The Butler Trust’s Inaugural Kathy Biggar Trophy

There’s plenty of good practice in our sector worth sharing, says Butler Trust Director Simon Shepherd – and it’s part of our job to do so.

Kathy Mabel Baker, probation officer and Samaritan, born 10 June 1947; died 7 June 2018

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My first prison visit, to HMP Maidstone, was as an undergraduate. It was a revelation. I learned how prisons and probation were hidden worlds where good practice by good people could transform a life - and I wanted to be a part of it.

I’ve been in and around this sector now for more than 30 years - first as a prison psychologist then senior manager, before moving down the road to the addictions field for a while, and then returning, back in 2008, as Director of the Butler Trust.

The thing about the hidden world that is our sector, the thing you never see in the headlines, the TV dramas, soaps and documentaries, is that it’s crammed full of amazing people, doing amazing things, to protect the public and change people’s lives. Your job is to do those things, to keep the public safe and help change the lives of the people in your care. Our job is to help shine a light on what you do, give credit where it’s due, and help spread the very best examples of your work more widely.

Our #HiddenHeroes campaign is all about showing the world what you do, and showing you that, while you may be hidden, you are not forgotten - something that’s been especially important during the pandemic, when the way you have all responded to the additional challenges you have faced has been truly remarkable. And the Butler Trust Awards, which are presented every year by our Patron, HRH The Princess Royal, celebrate those people who stand out even within an already truly outstanding crowd. Because what makes this sector so special, is the people who work in it.

The other thing about this sector though, is the way that you are constantly innovating, to find new and better ways to do things. I recently visited every prison in England and Wales, and was struck (though not surprised) by how many examples of great practice there are going on up and down the country. I know the same is true in probation and youth justice too. That’s another area we want to shine a light on – to help identify some of the very many local examples of notable practice out there, and share them more widely.

So it is a great pleasure to introduce our new Ruth Mann and Kathy Biggar Trophies, recognising and promoting notable practice in custodial and community settings, respectively.

Ruth was a prison psychologist, who I trained with back in the day. She was a passionate champion of humanity and rehabilitation in prisons. She dedicated her career to helping make prisons the best that they can be, and the impact of her work can be felt right across the estate.

Kathy was a remarkable woman too1. Many of you will have had the privilege of knowing her, as I did - few will not know of perhaps her greatest legacy, prison Listeners.

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As well as being a renowned and widely respected Probation Officer with Inner London Probation Service (or ILPS as it was known), Kathy was also a Samaritan and, for a time, part of the then Suicide Awareness Support Unit in Prison Service Headquarters. In 1991, when HMP Swansea was reeling from the tragic suicide of a teenage boy on remand, she asked the local branch of Samaritans if they would train some of the prisoners there to offer a listening ear to their peers. With the force of Kathy’s personality helping to overcome some (perhaps understandable) resistance to prisoners being given so much trust and responsibility, the idea quickly took off, and before long Listeners were, literally, everywhere.

The impact of the Listeners can be felt well beyond the countless lives they have saved. They were also the start of active citizenship in prisons. Having seen the contribution that prisoners can make, peer support and mentorship exploded across the estate - from prisoners helping others learn to read, and supporting new receptions when they first arrive, to mentoring those in recovery from addiction, and assisting with the social care of an aging population. And it hasn’t stopped there, with prisoners taking an increasingly active role in the regime through prison councils, decency committees and the like. Much of this has its roots in the Listeners, brought in at a time when the greatest responsibility to which most prisoners could aspire was to be made the wing “tea boy”.

When we launched the Trophies, last year, we were not sure how much of a response we would get, given that we were in the middle of the pandemic, but we needn’t have worried - we received almost 80 submissions in total, including around 30 for the Kathy Biggar Trophy.

The 2021 Kathy Biggar Trophy was presented to London NPS Director, Kilvinder Vigurs, and the team behind “Young Adult Transitions”, by Kathy’s former colleague and close friend, Pam Wilson.
From a Breakfast drop-in to the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, virtual Book Clubs to Bubble Newsletters, Hot Debriefs to the BAME Recruitment Panel, all are of value, all worth investing effort in, all show how we can better share our best.

Our first three finalists were a Young Adult Transitions programme from London NPS, a Student Counselling Service from East of England NPS, and Parent Champions (supporting families of those at risk of exploitation) from Hillingdon YOT. Picking the winner wasn’t quite as fraught as Strictly Come Dancing, but wasn’t easy either. We eventually agreed the inaugural Kathy Biggar Trophy should go to London NPS. Their impressive team had forged excellent new practice around a critical and hitherto underserved weak point in the system: when young people transition into adult service.

2 Screenshot from our video on the Inaugural Kathy Biggar Trophy winning project & practice.2

2 https://vimeo.com/641606793
Moving from youth to adulthood has never been easy for anyone; for those in care or the criminal justice system, it can be even more daunting. Here’s the programme overview as submitted:

‘A 10 session, trauma-informed, modular 1-2-1 programme for young adults transitioning from youth to adult supervision services. This is a time of high vulnerability in terms of people dropping out of services/breaching and reoffending, because of the challenges in making the transition from a very supportive and intensive service to one much less so. The programme is delivered by the YOS probation officer (seconded from NPS), and the receiving officer within NPS – and focuses on assessing the young person’s needs, giving advice and guidance, introducing the new probation offender manager, and giving extra levels of support during the handover. The support of family members / significant others is also sought, and they are involved in the process wherever possible.’

Several factors impressed the judges, starting with the impetus behind the idea itself, which team member Koreen Logie captures with a vivid opening simile: “It’s like a cliff edge. You know, at eighteen, you kind of go into adult services, it’s very different...and there’s lots of myths around what probation does - especially among young people.” They also liked the way the team underpinned the new practice they were co-designing with real academic heft - helped by team member Eric Beckford doing his PhD at the time.

The direct involvement of the young themselves in co-designing the practice and project also resonated strongly. As one young service user said: “Youth Offending Service help start the race, they sometimes run beside me, but Probation are there at the end cheering me on!” Finally, we were all taken with the serious passion and intense professionalism team leader Patsy Wollaston brought to our Zoom interview.

You can find a full, searchable list of all of the entries for the inaugural Kathy Biggar Trophy, together with relevant local contacts for more information, on the Trust’s dedicated Knowledge Exchange website.3

There are of course many more examples of good practice out there, so we will make the Trophy into an annual affair, and look forward to finding out about what else is going on. The key challenge now is to make sure that these local examples of notable practice don't remain as isolated examples of what can be done, but spread throughout the system instead, just as Kathy’s Listeners did - and that’s down to you.

3 https://www.theknowledgeexchange.uk/kathy-biggar-trophy/