

# BRIDGING THE GAP

A LOOK AT HOW THE LIVES OF BRADFORD'S MOST VULNERABLE HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMED BY THE HELP OF THE BRIDGE PROJECT

BY JIM COULSON



**The coronavirus pandemic has focused our minds more keenly than ever before on the generosity and kindness of those in our society who give up their time to help others. Not only those who have stepped up during the multiple lockdowns to give back to society, but also those who have been quietly going about their business looking after the vulnerable for decades. One such organisation that has been doing just that is Bradford's Bridge Project.**

Bridge launched in 1983 with a remit to give practical help to street drug users in the city. From small beginnings, it grew to offer advice and counselling for their families and advice training to others working with drug users too. There followed a rehabilitation hostel, needle exchange, harm reduction service and complementary therapies to aid detoxification. Not only did Bridge concentrate on getting users drug free, but it also looked to provide training, mental health care, a gym and a host of other innovative and effective services to start service users on their path to recovery, helping them find new opportunities along the way, such as access to employment.

Today it works with a range of service users with complex needs, including those with drug and alcohol problems, ex-offenders, people who have been involved in prostitution and those with combinations of issues including mental health struggles and homelessness. It also works in the broader community helping Bradford residents improve their self care.

Things have not always run smoothly throughout the history of the Bridge Project. It faced constant challenges in the early days to secure funding to carry out its work, for example, but the team behind the organisation, which includes many former service users in both staff and volunteer positions, has learned to be agile and flexible to face these setbacks head on. Its development into a social business that tenders for competitive contracts from local authorities, health services and clinical commissioning groups means it works with an efficiency that has shielded it from some of the worst funding issues seen across the charitable sector since the virus hit.

However, Covid did still throw a series of curveballs in the direction of the Bridge Project, meaning the team had to turn their hands to new ways of working in order to find solutions as well as uncovering new opportunities to help the community.

Chief Executive Jon Royle recalls "we rapidly mobilised a telephone befriending service across Bradford for all the people who were cut off and isolated due to Covid restrictions. We matched them up

with trained befrienders so they would have somebody to talk to and get emotional support and companionship from.

One of the services that we had previously provided volunteers to work alongside GP practices running groups and social activities for patients. The minute Covid came along, we were no longer able to deliver that work. So we identified there were going to be these exceptionally large numbers of people who were going to be experiencing isolation and loneliness - one of the major causes of ill health and premature death.

There needed to be some very fast solutions. So we came up with the idea of a telephone befriending service, mobilising lots of volunteers to be trained to be matched to people who would need that support. We also commissioned a digital framework at the same time where people could enter their details if they wanted to access the service. And also people who wanted to volunteer - there was a digital platform where we put all the training materials and the recruitment material online."

Jon says that, as a charitable organisation, Bridge can be more flexible and fast moving than bodies like the NHS that have to deal with a strict regulatory framework. This gives the project the opportunities to spot issues and provide swift solutions as well as accessing new funding. "That has really come to the fore during Covid," he explains, "also, we've been in Bradford for decades and we've got about 80 staff and a hundred volunteers, so our people, our network is very embedded in the community. We've really got a pulse on what the emerging issues and needs are that are bubbling up in the local area. We are there to formulate solutions and responses to those needs."

With this local and historical connection comes a trust in Bridge that helps them reach people who might otherwise shy away from other organisations. "Prostitutes and homeless people and ex-offenders; these are groups that are often deeply stigmatised in society," says Jon, "and it is often difficult for them to trust what they see as officials or authority figures. When you are working with people with complex needs it is all about building that trust and that

relationship with them so they can open up about what their problems are and you can start to help them turn their lives around."

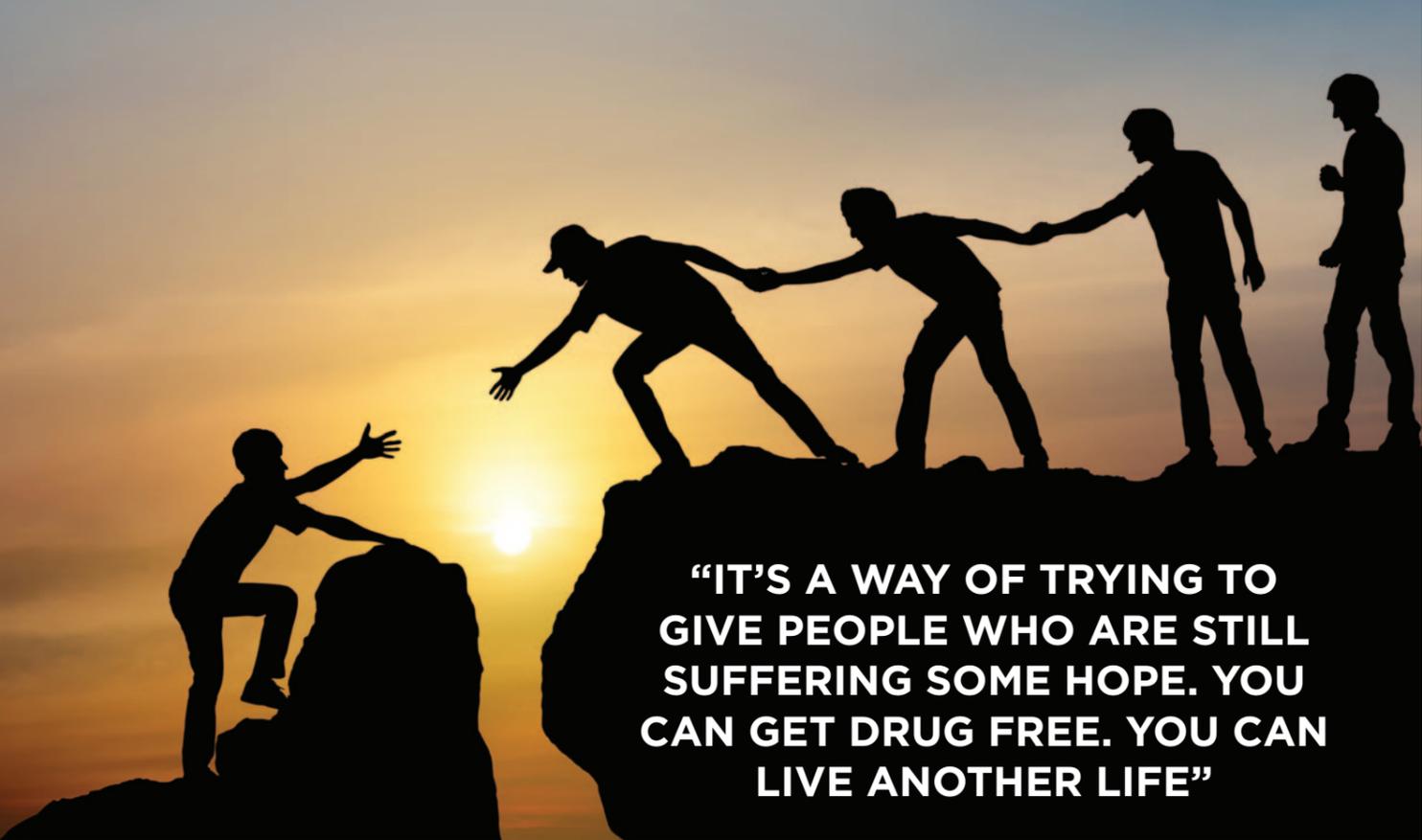
Much of the traditional in-person work Bridge does with its service users has moved to phone or video appointments during the pandemic, but for those with particularly complex needs, many staff members have continued to offer face-to-face support. For this reason, Jon proudly calls his team "amazing and courageous." He talks of their perseverance and selflessness in accepting a new way of working, with protective equipment in place, and continuing to provide their important one-to-one key worker service.

The relationship with the key worker can last over a number of years, as they help the service user set and achieve goals in small steps to keep them moving forwards in their journey. "It can be helping somebody to get decent housing, get them off the street first of all and then to stable accommodation, which is the bedrock for anyone before they can start to make other changes in their life" says Jon.

From there, the key worker can help address their drug or alcohol misuse, provide access to mental health services and help them claim the benefits to which they are entitled. Another important task is to connect them with their community.

"Very often, one of the biggest killers for people can be social isolation. Not having any sense of connection or belonging anywhere," Jon says. "You can imagine, say, how it is for someone trying to quit drugs and the only community they have known for years are other drug users, other people who are committing crimes. And if they want to turn their life around, they've got to break away from those connections.

We introduce some peer groups, mutual support groups where they can meet other people who are in recovery. They can make new friends, get new connections and feel like they belong somewhere. That is a transition back into the community. It's really hard for people to, day one, give up drugs or alcohol and then walk out into the big wide world and make those friends themselves." ➔



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One of the facilities Bridge offers to encourage this peer-to-peer support is the Vault Recovery Cafe where service users can drop in and meet those who are further along the recovery journey than themselves. It may even be the first time they have spoken to people who have given up drugs or alcohol and is an important step in instilling the belief that it is possible.

A Bridge team member who has lived experience of addiction and recovery, and who was involved with setting up the cafe almost a decade ago, explains, “it’s a way of trying to give people who are still suffering some hope. You can get drug free. You can live another life.”

He talks about how the new concept soon captured the imagination: “At first we were open two days a week. We had a table tennis table and we used to put a bit of food together, and people started slowly coming in. I think that was, number one, the food - people are always happy to get some food. And, two, it was a place for people to come with no tick boxes, no being judgemental, basically ‘where are you at and how can we help?’”

From this encouraging start, the cafe began opening five days a week and started to see up to 60 people come through the doors every day.

“We started running groups, running activities, going to recovery

events, being away for weekend breaks, art, mutual aid meetings,” recalls the team member, “if you like, it became a community. It wasn’t run by me alone, it was run by members of the Vault cafe. It became self-supporting. The idea was, come in, get the help, and then when you get to a point of being well enough, support the Vault by giving back and helping others who come through the doors as well.”

People come into the cafe with all sorts of different beliefs, different behaviours, different life experiences, but put all that stuff aside, the common theme is that they all have identification and a common goal of just getting well. You might see someone who doesn’t look like you, doesn’t dress like you but - and I’ve seen this happen - they become very close. They’ve pushed that all aside and actually sat down and listened to what this person has to say.”

It is this sense of togetherness that has helped one service user with his recovery. “In 2012, I first came into the Bridge,” he says, “and at that point in my life, I’d never really been around people who were clean or in recovery. It changed my life. I got clean for the first time in 20 years and I made a lot of friends and saw a lot of hope there. I got plenty of opportunities to volunteer and I just kind of stuck around. I’m super

grateful to Bridge. I tried for 20 years to change on my own, but through the help of Bridge I changed. And I’m not the only one, I know lots of people who have changed because of the service.”

Chief Executive Jon Royle says that, although Bridge has adapted well to the Covid pandemic, discovering new ways to work and to reach service users, there are also challenges. One of the main issues is recruiting new volunteers. This, he says, could be down to the fact that so many people are already helping out with other causes that need help during the restrictions.

“I’d really encourage people who want to volunteer and help others to get in touch” he says, “for example, the telephone befriending - it doesn’t matter where you live. As long as you’ve got a phone and you are willing to give some time every week to befriend someone who needs some support, we could certainly use your help.” <sup>NL</sup>

**If you are interested, you can visit Bridge’s website at <https://thebridgeproject.org.uk/> or call 01274 952200 and help the organisation provide hope to those affected by the pandemic. As Jon says, “the most important currency that we can offer as an organisation is hope.”**