



back up

transforming lives after spinal cord injury

Impact report 2023/24



Components of success

- Being peer driven
- Growing fundraising to meet our ambition
- Developing and empowering our people
- Being inclusive
- Harnessing technology
- Driving efficiency and effectiveness
- Volunteers at our heart
- Compelling communications
- Committed to collaboration
- Open and accountable



Welcome



In 2023/24, 4,400 people across the UK sustained a spinal cord injury – that’s one person every two hours. Today, there are an estimated 105,000 people living with a spinal cord injury in the UK.

At Back Up, we want to be there for everyone affected by spinal cord injury. In 2023/24, we are proud to have supported more people than ever before. We reached 2,622 individuals – that’s nearly 25% more than the previous year. We work tirelessly to retain those values and goals which make Back Up unique, and to ensure that our services remain as impactful as ever.

This Impact Report celebrates some of the people we have supported over the past year, and brings to life our goals: Living Confidently, Thriving At Any Age and Staying Connected. From eight year old Bobby and his mum Amy to Julie, who was injured aged 55, Back Up provides the practical skills and, crucially, the confidence needed to positively adjust to life following a spinal cord injury.

“Discovering Back Up really helped me in those difficult early days... they gave me the courage I needed to move forwards.” - Kehindi

Understanding what matters most to individuals and supporting people to achieve their goals is at the heart of our approach. Our services are designed and delivered by people who have lived experience of spinal cord injury. This means we truly understand what you’re going through.

Last year, we also saw an increase in the numbers of times that people are coming to Back Up for support, just like Iwan and Kehindi. Whether that’s to have fun on our multi activity courses, get support for returning to work or education, mentoring or family support, our Back Up community is a positive and welcoming space for everyone affected by spinal cord injury.

“Back Up gave me a new determination to be independent. They showed me that I have a future.” - Jemima

Many people we support, like Sam and Ian, go on to volunteer with us or contribute to our fundraising efforts. Whether you’ve volunteered, made a donation, taken on a fundraising challenge, or attended one of our events - thank you for making our work possible.

Abigail Lock | CEO

The impact of Back Up's work in 2023/24



Our online support group, the Back Up Lounge, was attended **922 times** (down from 1,064 times in 22/23). This is largely due to there being fewer lounge groups available. There were however 206 new people attended compared to 191 in 22/23.



Our services have been accessed **31,401** times up from 19,253 in 23/24. This growth is largely due to our dedicated outreach and engagement work across the regions, growth of our family support offer, and strong continued performance of our digital service offer.



221 people were supported through our mentoring service, up from 203 in 22/23 with 84% (84% in 22/23) reporting an increase in at least five of seven positive coping strategies.



812 people attended our Wheelchair Skills Training sessions, up from 510 in 22/23, with 98% of participants learning more skills and feeling more confident using a wheelchair.



440 one to one support interventions have been successfully delivered to ensure that children and young people are fully included in education (including the information and guidance service).



338 family members accessed our family support services, up from 229 in 22/23 (an increase of 48%). This is largely due to continued growth of our family support teams across the regions, and our work to better engage with families at the acute stage of their loved one's injury.



128 people attended our virtual What Next? and Skills for Work course and careers fair event, up from 80 in 22/23. 82% (79% in 22/23) of those attending Skills for Work reported being in work, volunteering or education 6-12 months after attending the course.



211 children and young people have been supported (up from 145 in 22/23) across all services. 100% of the children and young people Back Up have worked with say they are now feeling happier at school.



Iwan

Living Confidently

While travelling to work one morning, I was in a car crash, and sustained a spinal cord injury. You never expect something like this to happen to you - but then it does, and you just need to make the most of it.

I wanted to get on with things - to be positive and live my life as best I could again. But you can start to feel a bit isolated and institutionalised in hospital. Everyone you know is carrying on as normal, but your life has changed drastically. Leaving hospital can feel especially daunting - going to bars, restaurants, even just going to the park. Everything just feels tougher.

I needed some motivation, so I signed up for a Back Up Multi Activity Course. This gave me the confidence I needed to get back to living life again.

The course was such a positive experience. I met so many others in similar situations who were just getting on with life. It made me realise that I had no reason to mourn anything from before my injury. Some of the people I met had been injured for five years, or even longer. Talking to them and hearing their advice gave me so much confidence.

One of the best things about Back Up's courses is that they get you out of your comfort zone. I was able to spend a good length of time away from home, trying out different activities every day. My favourite was canoeing. It felt amazing being out on the lake in the open air, in a boat with three others who also have a spinal cord injury. I didn't think I'd have been able to do something like that before I found Back Up.

Since the course I've enjoyed returning to work. I'm back in the same car dealership I worked in before my injury, three days a week. I also enjoy keeping active. I'm training for the Cardiff half marathon, and I'm also planning to try wheelchair tennis.

My wheelchair skills are also continuing to improve. I hope one day to become a volunteer wheelchair skills trainer for Back Up, so I can help others the way Back Up helped me.

Julie

Thriving at any age

Sustaining my injury frightened the life out of me. I got up one night to go to the toilet, and collapsed. My legs suddenly just stopped working. An MRI scan showed that my C2, C3, C4 and C6 vertebrae had fused together, damaging my spinal cord.

I was devastated. Prior to my injury, I loved travelling, I enjoyed fishing and gardening, but in hospital I had more questions than answers. How I would get back to living my life again?

Fortunately, Back Up came into my life when I was in hospital. Ollie popped his head into my room and introduced himself. We spoke, and I burst out crying! But he calmed me down, and we just chatted. For the next eight months I spent in hospital, he'd always stop by for a coffee and a chat. He gave me so much information about living with a spinal cord injury, the adaptations I'd need to make at home, taught us wheelchair skills, and showed me everything Back Up had to offer.

Having support from Back Up put my mind at rest. It proved that life doesn't stop after spinal cord injury.

I then went on their over-50s Multi Activity Course. I was a bit frightened before I went on the course. The only times I'd been away from home after my injury was in the car with my partner, or short trips into town on the bus. Fortunately, all my worries went away when I arrived. Everyone was chatting, sharing wheelchair skill tips, and having a giggle together in no time.

Out of all the activities, the zip wire was my favourite. I was hoisted out of my chair, said a few choice words, and off I went! Being able to do that independently after spinal cord injury showed me that doing other things wouldn't be so hard.

After the course, I was so inspired I booked myself a solo trip to the seafront near where I live - the fish and chips were amazing! Back Up gave me back the confidence I needed to travel again. My partner and I have booked an accessible caravan holiday later in the year, and I'm also looking into disabled fishing group which offers boat trips.

If it wasn't for Back Up, I don't think I'd be where I'm at right now.





Charlotte

Staying Connected

In 2015, my brother and sister were in a car accident. My sister passed away, and my brother Jack sustained a high-level spinal cord injury. He was paralysed from the chest down, and lost the use of his hands. He was 20 at the time, and I was 25.

The whole experience was shocking - and it has taken a long time to take in everything. I coped by throwing myself into work, and trying to maintain a sense of normality. I don't think I properly processed my loss. I kept thinking that because I was the sibling, I needed to keep a level head, to keep helping my parents, to keep being useful. I think it only really hit me a couple of years ago. I started struggling with my mental health, due to all the unprocessed trauma.

Being a sibling of someone with a spinal cord injury can be isolating. I didn't really speak to my parents about how I felt - they had enough to deal with - and I didn't speak to friends about it, as they wouldn't have comprehended what I was experiencing.

I began seeking help while in this bad headspace six years on, and discovered the Back Up mentoring service.

I saw a post about family mentoring on Back Up's Instagram page. I was aware of the charity as my brother had been on their courses, but I didn't know they supported family members too. I reached out, and Back Up paired me with someone who also has a brother with a spinal cord injury.

I remember my first mentoring session - they began the session by telling me their story, and I started crying. It was such a relief to speak with someone who'd had a similar experience and understood exactly what I was going through. I felt seen.

My mentor validated a lot of the things I was feeling. As a family member of someone with a spinal cord injury, he relayed his experiences to me, and shared tips and advice he had learned over the years. It was so valuable.

My mentor was really pivotal in me getting better. Now I'm 34, living in Wales, have just finished renovating my house, and I recently got married. I would 100% recommend Back Up's family support service to anyone else in a similar situation.

Bobby and Amy

Living Confidently

My son Bobby sustained his spinal cord injury at birth, during a planned caesarean. I just remember there was sudden panic in the room - I didn't realise was happening at the time. It wasn't until Bobby was a toddler that we understood the extent of his injury. As he got older, we discovered that he would need a wheelchair. This was a challenge for us, as Bobby's older brother is also a wheelchair user.

Mobility was one of the main issues, especially when both of my sons were very little. If Dad was at work, then how would I get them out and about? Even something as seemingly simple as going out to dinner could be frustratingly hard. Bobby also struggled with his wellbeing. Although he was used to disability with his brother, he started to encounter difficulties when he entered mainstream school.

I don't think Bobby cared at first because he knew no different. He went to a nursery that was attached to his older brother's specialist school. When he went to primary school, he realised he was the only kid who used a wheelchair there.

That's when we started having problems. He began to question things, asking why he couldn't just take lessons to help him walk. One of his friends even offered to write to a popular YouTuber to see if he could get him a new spinal cord!

It's only very recently that he has fully realised he won't be able to walk when he's older. Fortunately, Back Up was there to help. I found a supportive community of other parents, and Bobby could see what was possible for him as he grows up.

Last summer, we went on Back Up's Multi Activity Course in the Lake District, where Bobby could try adventurous outdoor activities with other kids in a similar situation. It really helped Bobby come out of his shell, feel happy, and understand how to thrive with a spinal cord injury. Importantly, Bobby met Back Up's volunteers - young people and adults with real experience of living long-term with a spinal cord injury.

Bobby tried everything on this course - from abseiling to kayaking. He came away with a real can-do attitude! He's been happier doing more for himself, trying to be as independent as he can.

For me, it's been great to meet other parents I wouldn't have otherwise connected with. They've given me the best advice and information for taking care of yourself and your family.





Jemima's story

Thriving at any age

After I sustained my injury, everything changed in one moment. I was unconscious in the ICU for a long time, where I had a series of surgeries in just the first six weeks alone. It was the beginning of a very slow recovery process - everything was in crisis mode.

My injury wasn't just life-changing for me - the impact was felt by my family too. My mum had to leave her job to help with my care needs, and we had to convert our family living room into a ground floor bedroom I could access.

There was so much uncertainty. What was my future going to be like? I was 13 at the time of my injury, and it was like I had been sent back to primary school. I felt I had lost a lot of independence I'd gained. Fortunately, Back Up was there to help.

I first met Back Up while in hospital. At first, they helped us by answering our questions about my injury. My mum found it super helpful to ask about education and how to look after my physical health - she was able to talk to people who had been there themselves. And I joined a fun Back Up Multi Activity Course, designed especially for 13 - 17 year olds.

One of the best things about the course was practising my wheelchair skills with other young people. The young Back Up volunteers had some amazing skills! Learning from them meant that I could be more independent when I returned home after the course. Thanks to my new skills, I didn't need my mum to push my chair anymore.

Out of all the activities on the course, my favourite was wild swimming in the lake. My mum says I was a real "water baby" growing up - so being able to swim independently after my injury was just amazing.

Back Up gave me a new determination to be independent. They showed me that I have a future. In the long term I'm planning on going to art college, but in the meantime I am focusing on my creative interests. I'm taking my younger brother to our local comic convention, and will be making us matching costumes.

Since the course, I've continued being involved with Back Up - going on another Multi Activity Course in the Lake District, and I'm looking at becoming a volunteer with the charity. Every time I've used Back Up's services, I come away fired up and ambitious!

Kehinde

Staying connected

My injury happened in the middle of the night. A fire broke out in my flat and I had to jump from a second story window with my children. The fall damaged my spinal cord at the T12 - L1 level.

I didn't just sustain my spinal cord injury in the fire - I also lost my son. This was deeply traumatising, but I knew I needed to keep going for my other two children. I had to be OK for them.

I was in hospital for eight months after the fire, but I couldn't wait to go home. I was able to cope while around my family, so I was eager to get back to living a normal life with them as soon as possible. I was determined to move forwards.

Discovering Back Up really helped me in those difficult early days. I met a volunteer on the hospital ward, who told me her story. She gave me so much encouragement - showing me that I could still be whatever I want to be, and that I could still be there for my family as well. She told me all about how she went to university and travelled the world - this gave me the courage I needed to move forwards.

I signed up for Back Up's mentoring service when I left hospital. I wanted to get to know someone else in a similar situation, and learn how they were living life.

My mentor didn't just give me a shoulder to lean on, she proved that I could do anything with the right adjustments. In our weekly mentoring sessions, she helped give me accountability for the goals I wanted to achieve. Every time we spoke, I'd update her on what I had done. I'd tell her how I was able to go to the park with my kids, meet with friends, or go to the shops with my husband. She pushed me to keep going.

Since I had mentoring with Back Up, I've made arrangements to travel further. I am now planning on a trip to Nigeria with family. **I would absolutely recommend Back Up's services to anyone in a similar situation - my mentor made all this possible.**





Our plans for the future

People affected by spinal cord injury are at the heart of everything that we do. But new figures from the NHS show that almost 4 out of 5 people sustaining a spinal cord injury in the UK will not be admitted to specialist spinal cord injury centres.

As we enter the final year of our Transforming Lives Strategy, we are extremely proud of our progress over the past year. Our strategy is owned by all of us at Back Up, and we're actively working on developing our 2025-30 strategy.

Our next five-year strategy will be an evolution and not revolution. We will focus on developing Back Up's strengths and expertise, identifying opportunities which are complementary to our existing services. And importantly, we will engage with both people we have supported and those who do not currently use Back Up's services. This will help us to better understand the barriers which are preventing us from truly being there for everyone affected by spinal cord injury.

We are looking forward to working together to deliver our new strategy for the next five years. With your support, we will...

- **further expand our services to communities across the UK.** We want to be closer to where people live and go beyond NHS specialist centres.
- **be there for everyone affected by spinal cord injury.** Whatever your background, whatever you look like, whether you are old or young, have a higher-level injury, are a cat person, a dog person or neither, we want to be there for you.
- **reach more people affected by spinal cord injury.** We are building vital infrastructure to ensure more people know about us. Reaching the UK's 33 Major Trauma Centres is a major focus for the year ahead.

We have an ambitious strategy which sees us growing our services to support even more people affected by spinal cord injury. We simply could not operate without the support of our amazing volunteers, and generous donors, partners and fundraisers. We will continue to grow our fundraising in a sustainable, ethical and diverse way. To all of our funders thank you so much. Quite simply we couldn't do what we do without you.

Join us as we work towards our vision of a world where people with a spinal cord injury can realise their full potential.

If you would like to support our work with a single donation, set up a regular gift or find out more about leaving a gift in your Will, please visit www.backuptrust.org.uk/donate. For more ways to help, visit www.backuptrust.org.uk/get-involved.

Sam

Volunteers at our heart

I broke my neck diving into shallow water when I was 19. I damaged my spinal cord at the C4 level and I am unable to walk or use my hands. Living with my injury has been very difficult, and I've gone through some tough times. However, going through all this has left me with a positive mindset seven years later.

Although there were plenty of dark moments, I'm lucky to have some lovely people surrounding me and helping me get through it - including Back Up.

I first met Back Up in hospital. A volunteer from the charity was chatting with people on the wards. He had a high-level injury himself, but he was just getting on with things. It made me realise there was life after spinal cord injury. I felt like everything had been taken away from me so this was exactly what I needed to hear.

When I came out of hospital, I joined the Back Up ski karting course in Sweden. It was so amazing to travel the world again, and the freedom of being on the slopes was fantastic. It was something I didn't think would be possible after I sustained my injury.

I had such a great time on the Back Up course that I wanted to give something back. As humans we need a good purpose in life, and volunteering with Back Up has given me that.

In the past year, I've volunteered a lot with Back Up. I teach power chair skills all around the country, in spinal cord injury centres like Stoke Mandeville and Stanmore. I've also taught at Cardiff - which was great, because I've never supported people in Wales before with power chair skills training in a hospital setting.

It's really rewarding. It's not just teaching people how to use their chair in a safe environment, but it's also about combating the isolation newly injured people experience. Just like when I was in hospital, people want to hear that life carries on after injury.

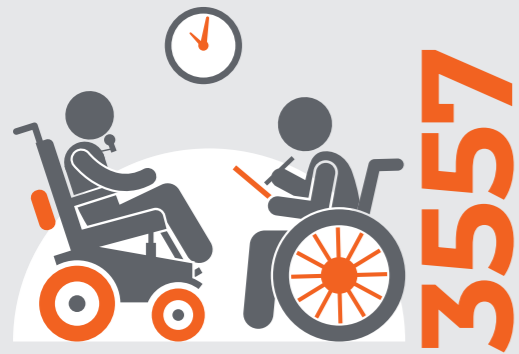
Outside of volunteering, recently I've been busy making art and selling prints. I do mouth paintings, some of which I do for charity. I'm also building a custom camper van - which has been a dream since before my injury. As well as hiring it out for my business, Wheeleasy Camping, I'm planning on travelling Europe and the UK - hopefully finding a bit of sunshine where I go!



The difference our volunteers make

Volunteers are an essential part of our mission. Their impact is felt across the whole charity - thanks to their unwavering passion, commitment and support, we can ensure that more people get the support they need after sustaining a spinal cord injury.

Last year, we estimate that our volunteers contributed the following hours to our work:



Volunteer mentors spent **3,557 hours** making positive changes to the lives of others.



Office volunteers gave **1,421 hours** of their time to provide fundraising and administrative support.



Our family volunteers dedicated **208 hours** to supporting family members of people with a spinal cord injury.

In total, we estimate that our amazing volunteers contributed around **22,273 hours** to our work this year. This works out at around **928 days'** worth of time. We are extremely thankful for the brilliant pro-bono support offered to us and for all the valued contributions our volunteers make.



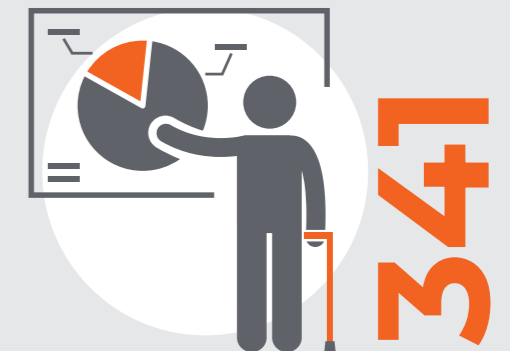
The volunteers which support our life-changing course dedicated **11,011 hours** to building our course participants' confidence and independence.



Our fundraising volunteers gave **1,377 hours** to planning our special events, sourcing prizes for events and supporting our work.



Our youth advisers and education advocates gave **380 hours** of their time to support children and young people with a spinal cord injury, through mentoring and our Youth Break Out Lounge.



Our trustees dedicated **341 hours** to governing Back Up and shaping the charity's future.



Ian

Giving something back

I sustained my injury 11 years ago in a cycling accident. I had always enjoyed outdoor pursuits - paragliding, cycling, mountaineering, sailing - so being suddenly paralysed from the T4 vertebrae down was a big shock.

Fortunately, I came across Back Up during my rehab. The charity supported me with wheelchair skills training in hospital, showing me how to navigate curbs and tricky terrain. It wasn't just the practical skills that helped me. Back Up's volunteers have years of experience with living well after spinal cord injury - hearing their stories and advice was a crucial part of getting my life back on track.

Since leaving hospital, I've made it my mission to give something back to Back Up. Over the years, I've used my outdoors hobbies and interests to raise life-changing funds.

My first fundraising challenge for Back Up was a 100 mile push from London to Brighton, following the Thames. It was hard work, but we managed to raise £10,000! Since then, I've completed several challenges for Back Up - the most recent being last year.

In 2023, I took on a marathon along the Brighton seafront. I challenged myself to push the entire 26.2 mile route in one day, and completed it in around 12 hours! It was dark by the time I finished, but it was such a memorable moment to cross the finish line, surrounded by cheering friends. It was hard work, but our efforts raised £3,600.

For me, supporting Back Up is equal parts about doing something I love, while also giving something back to an important cause. I just hope I can be the very embodiment of a Back Up success story - helping support the services which helped me so much in the early days.

How we raised our money

In 2023/24, we raised an incredible £2,615,743, over £500,000 more than in 2022/23. Read on to discover some of our fundraising highlights:



Our wonderful community of individual supporters donated and fundraised over **£632,000**



Over 800 people attended our iconic fundraising events, including our Front Row Fashion Show, City Dinner and Back Up Ball.



Nearly £1.4m was donated by **89 trusts, foundations and companies** through grants, sponsorship, pro-bono support and employee fundraising.



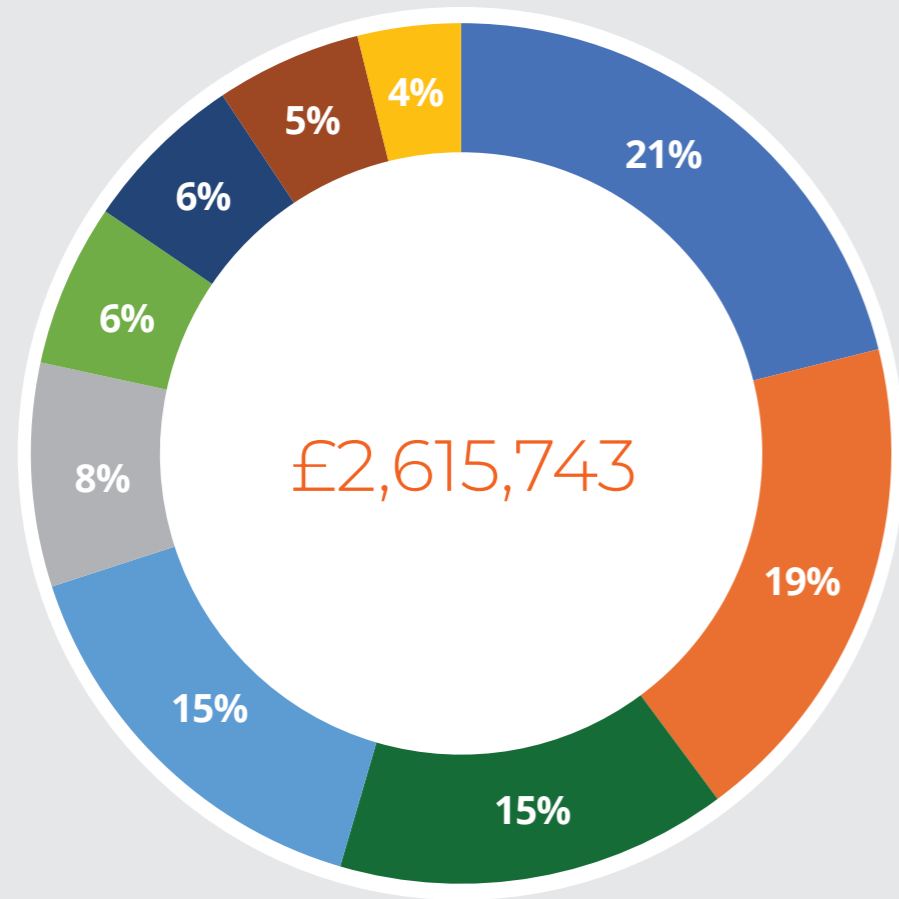
442 people took part in our challenge events, including The Spinal Circuit and The Push.

In 2023/24, with the help of our incredible donors, partners and fundraisers, we raised £2,615,743.

From riding bikes and hosting barbecues to birthday fundraisers and everything in between, hundreds of individuals have stepped up to support Back Up this year. Thank you so much to every person and organisation for joining us in 2023/24. **Quite simply we couldn't do what we do without you.**

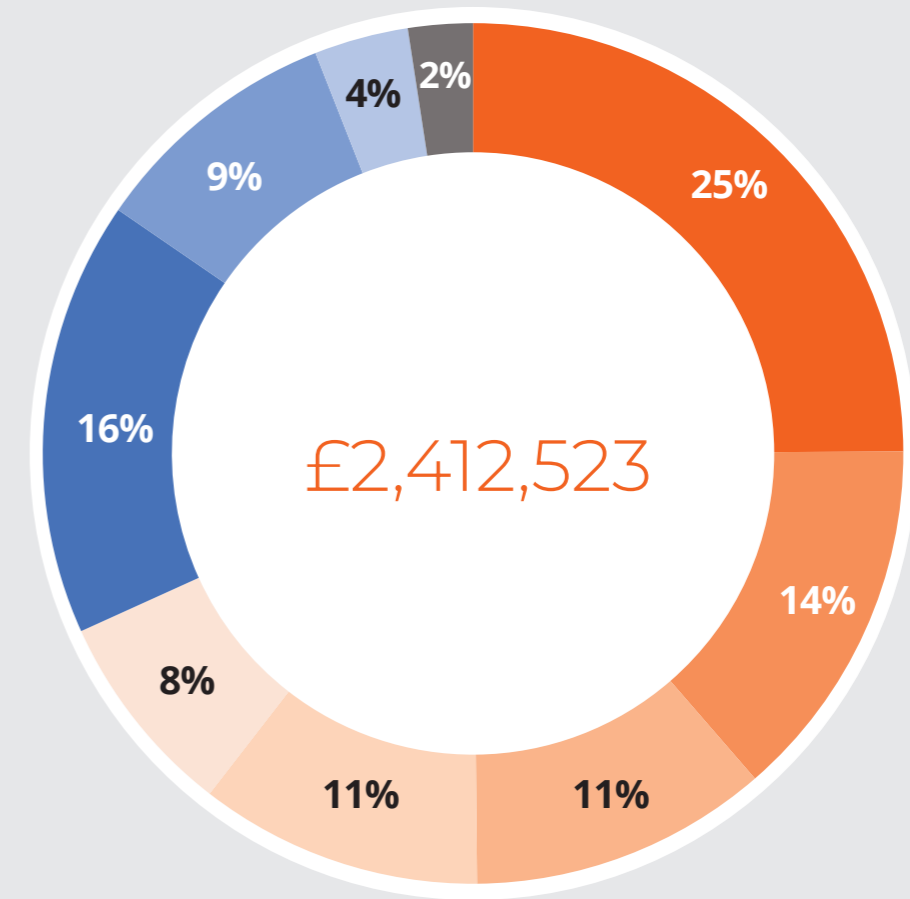


How we raised our money



- Motability Foundation
£552,030
- Trusts
£489,954
- Events
£384,435
- Donations
£404,461
- Corporate
£219,765
- NHS Support Grant
£160,000
- Trading activities & Investment
£160,406
- Challenge
£143,357
- Community
£101,335

How we spent our money



- Outreach & Engagement
£601,327
- Courses
£330,782
- Awareness
£353,786
- Mentoring
£256,613
- Children and Young People
£186,654
- Fundraising
£335,166
- Events
£215,162
- Challenge
£74,493
- Governance
£58,540

In 2023/24, with the help of our incredible donors, partners and fundraisers, we raised £2,615,743. Corporate supporters, trusts and foundations and major donors have continued to partner with us to deliver our vital services to people with spinal cord injury. Most significantly we secured a three-year grant from the Motability Foundation for £1.86 million. This will enable us to reach many more people affected by spinal cord injury and build on our work supporting people affected by spinal cord injury to be travel confident. To all of our funders thank you so much.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the individuals, organisations, corporate partners, trusts and foundations who have enabled us to support people with spinal cord injury in 2023/24. Without your generosity our work would simply not be possible.

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 (Resigned on 13th November 2023)
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 Damian Riley*
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 Martine Petetin
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* Has a spinal cord injury

** family member

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transforming lives after spinal cord injury

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Thank you to our photographer Ash Knotek for providing the majority of the photographic images used in this Impact Report.

