



# Annual Report | 2025

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The Great Friendship Project



# Why We Exist

## The Great Friendship Project

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**Over the past decade, youth loneliness has moved from a largely hidden issue to a growing public health concern.**

What was once seen as a private struggle affecting a small minority is now increasingly recognised as a widespread social challenge affecting millions of young people.

Youth loneliness is not a temporary condition, nor a consequence of individual failure. It is a structural, pervasive, and costly social issue with profound impacts on both public health and the wider economy.

Yet for too long, it has been treated as a second-order concern by policymakers, commissioners, and society at large.

Since 2021, The Great Friendship Project has worked to develop and scale a new model for tackling youth loneliness through community-led activities, targeted programmes, national campaigns, and direct policy engagement.

In that time, our community has grown to reach tens of thousands of young adults each year, while our campaigns and research partnerships have helped bring youth loneliness into national conversations about public health, social connection, and the future of community.

We have also received growing international recognition for this work, including being named one of the world's leading youth-led organisations working to build a more socially connected future.

And yet the need for this work has never been greater. As society undergoes rapid change - from the rise of AI and remote working to increasing political polarisation and the erosion of traditional community spaces - opportunities for meaningful connection in everyday life are becoming harder to find.

This report reflects on what we have built so far, the evidence behind our approach, and the role we believe community can play in rebuilding the social fabric for a new generation.



*David Gradon*  
CEO/Founder.  
The Great Friendship Project

# The loneliness epidemic



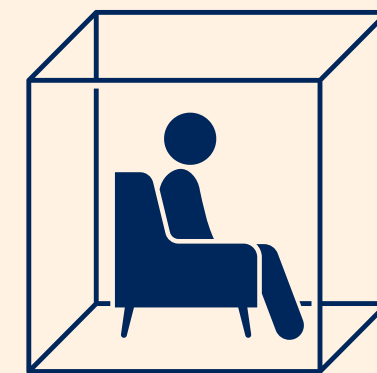
**1 Million**

UK young adults struggle with  
persistent loneliness weekly



**22%**

report having just one  
or no **close friends**



**5x**

more likely to be **chronically  
lonely** than over-65s.





**\$406bn**

estimated cost to the US economy every year



**30%**

higher chance of premature death



**1 in 5**

young people globally report persistently loneliness every week.

## A Global Health Threat

In June 2025, the World Health Organisation released its landmark report “From Loneliness to Social Connection”.

Loneliness and social disconnection, the report found, now represents one of the biggest risks to global health, wellbeing, and societal resilience.

Loneliness contributes to approximately 871,000 premature deaths annually. It raises the risk of stroke, heart disease, diabetes, cognitive decline, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

Critically, the WHO identifies young people as one of the groups most at risk - with 1 in 5 aged 13 to 29 reporting persistent loneliness, despite growing up in the most digitally connected era in history.

# Our Mission

We tackle loneliness amongst young adults in the **following 4 ways**:

**Campaigns &  
Policy Action**



**Research**



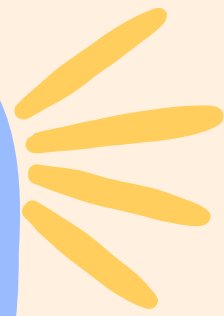
**Community  
Activities**



**Programmes  
& Support**



# Community Activities



**Research shows friendships form through repeated interaction, shared experiences, and time - not forced conversations.**

They tend to develop naturally when people spend time together in low-pressure environments with a shared focus.

Our approach reflects this. Whether through walks, meals, workshops, or board games, the activity itself matters less than creating the right conditions: regular contact, low pressure, and space for natural interaction.

We also recognise common barriers such as social anxiety, cost, limited opportunities to connect, and the stigma of loneliness.

To address this, our activities are free or low-cost, held in welcoming non-clinical spaces, and designed so everyone attends with the shared aim of meeting new people - helping normalise coming alone.

Our diverse programme encourages ongoing engagement, while facilitators focus on creating supportive environments rather than directing interactions.



# 2025: Impact Snapshot



**77%** say they've built new friendships

**73%** report reduced social isolation

**67%** report a greater sense of community

**18,500**

Attended in the last year

**40 Million**

Campaign Impressions



Partnered with leading brands, local councils, sector leads & government bodies



Featured by the BBC, The Sun, and a range of international media outlets



**“After moving back to London, I was worried about rebuilding friendships. The project has made it easy, and I’ve met some truly lovely people that I now consider my closest friends”**

# Meet Harvey

**At 22 and living just outside London in Hertfordshire, Harvey found his friendship circle had gradually disappeared as friends moved away to university or into new stages of life.**

Over time, his social circle became smaller and he found himself spending more and more time alone.

At the same time, he was also struggling with unemployment, which made this period even more difficult - particularly during the winter months when shorter days and darker evenings often meant long stretches of isolation and little structure to his days.

After searching online for ways to meet people his age, Harvey came across the project online and decided to push himself to attend one of our activities, despite the challenges he faces navigating unfamiliar environments as an autistic young adult.

What started as one visit soon became something he looked forward to each week.

**“Every time I went, I was looking forward to seeing my new friends, as well as meeting new people.”**

Thanks to the project - I now have multiple different circles of friends and regularly meet up with them independently outside of the community activities

It's been amazing being around such good and ambitious people and it's helped re-inspire me to undertake a long term goal of mine to go solo travelling for the first time.”

**“Joining the project’s activities was one of the best decisions I’ve made. Making friends was always something I found tricky but the project is easily the best place and way I’ve found to meet new people.”**



# Growing Confidence

**“I also felt re-motivated to seek employment, something I had almost given up on, and I am now in a job that I enjoy, I have become more active and realised the importance of making face to face connections.”**

In this day and age, it can be very easy to fall into the trap of spending your free time mindlessly scrolling through social media, and I feel like I am healthier for being able to avoid that and instead embracing the freedom of going out and about into the real world.

I feel incredibly excited about life at the moment, I hope to be able to save enough to move out within the next couple years and hopefully live in London.

It's been amazing being around such good and ambitious people and it's helped re-inspire me to undertake a long term goal of mine to go solo travelling for the first time.

**Since 2024, Harvey has become a friendly familiar face at our activities, has attended over 80 activities and has even helped host our monthly pub quizzes!**



# Research



**To rigorously assess our impact, we partnered with researchers at Queen Mary University of London and the University of Exeter on a UKRI-funded evaluation using a randomised controlled trial (RCT).**

The study uses validated measurement tools to track changes in loneliness, mental wellbeing, social confidence, and the development of meaningful relationships.

Participants completed surveys at multiple stages, allowing researchers to assess both immediate outcomes and whether improvements are sustained over time.

The research is now in its final phase, with follow-up data collection underway. Once complete, the findings will be published and shared with policymakers, practitioners, and the wider loneliness sector.

This will provide our strongest independent evidence to date, helping demonstrate how structured community environments can reduce loneliness among young adults and strengthening our ability to engage funders and partners as we scale.



# Why it Works...

Working with the researchers at Queen Mary University of London and the University of Exeter, we developed a structured logic model to explain how our activities translate into measurable outcomes.

**The TGFP model identified three core mechanisms through which our intervention helps to reduce loneliness:**

## Mechanisms of Change



### Building social capital

Regular opportunities for interaction allow individuals to expand their social networks and develop new friendships.



### Strengthening Social Identity

repeated participation fosters a sense of belonging and shared community.



### Reinforcing positive feedback loops

Positive social experiences increase confidence and wellbeing, encouraging continued engagement both within TGFP and beyond.

# Rising Profile

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Our journey has garnered significant media attention, featuring on GloboTV, BBC, and various national press outlets, enhancing our visibility.



## Media Coverage

**These platforms have been crucial in spreading awareness about our mission and the impact of our work on combating loneliness and tackling the stigma.**

- ✦ Coverage in the last year has included a BBC Homepage InDepth feature, reaching approximately 35 million UK adults each day.
- ✦ This was accompanied alongside an interview on BBC Radio 4 discussing the growing youth loneliness epidemic.
- ✦ Our work has also been featured across a range of national outlets, including The Independent, The Evening Standard, and The Sun.
- ✦ In addition, we have appeared on several regional and national radio stations, including BBC Radio London, BBC Scotland, and other local stations.
- ✦ Internationally, we have also been featured by the largest TV outlet in South America, with a 100m+ daily reach GloboTV (Brazil), 9News (Australia) and a range of other regional news outlets.



# Global recognition and Influence

**In 2025, The Great Friendship Project received its first award on the global stage, highlighting the growing international relevance of our work on youth loneliness.**

We were hugely honoured to be selected as the winner of the WE Award Winner 2025 at the One Young World Summit in Munich.

The Summit brought together Nobel Prize laureates, global leaders, celebrities, policymakers, and young change-makers from around the world to address some of the most pressing social challenges of our time.

This prestigious award recognised the organisation as one of the leading Youth-Led Organisations globally building a more socially connected world.



# LaunchPad Programme




**In early 2026, we piloted the very first cohort of our new LaunchPad Programme - designed specifically for young adults who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET).**

This programme emerged from a growing recognition of the intersection between unemployment and loneliness.

When a young person falls out of work, the impact rarely stops at their finances. Routine collapses. Confidence erodes. Social circles shrink. Days begin to blur together, and the longer someone remains outside work or education, the harder it becomes to find a way back.

The pilot was funded by the TELUS Fund and supported by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).



**The programme combined structured group activities, challenge days, mentoring, and co-working sessions to help participants rebuild confidence, develop practical skills, and reconnect with both employment pathways and social networks.**

# Meet Tarah

**After graduating from university, Tarah was spending most of her time at home searching for jobs and apprenticeships.**

Her weeks were structured around applications - updating her CV, writing cover letters, and sending off forms - often without hearing anything back.

“On an average day I often felt discouraged and frustrated. The process can be repetitive and when you don’t hear back from employers, it makes you feel stuck and uncertain about what to do next.”

Living in London added another layer of challenge. Many activities and development opportunities felt financially out of reach, making it difficult to build skills, meet people, or stay active while continuing her job search.

Tarah discovered LaunchPad and thought it would be a great opportunity to build her confidence and gain new experiences while she continued her job search.

For Tarah, the most significant outcome wasn’t technical employability skills - it was connection.

“One of the biggest impacts the programme has had for me personally is that I’ve made some amazing new friends.”

Meeting others in similar situations reduced the sense of isolation that had been building during months of independent job searching.



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# Transformed Outlook

**Since joining, she has been going out more and talking to more people, which has strengthened her social confidence and her overall outlook has improved.**

The dedicated time to focus on applications in a more social setting - has helped her maintain momentum with her job search.

Tarah believes programmes like LaunchPad play an important role in supporting young adults navigating uncertainty of unemployment

**“Being part of a programme has helped me stay motivated and more determined to take the next step.”**



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# Campaigns

**Tackling loneliness requires more than simply providing support - it also requires shifting the cultural norms that keep many young people silent about their experiences.**

Our #TheLonelyMillion campaign aimed to do all those three things and give a name and number to this growing social and public health crisis amongst young people.

The campaign included national billboards, creative by One Day Agency, and a digital resource platform built by Milk & Tweed, offering stories and tools.

The campaign had over 40 million impressions and culminated in a Westminster event at the Houses of Parliament attended by MPs, journalists and charities.



# Policy Action



## Individual programmes change lives. Policy change changes systems.

Our policy work ensures that progress we've made becomes embedded in the structures that shape how loneliness is understood and addressed nationally.

Through the Loneliness Policy Action Group, we have been a consistent, evidence-based presence in the rooms where decisions are made.

Working in partnership with other sector leads, we've been working hard to secure durable policy commitments, including a new loneliness strategy, and the formal recognition of social health as a core pillar of population health.

Our #TheLonelyMillion campaign reached Parliament, where our data and lived experience testimony contributed directly to debate on the government's approach.

We have spoken at national conferences and sector events, presented to local authorities, Directors of Public Health and engaged directly with MPs to keep the issue high on the agenda.





Expand our programmess to more major cities in **the UK.**



# Looking Ahead...



Reach **millions more** through our awareness campaigns to tackle the stigma.



**Build Capacity**

Expand our ability to create more opportunities where meaningful friendships can form



**Spark Change**

Make loneliness visible and challenge the stigma through campaigns and partnerships



**Deepen Evidence**

Build the research and greater insights to prove and scale what works

Grow our community to **100,000 Young Adults**

