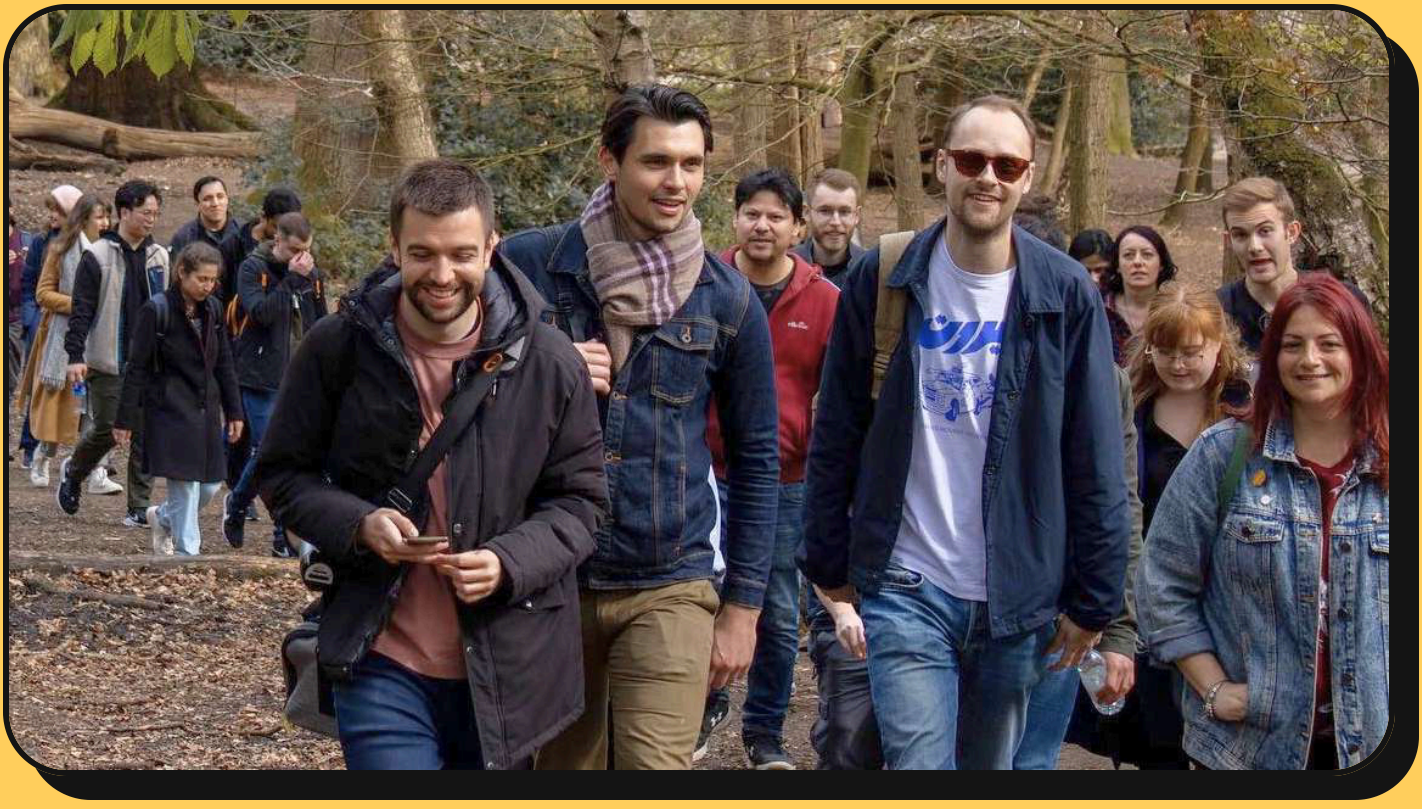
The Great Friendship Project

IMPACT REPORT

Annual Report 2025

Rebuilding the social fabric for a new generation.



A NOTE FROM OUR FOUNDER

Why we exist

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.

None of it would be possible without the thousands of young adults who have taken the brave step of coming along on their own, the volunteers and facilitators who welcome them, and the partners and funders who have backed our work. To every one of you – thank you.



David Gradon

CEO / Founder
The Great Friendship Project

The loneliness epidemic

Despite being more digitally connected than ever, young adults in the UK are now far more likely to be lonely than older generations.



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

Behind every one of these numbers is a young person who has moved to a new city for work, drifted apart from school or university friends, or spends their days working remotely with no one to talk to. Loneliness at this age is often hidden – and the longer it lasts, the harder it becomes to break.

WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION · JUNE 2025

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.

1 in 5

young people globally report persistent loneliness every week

30%

higher chance of premature death

$406bn

estimated cost to the US economy every year

The WHO's message is clear: social connection must be treated as a public health priority – and young people must be at the heart of the response.

Our approach

We tackle loneliness amongst young adults in four ways – from the ground up, and from the top down.



01

Community Activities

Free and low-cost activities in welcoming spaces, designed for meeting new people.

02

Programmes & Support

Targeted programmes like LaunchPad for young adults facing unemployment and isolation.

03

Research

Independent evaluation with leading universities to prove and scale what works.

04

Campaigns & Policy Action

Shifting cultural norms and embedding change in the systems that shape policy.

Each strand strengthens the others. Our activities generate the evidence; the evidence powers our campaigns; and our campaigns and policy work open doors to reach even more young people.

The power of community

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.





Impact snapshot

Every number here represents a young adult who chose to show up – often alone, and often for the very first time.

18,500
young adults attended in the last year

40 Million
campaign impressions

77%
say they've built new friendships

73%
report reduced social isolation

67%
report a greater sense of community

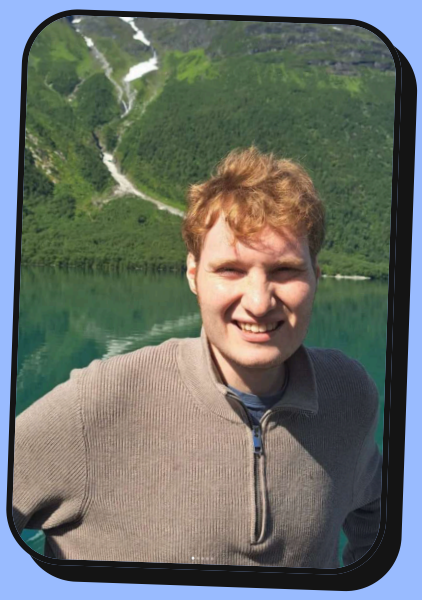
Partnered with leading brands, local councils, sector leads & government bodies

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.**
>
> Community member

CASE STUDY · COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

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 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.”

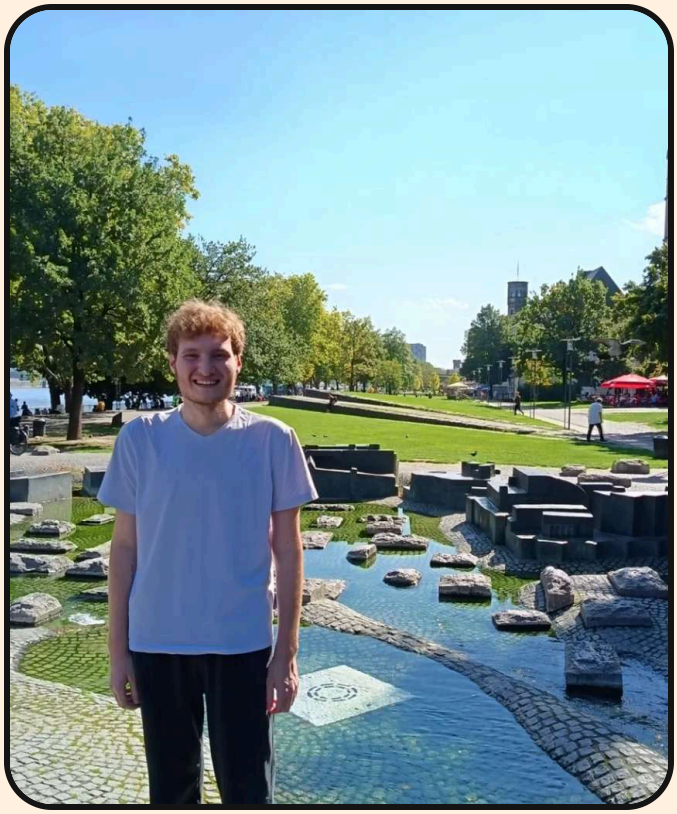
“Joining the project’s activities was one of the best decisions I’ve made. Making friends was always something I found tricky but the project is easily the best place and way I’ve found to meet new people.”

Growing confidence

"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.

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 of years and hopefully live in London."



80+ activities attended since 2024 – he even helps host our monthly pub quizzes!

"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."

Proving what works

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.



EARLY FINDINGS

Initial results from the trial point to positive change across every area we're measuring.

- ↓ **Reduced loneliness**
- ↑ **Improved mental wellbeing**
- ↑ **Greater social confidence**
- ↑ **More meaningful relationships**

MECHANISMS OF CHANGE

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:



01

Building social capital

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



02

Strengthening social identity

Repeated participation fosters a sense of belonging and shared community.



03

Reinforcing positive feedback loops

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

Together, these mechanisms create a virtuous cycle: the more young people connect, the more confident they become – and the more likely they are to keep connecting, both with us and in their wider lives.

MEDIA COVERAGE

Rising profile



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

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

35M

Coverage in the last year included a BBC Homepage InDepth feature, reaching approximately 35 million UK adults each day – accompanied by an interview on BBC Radio 4 discussing the growing youth loneliness epidemic.

100M+

Internationally, we have been featured by the largest TV outlet in South America, GloboTV (Brazil), with a 100m+ daily reach, as well as 9News (Australia) and a range of other regional news outlets.

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.

BBC | BBC Radio 4 | BBC Radio London | BBC Scotland | The Independent | Evening Standard | The Sun | GloboTV | 9News

Every feature helps another young person realise they're not alone – and that there's somewhere to go.

Global recognition

WINNER
WE Award 2025



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 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.

For an organisation founded in 2021, this recognition is a powerful signal that youth loneliness is a global challenge – and that community-led solutions have a vital role to play in meeting it.

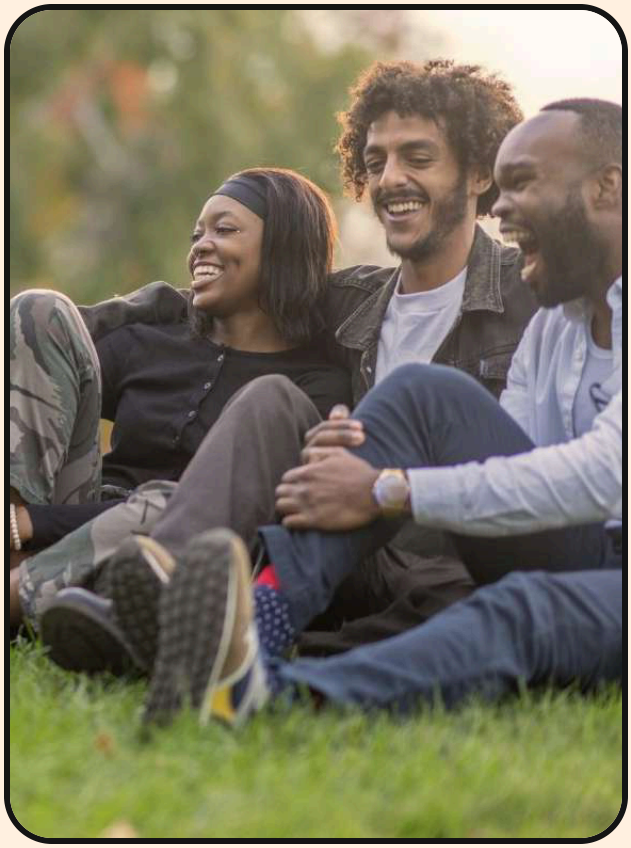
LaunchPad Programme

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 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.



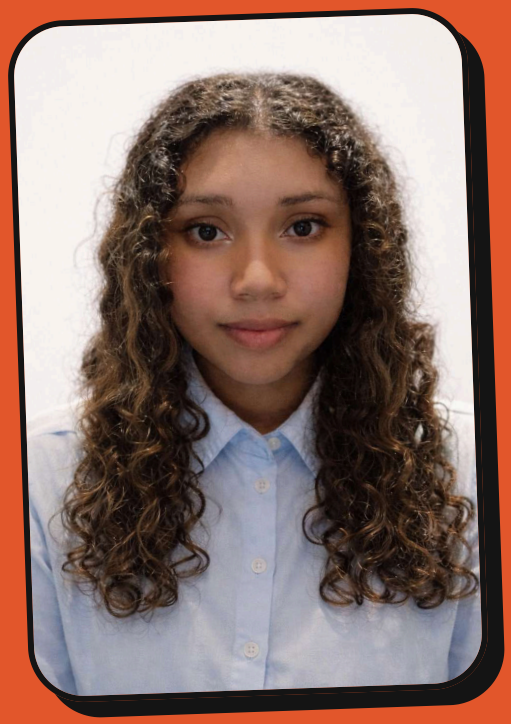
FUNDED BY
TELUS Fund

SUPPORTED BY
Department for Work & Pensions

Group activities | Challenge days | Mentoring | Co-working sessions

CASE STUDY · LAUNCHPAD

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.

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

> **"One of the biggest impacts the programme has had for me personally is that I've made some amazing new friends.**

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 the uncertainty of unemployment.

Her story reflects what we see across the programme: when young people are given structure, support and a sense of belonging, confidence follows – and so does progress towards work.

> **"Being part of the programme has helped me stay motivated and more determined to take the next step."**
>
> **Tarah, LaunchPad participant**

#TheLonely Million

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 set out to do exactly that – giving a name and a 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.

By putting a number on the problem, the campaign gave young people permission to talk about loneliness – and gave decision-makers a reason to act.



40M+

campaign impressions

Houses of Parliament

The campaign culminated in a Westminster event attended by MPs, journalists and charities.

Individual programmes change lives. Policy change changes systems.

Our policy work ensures that the 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 and Directors of Public Health, and engaged directly with MPs to keep the issue high on the agenda.





We will keep pushing for a new national loneliness strategy and for social health to be recognised as a core pillar of population health – making sure young people's voices are heard where decisions are made.

WHAT'S NEXT

Looking ahead...



OUR GOAL

Grow our community to 100,000 young adults

Build Capacity

Expand our programmes to more major cities in the UK, and expand our ability to create more opportunities where meaningful friendships can form.

Spark Change

Reach millions more through our awareness campaigns, making loneliness visible and challenging the stigma through campaigns and partnerships.

Deepen Evidence

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

We can't do this alone. Whether you're a funder, a partner, a policymaker or a young person looking to connect, there's a place for you in The Great Friendship Project.

The Great Friendship Project