



**Common Ground
2021-2022**

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Introduction

Changing Our Lives is a rights-based organisation. All of our work is rooted in the belief that no one is too disabled and no one's mental health is too complex to lead an 'ordinary life'. As such, we don't believe people's lives should be limited or defined by disability or mental health diagnoses.

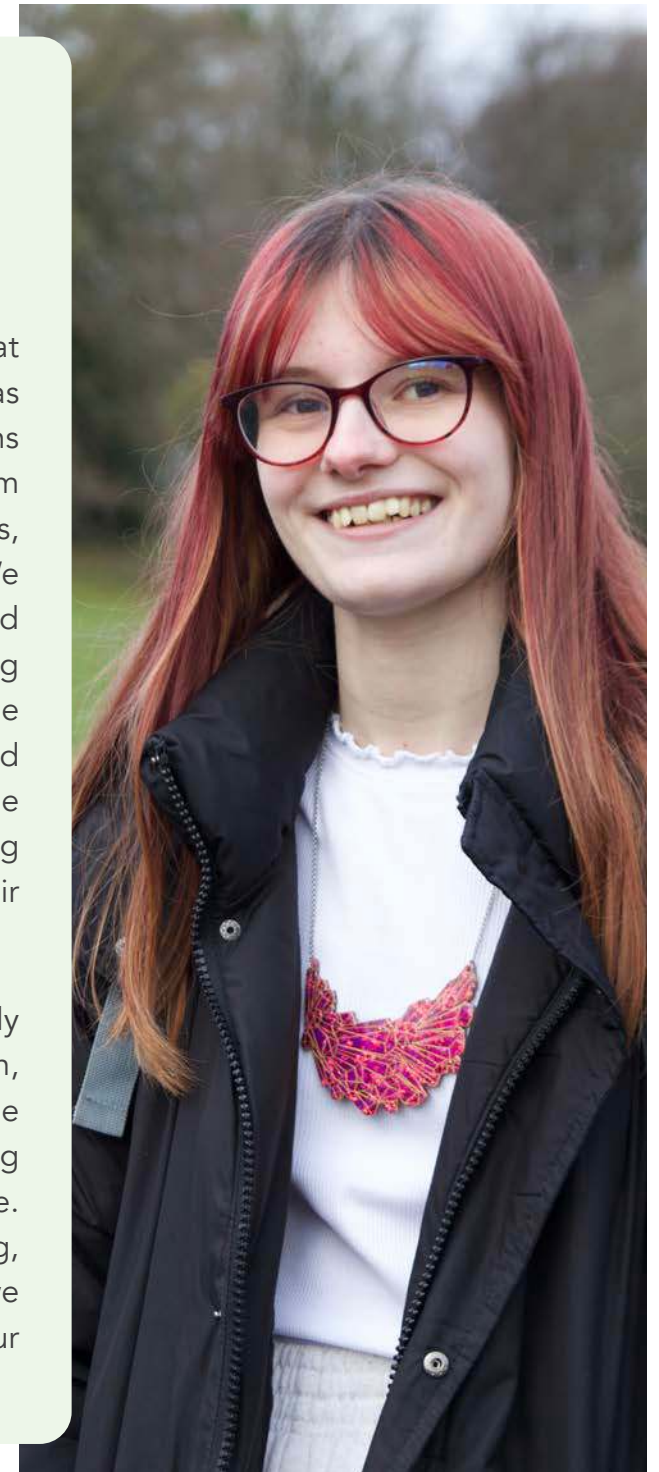
As part of the HeadStart Wolverhampton initiative, funded through The Big Lottery Fund, throughout 2021 and 2022, we continued to work on our Common Ground project in Wolverhampton. HeadStart Wolverhampton is a "test and learn" programme designed to improve the resilience and emotional wellbeing of children and young people by giving them the skills they need to address the challenges of modern life. Common Ground uses 'Community Connecting' as an approach to tackle youth loneliness and the impacts of this, through building connections between young disabled people and their local community. Friendships and connections are vital to good mental health and wellbeing but young disabled people often find barriers to connecting with their peers. Through the work that we do across England we know that too often disability is a pre-requisite for loneliness and often the social isolation and loneliness that young disabled people experience is defined by their disability, which can be all the more isolating. Therefore, we don't connect young disabled people into segregated services with other disabled people, instead we build relationships that are grounded in shared interests within communities.

The landscape of the pandemic

“Research suggests that 1 in 3 young people with a learning disability spend less than 1 hour outside their home on a typical Saturday.”¹

The increased awareness of loneliness throughout the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted that loneliness can affect all people, regardless of age or background. However, the pandemic has exacerbated the isolation and loneliness felt by young disabled people. Long before lockdowns and stay at home orders became a universal reality, young disabled people were isolated from their communities due to the attitudinal and physical barriers in society. At Changing Our Lives, we enable disabled people to live ordinary lives, something that most of us take for granted. We know that young disabled people can be viewed as ‘special’ and as a result are often segregated from their communities in schools and services where they are only ever exposed to other young disabled people with little or no opportunity for self-exploration and personal development. The absence of ordinary life opportunities breeds a culture of dependency, resulting in young disabled people being condemned to a lifetime of being treated as anything but ordinary. That is why the connections we foster are rooted in shared interests with a mutual exchange of assets, allowing real relationships to flourish over time and giving young people the opportunity to share their talents with the wider community.

The pandemic has presented a unique and challenging landscape to work within, particularly when aiming to establish new connections in communities. We have adapted our approach, working with both virtual technology, operating face-to-face where we can and working with the ever-changing climate presented by the pandemic. Lockdowns and isolation have had damning effects on the mental health of many young people and each young person’s situation is unique. For some young people, the negative implications of restrictions, and in some cases shielding, have increased levels of social anxiety. Through getting to know young people over time, we have developed relationships in ways that feel comfortable for each young person, adapting our approach to suit each individual.



Individual connecting work

We have worked on a one to one basis with nine young disabled people, including autistic people and young people with learning and physical disabilities, getting to know them over time by building trusted relationships. We get to know each young person and their family or immediate circle, by understanding their methods of communication, their likes and dislikes, hopes for the future and what makes them tick.

Via our links and relationships with communities in the local area, we facilitate individual connections for these young people, some within mainstream opportunities and some with individuals in the community who share a common interest. We connect young people in many ways, sourcing a variety of mainstream opportunities within their communities including, local clubs, employment support and volunteering. By establishing relationships with people, the success of these connections stand the test of time and make a real difference to people's lives. It is through using this approach that young people find solutions to overcoming loneliness and improve their mental health and wellbeing, while building stronger communities. Community connecting allows us to build on the strengths of young people, while amplifying their voice to make the change they need in their lives. Once the match is made, we spend some time with each young person to make sure they are going to benefit from the connection and then, because this is about natural supports developing between people, we draw back to allow the connection to flourish.





Anna's story



By getting involved with Common Ground, Anna has connected with people in her community through a shared love of art. Since the project began, Anna has taken opportunities to get creative, meet new people, started a volunteer role and even had her work exhibited at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. Anna was also introduced by another young person to an independent local shop that showcases homemade products from West Midlands' creatives and has a future aspiration to house her artwork there. Anna spoke to us about her experience and some personal highlights...

What have you enjoyed about the Common Ground project?

"I have enjoyed connecting with new people. My first opportunity started with meeting up with Changing Our Lives and another young person to spend the afternoon looking through the exhibitions at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. I really enjoyed chatting and connecting over a shared interest in art. I felt so happy to be able to go out and just explore and have a lovely chat, it put me into such a good mood! The positive energy and talking about art made me feel so much better.

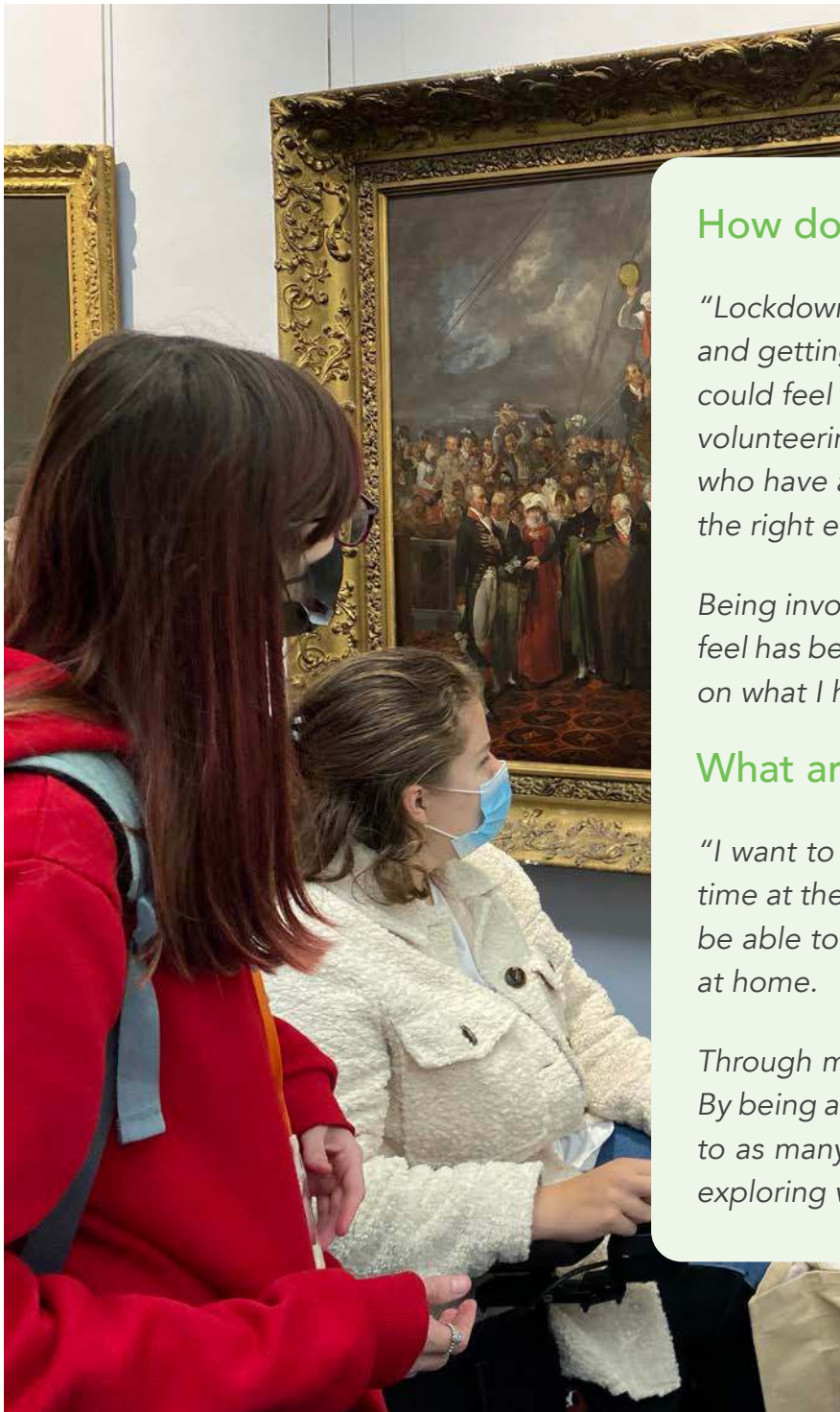
We then met up again to go to a print making workshop. I really enjoyed the workshop and catching up. It made me think about how maybe I could run art workshops myself in the future. I have continued to keep in touch with the young person who was introduced to me and we have continued to attend workshops in Wolverhampton together."

What have you achieved since getting involved in the Common Ground project?

"Being involved in different opportunities motivated me to get past the feeling of being stuck. Changing Our Lives introduced me to a volunteering opportunity at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. With support from Changing Our Lives, I then applied for the volunteer position and I was successful in my application! I enjoy my volunteer role; it's really nice to connect with other volunteers and have conversations with different age groups. I feel much happier for it. I have met so many great people from the ages of 15 to 50+. The role has helped me build my confidence, particularly through helping members of the public.

One of the things I have learnt from volunteering is how unique every artist is. It makes me think about what I am capable of when I let go and create. It has made me question why I don't paint more, which motivates me to get creative and express myself."





How do you feel since starting the project?

"Lockdown impacted my mental health negatively and I felt lonely. By getting out more and getting involved in the different opportunities presented to me through the project, I could feel a part of me coming back. It felt like another part of me opened up as I started volunteering; when I am volunteering I feel happy. Being in a creative setting with people who have a shared interest in art has been a positive experience. With the right people in the right environment, I know that creative side can come out of me."

Being involved in something that brings me joy and actually changes the way I feel and what I feel has been a great experience. This project will have lasting effects on me and I often reflect on what I have done and have been able to achieve."

What are your plans for the future?

"I want to progress as an artist, get better at it and continue to enjoy it. Having spent more time at the gallery, it makes me visualise how I can get creative in more ways. I want to be able to express whatever I am feeling through art and I am hoping to start painting more at home."

Through my volunteer role, I want to build upon my confidence and expand my experience. By being around the other volunteers, I am learning and I try to make the most out of speaking to as many people as I can. I am looking forward to seeing where the role can take me and exploring what else I can do in the future."

Group work with young people approaching the transition from education to the wider world

Over the course of the project, Changing Our Lives has built close working relationships with a special school and college in Wolverhampton to deliver bespoke programmes of work to 18 young people. The young people in these classes are approaching transition from school to college or from college to work and independent living. This can be a daunting and unfamiliar time, as young people prepare to leave a familiar environment for pastures new.

Through facilitating a series of customised workshops that focussed on their goals and aspirations, young people learnt how building connections in the community can increase confidence and resilience and take them closer to their desired future. With the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic, we adapted our delivery style to meet the needs of the school and college we were working with. By working alongside classes both virtually and face to face, we facilitated a series of workshops and activities based on future aspirations, friendships and community connecting.

Conversations in the college workshops enabled young people to think about the limited connections they had outside of education, as they opened up about feelings of loneliness. Some young people spoke about feelings of loneliness during the school holidays and the important role that friends play in their lives through contributing to positive mental health and wellbeing. These conversations hadn't occurred in class before and at times staff were surprised to hear of the lack of real connections in young people's lives. Exploring this in workshops, staff are now conscious of the areas that young people need further support with.

"The sessions were a good way of seeing how the students engage with new people face to face. It showed where their weaknesses are which has given me areas to work on before they leave college. Four of the students have now signed up for a volunteering scheme in Wolverhampton. We will continue to build on confidence in class and look at local clubs/groups they would like to join in the community."

Class teacher

"It's been a real learning curve for us on how to give the kids a voice and talk about their goals for the future [and] exploring how isolated [they] are outside of school."

"To make these connections happen for young people, we pledge to be resilient and adaptable to change and to grab opportunities for further community connecting in both hands and to open the world up to our young people."

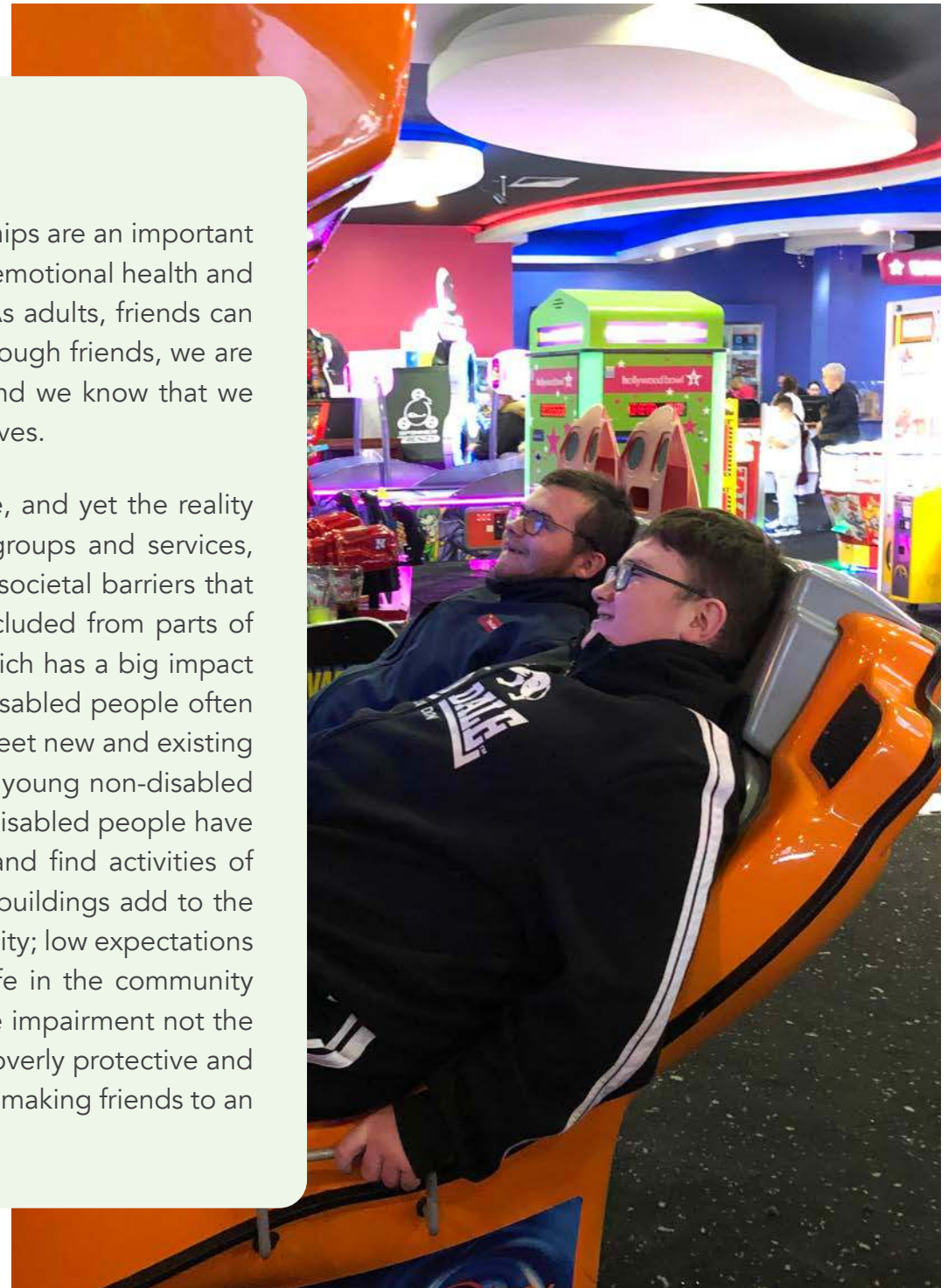
Workshops which took place in the special school saw us adapt our approach to reach young people who were learning in class bubbles. Getting to know the class over time, we delivered a range of activities which enabled the young people to think about their goals for the future and how making more connections outside of school life could ease anxiety around transition and assist with their goals. During the community mapping exercise, young people completed individual community maps to better understand the connections they had in their lives, spanning across the different areas of school/work, interests, friends and neighbours, family and their local area. Through doing this exercise, it became clear that for the class most of their connections were from school and family life, with many young people finding it difficult to name people in other areas of their lives. This prompted discussion between class teachers as they were shocked at how poorly connected young people were outside of school.

Following on from class workshops, Changing Our Lives delivered a training session focussing on community connecting with staff at the special school. During this session, class teachers were able to share their learning from the class workshops with the wider staff team. Staff were invited to complete their own community maps and compared them with the maps completed by the class. This motivated discussions on how the school can adopt community connecting as an approach to improve connections for young people, whilst highlighting the importance that friendships have on the wellbeing of their pupils. Staff made a commitment to explore how this practice can be embedded to benefit students in other school years and are trialling virtual connecting workshops with another school in the borough.

Conclusion

We know intuitively, anecdotally, and through research that friendships are an important part of most people's lives. Having friends is not only good for our emotional health and well-being but may actually increase our life expectancy as well. As adults, friends can often replace family as the most significant people in our lives. Through friends, we are linked to wider networks of people, social circles and interests, and we know that we have people who care about us and with whom we can enjoy our lives.

Young disabled people have a right to this just like everyone else, and yet the reality is that they are often socially isolated, segregated in specialist groups and services, and tourists in their own community. The attitudinal, physical and societal barriers that disabled people still face every day mean that they are often excluded from parts of society and community life that other people take for granted, which has a big impact on the formation and maintenance of lasting friendships. Young disabled people often have limited opportunities to learn about safe friendships and to meet new and existing friends; they may be educated in special schools away from other young non-disabled people and even outside of their local area. In many cases young disabled people have to rely on family in order to get out into the wider community and find activities of interest. Physical barriers such as lack of accessible transport and buildings add to the challenges, as do negative attitudes based on stereotypes of disability; low expectations and assumptions that disabled people need services not a full life in the community with friends; restricted views of what is possible and a focus on the impairment not the person. Families and professionals may be concerned about risks, overly protective and unnecessarily cautious, reducing the organic and natural process of making friends to an artificial series of assessments and sterile plans.





Sadly, all of these factors were a feature of the lives of the young people who became part of the Common Ground project. However, this project shows that with ordinary life thinking, person centred approaches and a focus on the wider community, we are all free to access, many of these barriers can be over-come and young disabled people can make real, natural human connections beyond segregated services and disability specific groups. Both disabled people and the local community have something to give and a lot to gain by connecting. Many positive outcomes have been achieved by the young people in this project: lasting friendships, finding a place and connection with a new community of interest, contributing something of value, increased confidence and self-esteem and the development of independence skills are just a few. The legacy of the Common Ground project will live on in the friendships and connections fostered, as well as in the minds of the professionals and families whose expectations have been challenged by seeing what is possible.

True inclusion is a universal human right not a privilege (Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities). Achieving inclusion means confronting the barriers that exclude disabled people, recognising instead our interdependence and striving to create welcoming communities where everyone has a place, where gifts and talents are valued, and individual contribution is expected and encouraged. Changing Our Lives is committed to this work and will continue to use community connecting, based on ordinary life thinking, to build relationships that are grounded in shared interests and a mutual exchange of assets.

References

- ¹ Mencap (2019), *Learning Disability - Friendship and Socialising Stats* Mencap, available at: <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/research-and-statistics/friendships-research-and-statistics>



**No one is too disabled,
or too affected by
mental health difficulties,
to lead an ordinary life**

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