

# New Chapters: Impact Report 2022






## Project overview

New Chapters is a creative writing-based project which aims to empower people in the criminal justice system to improve their confidence with writing, raise aspirations, and tell their story. To achieve these aims, we deliver creative writing workshops led by authors with lived experience relatable to the participants. We also seek to showcase participants' writing to wider audiences and break down barriers between community and custody through collaborations with partners like National Prison Radio and Buckinghamshire Culture, annual anthologies, public exhibitions, and writing exchanges.

## Key achievements

In 2022, we ran New Chapters in a total of nine settings: HMP Brixton, HMYOI Feltham, HMPYOI Isis, HMPYOI Swinfen Hall, HMPYOI Aylesbury, Oakhill Secure Training Centre, Swindon Youth Offending Service, Chiltern Way Academy, and Chiltern Skills & Enterprise Centre (CSEC). We reached 213 people directly through workshops, plus an additional 19 through regular writing groups, as well as many more through shows broadcast on National Prison Radio, which has the potential to reach 80,000 cells across the custodial estate'.





We received feedback from 178 of these participants through surveys given out at the end of workshops. Of those 178, 93% rated the session they attended as part of New Chapters either 'excellent' (60%) or 'good' (33%). The collated data we gathered from these forms is presented below, followed by a more detailed look at three key impacts of the project.

1. How would you rate the session you attended today?				
Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Excellent		60.11%	107
2	Good		32.58%	58
3	Average		6.18%	11
4	Poor		0.56%	1
5	Terrible		0.56%	1
			answered	178

## 1. How would you rate the session you attended today?

	skipped	0
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## 2. How would you rate your experience with the author who came to the session today?

Answer Choices		Response Percent	Response Total
1	Excellent		64.97% 115
2	Good		27.12% 48
3	Average		7.34% 13
4	Poor		0.00% 0
5	Terrible		0.56% 1
		answered	177
		skipped	1

## 5. Did the session...

Answer Choices	Yes	No	Response Total
encourage you to write more?	79.64% 133	20.36% 34	167
make you enjoy writing more?	72.56% 119	27.44% 45	164
make you feel more confident about expressing yourself in writing?	82.32% 135	17.68% 29	164
encourage you to read more?	71.43% 115	28.57% 46	161
		answered	168

5. Did the session...		
	skipped	10

6. And did the session...			
Answer Choices	Yes	No	Response Total
inspire you to think about your future more?	81.82% 135	18.18% 30	165
make you feel better in general?	85.19% 138	14.81% 24	162
made you feel that your story is worth sharing?	78.18% 129	21.82% 36	165
inspire you to tell your own story?	74.07% 120	25.93% 42	162
		answered	168
		skipped	10

### Impact 1: Improving confidence with, and enjoyment of, writing

There is clear evidence that New Chapters met the aim of improving participants' confidence with, and enjoyment of, writing. By meeting inspiring authors with lived experience relatable to their own and being guided through writing tasks and group discussions, participants are able to build writing skills in an enjoyable, creative way and build positive attachments and role models for writing. 82% of those we surveyed said their experience with New Chapters made them feel more confident about expressing themselves in writing. Similarly, 80% said it encouraged them to write more and 72% said it made them enjoy writing more. Whatever level and interest in writing participants had before the workshops, the sessions helped them build confidence and skills around writing through the combination of the inspiring authors (many of whom had direct lived experience of the criminal justice system themselves), a relaxed, non-traditional learning environment and the focus on creativity and personal stories being validated. One participant, for instance, said:

**“I've been given a lot of information that can help me with writing my book”**

While another said they particularly enjoyed ‘the opportunity to develop our own creative expertise’ and a third said ‘I’ve been given a lot of information that can help me with writing my book’. Another said that, although they had never thought of trying something like this before,

“The session has made me realise I want to write my own book about my life and how I have changed as a person”

## **Key Impact 2: Improving wellbeing and raising aspirations**

In addition to the skills building element of the project, New Chapters centres the importance of writing, as well as, reading for enjoyment and the beneficial impact that writing (particularly creatively and as part of a group) can have on mental health and wellbeing. Despite a range of personal circumstances, all of the participants in this project are vulnerable simply as a result of being incarcerated or in touch with the system in some way and many suffer from high levels of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, as well as a high number being neurodiverse or having learning difficulties and disabilities (LDDs). Often, there are additional reasons for trauma and vulnerability in the histories of the people we work with. It is therefore particularly important that over 85% of participants reported that the session made them feel better in general. Many singled this out in their written comments, with a particular emphasis on the social skills developed through group discussion in the workshop setting, helping them see themselves and their peers in a different, more positive light:

“Made me feel more motivated”

“It made me feel good about myself”

“It made me feel a bit more positive about myself”

“I really enjoyed the way we felt like a group so quickly and so real”

“It helped me deal with some emotions that I didn't realise I was repressing”

“Made me feel better about talking to people”

On a similar note, 78% said that the session inspired them to think about their future more and, in particular, participants mentioned the inspiration of the authors with lived experience encouraged them to look towards life beyond prison more positively:

“The author had a very relatable background and his insight into life outside of prison inspired me”

“It encouraged me to think about my life more”

“The session was very detailed and it's nice to hear about people who come from different backgrounds”

“Got me thinking when I put my mind to something it can turn out alright”

“Made me feel like I'd have a second chance when released”

“It made me want to change”

“It made me think more about life and the positivity I can get out of it”

### **Key Impact 3: Encouraging participants to tell their stories and feel their voice is being heard**

A key pillar underpinning New Chapters is that everyone is a writer and everyone has a story to share. The workshops, and the surrounding project activity aimed at showcasing the participants' writing (via National Prison Radio, in published anthologies, through writing exchanges and festivals/exhibitions in the community etc.) encourages all participants – who are often marginalised and have been made to feel they have little of value to offer the world – to believe they have a story worth sharing and that there are people out there keen to hear it. 78% said the New Chapters workshop they took part in made them feel their story was worth sharing and 74% said they felt inspired to tell their story after the session. Many brought out this feeling of recognition, validation and inspiration in their comments:

“I've been given a lot of information that can help me with writing my book”

“Got me thinking when I put my mind to something it can turn out alright”

“[I particularly enjoyed] Learning that everyone has a story”

“It was interesting because you get to write your own story and express yourself and you can write about anything”

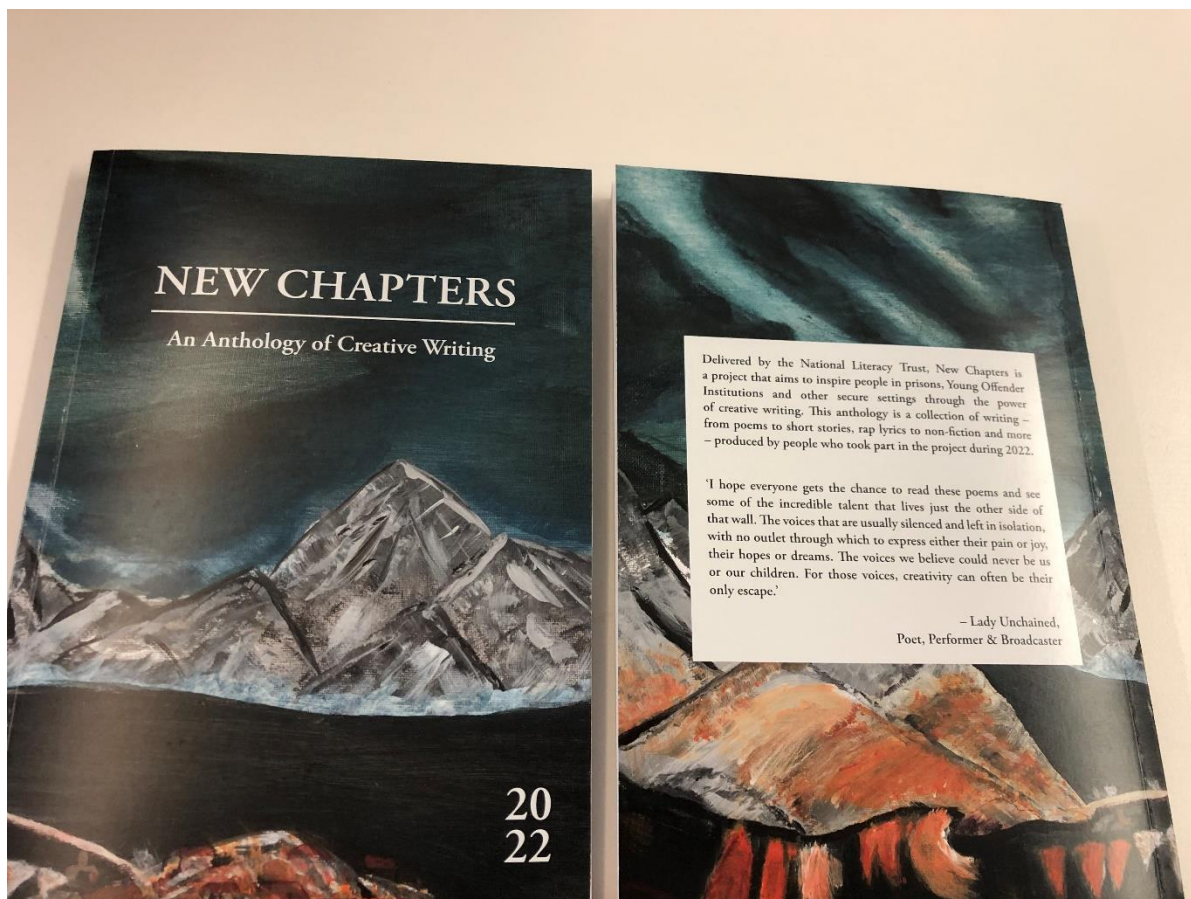
“The session, and this type of session generally, inspired me to get back to my poetry, written over the past 4 and a half years, and emanating from the pain of loss (and gain) of freedom of life in prison. I need to gain stability to get back to my writing a novel”

“The session has made me realise I want to write my own book about my life and how I have changed as a person”

*‘I think these sessions have gone from strength to strength and have been great for us here in the library and the prisoners involved in this project. The prisoners who have joined us for these sessions have all been engaged and listened and have been respectful of the authors and what they have to say as well as what each other have had to say. The work that has been produced has been amazing and all the prisoners I have spoken to who have been to these have loved it and have asked “when is the next one and can I sign up now?”’*

*Prison Librarian in HMPYOI Swinfen Hall talking about New Chapters*

### **Showcasing the work of participants**



In addition to the workshops, the other key part of the New Chapters project is supporting participants to showcase their work and find real audiences for their writing, while breaking down barriers between community and custody. As part of this, at the end of 2022, we collated, designed and published an anthology which collected writing – from poems to short stories, rap lyrics to non-fiction and more – produced by people who took part in the project across the year. The anthology features introductions by the poets Lady Unchained and Jamie Thrasivoulou, both of whom led workshops as part of the project last year. All the writing in the anthology is by people in touch with the criminal justice system, and even the painting that forms the cover artwork is by a man incarcerated in HMP Brixton! To read the extraordinary writing included, you can access a digital version of the anthology [here](#).

As part of our efforts to showcase the writing in the anthology to as wide an audience as possible, we have organised a mini exhibition about the project featuring the anthology and audio recordings of participants reading their work which is touring around eight libraries in Buckinghamshire during February and March 2023: Aylesbury, Burnham, High Wycombe, Princes Risborough, Buckingham, Amersham, Hazlemere, Marlow. We are planning to hold similar showcases in the community across the country – at other public libraries and at storytelling festivals – and are hoping to use these points of exchange to gather feedback from those who read the anthology to send directly to the writers featured in it, using feedback postcards.



As well as the anthologies, we have also showcased New Chapters participants' work via National Prison Radio. Over the course of 2022, we recorded three New Chapters workshops for special 'New Chapters Takeover' radio shows which went out on National Prison Radio. These shows featured participants reading out their writing produced as part of the project, as well as recorded discussions and readings from the author-led workshop recorded. The shows were interactive, so that listeners across the custodial estate (a potential 80,000 cells) could follow along and produce creative writing inspired by the prompts set, alongside those in the workshops. Listeners were encouraged to send their writing in to us to feature in the anthology.

Finally, a new element of the project is the establishment of more regular writing groups and writing exchanges in some prisons. In addition to the usual author-led workshops, we have helped set up regular writing groups, facilitated by our Criminal Justice Project Manager, in HMP Grendon and on the London Pathways Unit (LPU) in HMP Brixton, with plans to expand these into further settings, including a community-based Hub for people on the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway in London. We piloted a writing exchange between the group of writers in the LPU in HMP Brixton and a group in the community drawn from volunteers from Buckinghamshire Libraries. The two groups responded to the same writing resource, 'The Inherent Magic of Objects', to produce a short piece of writing about an object that is meaningful to them in some way. They then exchanged drafts and gave anonymous feedback on the work produced by the other group, before redrafting their

pieces for inclusion in a special section of the anthology. Some quotes from those involved show the impact this exchange had:

### **HMP Brixton participants:**

‘The idea that the project is run in collaboration with people outside of prison has significant potential. For me it is/was an escape from the standards of prison life, the perpetual contest of self-ego and egos of others (staff included). It is a real boost when the book these poems were printed in is a tangible thing to evidence creativity both inside and out. As a prisoner, it is a good ‘escape’ from the mundane prisoner existence. Showing others the end result encouraged others to want to get into creative writing.’

‘I think it is good because it helps you build confidence and helps you to express yourself. [Getting feedback] helped me build confidence with writing and also made me proud of the work I’d done. It felt good to listen to others’ stories and be able to share in their work. It helped me relax and made more confident in my writing.’

‘It was very constructive to hear other people’s views about my writing, my thoughts, and I value that that is how people construe my work.... It really made me be organised, not to waste time on something paltry. Mutual cooperation is rather a healthy practice.’

‘I really enjoyed hearing new ways of expressing myself through writing. [Getting the feedback was] exciting, learning new ways and people showing me how to change words and lines. It was also very good reading other people’s stuff learns you to become better in your own writing. I ended up changing my work based on the feedback given and it helped me writer differently. The exchange of writing gave me a better understanding of how creative writing works and been able to change into new ideas.’

### **Buckinghamshire Libraries participants:**

‘Brilliant idea! It was non-judgemental but helpful. Non-pretentious and unacademic, just based on enjoyment/emotion and inspiration. I was completely open to it, never having done creative writing before this. I took no offence and gladly adapted my work where I felt I could improve it based on the comment.... Actually, I felt the anonymity was a useful device, so we were completing the task and taking feedback with zero preconceptions or prejudices. It was a fun and, for me, a first experience of creative writing (bit of a challenge to begin with). It was a real pleasure for me – I hope all others involved had a positive experience.’

‘Angus [Criminal Justice Project Manager] was brilliant at making me feel more confident, brave and creative with my words. It was good, constructive, scary but nice. Reading/listening to others’ work made me feel sad for lost opportunities but also hopeful that words and reading can help.’

‘It was great to have a focus and the guidance notes to get started. The whole process was relaxed and friendly. [Receiving the feedback] was really positive, a real confidence boost and encourages me to share my work more. Very constructive. I enjoyed being part of this



project and reading more of the works in the anthology. I would encourage others to get involved in the future.'

Given the success of this pilot, we have plans for more exchanges like this between custody and community in 2023.

### Future Plans

In 2023, New Chapters continues to expand and diversify. We are delivering the project in a number of new settings and introducing new elements and variations on the approach taken last year based on participants' feedback and what we have learnt. In addition to the new writing groups and a potential partnership with the OPD Pathway to develop writing groups and exchanges, plans are underway for a new version of New Chapters focused on lyric writing to be run in HMPYOI Feltham and Oakhill STC, where participants will work with lyricists and producers to write their own song while building critical thinking skills by analysing and discussing examples of rap and hip-hop songs and writing a short, reflective essay on their own creative process through discursive workshops led by authors.

