and the prisoners' responses when asked whether they will continue to write to their penfriend after release. 86% of prisoners said that they would continue writing after release and many said that they expected the support of their penfriend to be very important at this time. It was not possible to contact released prisoners who have stopped writing to Prisoners' Penfriends (as their location was unknown to the organisation) so it was not possible to establish why, despite these intentions, ex-prisoners cease contact with their penfriends. This issue is discussed further at paragraph 6.54 below.

5. Volunteers' motivations, attitude to prisoners and personal gains

Motivation for volunteering

- 5.1. Volunteers offered a wide range of explanations for their decision to volunteer for the organisation (with many mentioning more than one motivation). The explanations most commonly offered were philanthropic in that they were associated with a desire to help prisoners by providing a link to the outside world (mentioned by 13 of the 35 volunteers), a general desire to 'give back' or do something good (2 volunteers) or a desire to help with prisoner education (3 volunteers). Some volunteers were motivated by religious faith,³⁶ one volunteer said that being a penfriend went 'side by side' with his work as a Samaritan while two others mentioned their involvement in the Women's Institute, which has run a high-profile campaign about prisoner issues.
- 5.2. Some volunteers were clearly motivated to do voluntary work and found that this project fitted their needs particularly well. Five volunteers were attracted by the fact that they could do this voluntary work flexibly and from home (which may to some extent reflect the older age profile of the volunteer group), three volunteers mentioned that they were attracted by the knowledge that they would never meet the penfriend and one simply said this was something they were capable of doing.
- 5.3. Other explanations given for volunteering related to the positive gains for volunteers associated with the work, namely the enjoyment of writing and receiving letters

³⁶ Only one volunteer expressly referred to 'Christian duty' as a motivation for joining the scheme but five of the volunteers (14%) mentioned that they were Christian.

(mentioned by 16 volunteers), a desire for human contact (1 volunteer) or a desire to occupy themselves with something useful (3 volunteers) and one volunteer mentioned that it helped her memory to write things down.

Volunteers' approach to their penfriends

- 5.4. Volunteers are mostly professional, educated people and attempt to manage interactions between themselves and prisoners to positive effect, which requires the volunteer to consider the particular needs and circumstances of the prisoner. This is apparent from the volunteers' accounts of how often they write to prisoners. Some volunteers pace their letters according to the response rate of the prisoner and one volunteer was conscious that when they received a letter from a particular prisoner it was important to write back reasonably quickly. However volunteers are aware that the speed in which they replied to prisoners' letters or the number of letters they write may create unrealistic expectations. To avoid this, one volunteer puts his letter to one side for a few days before posting it whereas another sends her letters to both prisoners she writes to on the same day of every month so that the prisoners know when it is going to arrive.

- 5.5. Volunteers carry a sense of responsibility for their penfriend. Three volunteers described feeling a responsibility to continue writing until the prisoner decided they no longer wished to continue.

'...I think he'd be pretty upset if I just stopped writing so that would be just dreadful for him I'm sure.' (V23)

- 5.6. In the same vein, another volunteer said that they would rather not continue writing to the prisoner once he was released from prison but they were worried how this might affect the prisoner if the prisoner wished to carry on writing. At its most extreme, one volunteer expressed the worry and responsibility they experienced over a suicidal prisoner:

'...I was very worried about this one at one stage and I asked Gwyn if she'd start reading his letters. ...he was getting very, very, very depressed....he was supposed to have a review and it never came and it was put off three months and another three months and he was getting so depressed and I was worried and then I had a letter from Gwyn saying 'here's his letter, I've taken the liberty of phoning them up. Because he said he was going to commit suicide.' (V34)

- 5.7. Despite the volunteers' sense of responsibility and their conscious efforts to manage the penfriend relationship for the benefit of the prisoner, it would be wrong to

assume that volunteers see the prisoners as powerless in the relationship. Volunteers are aware that prisoners, too, tend to manage the development of the penfriend relationship by the frequency in which they write and the length or type of content they include. For example, one volunteer explained that, at first, the prisoner restricted the relationship to the exchange of Christmas and Birthday cards but that this had changed and *'he's started including more information about his current situation and has said I've been a 'good penfriend over the years''*.

Offering emotional support and advice

- 5.8. Volunteers' accounts suggest that their approach to the penfriend relationship is considered and thoughtful. Although volunteers recognise that they provide emotional support and encouragement to their penfriend where appropriate, they also express some caution about the degree of emotional involvement (V15, for example, describing her relationship with a prisoner as *'professional'*) and volunteers insist that it is not their role to provide advice to prisoners. When prisoners express particular problems, volunteers either seek assistance from Prisoners' Penfriends or refer prisoners to professionals, other agencies or institutions.

'I am guided by what they write in their letters... Emotional support – yes if needed. Advice – not generally. I can't solve their problems but I can possibly help them sometimes to feel less alone.' (V7)

'We're not there to advise them and advise on their appeals and things like that. And we'd be in trouble with the authorities if we did that. ...So I might know that they are going to an appeal and that may be why they are upset and I might be sympathetic and say I hope it goes well, but I won't talk about the appeal, or give them advice, because that's not my role.' (V35)

'I never offer advice, unless it's on something minor. I usually suggest sources of help within the establishment. When I've been very concerned I've telephoned Prisoners' Penfriends, and they've dealt with it.' (V1)

Content of letters

- 5.9. Prisoners and volunteers were asked what they write about. The responses reveal a key difference in approach in that volunteers indicate that they tend to adapt the content of their letters to suit the interests and needs of their correspondent whereas prisoner accounts suggest that their choice of topics is based on their own interests.
- 5.10. The topics most commonly mentioned in prisoners' responses were everyday life (mentioned by 16 prisoners out of 65), sport (14 prisoners), prison life (10

prisoners), television (10 prisoners) and family (8 prisoners). Most other subjects mentioned were hobbies and interests but topics also included more personal issues such as 'how I ended up in prison' (2 prisoners), 'my future' (3 prisoners), 'my struggles' (4 prisoners). P34 explained that he writes about *'what I'm doing in prison, my hopes, fears and dreams. I also write about how I'm feeling and what I'm achieving.'*

- 5.11. Prisoners' Penfriends tries to match penfriends with similar interests. Where volunteers do not share their penfriends' interests, they work hard to overcome this:

'...at the start you are given a list of what they are interested in. Most of them like football about which I know nothing. So I say to them, "Sorry I don't know anything about football but I do know a bit about the river and river sports..." At the start it's quite difficult and you don't like to ask too many questions or give too much away either. So you try to throw out a few pointers...' (V28)

'One of the other prisoners that I wrote to...was doing a degree as part of his life there and so I tried to sort of connect in with things that I thought would interest him as well as writing about the whole process of studying. Because he got very anxious about deadlines and essays and so we did lots of support work on helping him to meet deadlines and how to relax when he hadn't.' (V26)

- 5.12. If no obvious topic of conversation is suggested by the prisoner's letter then volunteers find other ways of filling the pages. Volunteers are trained to avoid giving prisoners personal information about their own lives so they tend to attempt to steer the subject matter into neutral territory rather than reveal information about themselves. This leaves volunteers relying on *'clean, short jokes', 'bland subjects such as the birds in my garden'* or, if all else fails, *'the dog is useful.'* (V1, V8 and V13)

Volunteer gains – a two-way relationship

- 5.13. Although volunteers accounts indicate that they direct the relationship towards meeting the prisoners' needs rather than their own, it is also clear from the questionnaires and interviews undertaken that volunteers experience a number of benefits from the work, including emotional gains. Many volunteers expressed feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction in writing or receiving their penfriends' letters:

'I find it rewarding, I really look out for his mail... I don't tell people about it. So it's just a purely personal thing I want to do and I get a personal reward from doing it. ...I think it's good for me as well to have something like that having had a lot of stress in the past.' (V23)

- 5.14. One volunteer explained that *'On one occasion, in telling me about his family life, a penfriend helped me with mine'*. Another said she gained *'a measure of joy'* from the work. Other responses demonstrate that many volunteers see the letter-writing as a satisfying intellectual exercise.

'I think...how enjoyable the whole process is. And how much pleasure I get from reading a stream of consciousness on several sides of A4. ...it's a very interesting and thought provoking thing to do.' (V26)

'...not that one should do these things for oneself but I do find it tremendously rewarding and you get really interesting conversations, perhaps in the way that you wouldn't with other friendships or even other penfriends... when they do write they write with such colour and such depth and such insight... and when I get my letters I often really think, because they have put a great deal of thought into what they were saying and it's really interesting.' (V27)

'...I certainly enjoy the exercise, the intellectual exercise of writing the letter and I write it with a glad heart.' (V29)

- 5.15. Volunteers also felt that their contact with penfriends had broadened their outlook on life.

'[I get a] better understanding of human nature, a clearer understanding of [the] complexity of people's lives, additional interests (as I try to learn more about theirs).' (V9)

'...one chap put me on to a whole author I'd never heard of, much published in America and I read some quite interesting stuff.' (V28)

'...it's opened my horizons.' (V34)

- 5.16. The fact that volunteers find interest and enjoyment in the correspondence is an important element of the project, which could easily be overlooked. It demonstrates that the penfriend relationship is two-way. Prisoners are not simply the recipients of the charitable efforts of the volunteer but instead are contributors to a genuine relationship. This was recognised by the volunteer who wrote that:

'Prisoners I have written to can teach me about areas of life which are new to me – this is a good feeling for them. For example, a prisoner doing a chef's course gives me recipes and advice on cooking. They are pleased that there is someone to congratulate them on successes.' (V18)

- 5.17. This finding is significant given the research evidence discussed in section 2 demonstrating the importance of prisoners developing a sense of engagement in society and recognising that they have something to contribute to others. If seen simply as recipients of charity, prisoners would in this way be set apart from society, but as participants in a two-way relationship they have a social role, which carries purpose and some responsibility to the other participant.

6. Prisoners' motivations and experiences of the scheme

- 6.1. Despite the prisoners' accounts being elicited by questionnaire only, the majority of prisoners who responded expressed emotionally rich accounts of their experiences of writing to penfriends. Most commonly, prisoners are motivated to join the scheme by a desire for relief from isolation, whether in terms of finding friendship, support and human contact (mentioned as a motivation by 35 of the 65 prisoners) or simply through making contact with the world outside prison (mentioned by 12 prisoners). Prisoners also join the scheme in order to distract them from prison life; as a hobby or interest. This was mentioned by 27 prisoners.
- 6.2. Prisoners experience a number of significant benefits as a result of their contact with their Penfriend. The benefits described by prisoners fall into the following themes:
- Relief from isolation
 - Changing self-identity
 - Distraction, interest and self-expression
 - Happiness
 - Raised hopes for life beyond prison
- 6.3. Interestingly, although six prisoners said that they joined the scheme in order to improve their skills (usually their social or communication skills), no prisoners mentioned this specifically as something that they actually gained from the scheme. However, as will be discussed at paragraph 6.56 below, there is some evidence to suggest that the scheme may be benefiting prisoners in these ways.
- 6.4. It is important to note that most prisoners mentioned a number of benefits, with 28 of the 65 respondents mentioning three or more of these themes, 21 prisoners mentioning two and only 14 mentioning just one theme.³⁷ Of these 14 'single benefit'

³⁷ Two prisoners did not mention any of these themes. P46 had joined the scheme hoping for a romantic relationship and had ended his involvement on being allocated a male penfriend. P81 answered 'yes' to the questions about whether the scheme had impacted on his feelings about life in prison and beyond but he did not specify in what way.

responses, five mentioned significant emotional benefits (happiness or relief from isolation) but only nine referred to the contact as providing some kind of distraction or hobby. These nine responses are considered further at paragraph 6.37 below. Two prisoners mentioned five of the themes. There is also considerable interaction between the different benefits (for example, relief from isolation can clearly bring happiness and raise hopes for life outside prison). For the purposes of this report, however, each will be considered separately.

Relief from Isolation

- 6.5. Isolation from friends, family and ‘the outside world’ provides a very strong stimulus for prisoners to seek the service of Prisoners Penfriends. 35 of the 65 prisoners said that their motivation for joining the scheme was a desire for friendship, support or human contact.

‘I was hoping for support and to be understood as I was going through bad times.’ (P75)

‘I thought it would help me feel less lonely.’ (P87)

‘[I applied because] all my family are deceased and I had/have no outside contact other than probation officer and solicitor. Claire is my only contact with the outside world. Prison is a very lonely place. Yes you meet other people and make friends but it is not the same.’ (P21)

- 6.6. Twelve prisoners said that they were looking for contact with ‘the outside world’. This has implications for prisoner rehabilitation. Two prisoners explicitly said that their desire for contact ‘outside’ was part of their preparation for future release.

‘I felt isolated and lonely only speaking to other prisoners on the wing. I wanted to speak to ‘normal’ people on the outside based in the UK. I wanted to start to build a support network on the outside for when I am released.’ (P92)

- 6.7. It is not surprising that the prisoners feel isolated, particularly given the high proportion of participating prisoners who are serving long or indeterminate sentences.³⁸ This also reflects the research evidence about prisoner isolation. Some prisoners may have had little in the way of support networks on entering prison. A report by the Social Exclusion Unit in 2002 found that 27% of the adult prison population had once been in care.³⁹ The same report suggests that even those with a

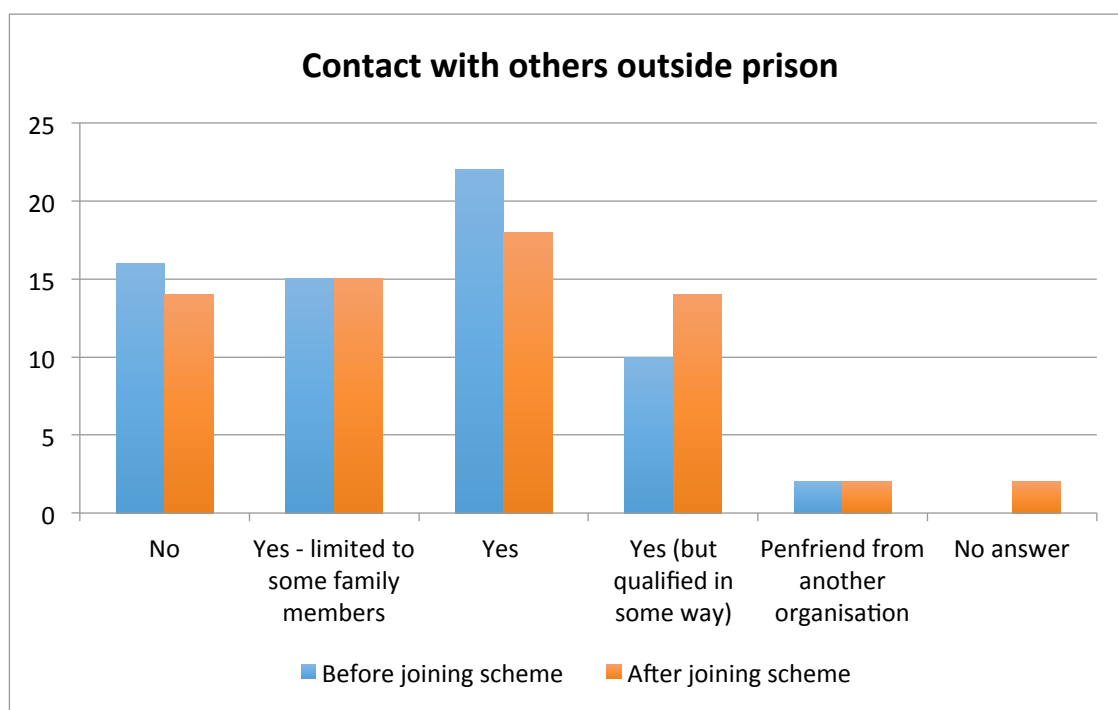
³⁸ See paragraph 4.12 above

³⁹ Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*, London: Social Exclusion Unit

support network may find it falling away during the sentence, with 43% of sentenced prisoners losing contact with their families whilst in prison.

- 6.8. Prisoners who participate in the Prisoners' Penfriends service have limited contact with those outside prison. A quarter of prisoners reported that they had no contact with anyone outside prison before they started writing to their penfriend. The remaining three quarters said that they did have contact with someone 'outside' but it is important to break this figure down further as fewer than half of those (34% of the total) who said they had contact with others outside reported this without qualification or expression of dissatisfaction. The remainder gave an answer that was in some way qualified. 23% of prisoners reported they had contact but specified that this was with family members only (e.g. *'just Mam'*). 3% of prisoners said that the only other contact they had was with a penfriend from another letter-writing organisation. Finally, 15% of prisoners reported that they had contact with others but qualified this or expressed dissatisfaction with this contact in some way, e.g. *'only my solicitor,' 'just my prison visitor,' or 'extremely sporadic letters from friends overseas.'*
- 6.9. The New Bridge research found that that prisoners reported that the scheme had made them feel more motivated to contact others outside prison (but prisoners were asked this question directly, rather than volunteering the information without prompting).⁴⁰ For that reason, this research asked prisoners whether they had any contact with others outside prison at the time of filling in the questionnaire, in order to compare this with their reports about outside contact prior to joining the scheme. The following chart demonstrates that the levels of contact remained remarkably similar so there is no indication that the scheme leads prisoners to increase or reduce their contact with others outside prison.

⁴⁰ The New Bridge Foundation *op. cit.* p12



- 6.10. As already discussed, only 12% of prisoners who responded to the questionnaire were serving sentences of less than five years, and the shortest sentence represented in the questionnaires was 16 months. This may in part reflect the time it takes for prisoners to find out about the scheme, make contact and then for their prison to give Prisoners' Penfriends the necessary approval for the prisoners' participation but, as two prisoners pointed out when asked why they thought their fellow prisoners had not signed up for the Prisoners' Penfriends service, short-term prisoners may have less need for the service as they may not experience the same degree of isolation.
- 6.11. Prisoner responses suggest that the penfriend relationship provides significant relief from prisoners' feelings of isolation. None of the prisoners' responses indicated that they had been in any way disappointed by the degree of support, care or friendship offered by their Penfriends and the majority were highly positive about this aspect of the contact. P92 wrote that he '*felt isolated and lonely*' only speaking to prisoners on the wing but that since writing to his penfriend '*I feel less isolated.*' The following longer extracts from this prisoner and two others demonstrate how the contact with someone on the outside who shows care and interest can lead into positive changes in a prisoners' self-perception and bring increased confidence and hope for life after release.

[Q8] '*Yes. I feel a bond with Jo. I get a sense of normal life after prison when I hear from her.* [Q9] '*Yes. I enjoy her letters. She's a friendly person. I also like having someone I can talk to about any issues that may arise.* [Q10] '*Yes. I feel less isolated. I have a*

greater hope for life after prison. I feel less stigmatised about my offences and feel that someone is interested in me as a person. Someone actually cares about me. [Q11] Yes. When we talk about current events or adventures and life experiences I realise that I am more than just a prisoner. People will want to associate with me and be my friend when I leave prison.' (P92)

'Having a penfriend gives you independence and for a short while takes your mind away from prison. It makes you aware that there are people outside who care enough to spend time with you and take time to write to you under these circumstances.' (P21)

[Q6] 'I've always liked writing letters and at the time I felt quite lonely and isolated. [Q9]...After writing letters for years the 'Penfriend', friend in the name is a real thing. I write to Jack when I'm upset, happy or just want to have a moan. We have our boundaries but in general we speak about everything. [Q10] Yes, I write about the good stuff but also things that bother me, get on my nerves. Jack always has something valuable to write... [Q11]...It gave me hope at the start, now Jack's letters inform me about a life on the outside I may have. [Q13]... I'm very happy with the scheme, I got so much joy and relief over the years. I've got no complaints.' (P61)

- 6.12. Volunteers, too, report that the penfriend relationship helps provide isolated prisoners with much needed support and encouragement:

'A regular letter seems to help with the stresses, and inevitable set-backs, they face. Many have depression, so to know someone takes an interest in them helps. Often they have disruptive family lives, 'difficult teenagers' or no family at all. This is all based on letters I've received.' (V1)

'Some have no visitors, friends or family. Letters offer friendship, someone to share news, feelings and opinions with... It is wonderful to receive a friendly letter when one is isolated; something to look forward to.' (V12)

'Communication is what life's all about really... And when they talk about what it's going to be like when they get out, they need to know that somebody cares about that because quite often they get the impression that nobody really cares, they're kept waiting and I get comments like, 'social workers never write to them and solicitors ignore them...' (V25)

- 6.13. It is clear, however, that different prisoners have different needs and not all prisoners present as needing relief from isolation.

'The two penfriends I have at the moment couldn't be more different. One is young, optimistic & full of plans for the future – he will be released [soon]... As he says in his

letters – he likes to chat. So we do, about rugby!! films etc. The other one was released... & is in a hostel. He is desperately unhappy, broken family, and cannot really see any way forward. I can only give him the most basic emotional support and he constantly thanks me for that.' (V7)

- 6.14. It is easy to see why prisoners with no or little contact with friends and family might feel the need to write to a penfriend but it is important to recognise that even those who did have contact with people outside prison still expressed a desire to relieve isolation and reported benefits from their contact with their Penfriends, e.g. *'Although I have a prison visitor it is not the same as getting a letter on the wing like everyone else. A feeling of being part of the world.'* (P34)
- 6.15. To some extent this will be because the contact from their families is infrequent. Prisoners serving long sentences are likely to be moved around the prison estate as their categorisation changes. This means they are unlikely to remain near to friends and families⁴¹ and this will make visits difficult, time-consuming and expensive: *'only my mum and two children visit and not that often due to the distance of travel'*(P60). Friends and family may have busy lives of their own and may not be inclined to write letters: *'although I am in contact with my family, I never receive mail from anyone. I felt left out at mail call.'* (P18)
- 6.16. There is, however, a sense in which contact from a new acquaintance (*'someone different to talk to other than mam'*) can offer prisoners something different to support from family and friends. As one volunteer put it,

'The latest letter I received said that it was 'nice to hear from someone outside of my circle'.' (V21)
- 6.17. There were some prisoners who sought something specific from a Penfriend that their family did not provide (for example one prisoner wanted to write to someone who shared his passion for art). However other prisoners appeared to value the greater emotional distance in the Penfriend relationship. Two respondents said that they wanted to write to someone outside the family because they felt under pressure from family members about their release. P33 said he could be *'more honest'* with his Penfriend because he was not family and P18 said that *'knowing we'll never meet just makes it easier to write down how my life is coming along.'* Volunteers understood this aspect too. *'[It's a] way of sharing ideas, thoughts and feelings easily (as it is with an unseen person they will never meet, & so feel safe to 'speak').'* (V9)

⁴¹ Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *op. cit.*

- 6.18. The existing research discussed in section 2 demonstrates that having someone to listen is important to prisoners who are at risk of suicide and self-harm. It is easy to see how these accounts of the friendship, support and relief from isolation experienced by prisoners could promote prisoners' well-being.
- 6.19. The existing research also points to the importance of being believed in, having a place in a social group and seeing oneself as more than just an offender. Prisoners' accounts show that they find a particular comfort and encouragement in knowing that their correspondent had freely chosen to write to them, despite no pre-existing relationship – described by one prisoner as *'the caring ear of a stranger.'* This aspect of the penfriend relationship appears to have an impact on the prisoners' self esteem and sense of their place in society and it is to this aspect that we now turn.

Changing self-identity

- 6.20. Receiving letters from a stranger who shows interest and compassion can affect the way prisoners see themselves. A quarter of prisoners who responded wrote about positive changes in their self-perception. This was most commonly described in terms of increased self-confidence but prisoners also spoke about feeling less stigmatised, having increased self-respect and feeling more valued. Some examples are set out below:

'[My penfriend gives me] hope that people do listen to your problems. I have a bit more confidence that I can do anything I put my mind to.' (P7)

'[My penfriend makes me feel] more positive as they offer an alternative perspective to events. It reminds me I can hold intelligent (written) conversations with others.' (P79)

'[My penfriend] gives me a lot of self esteem and help me to respect myself and others'. (P42)

- 6.21. One prisoner said that the fact that he was a sex offender created a fear in connecting with the outside world but that his penfriend gave him *'a feeling of being part of the world.'* He went on to say that having a penfriend *'very much has an effect on how I feel and how I deal with my life in prison (it means I'm not alone) someone cares. I feel safer looking forward and instead of it being full of dread I know now that there are people that will be willing to interact with me.'* (P34)

- 6.22. Fundamental to these changes appears to be a sense of acceptance. Prisoners are testing whether they can find acceptance from those outside prison,

'[I wanted to] interact with someone outside the family. To find out if with my convictions I can have a friendship with someone.' (P12)

'[I wanted] to make a friend and have someone write who made their own decisions as to whether to write or not, who was under no obligation to write.' (P51)

- 6.23. The sense of acceptance engendered by the lack of judgment on the part of the volunteer then builds prisoners' confidence and optimism:

'I wanted to find friendship. Someone who would not judge me.... My parents disowned me. So it meant a lot to find someone who has taken time out.... It makes you think that not all people judge you.' (P36)

'Receiving letters in prison means a lot because it means someone on the outside has taken the time to sit down and write to you which makes you believe that not everyone in society has turned their back on you. Letters to me are like rays of hope.' (P15)

'...having correspondence from these fantastic people puts your faith back into people. I think this should be funded as part of Prisoners rehabilitation program because it does help to bring your faith back into people.' (P36)

- 6.24. P92 said that he felt more hopeful about life outside prison as a result of his penfriend because he felt 'less stigmatised' that someone was interested in him 'as a person'. Two prisoners serving IPP sentences spoke of their relief at finding that their penfriend 'sympathised' with them about their indeterminate sentence. Another prisoner who was convicted of sex offences said that

'For a few minutes of writing or reading a letter we can feel like a normal human being again.' (P82)

- 6.25. Some might question whether lack of judgment and sympathy about a lawful sentence is an appropriate response to a sentenced prisoner. However, the research evidence at section 2 demonstrating that desistance is influenced by prisoners building community ties, envisioning a non-criminal self and having hope sustained, indicates that this would be to overlook the rehabilitative benefits of such a non-judgmental relationship. The response of one prisoner hints that the lack of judgment from the volunteer can actually help a prisoner to acknowledge his own wrong-doing: *'My penfriend cheers me up it's good that there are people out there that don't judge you. My penfriend makes me realise the mistakes I've made in life.'* (P1)

- 6.26. Volunteers understand the importance of accepting their penfriends. The lack of judgment on the part of volunteers helps them to write to the prisoner (e.g., to overcome the moral and social stigma of writing to sex offenders). A Christian

volunteer stated that, *'I hate the crime but would have Christian love towards the criminal'*. Another said that *'being a Samaritan you accept all people'* (V32). When explaining how they were able to write to sex offenders, V35 said, *'A human being is a human being.'*

6.27. Volunteers also recognise that lack of judgment is necessary in order to be an effective penfriend and see the value of *'being able to say what they are feeling and knowing there will be no blame or recriminations,'* (V2). Both volunteers and prisoners use the word 'penfriend' to talk about each other. Volunteers and prisoners take on an equal status in the building and negotiation of the penfriend relationship. Prisoners become 'penfriends' rather than inmates, offenders, etc. 'Penfriend' defines them both as a 'writer' and 'friend' and an organiser of ideas and relationships rather than a person defined by the offence they have committed.

6.28. Eight volunteers specifically mentioned the importance of withholding judgment, with one saying:

' One guy said, 'You know, it's wonderful that you aren't judging me, that you're listening to what I've got to say', and I suppose if you've been judged and locked up then the idea that someone will just reply warmly but non-committally to what you are saying must make a difference.' (V26)

6.29. Another volunteer described a prisoner's confused response to his initial letter:

'...at the end of his first letter he said, 'why are you doing this, most people have crossed us off and won't take any interest in our lives at all so why did you choose to write to me?' So I wrote back and... explained...that a long way in my past I'd spent a very happy and productive time dealing with people who society had decided were cast offs and felt that there wasn't any such thing, that everybody has something to offer.' (V26)

6.30. As well as the acceptance of volunteers enabling prisoners to build trust in their penfriends, which is likely to facilitate the 'listening' that is so important to prisoners at risk of suicide and self-harm, these accounts speak directly to the prisoners' prospects of desistance which *'can be supported by interactions with others who communicate a belief that they can and will change, that they are good people, and that they have something to offer society or other people'*.⁴²

Distraction, interest and self-expression

6.31. Some prisoners value letter-writing as an opportunity for self-expression

⁴² McNeill & Weaver (2010) *op. cit.* p8

'I wanted someone fresh to write to. To chat about other things rather than jail. I wanted to be able to have every day normal chat, to be able to express what I was doing, hopes and dreams with.' (P55)

- 6.32. Prisoners report that this self-expression supports their well-being:

'Although I have a prison visitor, I'm not allowed to write to him. The act of writing and putting my thoughts on paper gives me something different and is at times very important to the way I see myself and my mental health.' (P34)

- 6.33. The value of self-expression and reflection are also reflected in some volunteer responses.

'...[it] allows a prisoner to think through things in a ruminative thoughtful kind of way, with space unlike a conversation with prison visitors or therapists, the letters are a fortnight apart or even three weeks apart and so there's time to pause and think and the dialogue kind of develops across time.' (V26)

*'Once a mutual trust has been established, I believe prisoners appreciate an opportunity to get things off their chest through putting their thoughts down on paper. They **are** very candid about their life in prison and are willing to discuss their private hopes and aspirations.'* (V17)

- 6.34. Another volunteer felt that simply just giving prisoners the opportunity to express their feelings in their letters was likely to contribute to behaviour in prison:

'...I've worked in prisons and know a bit about how they work and I think I'd be very very surprised if you know some of the letters that I receive where a guy is really letting rip, I'd be very surprised if that hadn't had the effect of reducing the possibility of him hitting somebody or whatever.' (V29)

- 6.35. It is certainly clear that prisoners find that writing to their penfriend helps them make the time pass in prison. 42% of prisoners mentioned this as one of their reasons for joining the scheme and 52% of prisoners mentioned this as a benefit of the scheme.

'It makes my sentence go more quickly as I wait for the next letter.' (P39)

'Correspondence is one of the things that keep me going in prison [...] I enjoy writing to her and it is a form of escapism from the weird constraints of prison life.' (P99)

- 6.36. Volunteers, too, recognise this need for distraction and respite from the prison environment saying that '...it helps them to pass the time,' and '...it gives them something to think about.'

- 6.37. Nine of the responding prisoners spoke about the letter-writing only as a distraction, a hobby or an interest and made no mention of isolation, a need for friendship or any kind of emotional response to the penfriend relationship. These responses were strikingly different to the remaining prisoners' accounts but to a great extent this can be understood in the light of the length of the penfriend relationships for these 'hobby' letter-writers. Six of the nine prisoners had been writing to their penfriend for less than three months and two had been writing for 8 months only. The final 'hobby' letter-writer had written to his penfriend for 18 months. It may be that for these prisoners, the letter writing remains a hobby or distraction, but it is also possible that the absence of emotional response to the penfriend relationship from some of these prisoners could simply reflect the brevity of the relationship.
- 6.38. Some support for this idea comes from a few prisoners whose initial motivation for joining the scheme was for the distraction or interest but who, in the event, report gaining significant emotional benefits from the relationship. P52, for example, said he had signed up wanting *'contact with the outside world and to get to know somebody for a change of conversation rather than the same prison shit chitchat.'* However he went on to say that he hoped to keep in touch with his penfriend because *'we are building a friendship, it would be a massive shame if we didn't keep in touch.'* This prisoner said that he *'can't wait'* for the letters to arrive and that his penfriend gives him hope for the future.
- 6.39. P18 explained that he signed up for the scheme because, although he received visits from his family, no one wrote to him so he *'felt left out at mail call.'* As a result of his contact with his penfriend, however, he said, *'I feel I've made a friend and although we will never meet it still gives me pleasure to keep in touch. I look forward to mail call now and I feel as if I have won the lotto when I get a letter from my penfriend.'*

Happiness and well-being

- 6.40. The preceding sections have already discussed some improvements to prisoners' well-being through a reduction in isolation and improved confidence, but 21 prisoners (32%) specifically mentioned improvements in their sense of happiness and well-being as a consequence of their penfriend relationship.

'It helps me to be less depressed, a little happier and less lonely.' (P87)

'It makes a difference to me. I look forward to receiving her letters and it gives me hope and inspiration. When things are difficult I read her letters and this uplifts my spirits.' (P55)

'It very much has an effect on how I feel and how I deal with my life in prison (it means I'm not alone) someone cares.' (P34)

'[My penfriend makes me feel] that I can go on and freedom is a must.' (P98)

- 6.41. 15 prisoners said that receiving letters changed their mood. Most often this was expressed in terms of a letter making them happy or, as P61 put it, bringing *'joy and relief.'* Others said that correspondence *'can cheer you up no end,' 'helps pick my mood up'* or *'put[s] a smile on my face.'* When asked whether the penfriend contact made a difference to how he felt about his life in prison, P68 responded simply *'Yes. Brighter days.'*

- 6.42. One prisoner went further, and referred to the possibility that the scheme could prevent suicides in prison

'...I mean it helps people in their life. It might even save their life in a way, because you know there's a lot of people taking their own life and that, because you know it keeps them going.' (P1)

- 6.43. Volunteers too referred to the mood-boosting effects of receiving a letter, e.g. *'I know prisoner penfriends who said that receiving a letter brightened up their day and replying gave them something positive to do.'* (V15) Volunteers also expressed the hope that the penfriend relationship might have an impact on the way their penfriend coped with life in prison:

'... I hope it gives them the impetus to carry on and not blow it all by losing their rag.' (V25)

'Another guy recently wrote saying he had had a tough time with a rehabilitation course & re-reading some of my letters had helped to keep him calm.' (V5)

'I think it must have an impact on attempts by prisoners to take their lives. And also I think the way that prisoners then have a transition between prison and being free again. And I think the fact that they've had this contact with outside and ...they become less desperate inside, hopefully means that they don't self-harm or fight or attempt suicide, I think that's really crucial for prisons and the well-being of prisoners as a whole, and secondly, I do think that it means they [are] ...a little bit more up to date with what's

going on outside for when they are released. And it makes them a little bit stronger I think.’ (V23)

- 6.44. On occasion, a volunteer or the director of Prisoners’ Penfriends has identified a specific risk to a prisoner’s safety or well-being and the organisation has taken steps to mitigate the risk. The organisation’s policy is that the director will read all letters from prisoners about whom there are safety concerns and will report any mention of suicide, self-harm or violence to or from others, to the prison immediately. To this end, some prisons have supplied Prisoners’ Penfriends with the prison’s safer custody hotline number.
- 6.45. Volunteers mentioned a number of occasions when action has been taken by the organisation to report concerns and protect prisoners. For example, V12 - *‘reading between the lines’* - sensed that a prisoner was frightened of their cell mate and said that, by reporting the concern to Gwyn Morgan, the organisation was able to intervene and diffuse the situation *‘which could have otherwise been serious.’* Another volunteer recognised from their letters that a prisoner was becoming increasingly depressed and suicidal.

‘The one I have written to the longest was very angry when I first started writing to him, the world was against him and it was all desperately unfair and we gradually worked through that with me trying to encourage him in his education and praising everything that he told me he did. ...we went through a very steady phase then when he seemed to be studying quite hard and getting some good results ...And then he went back to it a bit and I did have a letter where I was really quite worried about him, but PP [Prisoners’ Penfriends] had already been onto it and had contacted the prison and at that time he was in need of some counselling, which he had. And now we’re very much again on an even keel.’ (V28)

‘One left prison quite quickly and had a bit of a panic because he was threatening suicide, because they hadn’t arranged housing for him, but of course Gwyn is brilliant and she got on to the chaplain straight away and sorted that out.’ (V33)

- 6.46. These accounts demonstrate that the scheme has an impact on the way prisoners feel about life in prison and suggest that this is likely to have an impact on prisoners’ mental health. It is also likely to have an impact on prisoners’ rehabilitation because research indicates that negative emotional states can significantly reduce prisoners’

chances of re-integrating into the community after release.⁴³ In the discussion of the next theme, it will become clear how the scheme makes prisoners feel more positive about their future life outside prison.

Raised hopes for life beyond prison

- 6.47. 54% of prisoners said that their contact with their penfriend made them feel more positive about their prospects following release from prison. In some respects this could be a natural consequence of feeling more in touch with 'the outside' and, as already discussed, in some respects it was the result of the change in self-perception and increased confidence that was a result of being accepted by their penfriends.

'The way I see my future on my release has changed since being allowed to write to my penfriend. I feel safer looking forward and instead of it being full of dread I know now that there are people that will be willing to interact with me. Due to the nature of the crimes here at [name of prison] there is a fear in the connecting to the outside world as we have to say what our crime was.' (P34)

- 6.48. Volunteers see the importance of prisoners having hope for the future.

'I have noticed how hope plays such a major part in coping and how easily if hope diminishes depression can set in.' (V18)

- 6.49. Many prisoners report deliberate efforts on the part of their penfriend to get them to look positively on their future outside prison, for example:

'I am encouraged by my penfriend to think about the future and to make plans. I am also aware now that my sentence will one day end and a new life is waiting for me outside. My penfriend has helped a lot with this.' (P64)

- 6.50. Even P62, who had sought a penfriend who would understand his 'reasons for not wanting to be released from prison', said that his penfriend encourages him to think about being released from prison and 'it's starting to make me think.' This process of orientating prisoners to the 'outside world' detaches them from prison and re-introduces them into society. It is humanising:

'They are not so isolated. They have a contact with the larger world and can feel connected, - to some extent. They will hear of changes and be more prepared for release.'

⁴³ Shinkfield, A. and Graffam, J. (2010) *The relationship between emotional state and success in community reintegration for ex-prisoners*. International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 54(3), pp29-42

Some have expressed worries about how they will cope after prison and such information may help to make the world more familiar. They also feel that they are more than prisoners; that being a prisoner does not preclude the exchange of ideas, hopes, aspirations and interests.' (V18)

- 6.51. Prisoners also spoke about how important they thought their Penfriend would be after they were released and 86% of prisoners said that they hoped to continue writing to their penfriend after their release. The prisoners' explanations for this hope demonstrate that they see their relationship with their penfriend as an enduring friendship, which will offer support to them when they are released. Two prisoners indicated that their original motivation for joining the scheme was in order to establish support for after their release. These prisoners were conscious that they would find it difficult once they were released but felt that their Penfriend could help with this.

'As I have very little support on the outside, it will be nice to have someone to write to, who already knows me. It will make me feel more relaxed when I do get out, knowing I will have someone I can write to if things are going well or not.' (P24)

'knowing I've got someone to write to makes a big difference for me because I am going to find it hard finding people to talk to'. (P74)

- 6.52. Prisoners want to be able to give their penfriends good news of their life outside prison. P70 said that he wanted to keep his penfriend *'updated with any progress or success'* he achieves once he has left prison, while another said he would carry on writing and *'mention how I am getting on once I have been released.'* (P55)

- 6.53. One volunteer explained how he had dealt with his penfriend's fears about release:

'...we've talked about how he said he was very anxious and concerned about what would happen when he was pushed through the door. ...he is very concerned about how he'll cope. And he said he wanted to stay in contact so he has someone to talk to about his experiences and to help him through that once he's released... Gwyn assured me that it was okay so long as we still used the Penfriend post box. So I went back and said I was happy to stay in touch.' (V23)

- 6.54. These accounts are very important in the context of the tiny number of prisoners who stay in contact after release and the views of volunteers about the inevitability of contact waning at that stage (discussed at paragraph 4.26 above). Prisoners clearly gain great comfort from their penfriend's support and believe that this will help them after release. This expectation and the possibility of continued contact is likely to

help them cope with prison and their preparation for release. It is clear, however, that for reasons which this research project is unable to determine, prisoners are very unlikely to access this support once they have left prison. Although, as some volunteers suggested, it may be true that prisoners' perspectives may change so dramatically on release that they simply no longer feel that they need the contact, it is also likely that some ex-prisoners who would value sustained contact find practical barriers in their way. Many ex-prisoners will require considerable time before they are able to establish a stable address to which volunteers can write; most will have little money and the purchase of stationery and stamps is unlikely to be a priority.

- 6.55. Further research is needed to understand this issue and how ex-prisoners could be helped to sustain contact. When an ex-prisoner ceases to correspond with his penfriend, the organisation has no way of making contact with him to find out whether this is the result of practical difficulties or a disinclination to continue contact. It is possible that agencies working with ex-prisoners might be able to assist Prisoners' Penfriends in making contact in these circumstances and this is something that the organisation is interested in pursuing with the help of the Ministry of Justice.

Skills and self-improvement

- 6.56. Six prisoners (9%) had self-improvement goals in mind when contacting Prisoners' Penfriends, namely a desire to improve their social skills (mentioned by four prisoners), their letter-writing skills (one prisoner) or communication skills (one prisoner). Clearly the changes in self-identity discussed above, particularly increased self-confidence, will have an effect on prisoners' social skills but the researchers were particularly interested to see whether there might be improvements in prisoners' literacy. Volunteers' responses indicate that they too are interested in this possibility. Four volunteers mentioned they had an interest in adult literacy, had taught English or were involved in nation wide schemes to teach adults how to read and write. Two volunteers, both former English teachers, talk about providing a positive example to prisoners:

'...[literacy] has been a problem but there has always been the chance of English classes which have been taken up. I also try to match the level of language of each prisoner. Also, having taught primary children and English to speakers of other languages it is not a problem for me. I don't correct spelling or grammar but I write correctly myself.' (V18)

'...He's actually learning disabled and his English isn't brilliant but in a way I feel I can help him with that because I did used to help people with English so when he's misspelled words, I do try to incorporate them in the next letter.' (V33)

- 6.57. Although a letter-writing scheme might appear particularly inaccessible to prisoners with literacy problems (and indeed nine prisoners suggested this might be the reason why their fellow prisoners had not signed up for the scheme), even those prisoners who face literacy challenges appear to be able to access the scheme and benefit from it. P14 ended his questionnaire by expressing the hope that he had filled it in correctly despite his literacy problems saying, *'I don't know if I have fillet it in ok because my readin and rights is not very good.'* Despite the prisoner's lack of confidence in his writing and the challenges facing him in expressing himself on paper, it was clear that he had obtained real benefit from the scheme: he wrote that, having been in *'a dark place'* before he accessed the scheme, his penfriend's letters had made a *'100% difference'* to how he felt about his life in prison.

- 6.58. Volunteers, too, appear to have confidence that the scheme is accessible to those with limited writing skills.

'I just try to encourage the prisoner to write. Some of them seem to have difficulty in writing as they may not write much, whatever they write about is always interesting to read, it's good that they can express themselves.' (V14)

- 6.59. Some said that they consciously adapt their writing to suit the needs of their Penfriend.

'I write simple letters, and can use stickers for fun, and try to use 'trendy' language!' (V12)

'...I adapt what I write, the words I use and the length of the letter, so the recipient doesn't feel they have to write something lengthy. I leave in crossings out, so they can see I don't always get things 100% right.' (V1)

- 6.60. Volunteers specifically seek to bolster prisoners' self-confidence by showing interest and encouragement in their achievements in prison, for example,

'...I always congratulate people of their successes, with courses for example.... One young man sent me poems about his feelings and they almost reduced me to tears... When I told him that, it seemed to help him know he'd made real 'contact' with me.' (V1)

'...he's done quite well on a course recently and my husband and I sort of make noises and all the rest of it and then he had a certificate so he sent it to me. And I copied it and sent it back to him. And that encouragement does seem to help.' (V34)

'They are pleased that there is someone to congratulate them on successes.' (V18)

- 6.61. Although none of the prisoners referred to seeing improvements in their literacy or communication skills, two volunteers described specific instances where they had seen significant improvements in prisoner literacy through the Penfriend relationship. The first of these volunteers quoted below was formerly a head of a school English department, had taught in a unit for pupils who had been excluded from school and had subsequently been an education adviser and a school inspector.

'...the first guy that I wrote to was Turkish and his English was incredibly poor but after several letters he had stopped repeating the same sentence over and over and had actually framed the beginnings of a letter and in every case with all six of them so far, their literacy skills had improved dramatically over the course of the letters because they don't write anything else and most of them don't read. So my encouragement to them to join the prison library and to find books and to suggest titles and all those things that I hold dear, so those kind of connections as well, I think, the letters scheme is important in the whole thing.' [V26]

'...I suddenly had a letter...from the one who I've written to most, who always printed everything (English is not his first language), ...in what I would call joined up writing. And I was so amazed that at first I thought someone had had to write it for him but he told me he has decided that he needs to learn to do 'proper writing' for when he is discharged and now he is doing 'proper writing' and good sentences and the letters look tidy.' [V31]

- 6.62. There is no doubt that improvements in literacy would benefit prisoners in their life outside prison, particularly in obtaining employment (which is a key factor in desistance from crime).⁴⁴ This research is not able to demonstrate that the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme has a significant impact on prisoner literacy but the material discussed in this section demonstrates that volunteers seek to improve prisoner literacy, that some prisoners join the scheme for this purpose and that some volunteers detect improvements in the literacy of their penfriends. There seems every reason to be optimistic that a letter-writing scheme would impact on participants' literacy skills but further research would be needed to test this. The

⁴⁴ Ministry of Justice (2013) *op. cit.*

organisation is planning to use volunteers who are former teachers to train volunteers how to encourage improved literacy skills in their penfriends.

7. Safety, training and support

- 7.1. In order to protect the safety of volunteers, Prisoners' Penfriends has established firm rules about the letter-writing process and all volunteers are trained about these safety arrangements. These safety precautions are essential to the safe operation of the scheme and the organisation reports that there have been no security incidents during the lifetime of the scheme.⁴⁵ Volunteers write under a pseudonym and are trained to remove all identifying information from their letters. Volunteers' addresses and phone numbers are never revealed to the prisoners. All letters – both ways – are sent via a box number and the correspondence is supervised by the organisation's director, Gwyn Morgan. The organisation's policies require that all letters written by volunteers to prisoners are checked (three times each) by the director to ensure that no addresses or names are revealed, that there is no other information identifying the volunteer and that the volunteer is writing in an appropriate tone, observing sensible boundaries, and sticking to the guidelines/undertakings. Photograph portraits are never permitted to be exchanged. Both volunteers and prisoners are told at the start of the process that correspondents will never meet, even on release, although the correspondence may continue on release, if the prisoner wishes, with all safeguards in place throughout.
- 7.2. Except in the case of magistrates, two references are taken up for each volunteer. All volunteers undergo face-to-face training. All volunteers receive guidelines on security and other matters. They also enter into a series of undertakings, which were drafted by the Prison Service. These undertakings include a promise that the volunteer is not seeking a romantic association with a prisoner.
- 7.3. When a prisoner applies to join Prisoners' Penfriends, the prisoner is told that the organisation is not a dating agency and that he will not be sent money or any other gift. If a prisoner has ever been convicted of an offence of a sexual nature, he will be allocated a volunteer who has been specially trained (again, in a face-to-face session) to deal with these offenders. In the case of a sex offender or prisoner in a high security prison, all letters from the prisoner will be checked and read through before forwarding to the volunteer. If a sex offender writes a letter which proposes any kind of sexual liaison or, indeed, if his letter is inappropriate in tone, the organisation will

⁴⁵ The information about Prisoners' Penfriends' security policies and procedures in paragraphs 7.1 to 7.4 was provided by the organisation's director.

report this to the prison immediately. The organisation reports that, in all cases when this has occurred (four occasions, including two during the pilots), the prisoner was immediately removed from the scheme by prison staff.

- 7.4. The organisation's policies also require that, in all cases, prisoners' letters are checked at the start of the correspondence and during its early exchanges. Where there are any concerns about the particular prisoner involved, the prisoner's letters will be read throughout the correspondence. As previously mentioned, if a prisoner's letter reveals that he is contemplating suicide, self-harm or violence to others, the prison is informed immediately. This also applies if the prisoner fears harm from others in the prison. Every letter is entered into an Access system, for the purpose of records and accountability. Notes on the correspondences are available for inspection by the prison concerned, should they be required.
- 7.5. Prisoners' Penfriends does not volunteer to prisoners the information that their penfriend will be writing under a pseudonym but if asked directly about this the director and volunteers will confirm this to be the case. Given the importance of the use of pseudonyms in protecting volunteers, the director of Prisoners' Penfriends has given the authors permission to discuss this issue in this report.
- 7.6. In order to assess how these security policies and procedures are working in practice, the research sought to examine volunteers' views about their safety under the scheme and the impact of the safety precautions which are put in place to protect and support them. Volunteers express great faith in the organisation and the security measures. Volunteers consider that they have been well trained and generally do not perceive themselves to be at risk because of 'excellent' security procedures in place to protect their identity.

'I'm always a little concerned about our security as a family, but I think this helps keep me safe. I write under an assumed name, and give out so little personal information it's unlikely I could be traced. I know the office has its own security systems. I do think that so much is achieved through these letters that any small risk is worthwhile [...] The training's been invaluable, and I never feel unsupported, Penfriends are only an email or a phone call away, and I always get a swift response.' (V1)

- 7.7. Some volunteers referred to incidents where they had 'slipped up' or a prisoner's behaviour had raised concerns but said that this had been dealt with by Gwyn Morgan:

'Security is very tight and letters are sent back if, as at first, I slipped up!' (V2)

'An abusive scrawl was weeded out by Gwyn.' (V13)

- 7.8. Volunteers are able to identify risks and take appropriate action. They are confident that they know when to seek advice and support and any problems they have encountered have been identified and rectified with Gwyn Morgan's supervision.

'...having had a couple of unpleasant experiences earlier in the year. I very nearly gave up – Gwyn has been very supportive. I plan to change my volunteer name regularly. Gwyn is very supportive and careful of us. I would probably have given up had it not been for her.' (V8)

'...Gwyn has been very supportive. I know she reads all letters and will intercept anything. I have also spoken to her a few times about issues that have arisen and have attended several training courses.' (V15)

'... on the odd occasion when I've been unaware or unsure, I've emailed her [Gwyn] and got the support. Once or twice she's said you can't do that and that's fair enough.' (V25)

- 7.9. The procedures that are in place to protect volunteers help provide boundaries and support volunteers to negotiate difficult or compromising demands from prisoners:

...One wanted me to go and visit him and it was good to have Gwyn saying no so that he didn't feel rebuffed by me.' (Volunteer 25)

- 7.10. Volunteers understand that they must follow the written rules designed to protect them and they are conscious not to disclose information in their letters that may identify themselves or their family. The necessary precautions volunteers have to take to ensure their security require effort and two volunteers described their role as a 'commitment' and a 'responsibility' respectively:

'One or two people I've spoken to [about becoming a volunteer] think about it, but it is a commitment really. It is hard to think of a page or two of writing that doesn't endanger yourself. I don't think either of my mates [the prisoners they write to] are going to get their own back because there's nothing to get their own back about but Gwyn is absolutely adamant that we are safe and rightly so.' (V25)

' [There is a] sort of responsibility of keeping a distance too, everything is coded and everybody that I write about has got a pseudonym and I invent places rather than mention the real place I'm writing about so the letters are based on reality but really they are a kind of fiction.' (V26)

- 7.11. It is apparent that volunteers are conscious of the need to maintain a degree of caution throughout the relationship:

'I noticed in the last two or three letters he's talked about when he gets out he'd like a posh camera but he has no money and there's a few references to him having no money... I'm reminded of the training course about manipulation so that's kind of made me a little more cautious about him. But we're still writing, still in the same vein, I just think that maybe he's expecting a little bit more than letters once he gets out. Which I guess is not unusual.' (V23)

'I'm friendly but you do get some that say 'lots of love' and 'cuddles' and stuff and I do carry on giving them my best and in the end they stop doing it because I don't respond to it!' (V35)

Tension between friendship and safety

- 7.12. Inevitably there is scope for these safety precautions to create difficulties in the penfriend relationship. Two of the 65 prisoners mentioned this, P92 commenting that *'the pseudonym process is a bit awkward and off-putting,'* while P25 was bothered by the lack of *'truthfulness'* and found it frustrating to communicate via the Prisoners' Penfriends office and to be limited in what he and his penfriend can write about or reveal. However both of these prisoners said that they understood the need for safety precautions and both were, in all other respects, highly positive about the scheme.

- 7.13. One of the volunteers reflected similar concerns saying that she found it challenging to provide the prisoner with false information about herself (for the purposes of preserving her anonymity):

'... it can be quite difficult because ...we are told not to reveal anything that may identify where we are. And I wouldn't like the prisoners to know that because I think it sounds quite patronising to them. I wouldn't like them to think that we are not genuine really. ...I try to keep as near as I can to reality, the truth. Because it's easier for me to write.' (V30)

- 7.14. However, this concern was not mentioned by all volunteers and there is no evidence to suggest that it is having a significant impact on the relationships between volunteers and prisoners:

'...he also understands the boundaries of what I can and can't say and he never oversteps the boundaries, never.' (V32)

Expanding to meet the need

- 7.15. These volunteer accounts suggest that the Prisoners' Penfriends scheme as it currently operates is safe. A key challenge facing Prisoners' Penfriends is how it can expand to meet the potential demand for the scheme within the prison system while maintaining the quality of training and support for volunteers and the safe supervision of letter exchanges. It is clear from volunteer responses that volunteers have enormous confidence in and appreciation for the organisation's director, Gwyn Morgan, who supports and supervises their work. Several volunteers expressed concern that there was a risk that this staff member might carry too heavy a load in giving the high level of care and supervision that is provided. The organisation has recognised that its director will need additional support to expand the work but increased funding will be needed in order to do this. It will also be important for any new staff member to work closely with the current staff member at first in order to ensure that the current high standards of care and supervision are maintained.
- 7.16. When asked, volunteers and prisoners were overwhelmingly happy with the scheme as it currently operates and most said that they did not want it to change. If anything, volunteers thought that the organisation should branch out to reach more prisoners and prisoners wanted the scheme to be better advertised. Volunteers believed the organisation provided an important function and deserved greater recognition and support. They were primarily concerned about funding and the financial sustainability of Penfriends. One volunteer suggested that the organisation could use volunteers' skills, experience and ability in 'wider ways' and explore opportunities to build upon the work volunteers already do to help the organisation expand to meet its capacity and potential. In fact, Prisoners' Penfriends has already started this process, with three volunteers (all with experience of the justice system) having gone into prisons to tell prisoners about the organisation. The organisation is planning to build on this to create a regional prison liaison network, giving volunteers some responsibility for prisoner recruitment. As mentioned previously, there are also plans to use volunteers who are former teachers to train volunteers how to encourage improved literacy skills in their penfriends.

8. Conclusions

- 8.1. The prisoner and volunteer accounts discussed in this report paint a rich picture of genuine relationships of care and trust between penfriends. These accounts demonstrate that, even within the constraints necessary for the protection of

volunteers, simple letter-writing relationships can lead to tangible benefits for both prisoners and volunteers.

- 8.2. Many of the prisoners who use the Prisoners' Penfriends service have committed very serious crimes. Many are serving long sentences, are isolated from the outside world and surrounded by other offenders. A few are so institutionalised that they fear release. Many have no contact with anyone outside prison when they start writing to their Penfriends. Many feel that they are outcasts with no hope of ever being accepted by those outside prison.
- 8.3. But this research suggests that writing to a Prisoners' Penfriends volunteer can change some of these things. Prisoners say that, through their contact with their Penfriends, they find help in getting through their years in prison, they reported changes in their self-perception, improvements in their social and communication skills, growing feelings of engagement with 'the outside world' and feelings of acceptance by 'normal people'. Regular and frequent letters provide a distraction from the routine of prison life as well as giving prisoners the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and express themselves. Letters from their Penfriends made them happy.
- 8.4. Highly educated, and many with experience of the criminal justice system, volunteers commit to the scheme, and to individual prisoners, for long periods. The volunteers tailor their correspondence to meet the needs of the prisoner and show care and thought in the way they respond to prisoners' letters. They adapt their letters to try to make them accessible to prisoners with poor literacy and there is some limited evidence that the scheme may lead to improvements in prisoner literacy.
- 8.5. Through their involvement in the scheme, prisoners report renewed hope for a future outside prison, they gain confidence that they can find acceptance in 'the outside world', they are prompted to plan for their future life and find inspiration in their penfriends' accounts of their own experiences. As a result of being 'accepted' by their penfriend, prisoners experience friendship with someone outside their criminal contacts and come to see themselves as '*more than just a prisoner*', they feel less stigmatised and '*like a normal human being*'.
- 8.6. Volunteers, too, experience emotional and intellectual satisfaction from the penfriend relationship, as well as gaining new insights and interests. The prisoner responses give no express indication that they are aware of these volunteer gains, but their frequent use of the word 'friend' to describe their penfriend indicates that they

recognise the relationship as two-way. This knowledge should contribute to prisoners' sense that they have something to contribute to others in society.

8.7. This report has identified a number of issues meriting further research, in particular the reasons why few women prisoners access the scheme and the impact of the letter-writing scheme on prisoners' literacy skills. Two areas of challenge for Prisoners' Penfriends were also identified; how to expand to meet demand for the scheme without compromising the quality and safety of the work and how to work with other agencies to ensure that those prisoners who wish to continue to correspond with their penfriend after release are able to do so. In truth, however, these two challenges arise out of the success of the Prisoners' Penfriends project in providing a service that, as was made so clear in the responses to this research, is highly valued by prisoners.

8.8. Writing about desistance (but arguably of equal relevance to prisoners' ability to cope with life in prison) McNeill et al⁴⁶ noted the importance of '*someone believing in the offender; someone who perhaps carries hope and keeps it alive when the offender cannot do so for him or herself.*' As one prisoner wrote of his penfriend,

'He is very helpful and caring and very understanding. He makes me feel like I can achieve things in life. It's made me want to be a better man when released and achieve my dreams if possible.' (P25)

⁴⁶McNeill et al (2010) *op. cit.* p17

Annex

Research materials

- I. Volunteer interview schedule
- II. Volunteer questionnaire
- III. Prisoner questionnaire

I. Volunteer interview schedule

Introduction:

As I said to you previously, I am a researcher from Warwick University and I am conducting these interviews for a research project looking at the impact of the Prisoners' Penfriend scheme. This interview is being digitally recorded and I will transcribe it but I will take out all identifying information. Short quotations from the transcript may be used in the research report but they will be entirely anonymous. Is that okay?

[continue if agreement given]

1. How did you first come to be involved with Prisoners Penfriends
 - ✚ How did you hear about it?
 - ✚ Why were you interested in it?
2. Would you recommend being a Prisoners' Penfriend?
 - ✚ What do you get out of it?
3. How long have you been writing letters for Prisoners' Penfriends?
 - ✚ Roughly how many prisoners have you written to?
 - ✚ How often do you tend to exchange letters?
4. What do you write about?
5. What do you think prisoners get from their contact with their Penfriend?
 - ✚ Can you give any examples?
 - ✚ Why do you think prisoners choose to make contact with Penfriends?
 - ✚ Do you expect to continue writing once prisoners are released?
6. Have you had enough support, training and advice from the organisation?
 - ✚ What makes a good Penfriend volunteer?
 - ✚ Do you feel that your contact with your Penfriends puts you at any risk?
 - ✚ Could the organisation do anything differently?
7. About you:
 - ✚ What is your current/former occupation?
 - ✚ Would you mind telling me what age range you are in – twenties, thirties, forties, seventies, eighties...
 - ✚ Which part of the country do you live in?
8. Anything else you wanted to say?

Closing:

Thank you very much for your time today. When this project has finished, Gwyn will receive a copy of the report and I am sure that she will circulate it to all volunteers but in the meantime if you have any queries or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

II. Volunteer questionnaire

Prisoners' Penfriends Research Project: Questionnaire

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

Please complete, answering as fully as you can (you could continue on another sheet of paper)
and return to Prisoners' Penfriends. Thank you.

How long have you been writing letters for Prisoners' Penfriends?	
Why did you join Prisoners' Penfriends?	
How did you hear about the scheme?	
What do you get out of being a Penfriend?	
How many prisoners have you written to (if known)?	
What do you write about and how often do you write?	
Do you seek to provide emotional support or advice in your letters?	
Is literacy a problem for any of your prisoner Penfriends? If so, how do you both cope with this in your letter-writing?	

<p>What do you think prisoners get from their contact with their Penfriend?</p> <p>(giving specific examples if possible – we are interested in all the ways that prisoners are impacted by the scheme)</p>		
Have you had enough support and training from the organisation?		
Do you feel that your contact with your Penfriends puts you at any risk?		
Could the organisation do anything differently?		
About you:		
(a) What is/was your occupation?		
(b) What age range are you in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20-29 yrs • 30-39 • 40-49 • 50-59 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60-69 • 70-79 • Over 80 yrs
(c) What region do you live in?		

III. Prisoner questionnaire

Prisoners' Penfriends Research Project Questionnaire



Please complete, answering as fully as you can (you could continue on another sheet of paper), place in the enclosed envelope and return to Prisoners' Penfriends. Thank you.

What age range are you in? (please circle)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20-29 yrs old • 30-39 • 40-49 • 50-59 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60-69 • 70-79 • over 80 yrs old
How long is your prison sentence?		
How long have you been writing to a Prisoners' Penfriend?		
How did you find out about Prisoners' Penfriends?		
Before you started writing to a Prisoners' Penfriend, did you have contact with anyone else outside prison?		
Why did you apply for Prisoners' Penfriends – what did you hope to get out of it?		
Roughly how often do you write to your Penfriend and what sort of things do you write about?		
Will you carry on writing to your Penfriend		
(a) through your sentence?		
(b) when you've been released?		
(please explain why/why not)		
Does your contact with your Penfriend make any difference to how you feel:		

(a) about your life in prison?	
(b) about your future life once you are released from prison?	
Do you <u>now</u> receive letters, emails or visits from anyone else, other than your Penfriend? If so, why do you choose to write to a Penfriend as well?	
What could be improved about Prisoners' Penfriends? As a prisoner, is there anything you think they should do differently?	
Why don't more of your fellow prisoners ask for a Prisoners' Penfriend?	
What could be done to advertise the Prisoners' Penfriend scheme better in your prison?	

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