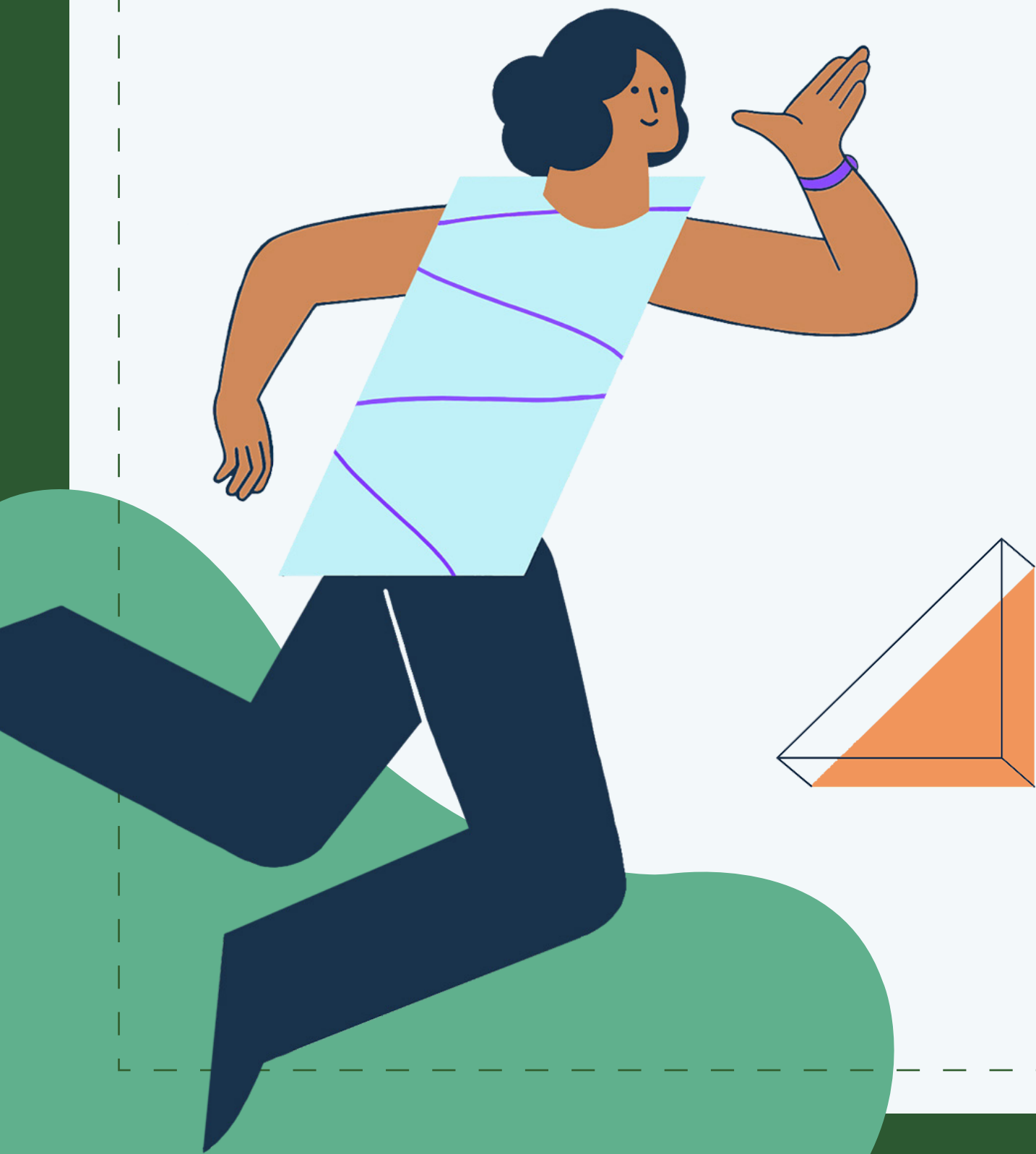


WRITE BACK

# IMPACT REPORT

2020-2021





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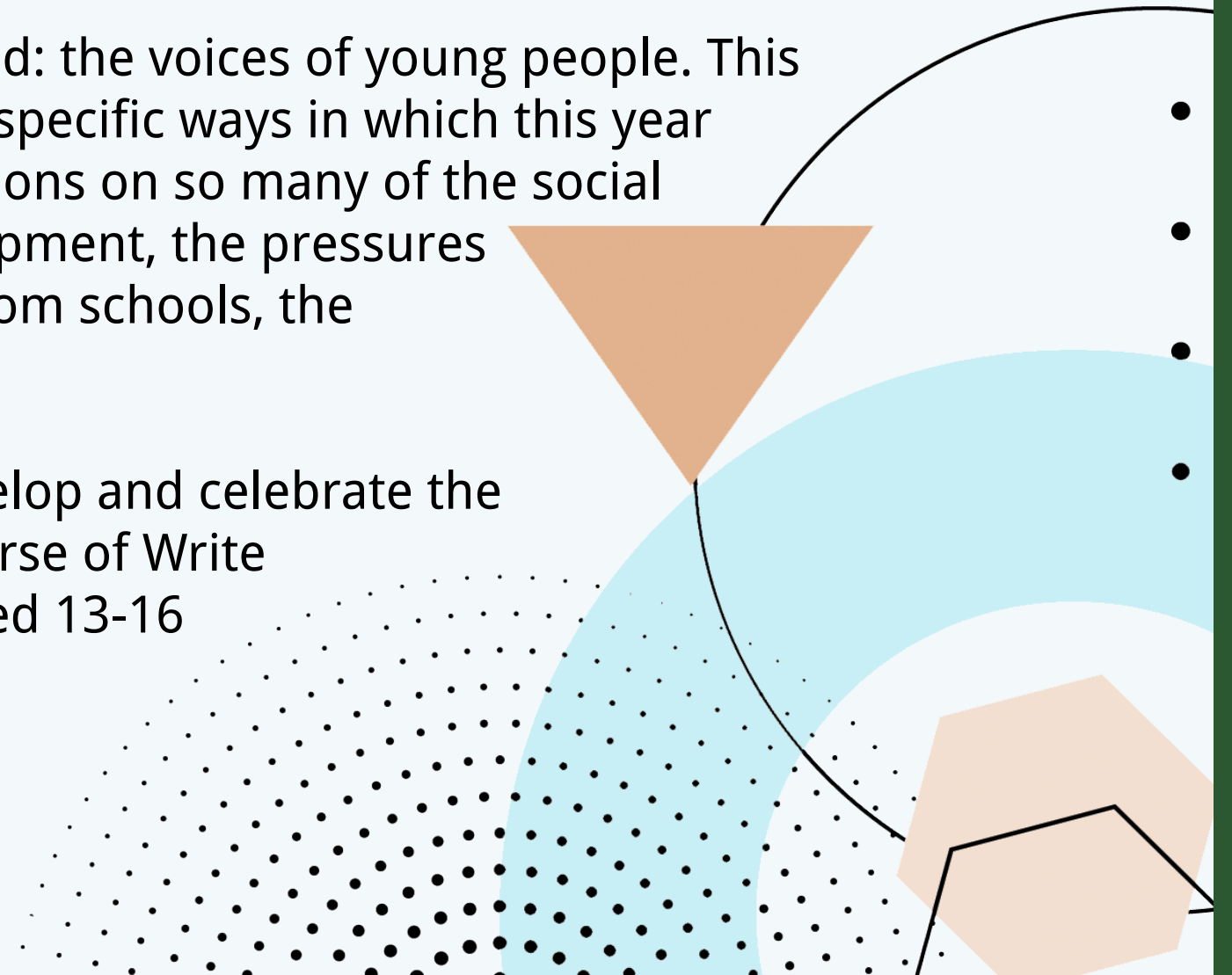
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# INTRODUCTION

The last year has certainly proved a challenging one. With political uncertainty across the Atlantic, climate breakdown from Australia to California, global protests against racism and state violence and, of course, the ongoing catastrophes in the wake of COVID-19, it certainly has proved capable of generating seemingly endless commentary and news coverage.

Yet so often there is a glaring omission in the perspectives captured: the voices of young people. This absence becomes even more indefensible when you consider the specific ways in which this year has impacted upon teenagers: the closures of schools, the restrictions on so many of the social and extracurricular opportunities crucial to young people's development, the pressures of an exam-oriented education system after months of absence from schools, the premature loss of grandparents and family members.

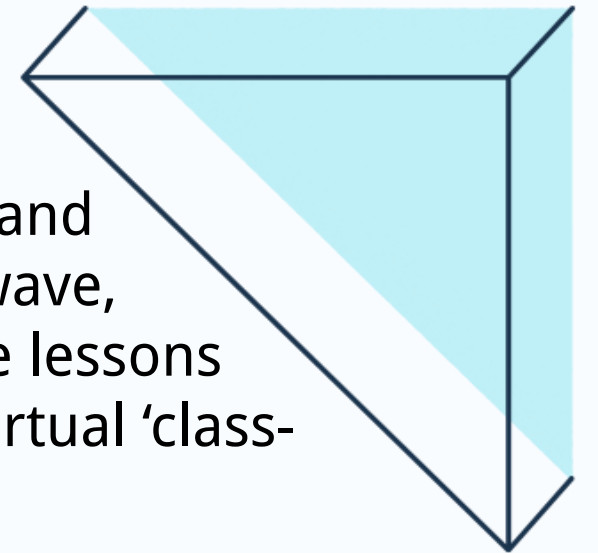
That's why, at Write Back, we've been delighted to encourage, develop and celebrate the stories of so many young people in the last year. Through the course of Write Back programmes at Future Youth Zone, the young writers (all aged 13-16 from across Barking and Dagenham) have had the courage and intelligence to reflect upon this eventful 12 months.



This has not always proved straightforward. School closures, changing government guidelines and the location of our work in a local authority that was among the worst affected in the second wave, has meant that we've had to alternate between online and in person provision. Yet, some of the lessons learnt should stand us in good stead beyond the pandemic: Zoom calls, home deliveries and virtual 'classrooms' are now firmly in our arsenal of activities.

This report aims to capture the lessons we've learnt as an organisation from this tumultuous year. It shows the value a storytelling approach can have in providing young people opportunities to discuss the issues important to them: the impact on their self-esteem, the rich lessons they gain from the stories of others and the fostering of community. In this report you'll see a breakdown of the main activities and outcomes of our work and you'll also hear from supporters, partners, schools and volunteers with their insights into our programmes.

Perhaps, most importantly, you'll also hear the voices of the storytellers themselves. This organisation emerged from the experiences of young people and it is the incredible scope, honesty and power of these stories that remain our guiding light in difficult times.



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## Dear COVID

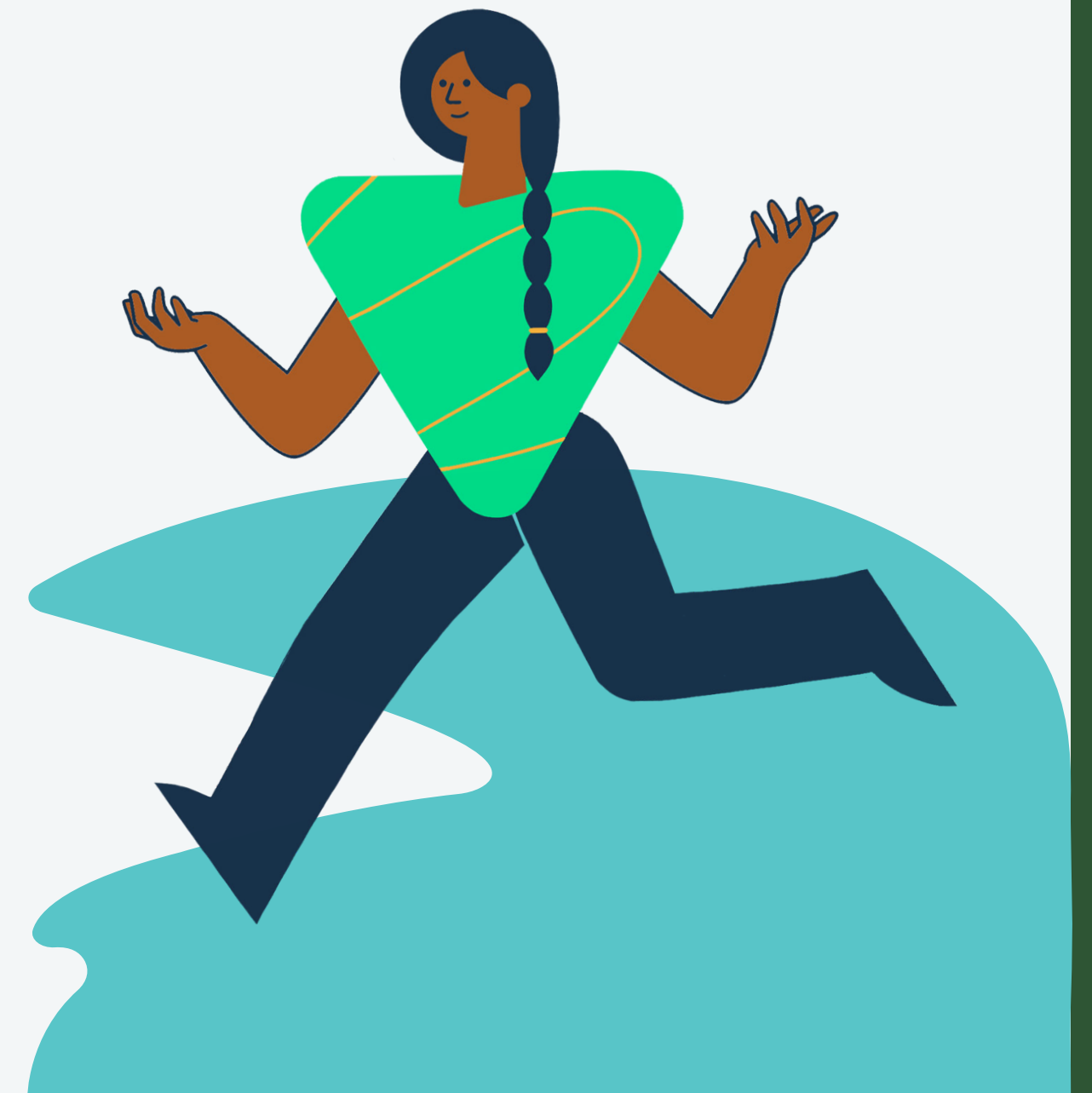
I've decided to spend time on finally learning to play the guitar. My dad has a few so can teach me and my brothers. You have made me really appreciate this time with my family, no distractions, no games, no school, just family. I have time to do anything. Well, not anything, we're still not free from you... but hopefully soon.

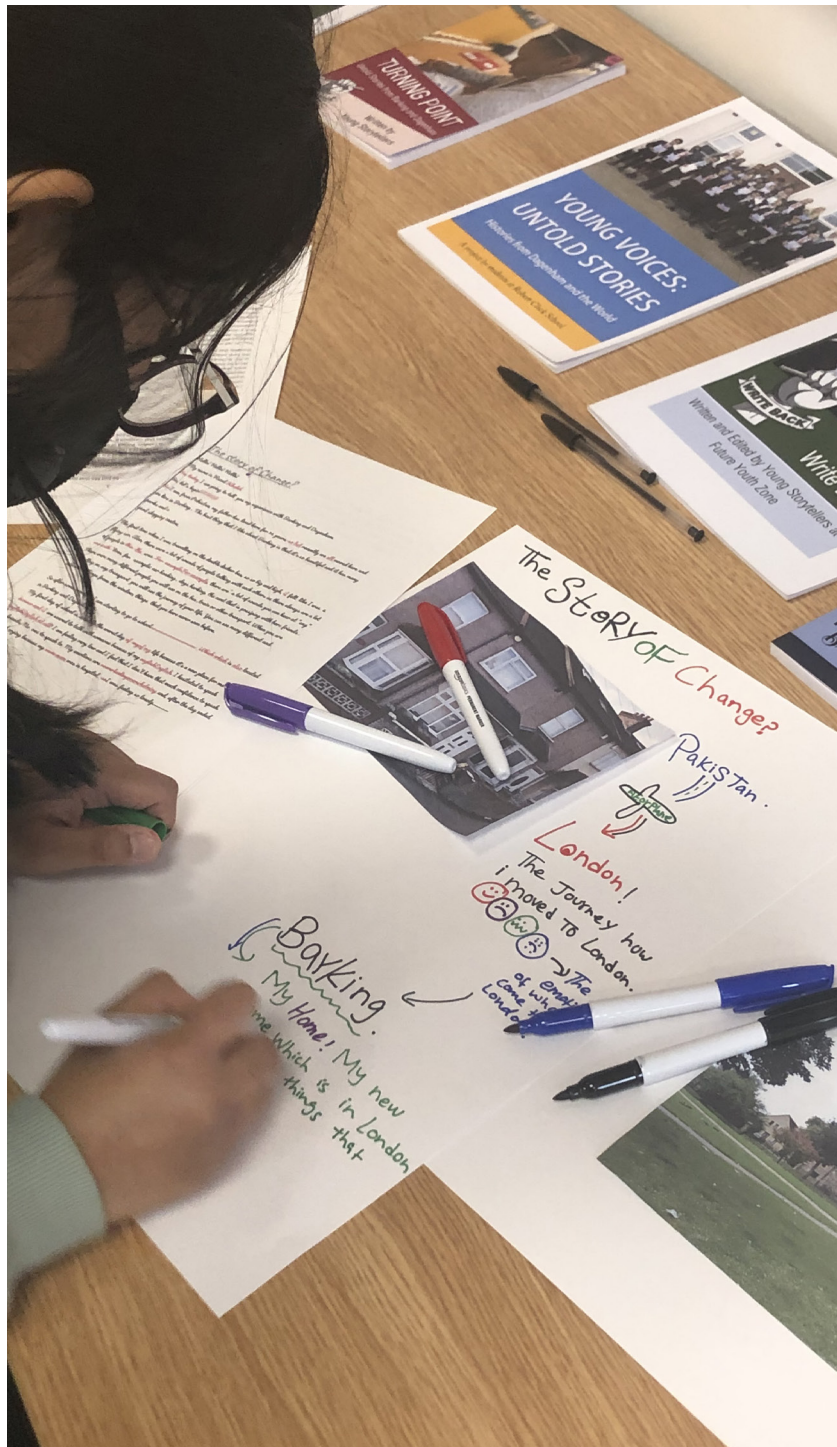
## Dear You

The walls in my bedroom feel so much closer now. I've been here trapped for so long it's like a coffin, a coffin I can't escape from. Why can't you leave? Just die already.

## Dear COVID-19

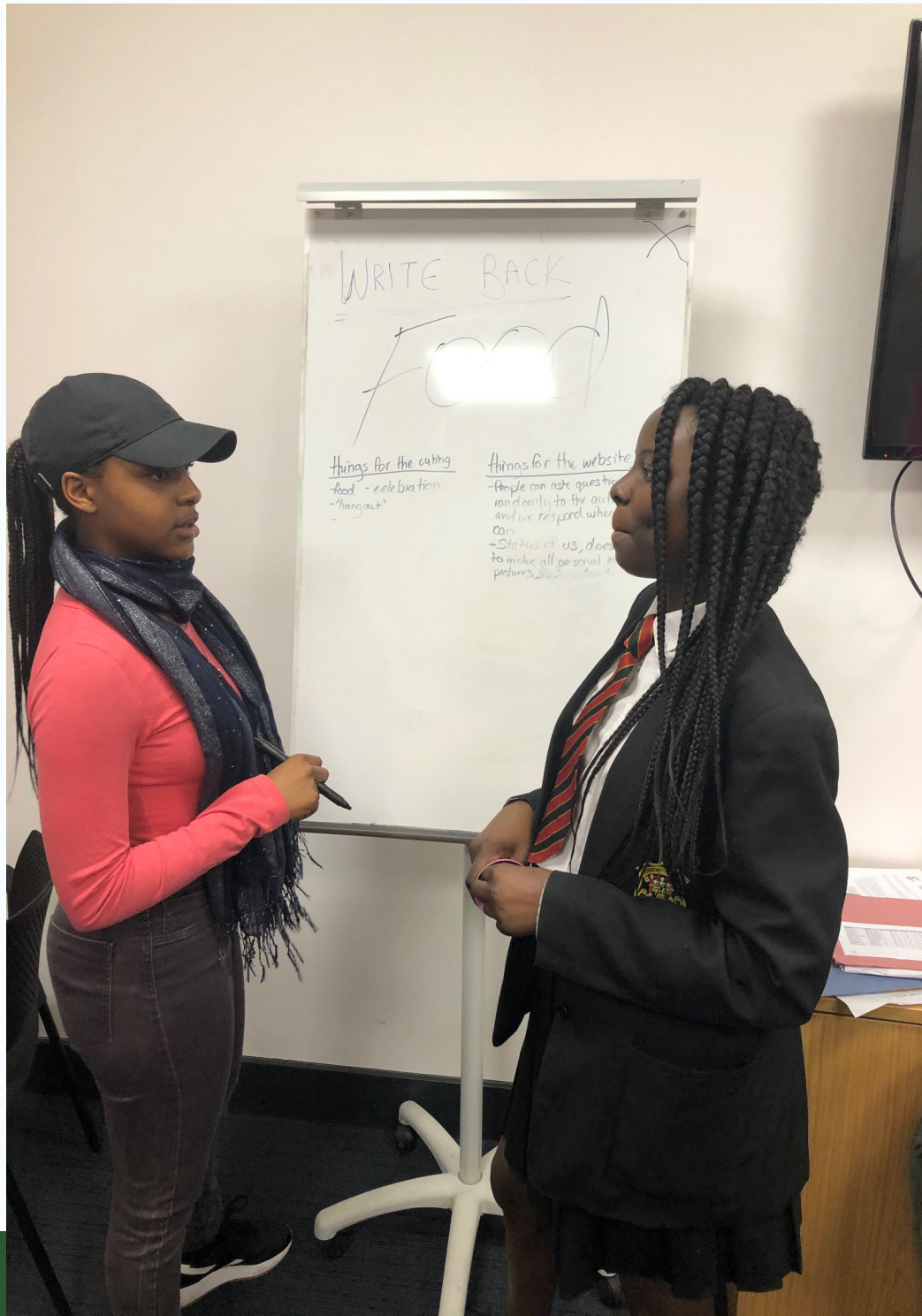
Even on the bad days I try very hard to see the light on the other side. It will happen soon and I'll get to see my friends and family again. I hate you so much COVID but you won't break me. Everything and everyone has a weakness, one day we'll find yours and you'll be nothing but a distant memory.





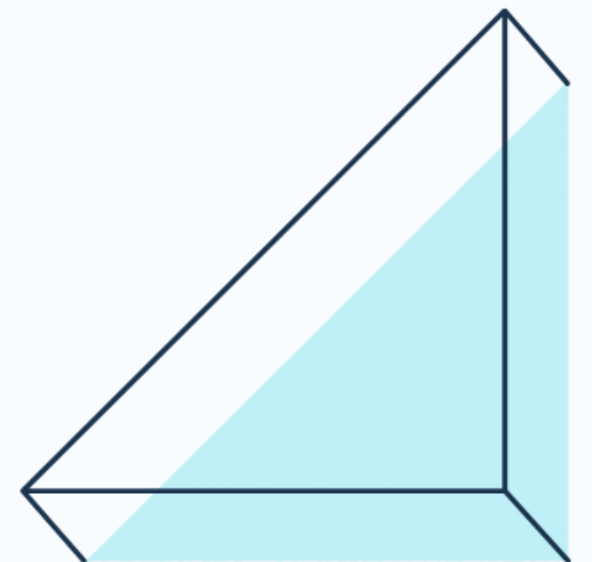
# ABOUT US

## Who We Are



Write Back is a registered charity providing opportunities for marginalised young people to see the value of their own experiences. We build self-respect, community and independent voices for young people through the sharing of their stories.

Our story started in a History classroom in 2015, working with Year 9 students to publish their stories of immigration. In September 2019 we began running sessions for young people across the borough of Barking and Dagenham. In early 2020, we registered with the Charity Commission, formalising our status as an independent charity, and recruited a board of trustees.

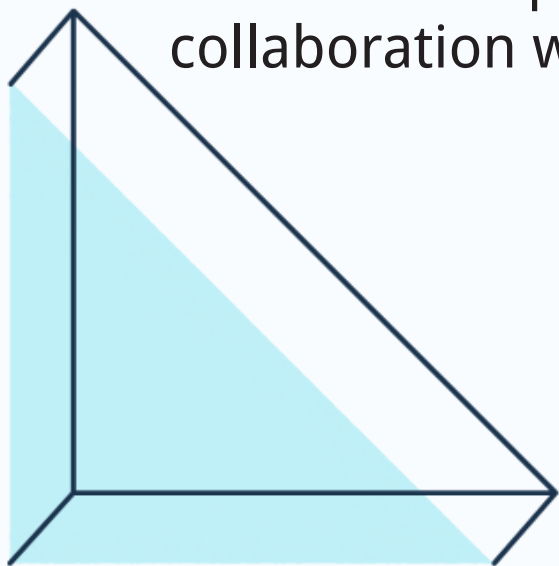


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## What We Do

We run 10-week storytelling programmes open to students aged between 13 and 16 and identified by their teachers as lacking confidence, self-esteem or a creative outlet. These young people are referred to us by schools in Barking and Dagenham, and are then enrolled in our programmes at the Future Youth Zone, an award-winning local youth centre. In each session we run confidence-building activities, engage with the writing of a young author and then develop the stories of the participating young people.

The 10-week project also involves working with writers and artists, and culminates with the celebration of the young people's work including in books, local museum exhibitions and much more. Alongside our main programmes, we run a graduate scheme that offers new creative opportunities for young people who have completed a 10-week programme. We also run bespoke, one off storytelling sessions for young people in collaboration with other partners.





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## Why We Do It

Write Back rests on three key ideas: that every young person has a story to tell and the capacity to tell it; that a deep connection with the stories of others is often the most powerful way to learn; that young people should tell their stories in the way that they want them to be told.

Our programmes have shown the transformative impact storytelling can have. They provide young people with the opportunity to discuss their identities in ways that are difficult to do within a school classroom: their experiences of being treated differently because of their gender, of racial profiling, of the stereotypes they have faced as migrants, of their experience 'coming out' as LGBTQ. Quantitative evaluations of our programmes as well as feedback from schools, families and the young people themselves have shown marked improvements for participant self-esteem and perceptions of themselves and their capabilities.

Our work is focused in Barking and Dagenham because this is where our project was created and where demand remains so great. The borough is the 9th most deprived local authority in the country and 37% of its young people and children live in poverty. Despite this, Barking and Dagenham has the joint fewest charities per head in the country. Research conducted by the local authority revealed that only 37% of young residents felt they had someone to talk to about problems that worry them. The same research found that almost a third of young people felt optimistic 'rarely' or 'none of the time'. We believe that storytelling can play a crucial role in addressing this situation by building young people's respect for themselves and by developing trust and community amongst young people.





# 2020-2021 In Review

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A Year in Headlines

- Since becoming a registered charity just over a year ago, Write Back has run over **100 hours** of storytelling programmes (both online and in person).
- More than eight in ten participants' self-esteem improved over the course of our programme, on average by **23%** .
- Through our programmes we have printed and celebrated the stories of over **70 young people**.
- Three anthologies of young writers produced, with over **62,000 words** published by young writers.
- Measured by the Rosenberg self-esteem scale, which participants took at the start and end of our Autumn Programme. There was an average improvement of **23%** between start and end scores.



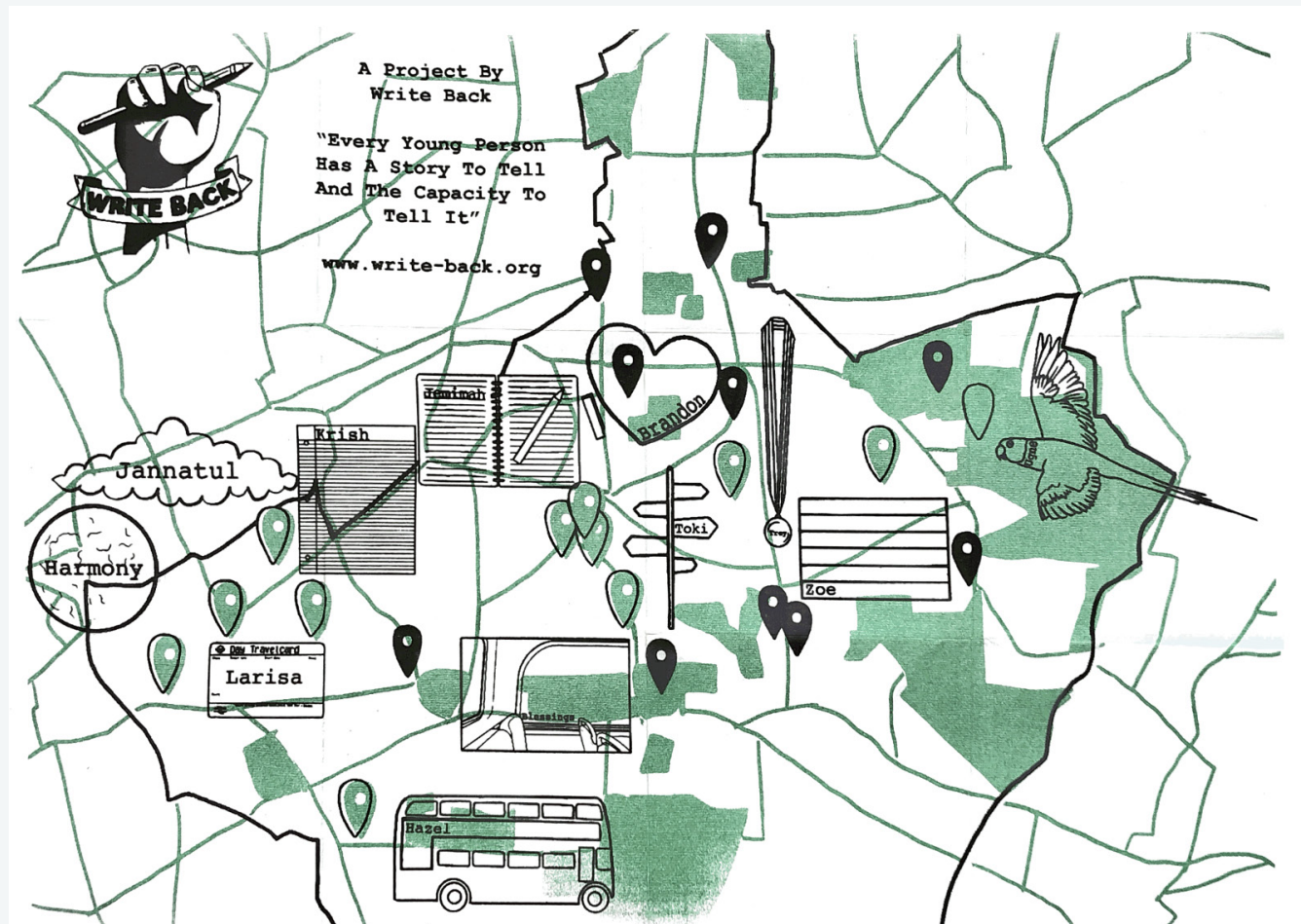


## IN DEPTH

In December 2020 our storytellers published Write Back's fifth book: 2020: Through the Eyes of Young People, cataloguing youth experiences in the pandemic. We celebrated that achievement in January through an online 'book launch' attended by over 60 people including local writers, representatives of our six partner schools and the leader of the local council.

Despite the upheaval caused by the January lockdown, we developed a partnership with the graphic design department at London Metropolitan University. Through this collaboration, our 'graduate' storytellers have produced an illustrated story map of their local area. These young people are currently working with Queen Mary University to turn this into an interactive digital map.





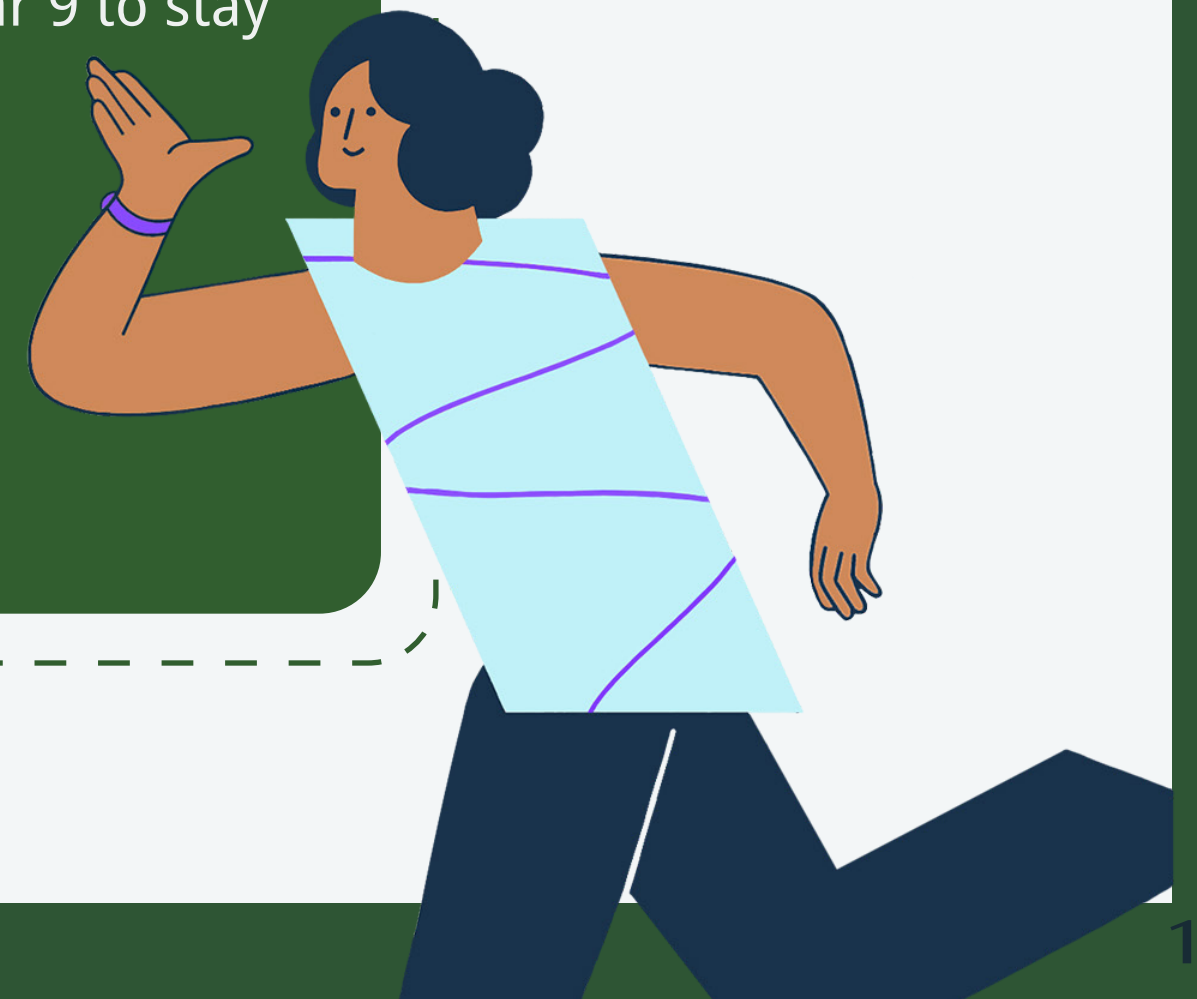
We have also deepened our relationships with our existing partners, supporting our six partner schools to continue referring young people onto the programme and developing CPD material they can use in the classroom. Our hosts in Future Youth Zone also commissioned us to run workshops for vulnerable young people in school holidays and we are currently in exciting conversations with them about plans for their alternative education provision.

In addition to our main programmes, we have been supporting many of the young people who originally helped to 'found' Write Back to publish a new book based on their experiences of race. This is due to be completed in July. We have also secured a place for one of our students to join an international network of young writers who are due to be published in an anthology by Penguin Random House in 2022 and are supporting him through the process of writing and revisions.

## Here We Go Again

The test is tomorrow, you must get a 100%. Anything lower, see me. Did you get to sort out the issue? Have you apologised yet? Did she see your text? Homework due tomorrow: did you forget? Miss is going to shout! What will your mum say about the detention? Are you falling asleep? What time did you go bed? Where's your mask? Keep 2 metres away! Unfortunately, we have to ask Year 9 to stay home. Don't forget your homework!

It's all too much.  
I need to press pause.  
Breathe; in, out, again, slowly.  
Slow down and Rewind.



# MEET THE TEAM



Sam Norwood  
(Founder)

Sam has been teaching in Barking and Dagenham for the last 8 years. He set up Write Back in 2019 and leads the programmes. He is also the first UK-based Freedom Writer teacher, one of several hundred educators across the world who promote a culture of acceptance and diversity in classrooms from Rwanda to Palestine.



Helen Twigg  
(Volunteer Educator)

Helen started volunteering with young people when she was a university student: from being a Forest Schools volunteer in Norwich to touring schools with Fair Trade Scotland, she has always enjoyed watching students gain confidence and tapping into their creativity. Helen is passionate about creative writing and currently works as an English teacher in Barking and Dagenham.



Alex Newton  
(Chair of Trustees)

Alex works for an education charity in London. He's previously worked as an employment mediator for Acas and for a range of other charities in the education and equalities sector, including Stonewall.



Grace Selley  
(Trustee)

Grace is an experienced technology consultant, who specialises in working with nonprofits. She has previously worked at a number of charities including Stonewall, Mind CHWF and Into Film.



Daven Hindocha  
(Treasurer and Trustee)

Daven qualified as a chartered accountant at EY in 2012. For the past 10 years, he has worked in mergers and acquisitions as both an adviser and for listed businesses.

# Example story of a young person

## Blue

I can't really say Year 7 was my best year as I still carried that someone else with me everywhere. I didn't feel like me but it was okay because of just the thought of staying in the same school, seeing the same people, sharing memories and growing a connection. I was more than content with that. I felt like I had a place to belong to. Then came Year 8. During the winter I had to change schools again. I got so frustrated because every single time I finally felt comfortable in a new school, the sense of familiarity disappeared and it wasn't like I even got to say goodbye properly. I just left. Joined the new school and got on with my life. At times I would cry myself to sleep because I regretted moving.

Questions in my head swirled like a tornado. Do they miss me? Will I fit in? Why do I feel so tired of everything? Getting lost in my own world, I wouldn't speak a lot and I kept to myself. I started staring out of the bus window watching the rain fall and the world go by, my facial expressions were depressing to look at. I couldn't even face myself in the mirror and, if anyone asked why I looked like that, I wouldn't say. But inside my head I just felt so blue, so tired of everything.

## Yellow to Red

Throughout my whole primary school life, I've never stayed in one school. I never questioned why it always happened. Sure, I would get mad at my parents because, anytime I finally made friends, I would have to leave them behind and make new ones. But I got used to the cycle: being shy and quiet then making friends then, after a while, leaving for my new school to repeat the process again. Being young, I was ecstatic to meet new people and see new things, never knowing how soon I would get tired of this cycle. Then my cheerful and adventurous self shifted to despise everyone. My filter slowly started to turn from yellow to red.

## Black

It was the beginning of my last year in primary. You know the time when you were so excited to leave your childish self behind and become mature like they told you. I had this fantasy that growing up was going to be so cool, wondering how many things I was finally allowed to do like staying up late or watching shows past midnight. But, as the months went by, I became less... me and more... someone else.

This someone else didn't like to trust people and began to worry about what other people thought of her. She thought a lot about the future, even the littlest things like arguing would make her think that other people hated her. I realised 'she' was me: I didn't want to trust people; I thought a lot about the future. That year my filter blackened from the fear of failure, the fear of entering a new world - secondary school.



## Grey

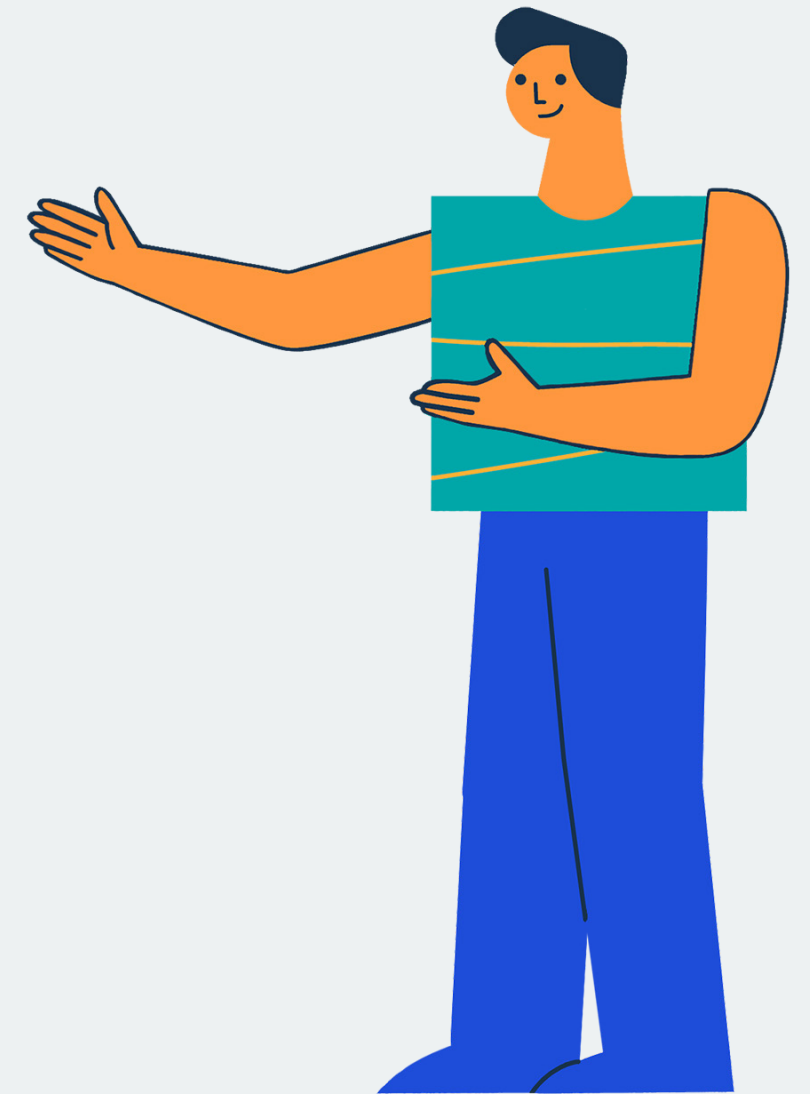
One night I couldn't sleep. I was exhausted with this thing we call emotions. It was driving me insane. I couldn't keep acting like I was fine and nothing was affecting me. All this fear and hatred and sadness I kept bottled up for the past 2 years led me to feel an emotion that I never thought I could feel. Emptiness. I couldn't feel anything and it scared me. I was scared of myself. I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror to see any signs of feeling but saw nothing. My face was expressionless and my heart felt heavy. I went back to my room and laid in bed staring at nothing. After five minutes or so my cheeks felt wet, my cries weren't audible but I heard them loud and clear. I wasn't okay. I felt like I was suffocating and falling into a hole of nothingness. That's when I realised that that person in the mirror was still me. I had got so immersed in thinking what everybody else thought of me and how to portray myself that I had changed - and not all for the better. I realised my filter was mixed with red, blue, yellow and black.

There was still yellow.

## Green

After that night I didn't want to let go of that yellow I still had in me, I wanted to expand it but I just didn't know how to do it. So, I did the only thing that came to my mind and that was remember the reason my filter was yellow in the first place. The happiness I felt when seeing new people and gaining this sense of adapting no matter the situation. In the past I had experienced new things and not once did I care to think about what was wrong. Replaying my filter change, I moved onto black and blue, it would be no good letting those colours hold me down. Instead, I accepted them with open arms as these colours helped me grow into who I am today, I just paid too much attention to the negatives instead of the positives.

That's when my filter transformed into a fresh green. Yellow: appreciating the little things in life and the people I have around me. Blue: letting out the sadness instead of bottling it up. Black: assuring myself that it's okay to fear the future. Now green: not forgetting who I truly am no matter what the future holds.



# TESTIMONIALS

“ It’s been an absolute blast and honour being a member of the Write Back community, I’ve never felt so accepted, free in my thoughts and simply able to just let myself be.

*Storyteller, Year 9*

“ If it wasn’t for Write Back, I’m not sure where I would be right now.

*Storyteller, Year 9*

“ I think everyone should share their stories and perspectives, because sharing your story is what will build a real connection between you and others. We can talk about the need for a stronger connection between generations, or races, or between any other form of separation between people, but generally a society in which all groups feel a connection with each other is a better society

It’s very important that young people are able to share stories and perspectives and politically we are not given a voice until the age of 18. Yet through the exhibition of stories and forms of art at a young age we were given the opinions to present our views and opinions on past, present and future political events which not only enhanced our knowledge but also our confidence.

*University student, former storyteller*

“ Q: What have you learnt about yourself through being on the Write Back programme?  
A: I have learnt that I am not worthless and I have the confidence to do what I want to do.  
A: I am more positive and confident about myself.  
A: I have a voice.  
A: I can be anyone I want to be.  
A: That my opinion is just as valid as anyone else’s and my age doesn’t make me irrelevant.

The main thing I’ve gained is an appreciation for just how different people are. Everyone has a story, and now whenever I meet someone I want to find out theirs.

*University student, former storyteller*



“ I continue to be thoroughly impressed by the amazing work and activities of Write Back. By empowering and inspiring young people to share stories of their personal and family histories, they are creating historic documents and narratives that historians will find invaluable in understanding the social and cultural life of London and beyond at the beginning of the 21st century. Keep up the wonderful work and we will very happily continue to archive the treasures you create!

*Stefan Dickers, Special Collections and Archives Manager, Bishopsgate Institute*

“ In a time where social media is dictating beauty standards and lifestyles, I think it is essential for young people to be able to express their stories and their perspectives without being judged. Most of the time, young people keep these experiences to themselves (some good and some bad) which may take massive chunks of their confidence away leading to many mental health issues. The ability for young people to be able to share their stories with others is a great step for them to build up confidence in public speaking, creative writing and also in themselves.

*University student, former storyteller*

“ The sessions have been fun, well prepared, inspiring, engaging and has unlocked creativity and passion in our young people who have attended through the medium of creative writing and expression.

*Gershon Clarke, Senior Club Manager, Future Youth Zone*

“ My son had never asked about the family history before, I didn't think he cared. When he got involved with this project he became more interested with our history and culture, which I think made him happier with who he was.

*Parent of a storyteller*



“ The students demonstrated pride in their past and also in themselves at being able to share their stories. Thank you for giving these young people the platform to enable them to do this.

*Amanda Wray, Learning Operations Coordinator, Valence House*

“ This project ensures that young people not only understand the meaning of tolerance, but more importantly truly embrace it such that it permeates their everyday lives.’

*Russell Taylor, Headteacher, Robert Clack School*

“ A rare opportunity to explore the issues of identity and personal histories which helps pupils develop their self-esteem and self-worth whilst stimulating their creative and critical judgement skills.

*Katy Staten, Head of History, Robert Clack School*





## OUR PLANS FOR THE YEAR AHEAD

While the last year has been a time of exciting growth and development for Write Back, the Covid-19 pandemic has also raised considerable challenges for us. Next year, we intend to continue growing our reach and impact, but are conscious that the pandemic is by no means over. We plan in the spirit of optimism, but are aware we may need to be reactive to current events or a shifting educational landscape.

In 2021 - 2022 we intend to expand our work to more schools and more students across Barking and Dagenham. This includes:

- Running two storytelling programmes each term (six over the year)
- Reaching a total of 120 young people
- Establishing at least 6 Partner Schools in Barking and Dagenham
- Expanding our 'graduate programme' to offer new opportunities and collaborations to our storytellers


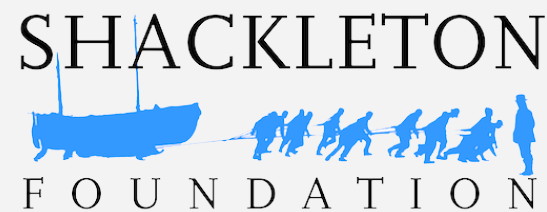
As a charity, we are also excited at the prospect of expanding our base of volunteer educators and supporters. Depending on funding (and pandemic-related events!), we also hope to be able to bring more people into the team to help us codify and deliver our programmes even more frequently, to larger numbers of young people.



## SUPPORTERS

We are fortunate to have such incredible supporters who make this work possible. In particular our thanks go to our current funders the Shackleton Foundation and UnLtd who gave us initial seed funding.

We are also indebted to Future Youth Zone, the inspirational youth centre where our sessions take place.



Thanks are also due to the teachers who refer students to us, to our partner organisations who offer insight and advice, to the parents and carers who support the young people through the programme, to those who've donated to us or volunteered with us and, of course, to all the young people who make this programme what it is.

## GET INVOLVED

There are lots of ways you can get involved in our work over the next year. Other than any specific links provided, the best way of getting in touch with us is by emailing **stories@write-back.org**.

### Schools

Become a Write Back Partner School for 2021 - 2022! You'll then be able to refer young people to our programmes. You can find out more and register here: **www.write-back.org/join-our-programme**.

### Funders

As a small charity we are dependent on the generosity of our funders to sustain our work. We are always looking for new funders to support and expand our work. You can also make a donation via our website: **www.write-back.org/get-involved**.



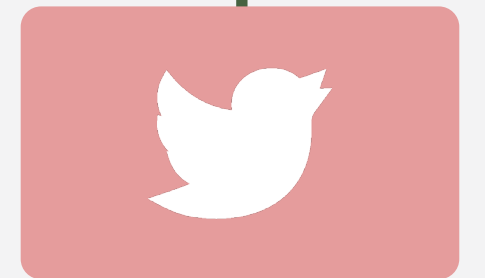
www.write-back.org



stories@write-back.org



@writebackuk



@writebackuk



writeback



## **Volunteers**

Are you a qualified teacher? Are you passionate about helping young people tell their stories and interested in delivering some of our workshops? If so, we'd like to hear from you. Do send us an email!

If you're not a teacher, but you're passionate about our work and would like to play a part in helping us grow as a charity, do also get in touch! We're particularly interested in hearing from those with experience in education, publishing, graphic design and marketing.

## **Young people**

Are you interested in attending one of our programmes? If so, do have a word with a teacher at your school and get them to send us an email.

**Write Back is a registered charity in England and Wales, number 1188293**