



# **ANNUAL REPORT**

## **APRIL 2008 –**

## **MARCH 2009**

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## **THE BRIDGE COLLECTIVE ANNUAL REPORT APRIL 2008 - MARCH 2009 (draft)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This is the first time the Bridge has attempted to produce a fully detailed annual report drawing collectively on the experience of many participants in the company.

The process of trying to collect and collate those experiences has shown how rich and diverse a world we have created together. Our activities happen through the commitment and hard work of many people, much of which is voluntary, and all of which people are making time to do alongside all the other demands of their personal lives.

This report necessarily reflects a perspective visible to those of us present at our 2009 AGM, in the light of the information that has reached us there. It has also to be a selective summary. There will be many important aspects of our year that it will fail to reflect adequately or at all.

Information has been submitted in various forms by many people. It has been presented in the form of quotes from individuals and groups. In order to present this coherently, it has been reorganised into themed sections. In doing this, we hope we have represented accurately what has been said.

### **Activities at the Bridge**

This section is presented as a list (in **bold**) of activities that have taken place over the year. Some of these are ongoing groups with fairly fixed membership, some are programmes of activity with different people participating at different times, some are one-off events. They are hard to classify and little attempt has been made to put them in any particular order. Where descriptive information has been provided, this has been added. Some further information, for example about achievements and outcomes, follows in later sections.

“Groups have their own life.

Each group as a part can communicate with the whole.

Each part has its own dynamics.

The Bridge is the sum of its individuals, groups and activities.

What is happening in all of the parts is the foundation of the Bridge.

The purpose of the Bridge structures is to support the individuals in groups and activities.

Being a Bridge member or group implies a willingness to participate in what the Bridge does and how we do it.”

(Bridge Collective statement on Autonomy and Group Relationships)

### **Women's art group**

“Glass painting; sewing for peace panels; Fleur and Nerak went to Phoenix for Walk for Women's Day; door panel in Crow's Nest; made Christmas wreaths with holly, ivy, willow; made felt people; encaustic art.”

### **Better Believe It**

“A place where it is safe to talk about any beliefs or experiences without being judged or being told that you have got it wrong. Every Monday.”

### **Underground Sound**

“Every Friday between 12 pm and 6 pm, there is a drop-in service for 18-30 year olds who wish to make use of our range of musical instruments. Since January there have been 2 paid workers for these hours, enabling Underground Sound to function more effectively and consistently.”

### **Greenwood project**

“We organise a programme of about 5 events a month in the outdoor environment, using some regular fixed venues and venturing out to new places as well. We try to plan things that can be accessed by public transport at affordable cost. People can use the events as an opportunity to be quiet, to be sociable, to share, and to be active, in any combination.” (Andrew)

“At the Greenwood project we hang around the fire, chatting and drinking tea away from the city noise. Some people also like to work with their hands making things, and others enjoy walking in the woods, and doing things outdoors” (Ceri)

### **Bipolar Group**

“The bipolar group is a small self help collective to support people with and relatives and friends of people with Bipolar disorder. We meet on the third Thursday of the month from 1900-2100hrs. We're a friendly bunch who tend to meet up just to chat, but occasionally we have guest speakers or a themed evening whereby a member brings some information on a topic relevant to bipolar disorder. Themes have included sleep and diet amongst others.” (Sue)

### **Social anxiety group**

“We are so grateful to have had the Bridge Collective help our social anxiety group. We have used the Bridge collective rooms for monthly meetings for approximately 4 years [The Joan of Arc Room within Mind for the first two of those years before the Bridge Collective started – ed]. The Bridge Collective allow us to meet in the evening so the rooms are a safe place to welcome sufferers. Most socially anxious people would have found it almost impossible to come to more public locations. The Bridge Collective has provided free use of their private rooms and provided keys to get in, tea making facilities etc.

Social anxiety describes the excessive anxiety, nervousness, and apprehension sufferers feel during interactions with other people. Even small everyday tasks like shopping, standing in queues, passing someone you know in the street or having lunch in the canteen can trigger extreme self-consciousness and anxiety. The anxiety often leads to social isolation and problems with depression and self-esteem. People's lives start to shut down when social anxiety makes normal aspects of life difficult, painful and full of anxiety. People with SA often drop out of education or employment as daily life can become just “too hard”. Without the Bridge Collective the SA group would have nowhere to meet and could not give people the chance to understand their condition. SA is often described as the invisible illness because sufferers feel ashamed and minimise interaction with others. In reality it is the third largest psychological disorder in the country, after depression and alcoholism.

We are so grateful to Bridge Collective, not just for the room and facilities, but for being there when we need support or advice. They keep us in contact with all the support services that are advertised in their rooms and welcome us to attend mental health forums and meetings within the wider Exeter community. Without Bridge the social anxiety group would not exist and many sufferers' lives would have been made even more lonely and anxious." (Neil, on behalf of Exeter Social Anxiety Support Group)

### **Rainbow Mind**

"Rainbowmind is a group for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans (LGBT) people with experience of mental health difficulties. The group has been running at the Bridge Collective since August 2008. We meet on the first Saturday of every month for tea/coffee and a chat. Rainbowmind aims to provide a warm welcome and a listening ear to anyone who identifies as LGBT and experiences/has experience of mental health issues. Rainbowmind offers solidarity and social contact for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans people with experience of mental health issues. We are creating a safe space in which people can be heard and respected for who they are." (Anna)

"A lovely group – it's good to share ideas, offer each other support and to share each others' experiences of what we've been through." (a member of Rainbowmind)

### **Voices group**

"The Voices Group meets on one Thursday each month so that people who have or have had the experience of hearing voices can meet each other, talk about their experience with others who will understand and not judge, share ideas, and know that they are not alone." (Andrew)

### **Discussion group**

"This group began its life in a discussion group facilitated by John Thompson from Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry ( [www.osdemethodology.org.uk](http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk) ).

Between March and August 2008, John facilitated a regular discussion group on a range of topics. When John left Exeter for a new job, we got together to keep the group going facilitating it together.

Between October 2008 and March 2009 we've met seven times for a drop in discussion over two hours. " (members of the discussion group)

### **Experts by Experience**

As participants in the Bridge Collective enterprise, we believe that it is important to recognise the important part people who experience mental health problems have to play in training mental health workers and related professions. Organisations and Groups can book 'Experts-by-Experience' to deliver training on most mental health issues based in personal experience. Fees are available on request. Opportunities are available for members of the Bridge Collective to participate in training with 'Experts-by-Experience' and to receive payment for it. These individual insights offer an opportunity for mutual learning leading to a greater knowledge and understanding of mental health. Further, along with other groups such as the Exeter Service User Groups, 'Experts-by-Experience' have been very influential

in changing the power dynamic between service users and professionals such as student social workers, nurses, doctors, police, DPT staff and trainee psychologists.

### **Spiritual Emergence Network (still meeting but to be renamed)**

“Devon Spiritual Emergence Network is a group of people who want to acknowledge the spiritual aspects of our experience and meet together for mutual support. We do this at seasonal turning points, usually in an outdoor setting. All belief systems and traditions are respected equally. You are invited to bring something to share in the circle - a memory, a poem, a photograph - anything in fact that feels like it has some connection to this time of the year for you. Please also bring food to share.” (from the newsletter)

“Really uplifting, positive space to connect with others on a spiritual level.”

“Good opportunity to get out with others in nature, mark the seasons and equinoxes, and have a chance to speak about our connection with nature. Good chance for me to speak my truth... and to be able to talk about my own journeys, the dark and light.”

### **Birch Club**

“The Birch Club ran for several months as a group of up to a dozen people who read various stories, poems, and factual extracts out loud to each other. Some of the material was practical wisdom and some of dramatic or historical interest. The club helped give its members an interest outside their normal life and the chance to contribute to a group activity.”

### **Ad hoc activities and outings**

Some samples from the newsletters:

“There was this amazing day when the most remarkable happening occurred, for a single quiet afternoon a yurt appeared in the crows nest, I couldn't stop the smile from spreading right the way across my face.”

“Tues 3rd March, Trip to Lyme Regis.”

“Film. Tues 9th Dec 2pm. Docu-drama with Rufus May showing how he supported a doctor who was hearing voices to work with her experience without using medication.”

### **P.A. (participatory approaches) network**

Hosted by Bridge and has contributed to our process. People from several groups and organisations who want to use, promote and learn about PA meet every two or three months at the Bridge.

### **Open Thursday**

“An open day when anyone can attend. No commitment. A welcome. Opportunity to just drop in or regularly attend.”

“A space to relax, be with each other, converse or not. Being accepted for how I’m feeling”

“Sanctuary, friendship, acceptance, laughter.”

“Chance to see people and catch up with what’s going on in their lives.”

“It is very useful to come in and use the computer. It is also a reason to get out of the house.”

“Thursday to me means I am alive and the group makes me feel good.”

“Nice group of people to meet. Interesting selection of books lying around. We probably wouldn’t meet at all except for Thursday.”

“What Thursday means to me: reason to live.”

“Usually a friendly, jolly crowd. Good day for reading and discussing leaflets, mags, etc.”

“I find the Thursday open days very supportive. When I feel low I have always found solidarity and friendship at the Bridge.”

“Open days on Thursdays are for friendship, camaraderie, chance to be ourselves, chat and lack of judgmentality, empathy, and share problems.”

“A chance for a cup of tea.”

“Always welcoming.”

## **Newsletter**

- A forum for collective members to display:
- Articles
- Poems
- Art
- Thoughts
- Stories of Real Experience
- Gives people the opportunity share subjects of interest
- Insights from ‘professionals’
- Feedback from partnership projects..e.g: Jon Perry Experts by Experience
- Calendar of events making events and meetings more accessible
- Communicates Something of Bridge Collective to people new or interested in the project
- Community linking such as: CCANW, The Pottery, HomeStart, Workways among others

- Reaches members/subscribers that may not have access to the internet

### **Website**

- Globally informing/ making the Bridge accessible through reading
- A quick and easy way to give people unfamiliar with the Bridge an idea of what we're about.
- Newsletters and Special editions available for download
- A forum which has (in an environmentally friendly way) allowed us to make information available and accessible, such as the the accounts and C.E.U. Bridge the Future document.
- Calendar available for download
- Links / networking
- Has reached a greater number of people
- Giving collective members the opportunity to learn about website management and design

### **Library, internet access**

#### **Participation in admin**

#### **Participation in running of company**

Membership, directorship, meetings, creation of policies

#### **Caretaking of premises**

Cleaning days, keyholding

#### **Wholefood project**

#### **Informal social and support networks**

"The Bridge can be a place to bump into people you haven't met for a while and renew acquaintance."

"Like being able to chat and give and take with people I meet at the Bridge over the telephone, coffee, and just knowing people are there in my head."

"Being part of Rainbowmind has offered new opportunities to meet up outside the group socially."

"Humanisation and the Bridge Collective: Providing a space in which people can be themselves, to show their true feelings and to support one another."

#### **Working with students and researchers, consultation with service providers**

## **Learning opportunities**

First aid course, WRAP taster

## **Visits to and from other groups doing similar work**

Brighton: visitors came and helped start Rainbowmind; representatives of the Bridge paid a return visit to share experiences of setting up our own company.

“Brighton Mind were really inspired by what we are doing here and encouraged to feel that they could start something similar.”

## **Participation in wider networks and survivor/recovery movement**

Hearing Voices Network

## **Yoga**

“People found the yoga very helpful.”

## **People at the Bridge**

### **How many?**

A very rough estimate of total number involved face to face in Bridge activities not including those receiving training from experts by experience etc. is about 150.

The Bridge does not keep individual records except for membership, newsletter subscriptions, and contact information specifically for that purpose. No one person is in direct contact with every group and activity. The following estimated numbers have been provided by some of the groups:

“The Social Anxiety group has met (and hopefully helped) 40 or 50 people during the last four years.”

“There’s been an average of around five people each time with about fifteen people attending at any one of the times.” (Discussion Group)

“The Voices Group has been small, often three or four people at any one time, and about ten people joining in during the course of the year. Members of the group travel from East and Mid Devon where there are no voices groups. There was one Networking day when many more voice hearers joined us from groups from Penzance to Bristol.”

“Numbers at each Greenwood event vary from four or five to about fifteen. Different days, venues, and activities suit different people, and an estimated 50 people participated over the year.”

“The Bridge had 40 members exactly at the beginning of the year covered by this report. The administration of membership renewals was not then fully up to date and the number of members has decreased slightly and was 25 when records were updated shortly after the end of the year.”

“Approximately 60 people were on the mailing list to receive our newsletter by post.”



“We’re all important”

“Thanks for cake from Margaret!”

### **Welcomes and goodbyes**

During the year Nicola became a director and Paula, Ben, Anne, Liz, and Elaine stood down as directors. Ben and Alex were employed to facilitate Underground Sound (Ben having done this in a voluntary capacity for the first year). Sarah was newly employed to administer the company’s finances, and took on other roles when Clare and Peter left employment with the company.

Thanks to them all for their service.

The Bridge welcomes the many other people who have joined us during the year as members and attenders, friends, supporters, sessional workers, keyholders, and in other roles. Many good wishes and thanks to those who have left.

### **Help we’ve received**

This section is about help we’ve had from people and organisations outside the Bridge. This has been huge and essential to our success and has come from many directions. It is only possible to describe some of the kinds of help and give a few examples, not to name everyone who has contributed. But thanks to everyone, whether named or not.

Money: grant from DCC, Allen Lane, Business Link Social Enterprise Development Voucher Scheme, private gifts and donations, Exeter City (rates waived).

Charlotte Hubbard of Exeter Service User Group visited once a month through the year to offer a listening ear, support, and an opportunity to give feedback anonymously.

Ian Gibson and Ralph Hayward (commissioners) have been encouraging and accessible and have given helpful advice on finance and structuring.

“Initially, Rainbowmind started as a result of interest generated by a visit from Eliot at an organisation called “MindOut”, based in Brighton. “Mind Out” runs an activity group for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans people with lived experience of mental health difficulties.

The Intercom Trust is a charity that works with LGBT people across the South West. We are supported by the Intercom Trust, who have helped us produce some beautiful posters and flyers to publicise the group.

Vicky Worthington is a community Development Worker at The Intercom Trust and she has supported Rainbowmind from the very beginning in August 2008. Initially, Vicky attended our meetings regularly, until we “got on our feet”. During our first meetings we decided on a name for the group and talked about possible guidelines to make the group feel safe for all who attend. We also shared ideas about what we wanted from the group.”

Support workers who have helped people to access the Bridge. Members of the voices group have depended on Roger, the support worker from Churchill House, for transport.

People who have bought our services – wild things, experts by experience customers

Meg, Alan and Escot people, Stefan, Verity, Alex... all helped with time, resources and support for the Greenwood Project.

CEU (Community Enterprise Unit) (see below)

Sarah Berry and Wolf and Water, working and ensuring continuation of the well attended and appreciated Woman's Art Group.

### **Consultation and communication within the Bridge**

#### **“Bridge Collective – the future” project**

In January 2009 we began looking at where we are now and where we want to be. We were helped in this work by the Community Enterprise Unit. There was discussion in meetings at the Bridge, and a questionnaire was circulated.

They produced a final report in May 2009 called 'Bridge Collective- the Future'. In this they put forward suggestions for future ways of working. In this report recommendations were made. Where we go with these recommendations will be the decision of all the membership.

#### **Directors' meetings**

These were held monthly through the year and were open to anyone to attend and take part in the making of decisions for the Company

#### **Keyholder system**

At any time that the Bridge is open there is a keyholder present who is responsible for the premises, and is often the facilitator or organiser of any activity that is happening. Keyholders are one of the links between groups within the Bridge and the company structure. We have held regular keyholder meetings with the intention of maintaining communication, but as most keyholders are volunteers with other commitments, this has not always proved effective and it is an issue that still needs to be addressed.

### **Outcomes and Achievements for the company**

“I like your website - hmmm... looks like it's very "personalised"... I'd heard about the Bridge Collective too, and am pleased to see it's networked approach is working well, I think it's excellent what you're doing, and I do miss working and exploring meaning and mental health with people, it's so cool that there are places for people to still "be" themselves, in particular I like the idea of the spirituality network stuff, I think too often that gets neglected as an aspect of an individual, and it's great that you're providing the space for people to talk and think about it - it was a common theme when I visited Delderfield and with the service user group.” (Rebecca Hardwick, SWDC Development Consultant, Suicide Prevention, Systems Development, Third Sector ).

“A personal view of a sample of our achievements follows:

Maintaining (if not increasing) a high level of valued activities with very limited and changing resources. We lost an experienced member of staff for personal reasons and took on new workers. The Bridge has largely relied on voluntary input by its members and attendees to sustain its activities and act as keyholders and the level of commitment to this has been impressive.

Establishing well understood processes for running as a collective and democratic company and community in which everyone can participate and contribute. This is work in progress and has been a challenge, and we have received valuable help from the Community Enterprise Unit.

In our first year our focus was very much inward looking towards settling into our new premises and identity as a company. Although as indicated in 1. and 2. there has still been a need for that in the second year, we have begun to reach out and establish our place in the wider networking that was so important in the old Joan of Arc project. This is an area to develop further.

There have been achievements in getting new resources into the Bridge. A major resource we rely on is people's good will. We have also succeeded in getting some new funding into the company: Work done during the year has resulted in funding for the Women's Art Group for 2009-10, and we also received a grant for development of our business that paid for the facilitation work by C.E.U. Experts by Experience have continued to generate some income for the company as well as for individuals. The wholefood project is not making significant profit for the company but there is the possibility that trading activity of this kind could grow in the future." (Andrew)

"Educating. Equalising. Information. Able to be informative. Participation."

"A model for other services"

### **Outcomes and Achievements in groups**

"The group is the one place sufferers feel safe and can talk freely with others who understand." (Social anxiety group)

"People are still scared of what they don't understand. You can mix in with people that can understand you and don't think you're dangerous". (voices group member)

"Safe; confidence building friendship; supportive; empathy; accepted even personal issues; interactions."

"Successes include: Keeping the group going; Sharing facilitating the group; Coming up with topics and perspectives to talk about including: 'consumerism', 'knowledge', 'image and spin' and 'community'; Creating a discussion between us where there can be 'a way of seeing different things without being in conflict'." (discussion group)

" Underground Sound, which has relied entirely on voluntary facilitation which was not proving to be sustainable, now has two paid facilitators and is rapidly becoming a vibrant and growing project again. "

"Rainbow Mind is a new mutual support group in the Bridge for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender who are affected by mental health issues. It was

started with help from a similar group from Brighton, and the Intercom Trust. No similar support group has existed before in Exeter and people are attending who have previously felt excluded from existing projects including the Bridge itself.” (Andrew)

“Reading people’s experiences of the group is very powerful and moving for me. The Rainbowmind is a visible space for LGBT people who experience mental health issues. It is already benefitting people who come to the group as reading people’s feedback clearly shows. Having a mental health issue can be a very lonely place. Being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Trans can also be isolating. Rainbowmind offers an open door and a warm welcome.” (Anna)

“Recently, the Intercom Trust were at Plymouth Pride 2009. This provided a wonderful opportunity to advertise Rainbowmind and other groups that Intercom supports. New people have made contact with Rainbowmind as a result of seeing the flyers at Plymouth Pride!”

“The women’s art group has succeeded in getting full funding for next financial year from the National Lottery”

“Thank you for an amazing teaching session at Exeter – it made us much more aware of the context of people’s lives and it was a highlight of the doctorate. Everyone in the group was inspired and deeply moved. Thank you.” (Jo, trainee Clinical Psychologist).

### **Outcomes and Achievements for people within the Bridge**

“For some people we are the only other sufferers they have met. They may not have even told anyone else. “ (Social anxiety group)

“I like to come to the allotment on Sundays because Sunday is a long day and it drags when I’m at home and there’s not a lot to do.” (greenwood project member)

“Some outcomes for individuals:

People have left or reduced or altered relationships with services

Sessional and regular part time employment in the Bridge, being a company director/ secretary

Learning (admin and computer skills, first aid qualifications, chairing meetings)

Voluntary work opportunities, opportunity to contribute and be valued

Social contact and support, ongoing and through crisis. Making lasting friendships

Freedom to speak about experiences without fear or judgement

Opportunities to be creative

Access to outdoor activities and environments

Physical activity: gardening, cycling, walking, yoga, singing...”

“The Rainbowmind group has been one of the most helpful groups I have been along to. Having been through a lot of depression and lack of support, the group members are all so kind and helpful. I don’t feel it is something I’m too frightened to attend. My self-esteem is

slowly beginning to recover. I feel I have made some real friends.” (a member of Rainbowmind)

“I find the Rainbowmind group a very supportive group and it gives me the chance of having a voice as a vulnerable gay man.” (a member of Rainbowmind)

“I find the group (Rainbowmind) very supportive and friendly. Coming to the group has improved my self-esteem, I can be comfortable with myself amongst other LGBT people. It means a lot to me to have a support group like this, as it is a safe space to go and feel supported by like-minded people.” (a member of Rainbowmind)

“Learnt I can do more than I thought and cope with more than I thought.”

“I did my first facilitation ever. You have to challenge yourself and then you can do it. We all have inner strength we can coax out.”

“The Bridge has enabled me to interact with people who I would never have before.”

“Having an appreciation for the challenges of making structures workable and taking and sharing responsibility.”

“It has been a good opportunity both being a facilitator and attending the Women’s Art Group. It has given me the chance to empathise with others and enabled me to overcome my fear of letting down my guard, enabling me to connect better both when facilitating and attending Escot and outings etc.” (Fleur)

### **Challenges we have faced**

“There have been divergences in views within the Bridge about the aims, culture, and working practices of the company and though the process of resolving these is not complete a personal view is that it has tested our commitment, made us think clearly about what we want to be, and strengthened us.”

“Paid working hours are thinly spread; when we allocated paid time to Underground Sound we lost input into other areas of work.”

“Able to express fears, emotions without rejection.”

“Remembering the difficult year we have all had and how we have all allowed each other to feel emotional pain and joy and support each other through this turmoil.

As a “belated psychiatric patient” (and I know others at the Bridge would agree) feelings and emotions are not something we are encouraged to express – we are taught they are something to run away from and be fearful of. At the Bridge, as a result of the difficult year we can see that we can ride above the storm and arrive at a more peaceful place with an inner individual and collective strength to continue progressing in life and together.”

### **Challenges and hopes for the future**

“**Money:** We have been able to sustain the work of the Bridge for two years with the funding we currently receive. This has depended on a lot of unpaid input, and while many people are

happy to contribute unpaid, there has been a heavy burden on some individuals. Our hope has always been that paid opportunities within the Bridge might be one possible route for people on their path to recovery and out of dependence on benefits. There are many possibilities for expanding our work, in range of activities, time, and geographical scope. We were able to build a useful reserve after our first year but in the second year we spent a little more than our income. So it will be useful for our income to grow to some extent, and we would always wish not to be too dependent on one source. Generating new income is a fairly slow process at the moment because of the limited time any of us has available to put into it.”

“Maintaining connection, communication, and support between the many diverse parts of the Bridge can be difficult. Not everyone can come to meetings, so we need to invent other ways for this to happen.”

“Unmet need for impairments – visual, hearing, etc.”

**“COLLECTIVE MEANS PEOPLE AT THEIR BEST – DIFFERENT CULTURES, IDEAS, BELIEFS, RESPECTING, SOMETIMES EXPLAINING WHY, SOMETIMES THERE’S NO ANSWER.”**

