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transforming lives after spinal cord injury

Impact report 2021/22

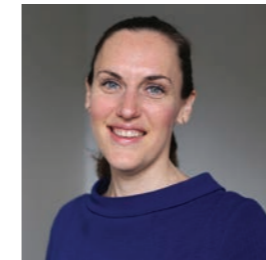


Components of success

- 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



At Back Up, one of our values is to embrace challenge. Over the past year, we have definitely lived this value! Many of our in-person services – from our vital wheelchair skills training sessions to our life changing face-to-face courses – were put on hold due to the continued impact of the pandemic. Not having a physical presence in the NHS spinal centres for large portions of the year, meant we found it harder to reach newly injured people. However, with the support of our brilliant Back Up community, and a little innovation, we continued to provide vital support to people. From launching our new online Employment Toolkit, to the expansion of our virtual courses, we’ve pioneered new ways to reach everyone affected by spinal cord injury.

This year marked the first in our journey to achieving the ambitions laid out in our Transforming Lives Strategy. Our strategy defines our focus till 2025, and ensures all our work is centred around three goals: living confidently, thriving at any age, and staying connected.

The progress we have made is only possible due to the support shown by our donors; individuals, fundraisers, trusts and corporate partners. To each and every one of you, thank you for enabling us to continue our life-changing work.

The achievements in this report are also testament to our passionate volunteers, who continue to go above and beyond to support Back Up and individuals affected by spinal cord injury. Thank you to everyone who has generously given their time.

Together, the Back Up community has weathered a very unusual couple of years, and laid the groundwork for an ambitious and exciting future. The stories in this report show that Back Up remains such a vital lifeline to so many.

Abigail Lock | CEO

The impact of Back Up's work in 2021/22

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic continued to affect our services throughout 2021/22. So, we developed our digital services further to reach as many people as possible. And, as the year progressed, many of our face-to-face services resumed.

900



Our online support group, the Back Up Lounge, was attended over **900 times**



130

130 family members accessed our family support services, with **98%** of family members feeling more supported after joining our family support events.

35



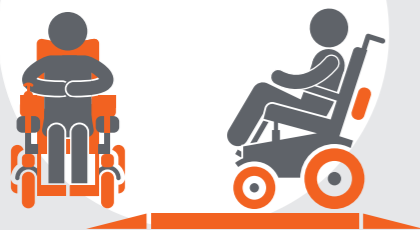
35 children and young people were supported through our Education Inclusion service, with **100%** of those young people feeling happier at school.



254

254 people attended our Wheelchair Skills Training sessions, with **100%** of participants learning more skills and feeling more confident using a wheelchair.

13,758



Our range of in-person and online services have been accessed **13,758 times** in 2021/22.

184



184 people were supported through our mentoring service, with **85%** reporting an increase in at least five out of seven positive coping strategies.



34

34 people attended our virtual What Next? and Skills for Work courses, with **87% of people** accomplishing their vocational goal within six months of attending the Skills for Work course.

4,047



Our new and improved virtual Education Inclusion Toolkit has been visited **4,047 times**.



Alex

Thriving at any age

When Alex was born, his spinal cord was tethered around the C5-7 level. Alex turned nine in August 2022. He's interested in everything, always wanting to learn more about the world around him, and he has great friends.

As a family, we were moving forwards and learning how to live positively with Alex's disability. However, during COVID, not attending school, seeing friends, or participating in wheelchair racing, gave Alex time to think and he started to struggle. He started focusing on the things he couldn't do, rather than the things he could. He felt very low and got frustrated. His self-esteem was at rock bottom and everyday felt challenging for him.

I tried to use my knowledge of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to help Alex. However, I don't have a disability so Alex felt I couldn't fully understand his experiences. He'd say- 'you just don't get it'.

Alex needed to speak to someone who could truly understand what he was going through, and who could give him insights into the promising future I know he'll have. I met one of the Back Up team at a 'Wacky Wednesday' session in Stoke Mandeville. I sat with him and asked a few questions about his life, his job, and even his wife. Hearing him speak helped me see the positive future Alex would have.

After reading about Back Up's mentoring service, we agreed Alex might find mentoring helpful. Alex's mentor was everything Alex aspires to be. They discussed everything - from cars and football, to the realities of living with a spinal cord injury. Alex even opened up to his mentor about how unkind comments from others made him feel. His mentor gave him valuable tips, and also showed Alex how to use breathing techniques when he is feeling frustrated. We both still use them most nights.

Mentoring has been a life-changing experience for Alex. His mentor was open and honest, and so positive about the future that it helped Alex picture all that his life could be. He really gave Alex hope at a time when he didn't have any. Alex is so much more open now about how he is feeling with friends and family. He's able to talk to us and seek advice rather than bottling things up and getting frustrated.

I was desperate to help my son and find the right support for him. Back Up was there for me, and him. I'll be forever grateful to Alex's mentor and to Back Up.

Lynne

Thriving at any age

After Syringomyelia caused my spinal cord injury, I started finding things quite difficult. I had a spinal shunt inserted in mid-December 2019, hoping it would improve my condition. But, unfortunately, it didn't work for me, and the day before my 70th birthday I had to have another operation. I'd planned a big party, but instead spent my birthday in the Marks and Spencer's café!

At that point, the COVID pandemic had just started to affect everyone in the UK, which was really tough. Resource was so limited, so I started looking at the support available and discovered Back Up. What's bizarre is that I knew of Back Up as I used to work for one of their corporate partners. However, at that point, I didn't think of myself as having a spinal cord injury. There's a tendency to think that if you don't sustain your injury in an accident, then you can't gain access to the support out there as you don't have a spinal cord injury. Back Up showed me that simply isn't true.

I signed up to mentoring right away as I didn't know anyone else who used a wheelchair, let alone had a similar injury to me. My mentor also sustained his spinal cord injury through an illness. It was so helpful speaking to him as he really understood what I was going through. To have that level of understanding with another person is so important.

After my experience with mentoring, I was keen to access the other support available, so I signed up to the What Next? course. At first, I was a little sceptical - I thought how can someone else teach me about confidence? But, from the first session, I changed my mind completely and found all the information so useful.

The course included sessions from lots of different people, some medical professionals but also those with lived experience. I found it so beneficial to hear about other people's experiences, as it made me realise there's different ways to overcome challenges. There was even a whole session on travelling, which taught me that visiting different countries was still possible. The physiotherapy session really stood out to me - the physiotherapist talked about pushing yourself a little, but often, rather than pushing yourself a lot, occasionally. This really stuck with me, and shaped the way I now approach exercise.

The whole experience was amazing, and just so encouraging. Meeting others in a similar situation and seeing how they approach life was so positive for me.

Now my confidence has increased, I'm starting to look into more activities and things I can do. I love sculptures, and this course has encouraged me to find live art classes that I can join. I want to make the effort now to really live, and enjoy life.



Noah

Living Confidently

In 2019, I started having real problems with my lower back, bladder, and legs. A few years later, I was diagnosed with Cauda Equina Syndrome which had caused a L4-S1 spinal cord injury. I decided to reach out to Back Up, and I remember that call so clearly – it was the first time I spoke to someone who knew what I was going through and could understand my situation. I didn't have to prove myself, I just felt supported.

At first, I signed up to Back Up's mentoring service. Back Up paired me with someone who I could really relate to. My mentor and I had so much in common, so I didn't have to explain aspects of my injury or identity, he just understood me.

Having experienced the support you get from speaking to others in similar situations, I then wanted to try one of Back Up's residential courses. I hadn't been to a specialist spinal unit, so it was the first time I had met others with similar injuries to myself, which was huge. The course taught me so much about living with a spinal cord injury such as the importance of establishing a bowel routine, which was brilliant as I hadn't known about that before. Being around people that understood what I was going through gave me both the confidence and the language to talk openly about my injury. I left the course feeling like I could do anything, and it gave me the confidence to try out para-sports. I've been playing Para Ice Hockey and Wheelchair Rugby League ever since!

Getting into paid employment was also really important to me, so I signed up for the Skills for Work course. However, I had to spend some time in hospital, which meant I went on the next Skills for Work course in February 2022. After four months in hospital, my confidence had taken a hit, so initially I was nervous about the course. But even after the first day, I started to regain my confidence. At the time, I was volunteering in a charity shop. Yet, I was being treated differently there due to my disability. After the course, I knew so much more about my rights which was really empowering in that situation. But, most importantly, I could now see that it was possible for me to have a job that I loved, and I had the practical skills to put myself out there and start applying.

This course was vital in helping me secure my new role as a Peer Support Worker with an amazing mental health charity. I've been working with the charity for a couple of months now, and the role is everything I had hoped for and more. Without Back Up, I don't think I would have the confidence to have made the most of the opportunities out there.





Susannah

Staying connected

I started out my career doing mainly admin work. Then, after a long spell in the Navy as one of the first seagoing Wrens, I decided to train as a nurse. I was living in Spain, working as a nurse, and living a simple life – great weather, nice food, and good friends. But, after my older brother sustained a high level spinal cord injury, I decided to return to London and support him.

When Trevor, my brother, was in the Royal London hospital one of the Back Up team visited him to speak about life with a spinal cord injury. After he'd spoken to my brother, I decided to chat to him – I'm a bit of a social butterfly and naturally inquisitive!

The Back Up team member had a low level injury and used a wheelchair. Hearing him speak about his life, his girlfriend, and his children gave me hope for my brother. It reminded me that there's a life for Trevor beyond the hospital walls.

I was on the Back Up website, and read about Back Up's mentoring service. Trevor and I weren't sure if it was what we needed, but I thought I'll give it a try!

At first, me and my mentor mainly spoke about day-to-day stuff. I just chatted away and it was so helpful to get the challenges I had been experiencing off my chest. But then, I started to ask my mentor more questions. Listening to her experiences helped me to accept that Trevor and I are still the same people. We are still brother and sister.

I'm lucky that I have great friends, all of whom want to support me. But, having a mentor who had similar experiences to me meant I could speak to someone who really understood what I was going through. It was such a relief to know it wasn't just me thinking and feeling these things.

I then signed up for the Family Lounge. Before the first one, I was a little nervous. I'm quite shy initially, but I wanted to push myself. One of the Lounge Hosts knew it was my first time, and welcomed me into the group. Having that community has been so useful – you learn all sorts. By listening to others you learn what you need to do to move forwards.

For me, the best advice I learnt is just to take each day as it comes, especially in the early stages. And I've also learnt that it's so important to make time for yourself. I used to feel guilty for going out and seeing friends for example, and occasionally I still do, but I also know that I shouldn't.

Robin

Staying connected

I've always been an 'outdoorsy' kind of person – I find spending too much time in built up areas really tiring. I used to be a snowboarding enthusiast and lived in the Alps for around seven years. After I sustained my spinal cord injury in an accident, back in 2018, I spent quite a few months at the Spinal Unit in Glasgow.

One of the Back Up team visited the unit and was teaching Wheelchair Skills. It struck me as a session that could be really useful. I thought the better I could get at using my wheelchair, the better life was going to be as I would have the skills to get around. The session was so positive and many of the skills I learnt still come in handy today. Then, a few years later, I saw Back Up was running a sit-ski course in Colorado. I applied then and there - I knew I just had to go for it.

When I sustained my spinal cord injury, I also sustained a traumatic brain injury, so I was curious to see how much of the course I would be capable of doing. When I first got on the slopes, I also felt an expectation, of myself, to be able to master the basics quickly because of my skiing experience. Yet, of course, my situation had really changed and it took me a while to get to grips with sit-skiing.

At first, it was frustrating. But then, this frustration turned into determination and I thought 'I'm not giving up'. I set myself the challenge of improving, just a little bit, each day and was supported by the other participants and the Back Up volunteers. I ended up being really impressed by how much I was able to do.

That's something I've really taken away from the course – my boundaries aren't as limited as I first thought. I can dig deeper and push harder to really do the things that I want to do. And I've been able to do more ever since. I hadn't flown since my injury, for example, so the sit-ski course was my first time on a plane. Now, flying doesn't bother me.

But, I think the biggest thing for me was really connecting with the other people on the course. Everyone there was in a similar situation, so there was no judgement at all – which is completely unique. And I think that's one of the reasons everyone gelled so much. We could be honest with each other, and came home with lifelong friends. The course helped me expand my horizons and get out there again. I no longer feel that tendency to isolate myself as much anymore. I've realised there's loads of fun to be had with other people out there.





Plans for the future

As we look to the year ahead, our focus is on reaching even more people affected by spinal cord injury with our life-changing services. To ensure we deliver against our Transforming Lives Strategy, over the next year we will:

- Respond to the growing number of older people with a spinal cord injury by increasing our support for both those aging with a spinal cord injury and those who sustain an injury later in life.
- As the NHS continues to face ongoing pressures, we will build and grow the numbers of people accessing our What Next? course. This course aims to equip those who have been recently injured with the information and practical skills they need to adjust positively to life after a spinal cord injury.
- We are the only UK charity with dedicated services for children and young people affected by spinal cord injury. Our unique position means that, in partnership with the NHS, we will pilot an accredited service providing Information, Advice, and Guidance to newly injured children, young people, and their families.
- The success of our Scottish Outreach and Engagement programme, combined with the fact that the majority of people sustaining a spinal cord injury do not get into specialist centres, means we will restructure our service delivery to enable more regional support.
- To meet the objectives within our strategy, we need to increase fundraising in a sustainable way. With the continuing economic uncertainty, we will focus on long term sustainability with a diverse range of income streams which ensure that Back Up is well placed to respond to unexpected economic events.

The difference our volunteers make

Volunteers have always been, and will always be, at the heart of everything we do. The contribution of our passionate volunteers is felt at all levels of the charity. Our vital work is made possible by their commitment and support.

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



Volunteer mentors spent **2,734 hours** making positive changes to the lives of others.



Office volunteers gave **935 hours** of their time to provide fundraising and administrative support.



Our family volunteers dedicated **96 hours** to supporting family members of people with a spinal cord injury.

In total, we estimate that our amazing volunteers contributed around **12,903 hours** to our work this year. This works out at around **537 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 courses dedicated **6,217 hours** to building our course participants' confidence and independence.



Our fundraising volunteers gave **639 hours** to planning our special events, sourcing prizes for events, and supporting our work.



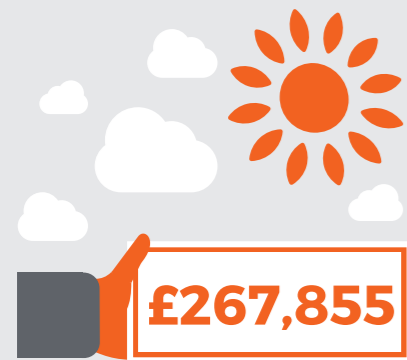
Our youth advisers and education advocates gave **282 hours** of their time to support children and young people with a spinal cord injury through mentoring, videos and our Youth Lounge.



Our trustees dedicated **594 hours** to governing Back Up and shaping the charity's future.

How we raised our money

In 2021/22, we raised £1,736,909. At the beginning of the year, in-person events were hanging in the balance, so we innovated and organised a celebrity shoe auction - 'Heels for Wheels'. As the year progressed, we saw the welcome return of our in-person events in accordance with Covid-19 regulations. Members of the Back Up community got together to support our vital work. Some of our fundraising highlights have been:



Our individual supporters donated **£267,855** to Back Up. We received **£4,050** from gifts in wills and in donations in memory of loved ones.



37 companies donated **£151,664** through sponsorship, corporate events and office fundraising.



331 people took part in our challenge events including the Spinal Circuit, #NoLimits cycle ride, and the London Marathon, raising **£104,375** on behalf of Back Up.



52 charitable trusts, including The National Lottery Community Fund, generously donated a total of **£418,226** to fund our services.



We raised **£28,000** from our Heels for Wheels campaign, which saw famous faces kindly donate their shoes in aid of Back Up.



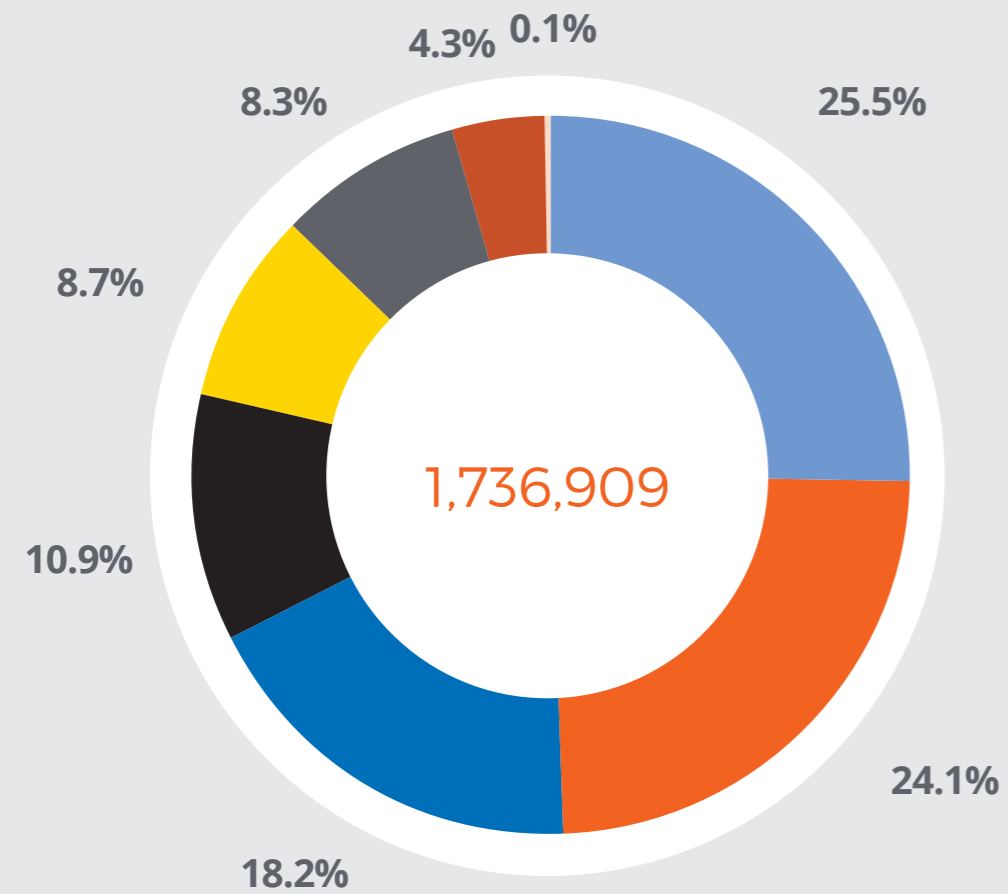
675 people attended our iconic fundraising events, including our City Dinner and Front Row Fashion Show. These events collectively raised over **£338,000**.

In 2021/22, we raised an incredible £1,736,909.

Every donation counts - big or small, they all help us support people affected by spinal cord injury. To all the individuals and organisations who have contributed to Back Up, we would like to say a massive thank you on behalf of all those you have helped in this past year. We simply could not do what we do without you.

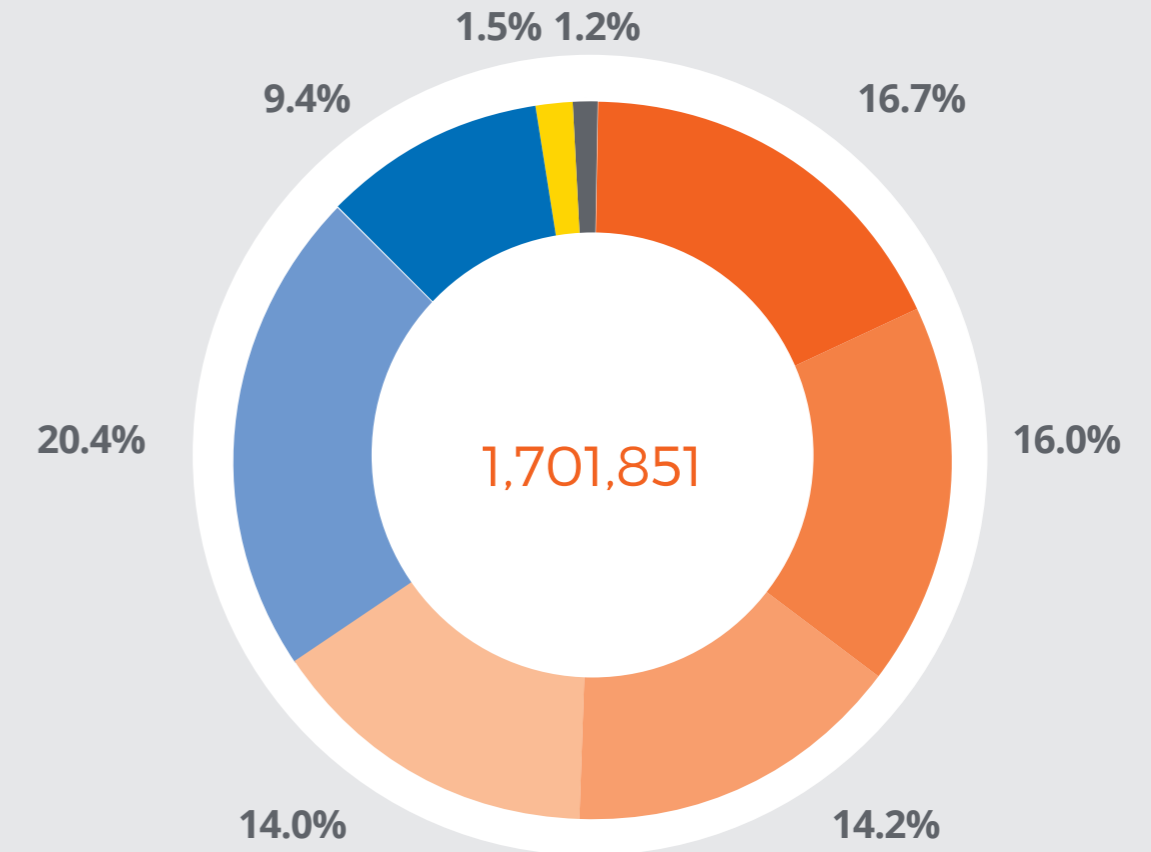


How we raised our money



- Events & Challenge
£442,461
- Trusts & Foundations
£418,226
- Donations
£316,022
- Government funding
£189,037
- Corporate
£151,664
- Trading activities
£143,535
- Community
£74,213
- Investment
£1,751

How we spent our money



- Mentoring
£284,502
- Outreach and Support
£271,649
- Events and Challenges
£240,909
- Courses
£238,444
- Fundraising
£347,362
- Awareness
£159,443
- Trading
£24,777
- Governance
£20,633

Although the majority of our income goes directly to our services, we wouldn't be able to function as a charity without spending on fundraising and governance to ensure the sustainability of our services for future generations. We recognise that going into 2022/23 there is still a high degree of economic uncertainty which is why we have maintained our reserves policy at four months. But, more importantly, our reserves will enable us to immediately invest more in our services in the coming year to deliver the commitments we have made within our ambitious Transforming Lives Strategy.

These reserves also ensure sufficient cashflow for day-to-day activities, meet opportunities that arise over time, and mitigate any unforeseen events that could come up over the next twelve months.

We already are delivering plans which will see us reaching even more people, providing more intensive support to those who have been injured during the pandemic and expanding our services to meet demand.

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 2021/22. Without your generosity our work would simply not be possible.

Trustees

Helen Cooke*

Mona Dhanjal**

David Fraser*

Anne Luttmann-Johnson*

Christopher Morgan*

Ben Parker**

Martine Petetin

Richard Rawstron
(Hon Treasurer from
July 2021 - present)

Tom Roberts**

Richard Smith
(Hon Treasurer – Resigned
10th November 2021)

Ben Sneesby*
(Resigned on 25th August 2021)

Rebecca Stevenson

Dr Clair Turnbull*
(Resigned on 10th
November 2021)

Joanna Wright*
(Chair of Trustees)

* Has a spinal cord injury
** family member

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back up

transforming lives after spinal cord injury

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We'd like to thank our amazing photographer Ash Knotek for providing the majority of the photographic images used in this impact report.

