



Free to Be Kids

Growing children's emotional health

2020 Impact Report

“ Free to Be is a lot of fun and it helps me learn that I can do so many things. ”

Bola, age 9

About Free to Be - for those new to our work

We believe that all children deserve to experience joy and adventure within their childhood, whatever other difficulties they face.

Many children referred to us grow up facing real hardships - many experience poverty, unstable housing, bullying, the loss of a family member, emerging difficulties with emotional health, or are growing up in families where parents have difficulties with drugs, alcohol, or mental health. As a result many have very limited views of their own potential, and of who they can be in the world.

Our projects are carefully structured to create opportunities for particularly disadvantaged children to experience feeling brave, adventurous, proud and successful, often for the first time in a long time. Children develop a much richer view of themselves, helping them grow in confidence, increase social skills and believe that they can achieve much more than they had thought.

The majority of our work takes place through our Thrive Outside programme which creates immersive, horizon broadening residential respite projects in outdoor environments, helping children to create lasting positive childhood memories. For the most vulnerable, we offer long term support through our London based Thrive Mentoring programme or through our Journey Programme - a recurring series of specialist residentials with consistent staffing and the same small group of particularly vulnerable young people, spread over a year.

All of our work supports children who are particularly disadvantaged and Thrive Outside is particularly successful at engaging children and families who might not otherwise access more traditional forms of support. For these children, our projects open up a whole new world. Everything we do is aimed to support children to develop their sense of who they are, and in turn to create changes in confidence, resilience and self-belief which help children do better at school, at home, and elsewhere. Schools tell us the impact of Thrive Outside is evidenced by lasting changes in educational engagement, improved emotional health, and real growth in children's belief in what they can achieve.

Beyond our main Thrive Outside work, we also run a Young Leaders' programme, coaching, training and supporting children to return on our projects as young volunteers, directly supporting children facing similar difficulties to their own.

If you'd like to read more about what we do and how we do it, please visit our website: www.freetobekids.org.uk



An Introduction from our Leadership Team

Well, what a year 2020 has turned out to be! In February, as we navigated the minibus through flood water and storm debris on our Journey Projects, we had no idea of what was about to unfold. Almost exactly a month later, Covid-19 plunged the UK into national lockdown. Overnight, schools shut and practically all face to face support services stopped. The children supported by Free to Be, many already struggling with social isolation and lack of opportunity, became confined for at least 23 hours a day, often in cramped flats without gardens, space to complete schoolwork or the technology needed to stay connected with friends and family. Simultaneously, restrictions around mixing and overnight stays made our projects impossible to run.

We've spent this year devising new ways to continue supporting our most vulnerable and isolated children as the risk levels and regulations have fluctuated. Over the lockdowns, our new Thrive Inside virtual mentoring programme ensured children benefitted from much needed social connection and gave their parents and carers regular respite. In the summer, restrictions eased, allowing families with the financial and practical

means to use air corridors to Europe or arrange holidays in the UK, but support for disadvantaged children remained mainly shut and our Covid-safe Adventure Days provided vital opportunities to play and have time outdoors.

Our fifth year of operation has been far from what we expected, and we've sadly had to postpone our birthday celebration event until 2021. Whilst we've not enjoyed as many campfires, farm trips or canoe adventures as normal, we hope you will enjoy reading about the ways our amazing children and volunteers have nonetheless connected and worked together over these strangest of times. As we emerge from the pandemic, we know that London's vulnerable children will be in even greater need of the freedom, affirmation and sense of belonging that our projects create. We're committed to resuming and growing our residential as soon as we as we legally can, to ensure more children than ever before are supported over 2021 and beyond.

“We believe in childhood, muddy trainers, new challenges, self expression, and real human relationships. Our aim is to open up a sense of adventure, freedom and possibility for children who are struggling, whatever life's circumstances.”

-From our website

With best wishes, *Rachel + Mike*

Has coming on these activities made you feel happier than you were before you came?
yes because we were stuck at home.

The best time in my life.



What is the best thing about Free to Be projects?
that i get to go to places i couldn't go to at home.



What has it been like coming on these trips out, compared to being at home during the coronavirus lockdown?
More better. Because I was bored at home.



What has it been like coming on these trips out, compared to being at home during the coronavirus lockdown?
Amazing, because when I was home I was bored and didn't get enough air.

What has it been like coming on these trips out, compared to being at home during the coronavirus lockdown?
really fun in lockdown I was bored

What has it been like coming on these trips out, compared to being at home during the coronavirus lockdown?
It felt amazing especially after doing nothing for 5-4 months

It felt Good to be out of the house



Circle the words that describe how you've felt whilst doing these activities:

Happy	Special
Sad	Adventurous
Part of a group	Bored
Respected	Safe
Left out	Believed in
Trusted	
Successful	Scared
Brave	Proud

A Summary of what we've achieved in 2020



78 children and young people attended our projects this year

59 volunteers gave their time to support or work alongside our children

100% of children reported positive indicators of improved self-esteem, confidence and resilience

“I did more in the days I went out with Free to Be this Summer than I did in six months of lockdown. Them days were the best days I had in the whole year.”

- Jamal, 13

94% of children surveyed during the pandemic, reported feeling demonstrably happier after receiving Free to Be support than they had been before

88% of children reported trying something they had previously not thought possible whilst they worked with us this year



This year, we benefitted from over **2,260** volunteering hours



“The Adventure Days were the highlight of the summer for her. In the midst of the pandemic, you guys still went ahead and you ensured the children were safe. I know I was a little bit anxious but actually she begged me to let her go and I thought, “I trust you guys from the last experience - you kept her safe then and I trust you to keep her safe again,” and she was safe. We feel very blessed and privileged to be a part of Free to Be.”

- Jessica's Mum

This year, we provided **111** project places for children and young people



Had we paid this year's volunteers at the London Living wage rate, it would have cost us over **£24,000**

The Need

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, almost all of the children supported by Free to Be were growing up facing extreme disadvantage. Most are part of the estimated 2 million English children identified by the Children's Commissioner as 'Left Behind'. Many are living in families affected by severe poverty, domestic abuse, parental mental health issues and parental substance misuse. Others are young carers or have a parent in prison. Not only do these adversities make childhood more challenging, there is strong evidence to show that they often lead to further difficulties in adulthood, impacting significantly on future health, employment outcomes and parenting capacity - often then perpetuating difficulties across generations. One in three adult mental health conditions can be traced back directly to adverse childhood experiences.

Thankfully, not all young people who face childhood adversity or trauma go on to develop such problems. The right support, such as help from compassionate, attuned adults; positive mutual relationships with peers and help in regulating and managing emotions significantly reduces the chances of adverse outcomes - hence, work like ours is so important.

Covid-19 has hugely exacerbated these existing challenges. The Child Poverty Action Group found that 8 in 10 low income families reported a significant deterioration in their living standards during the pandemic, due to falling income and rising expenditure. Figures from the Children's Commissioner show that during the first lockdown: the disadvantage gap amongst 7 year olds increased by 40%, leaving poorer children 7 months behind their more affluent peers; the number of children harmed or killed by abuse or neglect rose by 27%; and the rate of clinically significant mental health conditions increased by 50%. At the same time school shutdowns, bans on social mixing and lockdown restrictions made it almost impossible for children to access the support networks that limit the impact of these adversities. In this climate, our work, both during and in the aftermath of the pandemic, has become more vital than ever.

The Challenges our Children face



98% of children attending are from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds including living with parents with addiction or mental health difficulties, facing homelessness or other housing instability, acting as young carers or living in poverty.



50% have a history of, or concerns around, potential abuse or neglect.



96% are experiencing emotional, social or behavioural issues.



50% are either at risk of, or have experienced, an exclusion from school, or have been the subject of a referral to Social Services in the last year.



83% would have no holiday or no safe access to appropriate spaces to play without our support.



In an average year, for about a third of our children, their break with us will be the first holiday they have ever had.



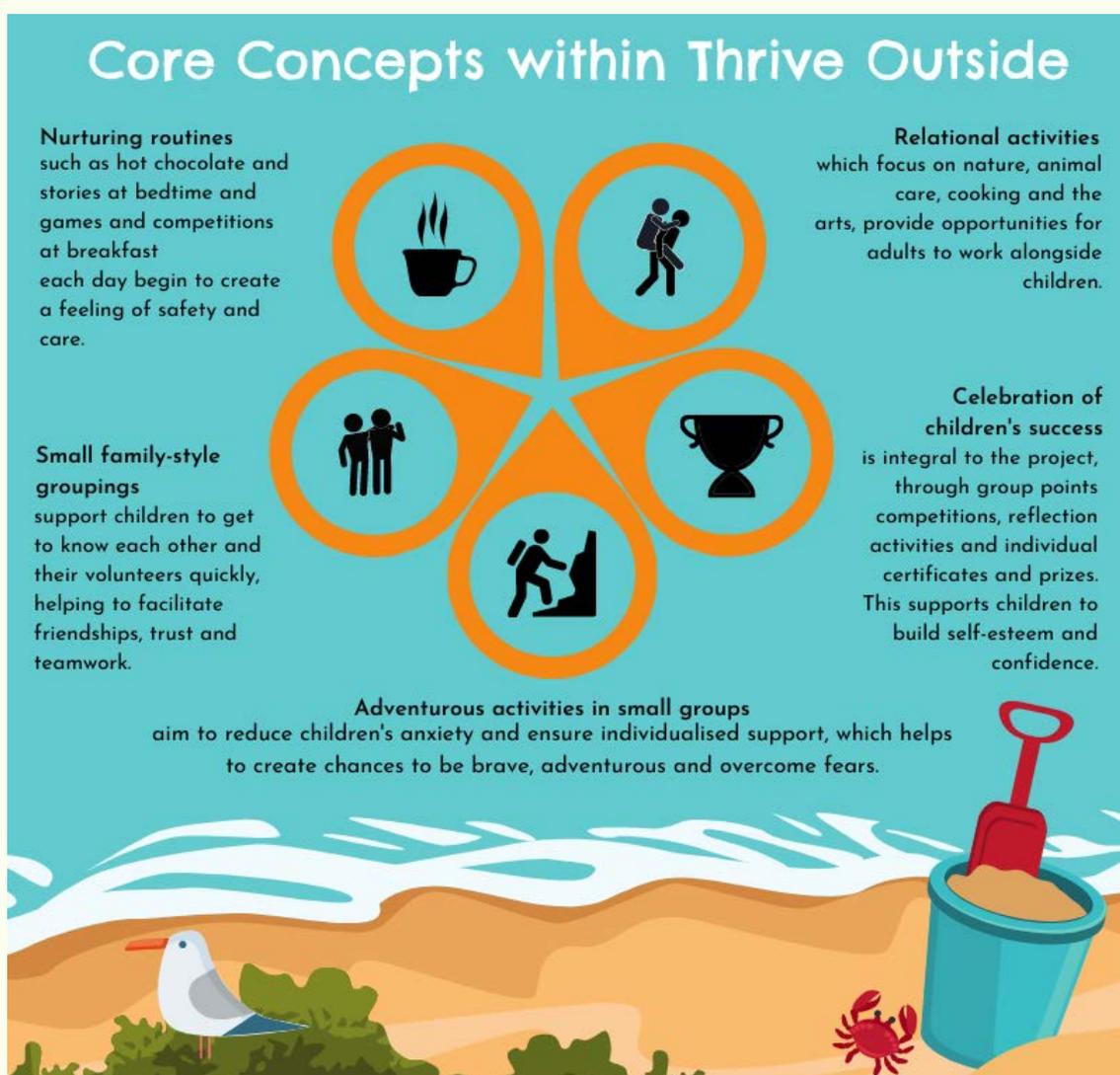
Thrive Outside: Our Model

“Free to Be is a place where you can go to relax yourself and enjoy and have fun. At the end you won't want to leave because Free to Be is like a second home.”

- Mohammed, Age 11

Our Thrive Outside project structure is carefully designed to support particularly vulnerable children, especially those who find it difficult to engage with or manage more traditional interventions, such as talking therapies, group work or less tailored residential trips. The five core concepts of our model are what help children who struggle in more generalised provision, to instead build relationships and engage with our work.

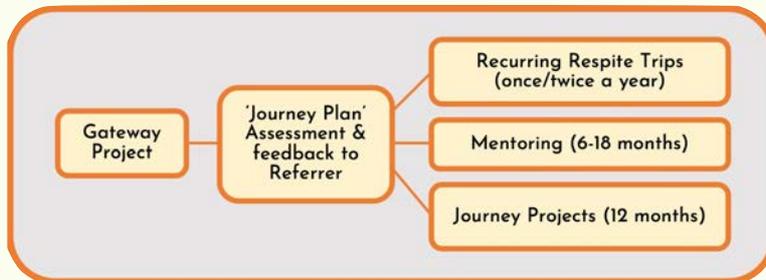
Whilst the pandemic has prevented us from running residential projects since March, our core philosophy hasn't changed, and so we've laid out our model below:



In a normal year of operation, this model allows us to quickly build a powerful sense of belonging and trust with children who often struggle with feeling safe or wanted. Our 5 day gateway residential projects provide children with over 50 hours of direct and intensive therapeutically structured support from the same, responsive, psychologically minded adults. This equates to over a years' worth of weekly clinic or home visits from social workers or other agencies. Through being alongside children and young people as they work in teams to build a raft, encourage each other to reach the top of a climbing wall, or overcome disagreements as they play together, we gain a better understanding of who they are and how they navigate social situations. We're then able to feed these insights back to referrers and use them as a starting point for our own longer term work.

Longer Term Support

Many children with particularly entrenched difficulties who are struggling at home, school and with the other types of support they are offered, engage deeply and powerfully with Free to Be when they attend one of our Thrive Outside Gateway projects. For these children there is a real need for ongoing support to build on the trust, sense of belonging and powerful shared experiences they benefit from whilst with us.



“When letters come from Free to Be, its exciting. I wonder if they are going to ask me if I can come on another trip. Free to Be is fun because you get to do everything. My favourite is the farm, where we see the chickens and the sheep.”

- Anya, 9

Following on from our Gateway Projects, which would usually take place during the Easter and Summer school holidays, we work with referrers to identify children and young people most in need of ongoing support. In a normal year, we match these children to:

- **Recurring Respite Projects** 1-2 times a year - designed to top up and sustain the positive changes they have made with us and provide a break from home for children to look forward to throughout the year.
- Weekly/fortnightly **One to One Mentoring** with an adult volunteer (generally one that they already know and trust, having worked with them on their Gateway project) in London. Sessions revolve around positive activities, planned by child and mentor together, creating regular space and time with a trusted adult.
- Our **Journey Projects** - spread over a year, these offer more specialised, targeted support to young people with particularly deeply entrenched negative self-narratives and include activities designed to build resilience, team work and confidence; one to one coaching and facilitated group reflection.

Of course, this year, much of our work has taken place in adapted formats to comply with Covid-19 rules, as illustrated in the rest of this report. Throughout, the core principles of our model have underpinned each adaptation, to ensure it remains accessible, effective and centred on the children who need it the most.



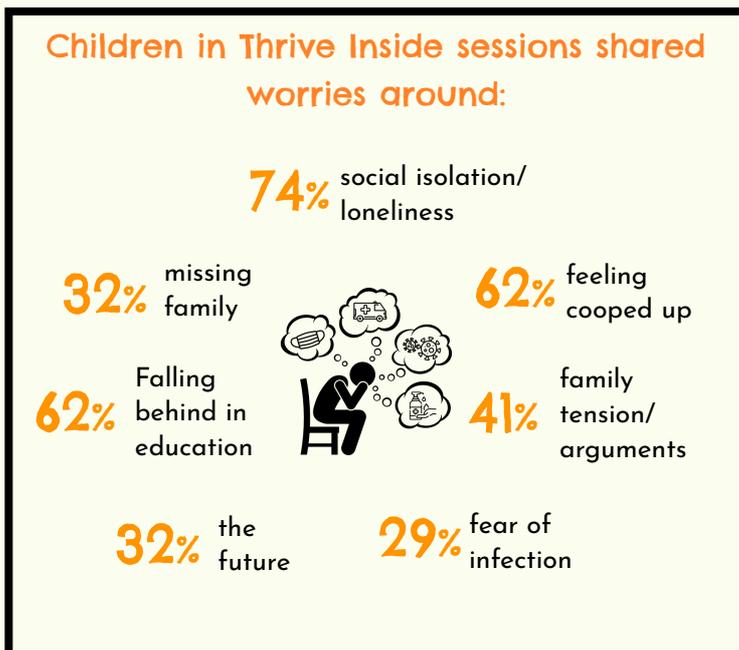
Responding to Covid-19

As the realities of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions became clear over early spring 2020, we were forced to cancel our Easter residential projects and set about designing a new way to support children through the lockdown. We reasoned that our impact would be greatest if we supported children and families with whom we had existing relationships, rather than attempting to establish new ones without the framework of support and opportunity for intensive time together that our residential projects provide. Our priority was to devise a safe and accessible service for those vulnerable children and families we knew well, who were particularly isolated due to the pandemic.

Thanks to the dedication of our amazing volunteer team, we were able to create Thrive Inside, a programme which worked online and over the phone (depending on the technology available to each family) to ensure children benefitted from positive relationships with trusted adults over the monotony of lockdown. From our residential work, we know that many children struggling with social skills and trust find unstructured spaces to talk too exposing, and this problem is only exacerbated when working virtually, so Thrive Inside was designed to allow child-led conversations to take place gradually as

“ It’s boring in Lockdown. On Free to Be, we’re always doing something. Even when it’s not a big activity, we’d just have a kick about or play hide and seek. I’m always doing something active there.”

- Alfie, Age 12



children enjoyed fun, relational activities with their mentor. We also incorporated our usual core concepts of celebrating successes and nurturing routines.

A successful crowdfunding campaign, and generous emergency support from The Fore’s RAFT fund and Tesco Bags for Life meant we were able to launch the programme within 6 days of lockdown starting, matching each child to a volunteer (often one known to them from previous residential together). Together they arranged weekly, or more frequent sessions, working on schoolwork, completing craft activities, baking the same recipe together or playing interactive games. In this shared space, important conversations happened naturally, with children sharing anxieties and using their trusted adult as a safe ‘sounding board’ to make sense of the many uncertainties the pandemic has created. Volunteers were supported with regular supervision by our staff team.

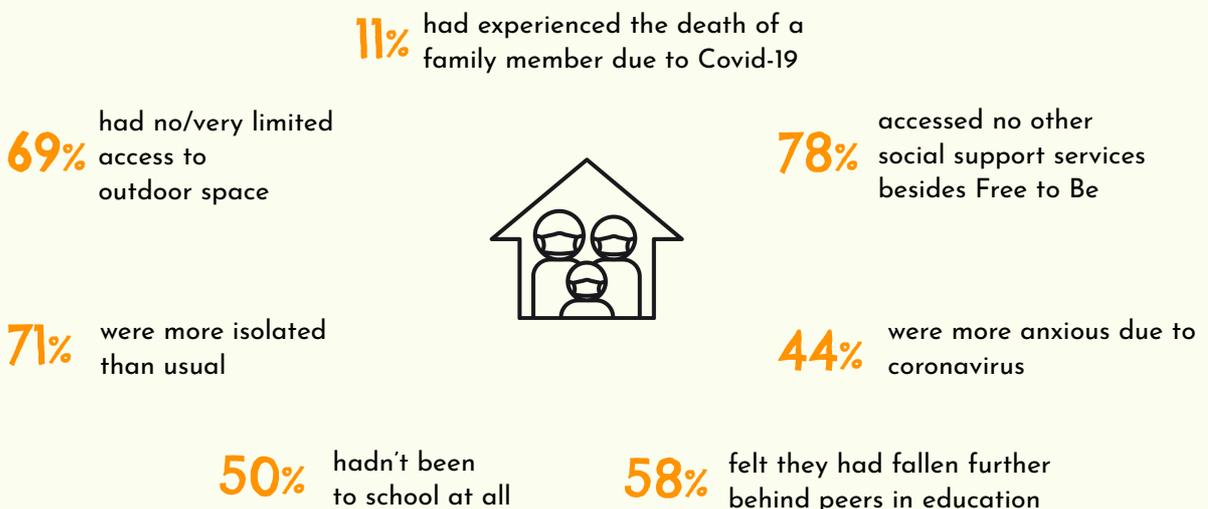
We have been very aware that, throughout the pandemic, most of our children have had their usually limited access to the outdoors even further curtailed. One child spoke about how visiting the shops had been her only experience of leaving her flat in 5 months. We fear she was not alone with this reality: in October, Natural England reported 73% of children from households with annual incomes below £17,000 spent less time outdoors during the pandemic, compared with 57% from households with an annual income above £17,000.

As Summer approached and more real world interaction was permitted our Adventure Days aimed to combat this issue, giving children who rely on Free to Be’s support more time outdoors and a ‘top up’ of the confidence building, horizon-broadening activities they would normally experience at our residential. Each child was grouped into a small, local ‘bubble’ and benefitted from two consecutive days of activities. These days enabled as much ‘depth of relationship’ as possible whilst working within government guidelines, with our volunteers (also bubbled) providing positive affirmation and encouragement. Whilst restrictions around travel prevented us from leaving the geographical areas of London where children lived, we sourced activities in outdoor spaces which replicated, as far as possible, the expansiveness and freedom that are so important within our residential trips, and provided opportunities to simply play after months cooped up and isolated indoors.

“Free to Be has been a lifesaver this year. I’m a single mum so I don’t really get much breaks - I’m doing this alone, so it’s hard. With Covid, there’s nothing for the kids to do, so they’re losing it and as adults, we’re stuck with them. With my mental health, I was losing it not knowing what to do with them, because they were just in the house, bored. I tried arts and craft stuff but it would just end up in the bin because someone would have a tantrum or break it, but you see, the Thrive Inside sessions and the days in the summer took that stress off me.”

- Dylan and Chelsea’s Mum

In August, we asked parents/carers to tell us how the pandemic had impacted on their children to date:



We expect that, sadly, in the months since we asked these questions, these numbers will have increased significantly.

Thrive Inside: Lockdown support

Through our Thrive Inside virtual mentoring programme, our volunteers supported **34 children** over the course of this year's lockdowns, providing just under **450 individually tailored online and over the phone sessions**, totalling over **600 hours of one to one support**. We delivered session supplies to children ahead of sessions and weekly competitions created a feeling of connection, despite the physical separation.

Activities included: baking, science experiments, pottery, jewellery making, mosaic workshops, creative writing, photography, an online secret mission (starring our staff team!) and an art project, with the children's artwork soon to be recreated on hoarding along the Thames.

Case study: Lamar is 11 and lives with his 3 younger siblings and mum in an overcrowded 2 bedroom flat in a large tower block. He has a diagnosis of ADHD, which made it especially difficult for him to be confined in such a cramped space during lockdown. Lamar's mum Gloria struggles with her mental health, recently being diagnosed with a form of Personality Disorder. All of the children struggle with significant issues around self-belief, behaviour and managing emotions, and have involvement from CAMHS. The combination of the children's high levels of need, Gloria's own mental health challenges and the overcrowded living conditions, made lockdown exceptionally difficult.

Lamar and his brother Dejuan have attended multiple Free to Be residential projects and for both of them the projects were their first, and only, experiences of leaving London and staying away overnight. They absolutely thrived on the experience and Lamar in particular loved the chance to try new activities, the busy days that used up all of his energy, and the huge expanses of space where he could run to his heart's content. This year, their Easter projects were forced to be cancelled due to Covid. Within a week, we instead matched Lamar and Dejuan to one of our volunteers, who they already knew and trusted, for weekly Zoom sessions where they worked together on various arts and craft projects (with supplies being posted to them in advance, the family

“ My son loved Thrive Inside. He had his CAMHS sessions online too and the therapist there could not get him to sit still and talk to her, but the Free to Be mentor had his attention the whole time, because the sessions were so fun. He really looked forward to them and would ask me when the next one was all the time. You guys would send stuff to my house so he had activities to do when I couldn't afford it or couldn't go out and get it, which was amazing. ”

- Shaun's Dad



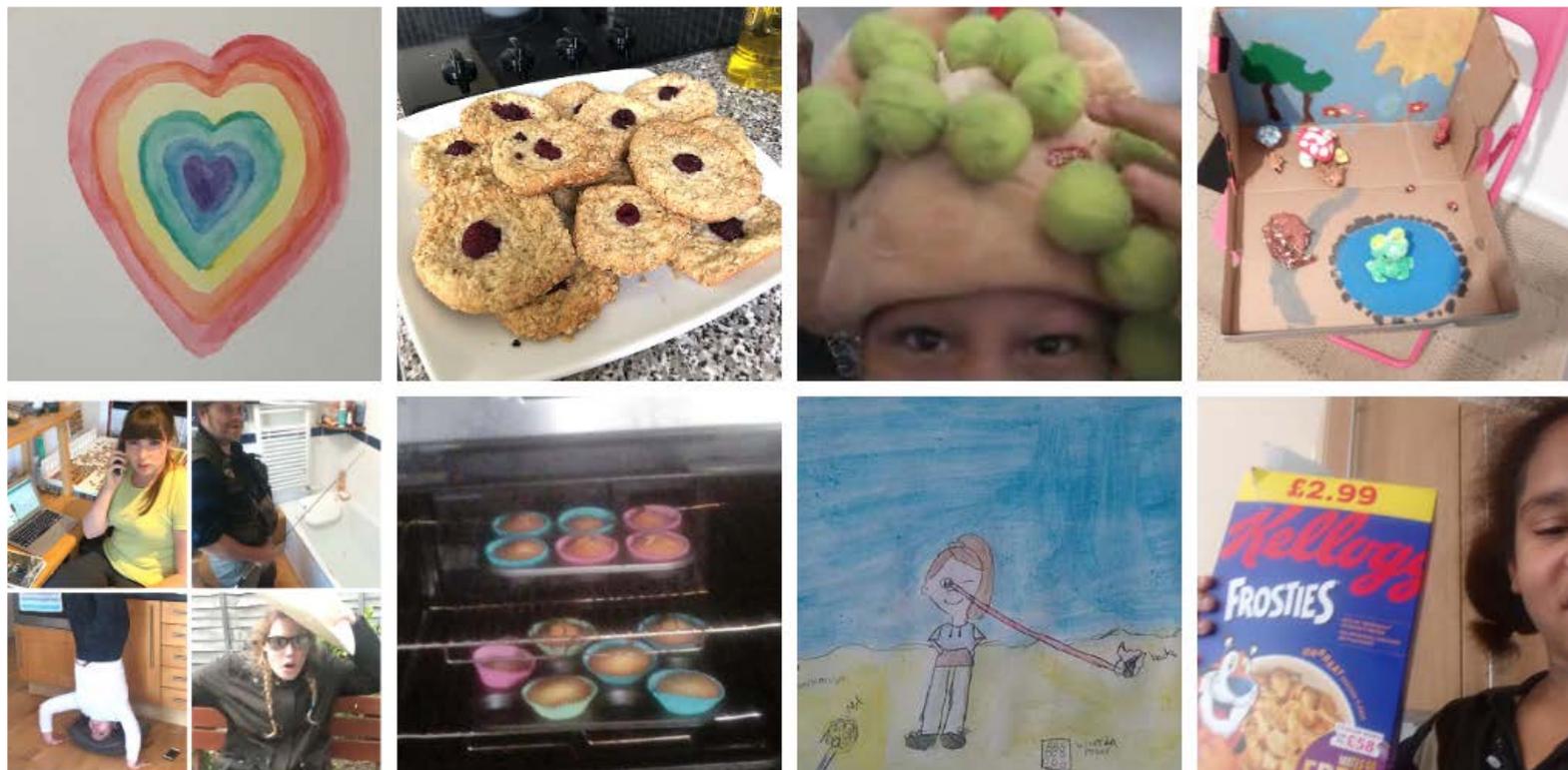
“Lockdown was a big challenge for us. We don't have very much family. I've got two friends, but obviously, with lockdown, that's not something I could access, apart from on the phone, so without Free to Be, I wouldn't get time off. Just listening to him laughing and joking on his calls with his mentor was amazing. It took a little bit of pressure off me by keeping him busy and distracting him from all of the horrible stuff going on.”

- Tommy's Mum

being unable to afford these themselves) and took part in our weekly competitions. Sessions ran from March all the way into August. Gloria told us that the sessions were the highlight of their week and importantly provided her with some valuable respite too. Knowing the sessions were scheduled throughout the lockdown gave the children something to look forward to and helped Gloria feel significantly less overwhelmed and isolated.

Case study: Chloe is 10 and lives with her aunt, having been removed from her mum's care due to severe neglect as a result of her mum's poor mental health and drug addiction. She and her aunt have a very difficult relationship, with frequent shouting, screaming and name calling in the home, which has led to concerns about emotional abuse. Chloe ran away from home last year, gets into trouble at school and struggles with very low self-esteem. Being isolated at home during lockdowns has been especially challenging, and Chloe had a brief period in foster care as a result.

Chloe first came on a Free to Be residential in 2019 and, whilst initially shy and withdrawn, bonded particularly strongly with Ella, one of our volunteers. By the end of the week, she had relaxed significantly, delighting in the sense of nurture she felt as Ella brushed and braided her hair during the 'pamper evening'. Over lockdown, we arranged for Chloe and Ella to work together through our Thrive Inside programme - we knew it was vital she had access to positive, fun, caring time each week during the period other support was closed, as well as someone to talk to about the difficulties at home. Since Ella lives in Sheffield, ordinarily mentoring wouldn't have been possible due to the distance, but embracing video technology allowed us to link them up and give this time to Chloe when she needed it the most. Chloe benefitted hugely from the weekly sessions and the support they provided. We're now looking at developing a new hybrid mentoring approach for after lockdown where we'll fund Ella to travel down once a month to take Chloe out for the day, with weekly online sessions in between preserving this important space for Chloe.



Thrive Outside: Adventure Days

Our Thrive Outside Adventure Days ran over August in line with government and youth sector Covid-19 guidance, providing much needed face to face support for children who hold long-standing relationships with Free to Be. The days offered a top up of confidence and positivity through adventurous activities and social interaction, both with other children and our therapeutically minded volunteers. **53 individual young people**

attended the days, between them receiving **855 hours of support**. 23 of the children taking part were also part of our Thrive Inside programme, meaning we were able to provide them and their families with consistent, regular support and respite throughout the most challenging periods of the pandemic.

Activities included: kayaking, pony trekking, outdoor cooking, cycling, stand up paddle boarding, campfires, animal handling sessions, den building in the woods and sailing on the Thames.

Case study: Jason is 13 and during the first lockdown was arrested after being found in possession of cannabis. There are concerns he may be being exploited by older boys and coerced into county lines drugs issues - he frequently runs away from home by climbing out of his bedroom window and is often away overnight. His mum recently found a knife in his bedroom. Many different organisations work with Jason, including Social Services and the Youth Offending Team, and all are increasingly concerned about risk and lack of engagement. He often refuses to meet the professionals supporting him or doesn't answer his phone.

Jason has attended Free to Be projects since he was 10. He's always been adventurous, brave and a leader to others. He relishes the chance to be active and try new things. Whilst he can appear old beyond his years and quite closed off to those who don't know him, he has developed deep and trusting relationships with the team at Free to Be through spending time together on residential climbing, canoeing, and doing other activities which build trust and togetherness. This summer, despite refusing to engage with school and other youth services for most of the year, Jason was keen to attend our Adventure Days. He led the way across the treetop adventure course, encouraged younger children on the zip lines, thrived on laughing and joking with our volunteers and was the first to hold a snake. We can't remove the risks from Jason's life, but we can show him, and others working with him, his leadership qualities, innate bravery, and depth of potential. Following

“ At Free to Be, you go out with new people and that makes everything different - you get more freedom and it's helped me learn that I can be more confident when I'm doing stuff. ”

- Rico, 13



chats we were able to have with Jason on the Adventure Days, he has now agreed to attend our residential Journey Programme as soon as it can re-open post-Covid, and we will continue helping him develop his story through 2021.

Children and parents told us:

"When I've been stuck at home, I've been thinking about Free to Be and remembering the friends I've made on the trips and all of the different adventures. The Free to Be helpers are really, really kind to everyone, including myself and it's always a really fun time." **Niko, 10**

"It was nice for him to go out with Free to Be and have time to have some real kid fun. I've got 6 kids and I wasn't getting to spend a lot of time with him, so sometimes he was missing out. I notice a big change in him when he comes back from Free to Be - that's how I know he is happy there. There are so many aspects of his personality that he can express with you. When he comes home, he's always excited and worn out and I can tell that he's had to use his brain and there's a bit of charisma going on!" **Peter's mum**

"It was different this summer. We had to go and then come home in the afternoon and then they'd pick us up again the next day. It was different to staying over, but that was okay, because at least we went out to do something. We got to go places and see sites and really have just fun." **Cassie, 12**

"The Adventure Days gave me a break too - we're tied at the hips - we do everything together, so it was a good experience for her to have that break and for me to also have one - it was healthy for us." **Temi's mum**

"Lockdown was bad because I couldn't do anything, but here I feel like I can do everything" **Tia, 9**

"Can I come again? It's the best bit about summer." **Junior, 10**

“It's a confidence thing really. She gets bullied at school and that's been really bad for making new friends, so its lovely for her to make positive relationships outside of school through Free to Be. That builds her confidence to know that she is likeable and it doesn't have to be that people are horrible to her all the time. **”**

- Shelly's Foster Carer



Thrive Outside: Mentoring

Our mentoring programme pairs children and volunteers who have attended our Gateway Projects to spend regular time together in London on a weekly or fortnightly basis for a minimum of six months. Over that time, pairs work on particular social and emotional goals, which they set together, with input from parents and referrers. Mentors are supported with regular supervision from Free to Be's Leadership Team. Building on a shared experience of our residentials ensures common ground from the beginning, overcoming many of the difficulties which lead to pairing breakdown in more traditional mentoring models. Over 2020, our mentoring programme has worked flexibly, with sessions happening online during lockdown periods and then reverting to carefully risk assessed in person sessions when restrictions allow. **Twelve volunteer mentors have, between them, provided approximately 300 hours of tailored one to one support through the programme this year.** **Activities undertaken by mentor pairs this year have included:** farm visits, music and dance lessons, trampolining, museum visits, bike rides, frisbee in the park, theatre trips and crazy golf.

Case Study: Kelsie is 12, and lives with her Dad and older brother who in the past was involved with gangs. During the first lockdown, she ran away from home three times, expressing that her brother bullied her, and her Dad was too busy to have time to help. She wanted to stay with her Mum, but having been removed from Mum's care due to mental health issues when Kelsie was young, Social Services didn't feel this was appropriate. Kelsie shared thoughts about self-harm, feeling alone, and deeply misunderstood, with no one on her side.

We were very worried about Kelsie being at home during lockdown without support. We matched her to one of our experienced volunteers, Jo, initially through Thrive Inside, but transitioned this to mentoring as soon as restrictions allowed. Because Kelsie already knew and trusted Jo, she quickly began to share worries around self-harm and body image. Jo was able to be a stable, consistent person 'just for her'. When lockdowns meant they couldn't meet in person, they switched to online sessions instead. Kelsie is an amazing baker, so we sent baking ingredients to her house and she and Jo cooked together over Zoom. They wrote film scripts with characters based around Kelsie's life. Gradually, through these shared online and offline experiences, Jo helped her work through some of the challenges she was facing - we helped advocate with Social Care, paid for dance classes and talked about her mental health. Despite struggling with relationships in school, Kelsie's long-term links with Free to Be have helped foster an in-depth mentoring relationship which will continue for as long as she needs it.



Thrive Outside: Journey Projects

For a significant cohort of older children, we know that challenges at home and school are further compounded by the fact that they and their family's engagement with traditional support interventions through social services, CAMHS and schools is limited or often leads to little change. Despite this, many engage deeply and powerfully with our projects.

Journey Projects build on this by providing a year's worth of support in the form of four intensive, small group residentials. These retain the sense of fun, nurture and belonging that so deeply resonate with the young people, whilst incorporating a range of more overt work to build confidence and problem-solving skills. The projects also create powerful opportunities to support young people individually in identifying and working on areas of challenge within their thinking about themselves and relationships with others. The projects provide time and space for self-reflection and facilitated group conversations (both about issues that impact on young people's lives and about their own strengths, challenges and ways to support each other). Extended challenge activities stretch young people's perceptions of what they can achieve, and daily 'Honours Councils', provide opportunities for young people to feed back on the skills and qualities they witness in others. This combination allows groups to create a powerful sense of trust and a safe space within which to share authentic feelings about strengths and weaknesses.

Fifteen young people, aged 11 to 15, participated in our two Journey Project cohorts over 2019-20, completing their final projects in The Forest of Dean in February. On their final trips, the groups challenged themselves to complete underground caving expeditions, working in teams to negotiate tight gaps and abseil down rock faces. When some group members struggled with heights, darkness and confined spaces, the others supported them through their vulnerabilities, ensuring that everyone completed the journey together. They also worked in teams to problem-solve under pressure as they worked their way out of escape rooms and worked with artist Tim Martin to develop creative reflections of their time together over the year in graffiti workshops.

“The projects were transformative for these young people. Over the year, I saw them grow in ways I would never have imagined. One, who had at first written off whole days to angry outbursts and sulks, began to catch himself, stay calm and trust us in stressful situations. Another, who was really shy, was making the whole group laugh by the end. This was made possible by the safe yet adventurous space that the Journey Projects helped us build.”

- Beth, Volunteer



Journey Projects: Pilot Results

Our February residential was the culmination of a full year of piloting a new, more intensive design for our Journey Projects, supporting 12 - 15 year olds with particularly complex needs. Impact and evaluation measurement from work with the two cohorts showed that:

100% of young people felt the projects had helped them in meaningful ways, most commonly in building confidence and belief in themselves/ what they could achieve. Others noted facing their fears and getting in trouble less.

100% of referrers/parents reported that the projects led to the young person believing they could achieve more from life than they had thought beforehand.

100% of referrers/parents reported the young person was now more able to manage when things go wrong.

100% of young people reported they were more likely to engage in other professional helping relationships (e.g. with social workers, school etc) after our Journey Projects.

92% of referrers stated that, from programme start to programme end, the young person's risk had lowered in at least two key areas, with the majority rating risk as having lowered in 5 or 6 areas.

On average, young people saw over a **4 point increase on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale** and over a **3 point increase on the Wignild and Young resilience scale** (measured start vs end of programme).

Alongside our own internal evaluations, Frankie Papadakis, a Researcher from The Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families, interviewed a number of participating young people about their experiences on the Journey Projects as part of her paper, *'An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis exploring vulnerable adolescent participants' experiences of therapeutic residential weeks from the adolescents' perspective'*. The following excerpts give a flavour of her findings:



"The projects seem to be able to draw the fine line between encouraging and enabling the adolescents to conquer their fears and do things they did not think possible without applying pressure or causing stress, thus enhancing self-esteem. The adults' positivity, energy and unconditional care gave the adolescents feelings of safety and empowerment enabling them to try and succeed at activities they would never have thought possible."

"Critically, the projects consciously focused on positives rather than on negative behaviours and personal difficulties: celebrating achievements together in daily 'Honours', thus reframing participants' self-image."

"It seems the authenticity of these experiences enabled the adolescents to develop new competencies, potentially increasing self-confidence and agency associated with resilience."

"The projects enabled participants to temporarily put aside their vulnerabilities and participate enthusiastically in the programme. Being encouraged to recognise their achievements and talents enabled the adolescents to perhaps challenge their existing psychic narratives, and begin to recognise their positive talents, and give them some sense of hope for the future."

"For these vulnerable adolescents' being part of this intensive programme of residential has been a significant, positive and powerful experience."

“My son is so misunderstood at school and has really bad anger issues. But you guys take time and are able to talk to him. When he's in other places, they don't understand his behaviour and so they assume he's just bad, or that he doesn't listen, but you guys give him that freedom to feel comfortable and I love that. He doesn't come home feeling like the naughty one.”

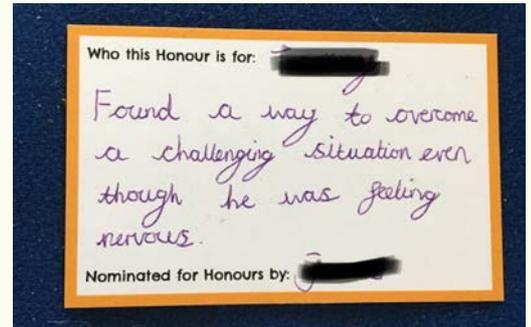
- Aaron's mum





“ Without Free to Be, we would be in a much worse place. I would have really, really struggled. The things that were happening were breaking my family and you helped me to see there was a way out. ”

- David's mum



“ Free to Be changed me as a person. I thought, if my dad can't change me, my mum can't change me and school can't change me, then surely this can't either, but I found myself being more mature and knowing more about life. Before then, no one was prepared to listen to what I'd been going through but Free to Be were interested. ”

- Kyra, 14



Our Impact

Based on 2019 evaluation information from children, volunteers and referrers



How our Projects Support Children

- 98% of children who attended reported positive indicators of improved self-esteem, social confidence and resilience,** including feeling believed in, trusted, adventurous and special.


- 92% of children reported trying something they'd previously not thought possible whilst with us.**


- Project workers reported that **99% of children showed improvement in terms of their self-belief and social confidence over the project,** with **82% of children showing very significant improvement.**


- 100% developed or learnt new social skills on our projects,** including making and keeping friends, relating better with trusted adults and managing frustration and challenge more constructively.


- 100% of referrers providing feedback reported positive change in the child's emotional wellbeing and/or behaviour after our project,** including being more positive, having better interactions with others, managing when things go wrong and having a stronger sense of self.



Referrers consistently describe our projects as benefitting young people's education, emotional health and capacity to fulfil their potential. Feedback from schools in 2019, our last full year pre-Covid-19, showed that the opportunities we provide translated into observable improvements in confidence and self-belief in the classroom, and that this was still the case when measured at the end of the term after children had attended.

Demand for places on our projects has remained extremely high even whilst we have been unable to run due to Covid-19, with referrers consistently telling us that they need much more of what Free to Be can offer. In our (pre-pandemic) survey, schools, on average, asked for three to four times the number of places we can currently offer them. Over the course of the pandemic, schools and social workers have repeatedly told us that they are witnessing an increase in vulnerability amongst the children they support and that the need for our projects will be even greater, once restrictions ease enough to allow us to resume taking new referrals.

Referrers this year told us:

"As a school, we have been referring children to Free to Be for over five years now. The charity has provided many of our vulnerable children with opportunities to access new and exciting experiences which would not otherwise have been available to them and enabled them to leave behind for a few days the challenges which their everyday lives present. Every one of the children who have attended has asked if they can go again. Parents and carers have been hugely appreciative and full of praise for the support provided." **SENCO**

The children we have referred to Free To Be Kids have all commented on how much fun they have had on their projects. They have experienced activities that they may never have had the chance to do and see it as a 'special time' for them. They have come back with a greater self-esteem, more confidence and happy. When we speak to them about their time with Free To Be Kids their faces light up with the memories. One boy has said how much he would like to become a mentor for the younger children. It is priceless what these experiences give to our most vulnerable children. **Learning Mentor**

Organisational Achievements

Much of our thinking over 2020 has been focused on ensuring that the charity is in as robust a financial position as possible, to help us to navigate the funding uncertainty and increased need that the pandemic has created. We've worked hard over the year to economise where possible, whilst ensuring that the quality of our core services are not detrimentally impacted. Strategies have included: negotiating rent reductions during the lockdown, utilising the government's furlough scheme where applicable and agreeing on grant deferments where it has been impossible to deliver funded projects due to government restrictions. We are particularly grateful to those funders who have worked flexibly with us over this challenging time.

This year has created unique challenges for charities working residentially with children and we have actively built relationships with others in the sector to tackle these. In supporting smaller children's holiday charities with advice and resources and organising strategic conversations with larger organisations around working together and lobbying government, we've adopted a collaborative approach to problem-solving. In October, Lord Hague highlighted our work in his Daily Telegraph article about the vital importance of outdoor-based support for vulnerable children.

In December, we developed a new comprehensive 5 year strategic plan, focusing on our medium term growth and sustainability. It aims to build our staff team, which in turn, will increase our capacity and allow us to offer more in depth, long term support for the most in need children. The plan also includes an ambitious fundraising campaign to enable us to acquire a permanent base for our residential work, which would give us the means to expand residential support over weekends and during school terms. Several generous grants have supported the development of our logistics in 2020: funding from The Newton Foundation will allow us to purchase a minibus, reducing our reliance on hired vehicles and ensuring that we continue to remove travel barriers so that the most vulnerable children can access our projects. Funding from The Berkley Foundation, and development expertise from several skilled volunteers is allowing us to create a bespoke database to ensure children's and volunteers' data is stored and used as securely and efficiently as possible. We hope both will be ready in 2021.

“I've been volunteering with Free to Be for 5 years and I can honestly say it's a highlight of my year. I continue to be impressed by the logistics and organisation, and most importantly the way in which the team lead, empathise and interact with the children. I was thrilled that not even a pandemic could stand in the way of Free to Be this year. The way they handled all the Covid restrictions was meticulous, and it was a joy to give kids who had been stuck in for many months a chance to go kayaking, cycling and more. So many of them commented on how the days were a real escape, as they were for me too!”

- Amy-Kate, Volunteer

Over the spring and summer, we are proud to have achieved Project Oracle accreditation for our Impact and Evaluation processes from The Centre for Youth Impact, and to have been awarded a Silver Quality Mark from London Youth, following thorough evaluation of our policies and procedures. We're currently one of only 26 organisations across the capital to hold this award.



Photos, L-R: 1,2 - The team participate in training sessions at our Volunteer Weekend in January; 3- New Volunteer Training continues in a newly designed online format throughout the pandemic; Lord Hague highlights our work in The Daily Telegraph in October.

Supporters

Our work this year wouldn't have been possible without the kindness and support of large numbers of generous individuals, groups and organisations. There are far too many to list here, but to all those who donated their birthday money, added us to their wedding gift lists, hosted cake sales and karaoke, helped sort and carry equipment, wrote letters, stuffed envelopes, completed sponsored runs on our behalf or helped in any other way, we'd like to say a huge and very heartfelt **THANK YOU**.

A extra-special thank you to those long term donors who give via standing order every month of the year - your donations are some of the most important to us, thanks to the financial stability they provide.



Attic Self Storage generously look after our equipment between projects. This year they also provided secure minibus parking during our summer Adventure Days and a drop off point for donated gifts during our Christmas Campaign.



A big thank you to the team at mtn-i, who continue to support our work - from funding our projects, to providing gifts in kind, practical help with our administration and staff volunteering on our projects.



BGF staff very kindly nominated and selected Free to Be as the beneficiaries of their charity support this year. Their funding will cover the costs of children's work with us during and following the pandemic.



Unilever brand Nice By Nature supported our work over 2020, with funding towards our Thrive Inside programme and summer Adventure Days. We're grateful for their support to help our children discover their sense of adventure.



101 Architecture+Design have been loyal friends of Free to Be since our inception. They continue to donate generously towards our work.



Higson Consulting, lead by their CEO, our amazing volunteer Augusta, have provided valuable coaching support for our team and Young Leaders, and are leading the fundraising and planning for our 5th Birthday Celebration.



The team at Newton Europe, including our wonderful long-term volunteer, Charlie De Cock, have very generously pledged to buy us a minibus. We collect all children attending our residentials directly from their homes - removing barriers around transport ensures that the most vulnerable children can access the support they need. Owning our own bus will ensure vital flexibility and enable even more children to benefit from our projects.

Special thanks also to:

The Global Research Team at HSBC for all the sponsored challenges they've completed for us; all who donated in memory of our wonderful volunteer, Emma Biddiscombe, who very sadly passed away in November and will be remembered for her kindness and commitment to our children; Bim Cooper for running a fabulous pre-loved fashion sale for us; Justine from Just-Smile who made clear panelled facemasks for us, to ensure the children could still see our smiles despite Covid; Alleyns College, Bell House and the Friends of Myatt's Fields, who welcomed our children and various furry friends to their grounds this summer for our animal handling sessions; RADA for providing brilliant training for our volunteers to help with 'Speaking so Children will Listen'; Alex Hudson, for donating his technical skills to develop our database; The Level Collective for donating a proportion of their Black Friday profits; Printmates Ltd for providing pro-bono printing of our volunteer recruitment flyers; FTI for donating laptops, enabling us to continue working effectively during the pandemic; Durlston Partners who also donated much needed computer equipment; The Old Vic for providing free theatre tickets for children and mentors; everyone who donated so generously towards our Thrive Inside Crowd-funder; all who bought gifts, made donations or gave food vouchers to our Christmas Campaign, and everyone else who has helped us with free and discounted products, services and donations this year.

Grants and Charitable Trusts

We are particularly grateful to the following grant giving bodies and charitable trusts for making our work this year possible:

The Potterspurty Lodge Trust
The Wright Family Foundation
The Jane & Michael Davies Charitable Trust

Young Londoners Fund
SUPPORTED BY
MAYOR OF LONDON





www.freetobekids.org.uk

