



# FREE TO BE KIDS



## 2023 IMPACT REPORT

“ Free to Be Kids is like being in a cocoon, where people hype you up and give you confidence. Whilst you're there, it's like you transform into a butterfly, you feel so good in yourself, like you can fly!

Dekari, age 13

[www.freetobekids.org.uk](http://www.freetobekids.org.uk)





Throughout this report, children's names and other identifying details have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

# ABOUT FREE TO BE KIDS – 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 mental health, or are growing up in families where parents have difficulties with drugs, alcohol, or illness. 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](http://www.freetobekids.org.uk)



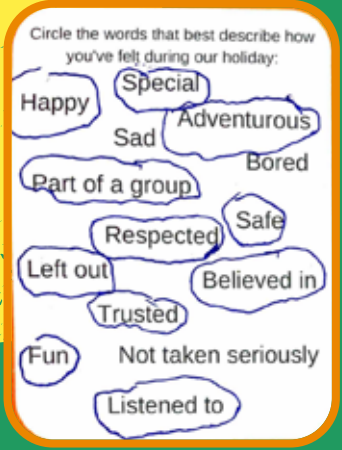
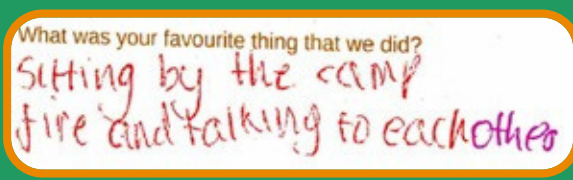
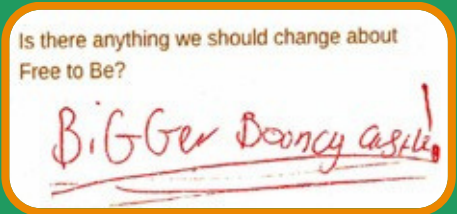
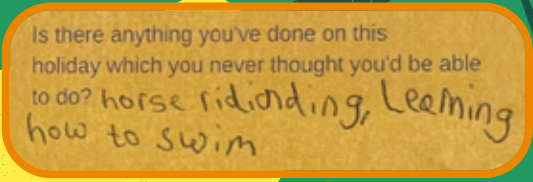
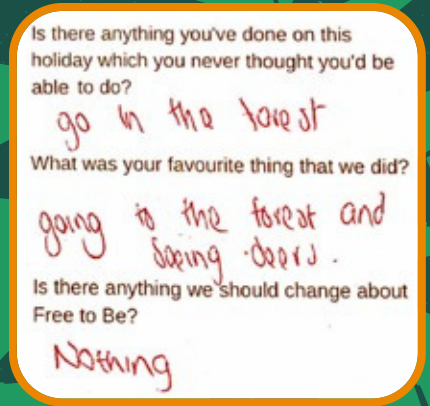
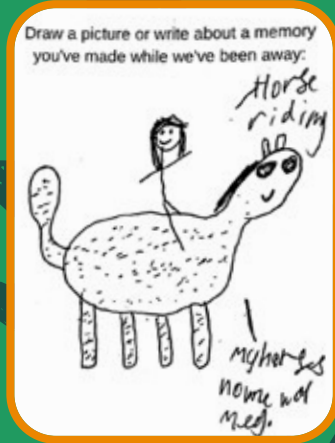
# AN INTRODUCTION FROM OUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

## Welcome to our 2023 Impact Report!

It gives us great pleasure to report back on another successful and jam packed year at Free to Be Kids. 2023 has been notable for many reasons, but the most significant has to be our partnership with Woodcraft Folk, which has led to Free to Be Kids' first permanent home! Having known that it was vital both for sustainability and further growth, we have been working to find a permanent base for our residential work for several years and are delighted to have now achieved this goal, thanks to the vision and cooperation of the Woodcraft Folk team. Cudham Environmental Activities Centre on the Bromley-Kent border is a perfect site for our work and, with the support of the team there, we've quickly settled into our new home. Whilst just a stone's throw from the South London boroughs where the majority of our children live, the centre is hidden in a beautiful valley just beyond the western edge of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Our children have particularly enjoyed spotting the deer and badgers that live in the woods surrounding the site. We're excited to build on our partnership work with Woodcraft Folk over the coming years.

As always, our work just wouldn't be possible without a large number of supporters, volunteers and, most of all, the amazing and inspiring children who trust us to support them. We hope that you will enjoy reading more about what we have been up to over 2023 and all that our children have achieved.

**Rachel & Mike**  
Co-Founders and CEOs



# A SUMMARY OF OUR ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2023

“Free to Be Kids is my safe space, I feel like it’s a home full of love. It’s a place where I can take a breath and no one will judge me.

Michael, age 11

We supported **213** children and young people this year

This year, we provided **327** residential project places for children & young people

**100%** of children learned new social skills

**91%** reported trying something they’d not thought possible

**94%** reported improved indicators of self-esteem

**230** volunteers gave up their time to support our work

This year we benefitted from over **16,000** volunteering hours – had we paid this year’s volunteers at the London Living Wage rate, it would have cost us **£218,397**

“Thank you Free to Be Kids for the amazing work you and your team do to provide the children and young people who need it most, the time away to be themselves, be free and be kids again.

Referrer




# THE NEED

Over the last 3 years, we've become increasingly concerned at the levels of mental health difficulties the children referred to us are presenting with, a trend that has been echoed by other frontline organisations supporting children and young people. According to analysis by Mind (2024) of NHS annual data, the number of referrals to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) has reached an all time high, with over half a million children referred in 2023.

In line with our own observations, Mind attributes the increase largely to cost-of-living crisis and the pandemic, with more than 50 per cent of all youth referrals for mental health problems coming from households with at least one parent who is struggling financially. All of the children we work with at Free to Be Kids are from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds. We support children whose poverty has caused mental health issues to manifest on a heartbreakingly frequent basis.

This year we saw:

- Children with high levels of anxiety due to worries about how their families will manage to afford basic living costs such as food, rent and heating.
- Children sacrificing their social life, not joining extra-curricular activities or going out, prompting seclusion and loneliness.
- Young people who have become victims of criminal exploitation because they are so desperate to make some money to feel a sense of dignity.
- Children who are scared about being singled out and shamed as different to their peers because of poverty. Or, worse, children for whom this fear is a reality, leading to them being bullied by peers for being different.
- Children with parents who are unable to meet their needs because they are too consumed with worry about how they will manage to make their income stretch to cover the family's basic needs to focus on their emotional wellbeing.
- Children whose experience of the world has been dramatically limited because of a lack of funds, meaning that they have never had the opportunity to benefit from formative childhood experiences like visiting a farm, seeing the sea, learning to swim or ride a bike, or simply spending time outside of their local area.



**“The projects have really helped Muhammed open up. He doesn't talk to adults easily and won't tell me anything about his worries. But knowing he does open up to you and your staff is so reassuring.**

Muhammed's mum



**100%** 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

**91%** are experiencing emotional, social or behavioural issues

**41%** have a history of, or concerns around, potential abuse or neglect

**52%** are at risk of, or have experienced, an exclusion from school, time in Care or a referral to Social Services within the last year

**72%** would have no holiday this year without our support or no access to safe space to play at home

## CASE STUDY

Kaia, aged 11, had a very difficult start in life, growing up in deep poverty without safe spaces to play. When she was just 5, Kaia witnessed her mother being subjected to domestic violence, repeatedly watching as her father hit and punched her. Now, Kaia and her mum have found refuge and she has started to process some of the trauma she experienced, but as she has become old enough to understand what she saw, her anxiety and stress has increased. She struggles to trust or connect with others and doesn't talk about her feelings, so as not to burden people. She has started being bullied in school, feels alone, and has very few, if any, friends. Recently, Kaia smashed a mirror and tried to cut herself with the shards when everything felt too much. She has been referred to CAMHS but after waiting 6 months, is yet to even be assessed.

Kaia joined our Thrive Outside projects last year. She had never left London before and marvelled at the pine trees in the forest and the vastness of the sea at the beach. Beyond a much-needed break from the turmoil at home, the projects proved especially powerful for Kaia because of the relationships we carefully helped her build with the other girls in her group. For the first time in a long time, Kaia felt lovable, and kind, that she belonged and was capable of having friends. The high adult ratios and careful support of our empathetic volunteers created a safe space for Kaia to express her individuality and begin to relax away from the worries she faces every day in London. Kaia needs long-term love, care and support so we have offered her a place on our 2024 Journey Programme, which will give her more intensive support to find her voice.

# THRIVE OUTSIDE: OUR MODEL

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 help children who struggle in more generalised provision, to instead build relationships and engage with our work.

## CORE CONCEPTS WITHIN THRIVE OUTSIDE

### NURTURING ROUTINES

such as hot chocolate and stories at bedtime and games and competitions at breakfast each day begin to create a feeling of safety and care.

### RELATIONAL ACTIVITIES

which focus on nature, animal care, cooking and the arts, provide opportunities for adults to work alongside children.

### SMALL FAMILY-STYLE GROUPINGS

support children to get to know each other and their volunteers quickly, helping to facilitate friendships, trust and teamwork.



### CELEBRATION OF CHILDREN'S SUCCESS

is integral to the project, through group points competitions, reflection activities and individual certificates and prizes. This supports children to build self-esteem and confidence.

### ADVENTUROUS ACTIVITIES IN SMALL GROUPS

aim to reduce children's anxiety and ensure individualised support, which helps to create chances to be brave, adventurous and overcome fears.



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 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 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.

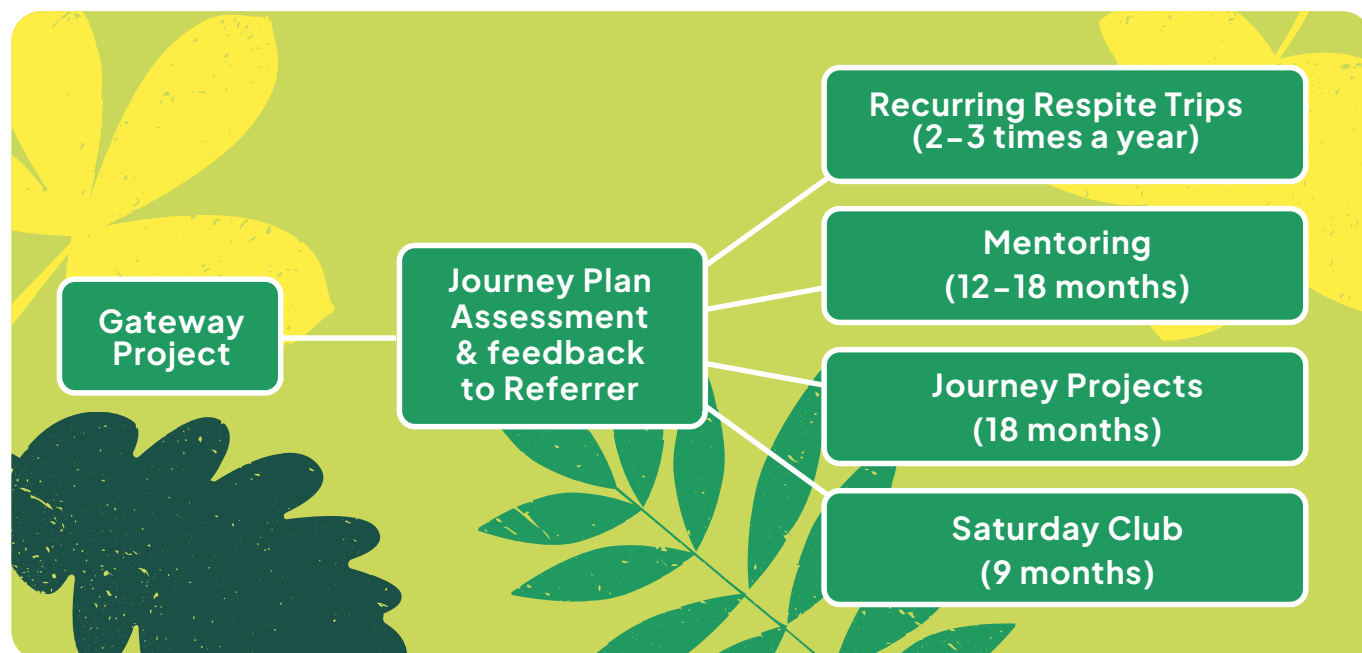


## Longer Term Support

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 Kids 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.

“I enjoy that we do things I would never do in London, because mum wouldn't be able to afford it. Here I can see friends and we actually do things that are so fun and exciting.

Alfie, age 8



Following on from our Gateway Projects, which 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. 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 **Saturday Club**, which offers regular monthly group support in London, culminating in a residential.
- Our **Journey Projects** - six projects, spread over 18 months, these offer more specialised, targeted support to young people with particularly deeply entrenched negative self-narratives and include activities designed to build resilience, teamwork and confidence; one to one coaching and facilitated group reflection.

“I have tears in my eyes thinking of Theresa's progress! Thank you so much for the amazing work you do and the absolutely life enhancing opportunities these wonderful children have had.

Social Worker

# THRIVE OUTSIDE: GATEWAY PROJECTS

Over 2023, we have been able to offer **216 Gateway residential**s for particularly vulnerable children from across London, referred by their teachers, social workers and other professionals who were worried about their emotional health.

As well as providing respite and confidence building support, these projects offer a valuable opportunity to assess children's needs, ensuring that our team can then offer appropriate follow-on support for the children who need it most. As always, places were provided entirely free of charge to families, with children collected from and returned to their front doors, removing the financial and practical barriers which would otherwise prevent many from taking part.

We were grateful to receive funding from a number of local councils through their Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programmes, in recognition of the healthy food and enriching activities we provide.

“I love that I get to do things at Free to Be Kids that I would never usually do in London, because I wouldn't be able to afford it. Here I can see friends and we actually do things that are so fun and exciting. I'm proud that people here trust me to be their friend.

Sara, age 11



## CASE STUDY

Tafari, aged just 10 is on a Child Protection Plan because of his parents' heavy alcohol use, learning difficulties and mental health problems. Their household is chaotic and hostile with shouting, screaming and threats a daily occurrence.

Tafari, as the oldest child, has the role of a Young Carer in the family. He is often seen by members of the wider community doing shopping and carrying heavy bags of groceries home, sometimes as late as 9pm on a school night. He gets his siblings ready in the morning and helps with all the chores and cooking due to his stepfather's heavy alcohol use and his mum's mental health problems. His family has recently been rehomed, so Tafari has had to start a new school, where he doesn't know anyone, has been a victim of bullying and has struggled to make new friends, eroding his confidence and self-esteem still further.

Tafari joined a Thrive Outside Gateway Project in 2022. Initially, he was apprehensive about leaving his family, and presented as tense and nervous, but that soon melted away. He loved seeing the sea for the first time, trying new activities and having the time and space to run around playing football with the other boys in his group.

Thriving in the warm, care-filled atmosphere created by our volunteers, Tafari quickly became popular with the other children, often acting as a spokesperson for his group. This was powerful for Tafari because he saw people liked and accepted him, challenging his narrative that he was different and 'no good'. Across the week his confidence skyrocketed. He became more relaxed and couldn't stop smiling. His belief that he is unlovable and unimportant, which stemmed from the bullying at school and his often volatile home environment, was challenged by his experience of completing stretching activities, being respected and feeling he belonging as part of a team. After he returned to school, his Head Teacher called us, amazed at the impact of the residential on Tafari's previously fragile confidence. Tafari had told him that he was counting down the sleeps until his next residential! We will continue to support Tafari through his childhood to deepen and sustain this transformation.

“The love at Free to Be Kids is contagious, you could get love-itis.

Josh, age 9



# 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 18 months of support in the form of six 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 for self-reflection and facilitated group conversations (both about issues impacting young people's lives and 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 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.

## Impact and evaluation measurement with our most recently completed Journey Project cohorts showed:

**100%** of young people felt more confident and resilient after programme completion, with changes sustaining at least 6 months beyond the programme's end.

**93%** of young people demonstrated increased belief in their own potential by the programme end.

**92%** of young people showed increased likelihood of engaging in other 'helping relationships' with safe adults.

**92%** of parents and or referrers confirmed that the young person's risk had reduced in at least 2 key areas.  
**The top 3 risk categories seeing improvement over the course of the programme were:**

- Emotional/mental health, where **75%** of young people improved
- Educational engagement, where **67%** of young people improved
- Risk of getting involved in harmful, exploitative or abusive relationships, where **67%** of young people improved

**96%** of young people recognised improvements in themselves in at least two areas related to managing adversity, building relationships with others and emotional literacy.

**87%** demonstrated sustained improvement in emotional health by the programme end.

“The Projects have helped me experience a lot of new things and before them I would have given up sooner but now I can push past challenges and try things better.

Jordan, age 14

**Six** Journey Project Cohorts have operated over 2023, between them **supporting 37 young people** aged 12 – 16 with particularly complex needs.

**13** separate Journey Project residentials have taken place.

“Free to Be Kids have made a huge difference for Kourtney. She’s always had deep social anxiety. When she started the programme she was refusing to go to school and didn’t have a friend in the word. Now she’s just started at her new school and is going out to meet friends she has met on your projects. You’ve changed her life.

Kourtney’s Mum



## CASE STUDY

When we first met Mohammed, (now aged 14), through his primary school, his home life was loud and challenging. Relationships were strained and the family was overcrowded in a 2 bedroom flat, with 4 children sharing one room. In his teenage years, Mohammed’s mental health nose-dived as he tried to juggle school and the chaos at home. As he became increasingly sad, depressed and closed off, his behaviour became progressively more difficult to manage, and he was excluded from school after a fight with another boy. His relationship with his parents degenerated to the point where he regularly ran away and, as a result, he became susceptible to criminal exploitation. Knowing how much he had enjoyed coming on our Gateway Projects, we persuaded him to join the Journey Programme to help improve his emotional wellbeing and behaviour.

Our Journey Programme provided a safe space away from home and school, where Mohammed felt more able to show his true emotions. We helped him to develop strategies to calm himself when angry and, over the course of the programme, he showed increasing confidence when faced with activities that challenged him. Where initially, these worries led to angry outbursts and refusals to take part, over time, Mohammed began to recognise that he could stretch himself and give things a go. His success at caving and sleeping outside in a hammock allowed him to experience feeling proud, building his confidence further.

Mohammed was a popular member of the group and a natural leader. Through recognising, naming and helping him to recognise this in himself, we’ve supported Mohammed to believe that he is likeable and appreciated, contradicting the negative messages he receives daily at home and school. We have discovered a very warm and friendly young man, who is always happy to help others. He has a bright future ahead of him, and we look forward to continue supporting him as he discovers it.

# SATURDAY CLUB

Saturday Club provides ongoing confidence building opportunities and activities for children, aged 9-12, especially those who require intensive support with developing social skills and self-reflection. Led by our Senior Youth Worker, consistent small groups of children attend 8 - 10 Saturday sessions over a nine month period, during which they work together to design and plan their own residential, before going away on it together as a group.

A consistent group of volunteers and Young Leaders, commit to work with the group across the full nine months. The project finishes with a showcase event, where children present back their experiences to their family members, sharing the elements of the project that they are most proud of and creating an opportunity for parents and carers to join our team in celebrating their unique successes, skills and talents.

## 21 children were part of Saturday Club over 2023, taking part in activities which included:

group cooking challenges, kayaking, bushcraft sessions, trampolining, ice skating, a food gameshow & taste testing and art sessions.

## Residentials in Surrey and Kent included:

campfires, nightwalks, tomahawk throwing, team building challenges, treetop high ropes courses and a trip to a water park.



## The children said:

**'I've learnt that I can be a lot more adventurous than I thought I could be. I've learnt I can hold back if I feel out of control, I can take 5 minutes and calm down. Saturday Club has helped me a lot. I feel less angry and more happy.'** Callum, age 13

**'I enjoy the adults being here. Some of them are funny, they know how to make us smile when we feel down and others can really relate to the kids. We all choose what we like to build the residential, we all have a say in the final decision.'** Aliyah, age 13

**'It helps me do things that I usually wouldn't do. It's full of laughs and joy.'** Luca, age 12

# THRIVE MENTORING

Our mentoring programme pairs children and volunteers who have already built trust on our residentials to spend regular time together, generally for 12 months or more. Over that time, pairs work on particular social and emotional goals, which they set together, with input from parents and referrers. 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.

**Eleven mentors have, between them, provided around 500 hours of tailored one to one support through the programme this year.**

**Activities undertaken by mentoring pairs this year have included:** pizza making, silverwork classes, American football, cinema, theatre and museum trips, tennis, Christmas market visits, go karting, cat cafes, picnics, pottery classes and college induction visits.



“The shared experiences they have are so important – going down to the arcade and playing guitar hero together and being silly – I couldn’t do that as his mum, he’d just be embarrassed! With his mentor, he has fun and at the same time he can talk to him about things that matter.

Rachelle, Dylan’s mum

## CASE STUDY

Destiny’s mum struggles with drug and alcohol abuse and has severe mental health problems. As a tiny child, Destiny, (now aged 12), often saw her mother drunk and high, unable to stand or speak. Destiny now lives with her aunt, in a safe environment, but has a lot of anxiety from her early life experiences. She finds social gatherings difficult, tending to isolate herself, and her worries led to her refusing to go to school and escalated to her barely leaving the house.

Meeting Emily through the mentoring programme was a real turning point for Destiny. They often go on walks, chatting along the way and stopping off for hot chocolates and a piece of cake before heading home. In the summer, they went on a day trip to Eastbourne where they ate fish and chips and skimmed stones across the sea. Last Christmas, they went ice skating at The Natural History Museum, which Destiny’s auntie told us she especially loved.

As well as getting Destiny out of the house, Emily provides the emotional support and friendship she so desperately needs, giving Destiny the time and space to talk and be listened to, something she misses out on from peers. Destiny’s aunt told us that Emily was a big part of Destiny’s decision to return to education after they spent hours talking it through together, with Emily providing gentle encouragement. Now back at school, Destiny is beginning to build a friendship group. It’s clear that the social skills she developed with Emily have helped her feel confident to do this. Destiny’s mentoring will continue as she settles back into school.

# YOUNG LEADERS' PROGRAMME

Our Young Leaders' Programme supports teenagers who have previously attended Free to Be Kids' projects as children to return as young volunteers, providing inspirational role-modeling to the young people we work with. They tell us that the challenge, sense of belonging and acceptance they find in being afforded trust and responsibility on our projects builds confidence, develops new skills and provides concentrated time away from home with a pool of adults who believe in them. **Over 2023, our team of talented, hard working Young Leaders provided almost 1,500 hours of support between them. For most, this is their first experience of volunteering.**

This year, we have been working hard to extend our Young Leaders' Programme to include wraparound support and development opportunities outside of our residential projects, including, dedicated 1:1 coaching and careers based support. Young Leaders this year took part in a CV writing and personal branding workshop delivered by staff from LinkedIn.

Young Leaders have also played a crucial role in staff recruitment and organisational resource creation. Many spoke, performed and looked after the guests at our Summer Celebration event in May.

“Being a Young Leader is an amazing and unexpected experience. I love making bonds with the kids. One boy was really nervous about going horse riding, but he asked if I could sit with him on the bus. He trusted me out of everyone, even though I was one of the newest volunteers - I guess because he knew I'd been a kid like him once.

Toyin, age 15







**Young Leaders speak and perform at our Start of Summer Celebration event**



## CASE STUDY

Throughout her childhood Sam (now 17) struggled with low confidence and managing emotions. She would often become frustrated by small things and respond by becoming physical with other young people. Despite her aggressive persona at school, Sam presented as depressed and sad at home and had begun to use razors to cut her legs where no-one would see. At the end of year 9, following another fight and poor attendance, Sam was excluded from school. This impacted on her relationship with her mum, which led to her moving out of her mum's house and into her grandma's. Sam's grandma told us that she was very worried that Sam barely left her bedroom.

Having worked with Sam when she was younger, we supported her to join our Journey Projects. She attended every trip, talking regularly in Honours' Council about how the projects give her space to be herself and make new friends away from the negative influences in her area. She enjoyed the opportunities to be playful and mischievous, using her energy in positive ways, without being judged.

To build on the deep impact of the Journey Programme, we invited Sam to become a Young Leader, trusting her with the responsibility to support younger children who are going through similar struggles to the ones she has had. Sam has shown a real aptitude for supporting children struggling with frustration and anger and leads the younger children with maturity, calmness and sound judgment. Having the opportunity to develop a different story about herself - one in which her past experiences have become a strength she uses to support others - has been profoundly positive. Through our trust, Sam has learnt that she is a reliable, important and valued team member, capable of more than she had imagined. Her self-harming has reduced and her relationships with family are slowly improving, with a recent move back home so far going well. We know Sam will continue to shine as a role model for our younger children and have committed to support her to return as a key adult volunteer on our projects once she turns 18.

# OUR IMPACT

Based on evaluation information from children, volunteers and referrers (our impact and monitoring procedures have been evaluated by the Centre for Youth Impact.)

In 2023:

**94%** of children reported positive indicators of improved self-esteem after completing our projects.

**91%** reported achieving something they'd not thought possible whilst on our projects.

Project workers reported that **94%** of children who attended showed improvement in social confidence.

Project workers reported that **100%** of children developed new social skills whilst on project, including making/keeping friends and managing better with frustration/challenge.

Referrers describe our projects as benefiting young people's education, emotional health and capacity to fulfil their potential. Feedback from schools shows every year that the opportunities we provide translate into observable improvements in confidence and self-belief in the classroom, and that this has lasting effects on children when measured again at the end of the term.

“Huge thanks for giving our kids the benefit of these positive experiences and time away in nature, surrounded by the attention and loving care of your ethos and team. All of them had a really brilliant time. It has been a profound experience to watch them roll back their stressors and worries to really get in touch with being children again.

Head Teacher

“I had never been on holiday before Free to Be Kids, so initially I felt really out of my comfort zone. All my life I've been the weird kid or the one no one likes, so I told myself that I was not good. If you told me two years ago that I'd be here enjoying myself and achieving things, I wouldn't have believed you. At first I felt vulnerable, but when you step out of the box, you realise it isn't a bad place. It's been such a journey and I've learnt that with the right people, anything is possible. It's taught me to just try, because good things can happen.

Blessing, age 14

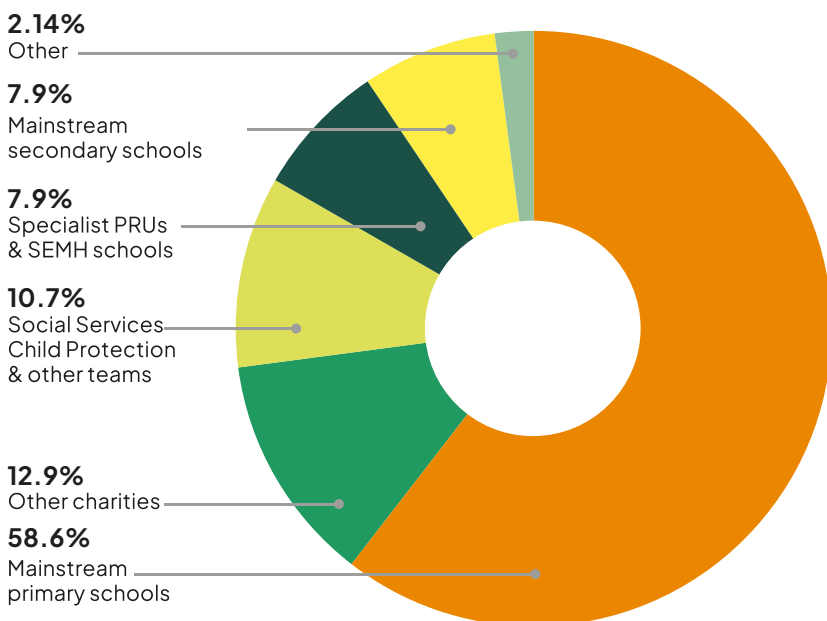
# OUR REACH

Over 2023, we've supported children from the following areas of London:



**KEY**  
 CL - City of London  
 CW - City of Westminster  
 K&C - Kensington & Chelsea  
 H&F - Hammersmith & Fulham

Referrals over 2023 came from the following organisation types:



“Words are not enough to say how grateful we are for the care you give Jekari. You have helped him come out of his shell, and now he is beginning to have the social interactions he never knew how to.”  
 Jekari’s Mum

# ORGANISATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Much of our focus over 2023 has been on future-proofing the organisation, to ensure it is strong and resilient ready to scale work in line with our growth strategy over the coming years. A major part of this has been the securing of a long term home for our residential work, thanks to our partnership with the Woodcraft Folk. We have also been developing and embedding our data management and finance systems after major work on both of these in 2022.

Following a skills audit, we welcomed two new Trustees to our board: Elena Davies, who brings expertise in finance, strategy and investment management, and Sola Adebikian educator, community worker and professional storyteller with a huge passion for inspiring and motivating young people. We also welcomed Holly Slimming, our first dedicated Fundraiser to the staff team, as part of a plan to grow our funding and broaden income streams, allowing our work to reach more children. We've been delighted to win Charity of the Year support from Axis Capital and property management software company Yardi, and are hugely thankful to their teams for the practical and financial support they have provided.

Our second Summer Celebration event took place in May, organised brilliantly by long term supporters Higson. British polar explorer and television presenter, Dwayne Fields gave our keynote speech, sharing his experiences, from gun and knife crime growing up in Hackney, to becoming the first black Briton to reach the North Pole. Campfire marshmallow toasting, live music and some amazing performances from Free to Be Kids' young people ensured the event was a huge success, raising just under £35,000 to fund children's places on our projects over Summer 2023.

We've been working hard to develop new branding and a revamped website to grow our reach. We're incredibly grateful to the funders, supporters and design professionals who have contributed towards this project and given time and expertise for free or at very reduced rates, meaning no funding has been diverted away from our direct work with children. We're delighted to showcase our new brand here in this report and look forward to launching our new website in Spring 2024.

“Every time I volunteer, I wish I had booked myself in for another week. Watching the change in children who are initially reluctant but end up not wanting to leave because they loved the project so much is amazing. The children really need this time away from difficult home lives, and I think volunteers need it too, to get a bit of perspective on our worries.

Nobel (Current Volunteer)



Summer Celebration Event, May 2023

# THE FUTURE AND HOW YOU CAN HELP

We're embarking on an ambitious strategy to double the number of project places we're able to offer to London's most vulnerable children: Over the next five years, this will allow us to:

- Increase the number of children we can support by around 75%, ensuring that we work towards meeting the increasing need for our work reported by referrers.
- Ensure that more of the most in-need children can access ongoing support from Free to Be Kids for as long as they need it throughout their childhood.
- Significantly grow our targeted support work by tripling the size of our Mentoring and Young Leaders' Programmes and doubling the capacity of our Journey Projects.

But to make this a reality, we also need to double our fundraising and volunteering targets, meaning your support is even more vital than ever.

**Please consider whether you or anyone in your network can help us to continue our work by:**

- Providing multi-year grant funding
- Nominating us as your workplace's charity of the year
- Committing to a regular monthly donation
- Introducing us to contacts who may consider a significant gift towards our work
- Offering pro bono expertise in any of the following areas: land and property acquisition, graphic design, photography and film, fundraising
- Donating free goods or services to reduce our spend on printing, postage, fuel, vehicle hire and maintenance.
- Volunteering on projects or linking us to those in your network who might be interested in doing this.

If so, please contact us at [hello@freetobekids.org.uk](mailto:hello@freetobekids.org.uk)

“Free to Be Kids is my safe haven. Being here has taught me to be more understanding and accepting of people. I'm proud of building up confidence and being brave. I've learnt to trust myself and trust others, and then they trust you.

Ajani, age 12



# SUPPORTERS



Our work this year wouldn't have been possible without the kindness and support of large numbers of 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, sorted and carried equipment, wrote letters, give regular monthly donations or helped in any other way, we'd like to **say a huge, very heartfelt thank you.**



An **extra-special thank you** to the wonderful team at Woodcraft Folk, who've worked with us to create our first home at Cudham Environmental Activities Centre.



We would also like to send heartfelt thanks to the following organisations who have helped us both financially and with pro bono support, from organising our Celebration Event, to providing us with storage and a safe home for our minibus outside of projects:



**Huge thanks** to our friends at

Axis London for choosing us as their **Charity of the Year!** As well supporting our projects financially, their amazing staff have helped cook meals, paint bedrooms and maintain the grounds in preparation for our children's arrival this Summer.



More **big thanks**

to the team at Yardi for selecting us as their **Charity of the Year** and for visiting our children for a morning of pancake making and art during our projects this summer!

## Special thanks also to:

Everyone who supported our annual Christmas campaign; Booker Wholesale, who have loyally supported our work since the outset, providing annual donations of food, those who supported our Big Give campaign in June, including Ben Kott; all who sponsored, helped to organize and joined us at our Summer Celebration event in May. All those heroic souls who trained for and completed sponsored races and adventures on our behalf in 2023.



# TRUSTS & FOUNDATIONS

With special thanks to the Childhood Trust and the Imagine Foundation who acted as our Champion Sponsors, allowing us to double donations during the Childhood Trust's Champions for Children campaign, hosted by the Big Give in June 2023.



St Olave's Foundation Fund



Masonic Charitable Foundation



DRAPERS' CHARITABLE FUND



Haberdashers Company Charitable Foundation



Worshipful Company of Innholders



Worshipful Company of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators



IGEN  
The Sheldon Trust  
The Keith Rae Trust  
The Jane and Michael Davies Charitable Trust



Heartfelt thanks to the team at children's holiday charity **Oliver '68**, who sadly closed their doors this year. They have generously donated a proportion of the sale of their holiday home to Free to Be Kids, entrusting us to continue their legacy of providing joy and adventure to vulnerable children.



**FREE  
TO BE  
KIDS**

[www.freetobekids.org.uk](http://www.freetobekids.org.uk)

Registered charity number: 1165678