SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

IMPACT REPORT

24 25

BACKING CHILDREN IGNITING POTENTIAL

Charity: England & Wales 1147009 | Scotland SC046178

> Malia has come so far. She's full of energy, has a brilliant sense of humour, and is incredibly driven. Watching her turn challenges into growth – and start dreaming big – has been one of the real joys of working with her.
>
> **– SOHK Delivery Team**

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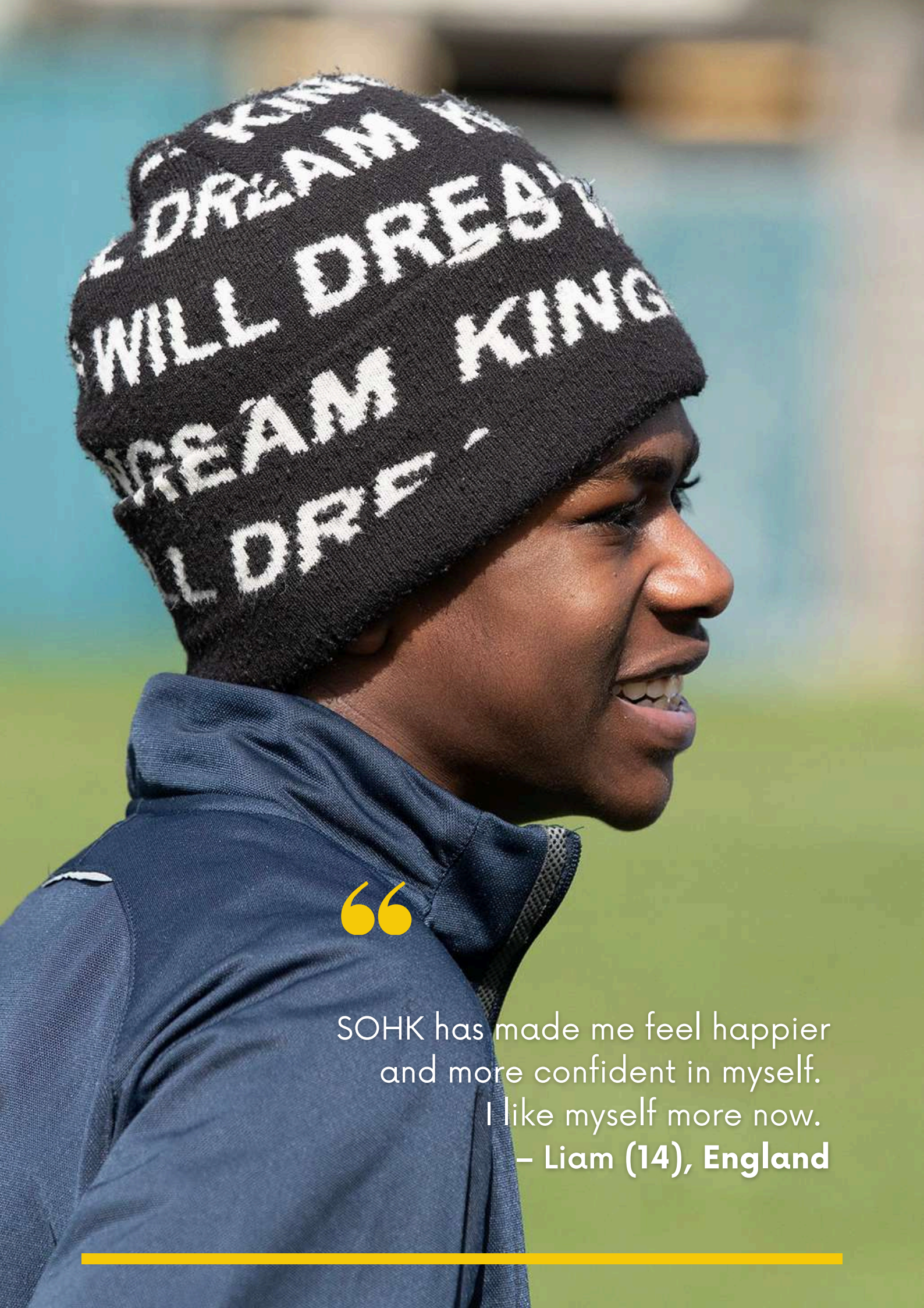
Charity: England & Wales 1147009 | Scotland SCO46118



“

SOHK has made me feel happier and more confident in myself. I like myself more now.

– Liam (14), England

FROM THE CHAIR

This year's Impact Report reflects on another year of progress for School Of Hard Knocks (SOHK).

SOHK is an education inclusion charity that works intensively, over a two-year delivery cycle, to support children in the early years of their secondary education. These young people are from economically-disadvantaged areas and are struggling – for a variety of reasons – to engage with school life, let alone thrive in it.

James Cameron, Chair of Trustees

Rugby remains the driving force that empowers young people to engage more fully in education and to lead healthier, more balanced lives.

The Rugby World Cup 2025 showcased this power on an unprecedented scale, highlighting a game that is both challenging and inclusive, where every player is essential to success. Above all, it's fun - and we see these elements being skilfully brought out in our schools, week after week. This is why, for the majority of our young people, their time with SOHK is the absolute highlight of their week.

Such impactful work is made possible by the generosity of our supporters, grant makers and corporate partners. We are especially grateful to Impetus, whose pro bono consultation with Bain & Co has helped shape our new five-year strategy.

I am immensely proud of the entire SOHK team - trustees, our President Deborah Griffin, Founder & CEO Ken Cowen, Senior Leadership, and our Operations and Fundraising colleagues - whose tireless efforts make everything possible.

Please read on, and if you feel inspired to support us or learn more, do get in touch. Every contribution helps us continue making a difference in young people's lives.

06

THE SCALE OF THE ENGAGEMENT CRISIS

School attendance declines each year, while exclusion rates are rising. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), children in England lost 34 million days of school learning in 2023-24, a record high.[2]

The consequences of this are profound and lifelong: those excluded or persistently absent face far lower GCSE attainment, higher risk of poverty, poorer health outcomes and increased likelihood of contact with the justice system. These trends underline why interventions that support disadvantaged children and keep them engaged in school are so critical.

Persistent absence

- 1 in 5 pupils in England are persistently absent (≥10% sessions), double the pre-pandemic rate.
- There were nearly 1 million suspensions and 10,885 permanent exclusions in 2023–24, the highest on record.

1 Pupil absence in schools in England, Academic year 2023/24 | Explore education statistics - GOV.UK
2 Revealed: Half of all children suspended from school have special educational needs | IPPR

Impact on learning

- Pupils with no absences are ~2.2x more likely to achieve 5+ good GCSEs than those persistently absent.[3]

A growing gap

- Pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM): 43.3% persistently absent vs 18.8% non-FSM.[4]
- Pupils eligible for FSM were nearly 5x more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers.[5]

Effect beyond school

- Persistently absent pupils are 2x more likely to be NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) after leaving school.[6]

These trends highlight the critical need for inclusive, preventative programmes like School Of Hard Knocks (SOHK) that build trust, resilience, and engagement.

3 Missing Children, Missing Grades | Children's Commissioner
4 Pupil absence in schools in England, Academic year 2023/24 | Explore education statistics - GOV.UK
5 Revealed: School exclusions and suspensions rise by a fifth last year, finds new report | IPPR
6 Impetus statement on Autumn Term attendance statistics | Impetus

> Since joining SOHK's programme I feel a lot calmer and can handle my emotions better at school and at home. I am really enjoying the rugby and would be lost without our weekly sessions.
>
> **– Josh (13), Wales**

OUR VISION & MISSION

We envision a society in which everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. SOHK exists to empower young people facing complex challenges to realise their potential and stay engaged with education.

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS STRIVES TO:

01

Provide a safe, inclusive environment where rugby and mentoring build confidence, resilience, teamwork, and communication skills.

02

Re-engage young people with learning through group and one-to-one support.

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

WHAT MAKES SOHK SPECIAL?

Rugby sessions build SEL

Rugby sessions promote teamwork, discipline, and physical confidence while embedding key social-emotional skills like communication and cohesion.

Group personal development

Group sessions focus on resilience, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation to foster confidence and commitment among students.

Personalised 1:1 mentoring support

One-on-one mentoring provides tailored goal-setting and motivational conversations, enhancing self-awareness and sustained school engagement.

DELIVERING IMPACT

The people delivering our programme

We have three SOHK staff members per school - each specialised in their roles. Each team is made up of an SEL Lead, a facilitator and a rugby coach, all supported by a regional manager and our director of programmes.

Our **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Lead** brings extensive expertise in supporting and mentoring young people, particularly those experiencing significant barriers and challenges. Their background includes specialised training and years of hands-on experience in developing resilience, emotional regulation, and positive coping strategies, ensuring tailored interventions that make a measurable impact.

Our **Schools Facilitator** is highly skilled in using sport as a catalyst for social change, with a deep understanding of how rugby can support Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills such as teamwork, resilience, and communication. They bring proven experience in designing and leading group personal development sessions.

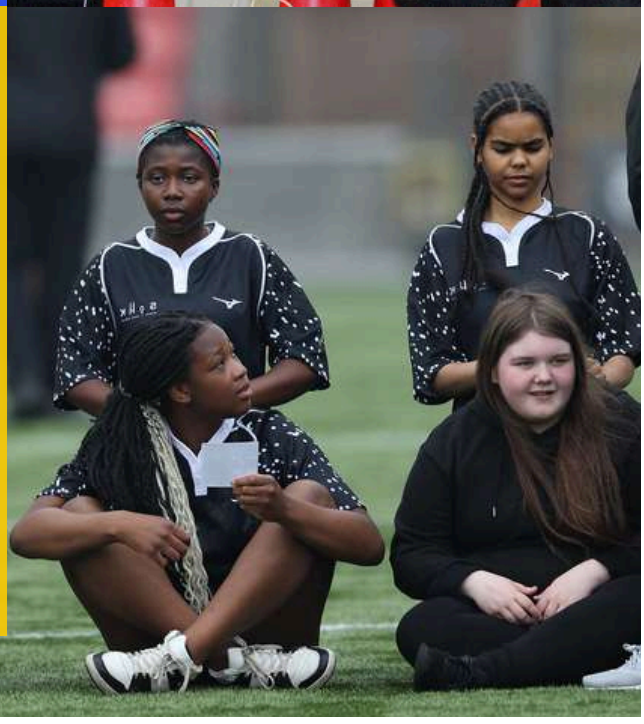
SOHK **Rugby Coaches** are fully qualified and bring a wealth of experience in delivering inclusive rugby programmes to hard-to-reach groups. Beyond their professional role, they are active members of the rugby community. This deeper understanding of the game and its values ensures they not only teach the game but also inspire young people to embrace these values, using rugby as a powerful tool for personal growth and positive change.

WHAT IS SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the development of skills to manage emotions, build relationships, and make responsible decisions. In order to thrive in and out of school - and to have the best long-term life chances - children with lower than average SEL skills need extra support. This is not a quick fix - one reason why our programmes last for two academic years.

Why SEL matters

The OECD's Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (2021)[7] found that competencies like curiosity, persistence, and empathy are strongly linked to better life outcomes.



SEL experiences contribute to:

- Higher academic performance
- Improved mental health
- Stronger social connections.

7 Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES) | OECD

OUR SEL OUTCOMES

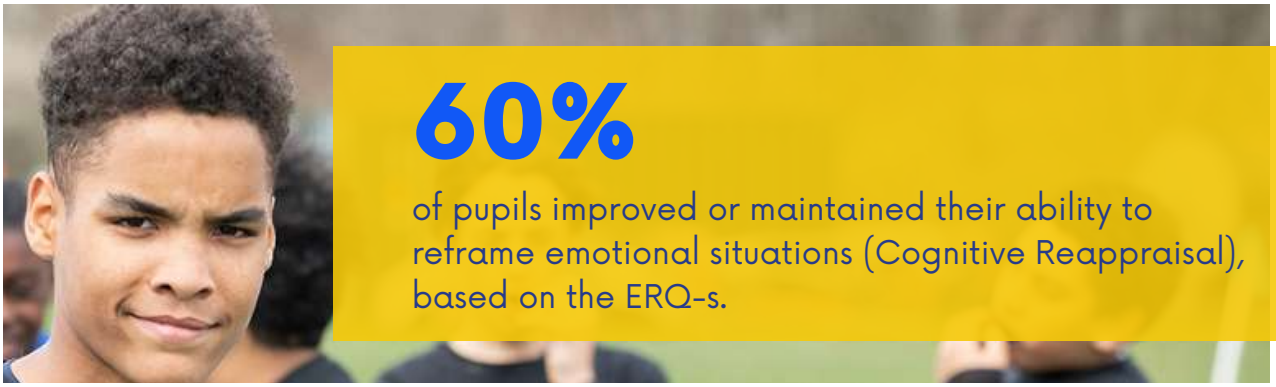
At SOHK, we researched many surveys to gather SEL data. We decided to use two main surveys to better understand pupils' wellbeing and emotional skills, directly linked to the 3Cs.

- The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale measures self-esteem, relating to confidence.
- The Emotional Regulation Questionnaire - Short Form (ERQ-s) assesses emotional regulation, relating to control and connection.

These outcomes should be viewed in the context of school wellbeing trends, which tend to decline during early secondary years; one study found that 79% of pupils' 'subjective wellbeing' scores fell from ages 11–14.[8]

60%

of pupils improved or maintained their self-esteem scores, as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.



60%

of pupils improved or maintained their ability to reframe emotional situations (Cognitive Reappraisal), based on the ERQ-s.

59%

of pupils improved or maintained their ability to express emotions more openly (Expressive Suppression), also measured by the ERQ-s.

8 Young people's wellbeing falls sharply after starting secondary school | University of Manchester

OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

Creating impact for disadvantaged children takes focus, effort and determination. A goal without a plan is just a wish - which is why we at School Of Hard Knocks strive to make every step count.

SOHK
SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

ACTIVITIES

OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

VISION

We envision a society in which everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.

MISSION

To empower young people facing complex challenges to realise their potential and stay engaged with education.

01 Full contact rugby training to build social and emotional learning skills

02 Group personal development sessions using SOHK curriculum

03 Personalised 1:1 mentoring sessions for all pupils

04 Experiences including matches, kit, excursions

TURNING GOALS INTO IMPACT

Our Theory of Change maps out why we do what we do, how it makes a difference, and what we're working towards long term.

EARLY CHANGES

Young people develop their 3Cs - confidence, connection, control

Young people feel a sense of purpose, achievement and enjoyment

Young people feel positively challenged and accountable for their own behaviour

Young people feel respected and heard

Young people build positive relationships with trusted adults

LONG-TERM CHANGES

Improved SEL skills

Positive relationships

Improved self-esteem

Self management / self regulation

Self awareness

Improved school engagement

Reduction in negative behaviour points

Fewer suspensions and exclusions

Improvement in attendance

LASTING IMPACT

Sustained SEL skills and behaviours

Fulfilment in work and life

Enhanced resilience

Positive contribution to society

I CAN REACH MY FULL POTENTIAL

WHO WE WORK WITH

At SOHK, we fundamentally believe that every child we work with has immense and deep value. They matter and they deserve to be seen and heard. Almost all of our young people, however, are struggling at school and are not on the right trajectory to realising their potential. Working closely with school leaders, we seek to identify pupils for whom we believe the programme will be transformational.

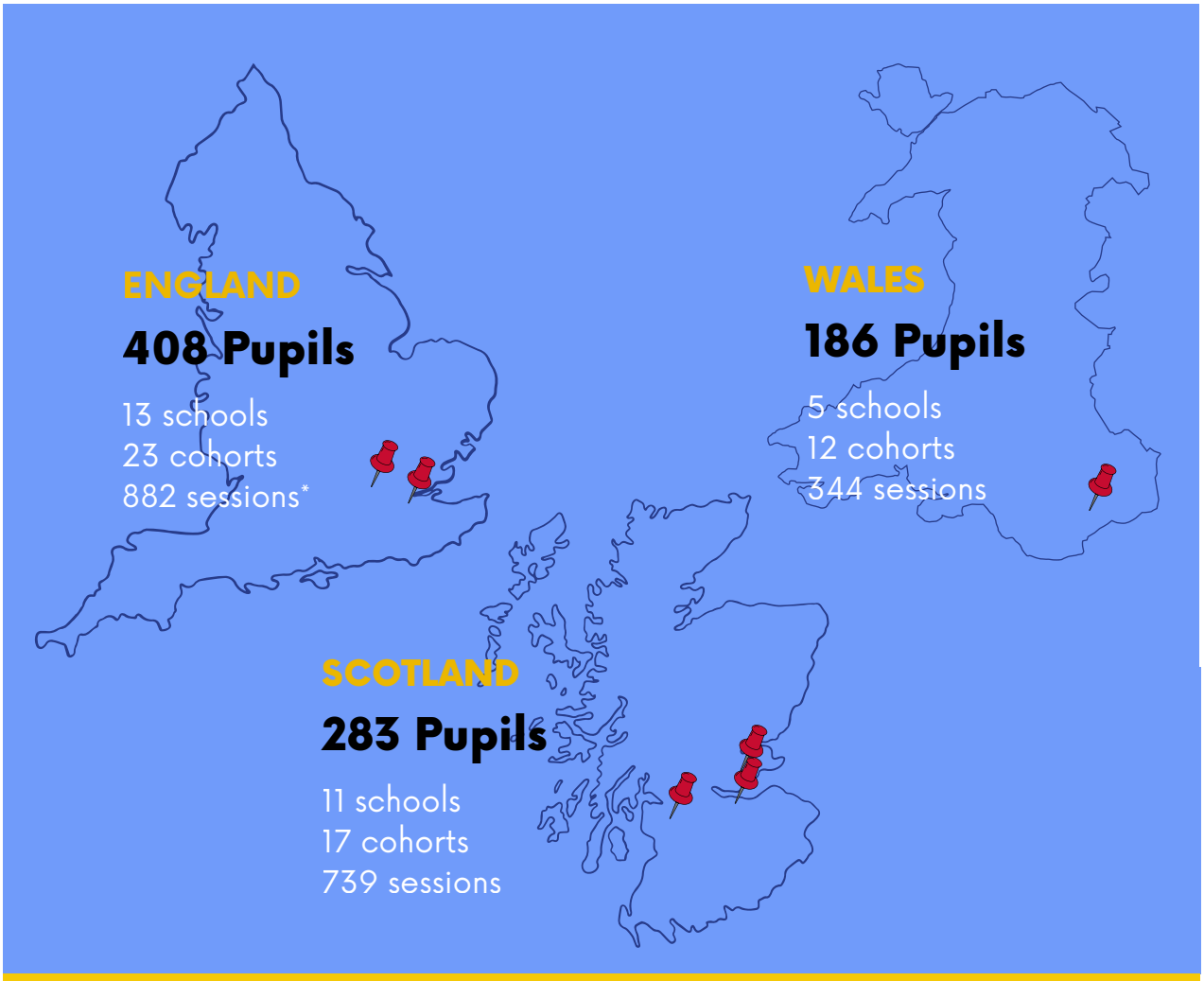
This includes pupils who may:

- Be displaying disruptive behaviour
- Be at risk of exclusion
- Have low confidence and self-esteem
- Be socially withdrawn
- Have identified Special Educational Needs.

> The programme has really helped me improve myself and my confidence. It made me look forward to school so I could be at SOHK again and I will be forever grateful for my opportunity of coming here. I will truly miss it.
>
> – **Diane (14), Scotland**

REGIONAL BREAKDOWN

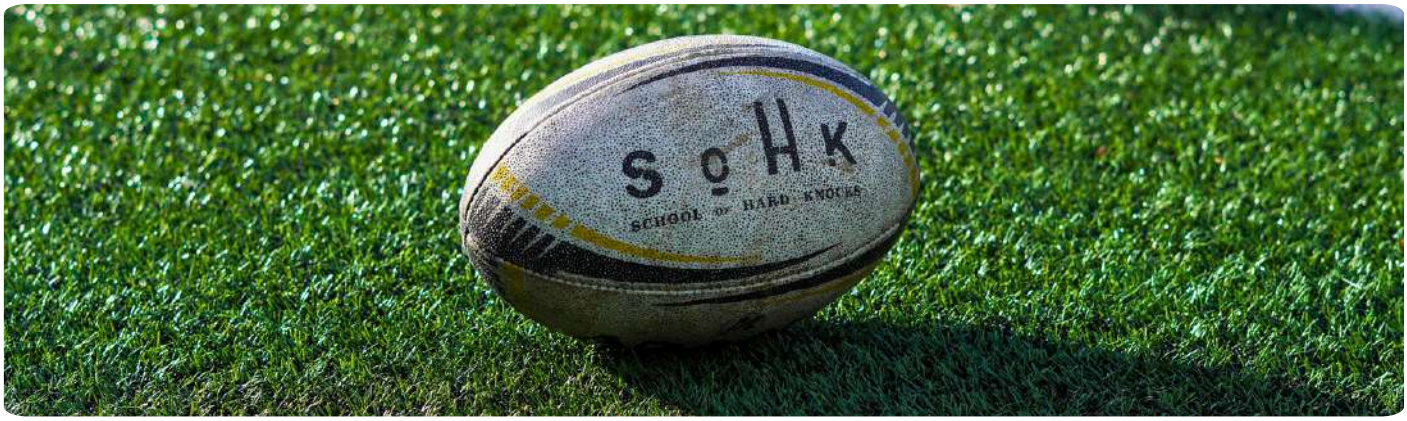
Our work takes us across the UK into 29 schools in England, Scotland and Wales to where our impact is most needed. But there is always room to do more.



> "We are proud to support a programme that re-engages young people with school at a time when their long-term trajectories can be changed for the better. It provides critical relationships and experiences that schools are simply unable to provide on their own."
> **– Susannah Hardyman MBE, CEO, Impetus**

*Sessions refer to classroom & rugby sessions

2024/25 IN NUMBERS



SOHK works to level the playing field for disadvantaged children across the UK. Pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), a key indicator of poverty, typically achieve lower GCSE results.[9] Across all our partner schools, the proportion of SOHK pupils eligible for FSM is above the regional average.

SOHK IN SCHOOLS

877 children supported

2:1 male to female

52 student cohorts

29 schools

5 delivery teams

CLOSING THE GAP

100% of SOHK cohorts exceed the regional FSM average

62% of SOHK schools are in the UK's 40% most deprived areas

SCHOOLS DELIVERY

1,965 hours of rugby + classroom sessions

1,731 one-to-one mentoring sessions

17 SOHK staff delivering across schools

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

655 students ended the year on the programme

75% Student retention rate

9 Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals | House of Commons Library

ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

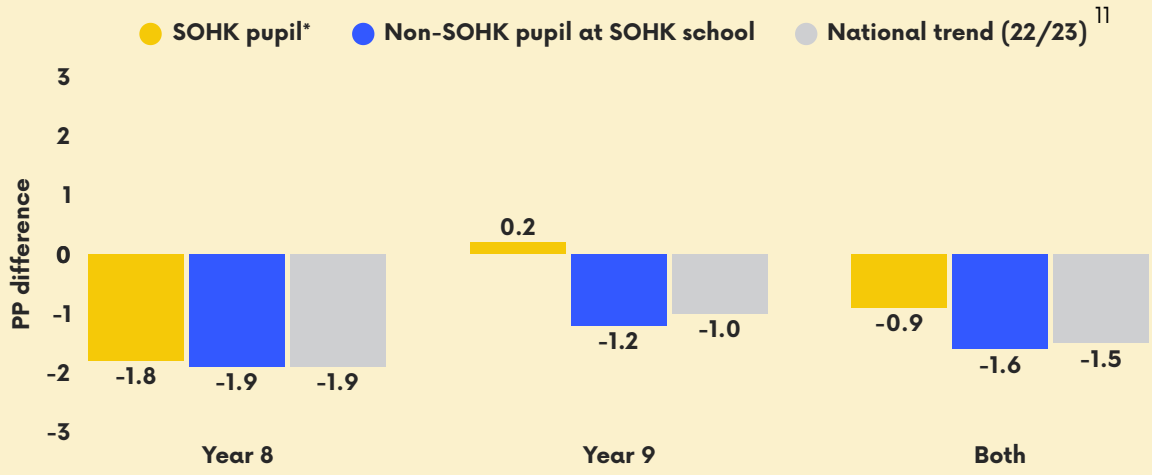
Attendance is the essential foundation to positive outcomes for all pupils[10]

In AY24/25, SOHK pupils showed stronger attendance gains than both national averages and peers in the same schools in Years 8 and 9.

While attendance typically declines in secondary school, SOHK Year 9 pupils improved their attendance by +0.2 percentage points (pp) on average, defying the national trend.

Year 9 SOHK pupils attended 1.4 pp more than their non-SOHK peers, equivalent to roughly three extra school days.

The difference in school attendance for different groups



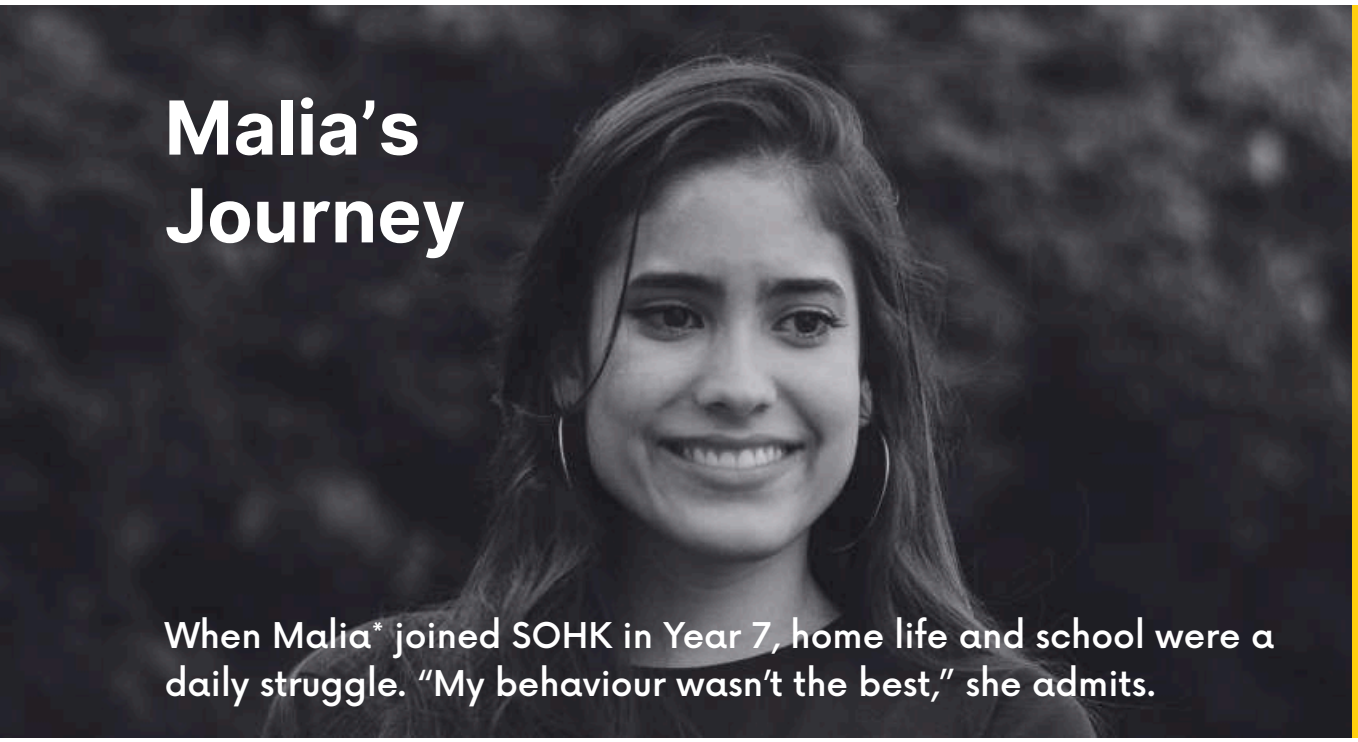
90%
of students report feeling more engaged at school

92%
of students feel able to build more positive relationships

89%
of students report feeling they've improved their self-awareness

* Based on the data of 270 young people
10 Working together to improve school attendance | DfE
11 How does absence change as pupils get older? | FFT Education Datalab

HOW SOHK HELPED ME



Malia's Journey

When Malia* joined SOHK in Year 7, home life and school were a daily struggle. "My behaviour wasn't the best," she admits.

*Names and images have been changed to protect the identities of our beneficiaries

Malia faced bullying, felt angry and misunderstood, and was frequently excluded. School felt pointless, and she didn't know how to connect with teachers or her peers.

SOHK quickly became a turning point. Through weekly sessions, mentoring, and support, Malia has learned to manage her anger, build healthier relationships, and see her own potential.

"I now think before I speak," she says with a smile.

Teachers and peers notice the change, frequent exclusions are gone, and she enjoys being at school.

Rugby has played a huge part in her transformation. "I can't sit still in lessons, but rugby keeps me moving," she explains. This year, she played a full match against another school team and is determined to sharpen her skills.

Just as important is the SOHK team itself. Sessions are a safe space where Malia can be herself, share her challenges, and leave feeling supported.

"It's just good vibes. I always feel better after coming here," she says.

Looking ahead, Malia has high hopes for her for GCSEs, and is even aiming for college and university.

"I feel like I can do anything I put my mind to," she says - and with her confidence, mindset, and SOHK support, there's no doubt she will.

> "Malia has come so far. She's full of energy, has a brilliant sense of humour, and is incredibly driven. Watching her turn challenges into growth – and start dreaming big – has been a joy."
> **- SOHK Delivery Team**

> I loved how we could have an escape from usual school life and how if we can't fully express ourselves, SOHK has let me during the typically hard weeks at school.
>
> **– Adam (13), England**

THE SOHK EFFECT

Mr F, Assistant Head Teacher

SOHK has been incredibly beneficial for our young people. They have a noticeably increased sense of purpose in life, with improved attendance to school and more positive relationships.

Mrs R, Assistant Principal

Our experience has been overwhelmingly positive. SOHK have gone above and beyond to support our students. Their dedication, energy, and genuine care have made a real impact, not just in building confidence and resilience, but also in opening up valuable opportunities for our students. We are incredibly grateful for the consistency and enthusiasm they bring each week. Their work is truly making a difference.

Mr N, Head of Year

I think it has worked really well and we have seen great improvement on and off the pitch for our pupils. I have enjoyed hearing how excited they are to go to sessions and festivals.

Miss C, Careers & Enrichment

SOHK is a great programme for our students, we can see such a positive change in most of them and it's great to see the students at the end of the programme feel like they have improved in many areas.

OUR AMBITION BY 2030

Between December and February, thanks to Impetus, we worked with Bain & Co to shape our ambitious 5-year plan. We defined three strategic goals and five core commitments that will enable us to strengthen and grow our schools pipeline, build the best team, level-up our fundraising mission, and extend our reach and impact.

SCALE

Reach ~1500-2500 young people annually

Operating in ~55-85 schools across the UK

RESILIENCE

A sustainable approach to support annual cost of ~£3m

... and build reserves to equate to 3 months of operating costs

EXCELLENCE

We will have proven and deepened our impact on the lives of young people

... and be one of the UK's leading SEL school programmes.

OUR COMMITMENTS

At SOHK, we don't try to be everything to everyone - we back the young people who need us most. Our commitments guide how we deliver deep, long-term impact over the next five years, staying true to our purpose.

2025-2030

1. TO EMPOWER MORE YOUNG PEOPLE TO STAY IN SCHOOL AND THRIVE

Target pupils in early secondary education who are disruptive, disengaged, withdrawn or low in confidence - with a strong focus on those eligible for Free School Meals in high-need areas.

2. TO STAY FOCUSED ON WHO WE SERVE AND HOW WE SERVE THEM

Maintain the integrity of our core programme: long-term, intensive delivery starting in Years 7–8, built around contact rugby, mentoring, and personal development.

3. TO DRIVE OUTCOMES THROUGH RIGOROUS IMPACT TRACKING

Measure what matters: attendance, behaviour, suspensions, exclusions, and emotional development. Use validated tools and school data to measure, manage and improve over time.

4. TO BUILD TRUSTED, LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS WITH ALIGNED SCHOOLS

Work only with schools that share our mission, meet our criteria, and commit to providing data, space, and consistent collaboration.

5. TO SCALE WITH PURPOSE

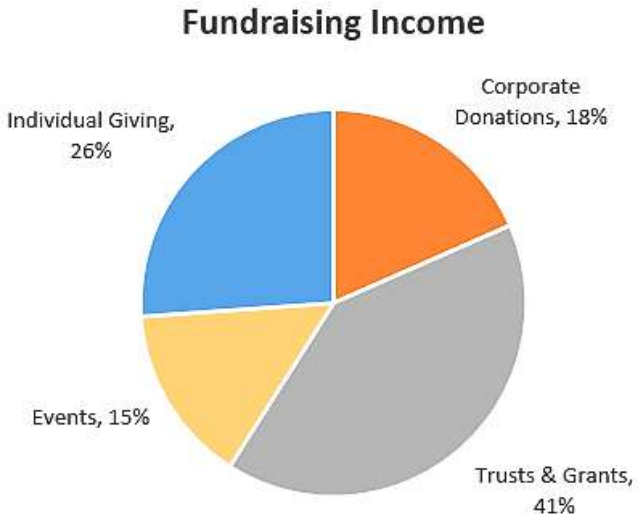
Grow to more high-need regions — but only where we can maintain delivery quality, train and support high-performing staff, and ensure sustainable funding and school engagement.

HOW WE FUND OUR WORK

SOHK's work is powered by a blend of funding streams - including trusts and grants, school contributions, corporate partnerships, individual giving, and events - creating a strong, diverse base that sustains our impact across the UK.

All participating schools contribute towards programme costs, showing their commitment to their pupils' success. In turn, our fundraising team works hard to secure additional support so the programme remains affordable, drawing on donations, events, corporate giving and charitable grants.

This mix of restricted and unrestricted income allows us to be flexible and invest where the need is greatest. We're working to broaden our funding base to strengthen resilience and enable sustainable growth - so we can support even more children.



Every act of support - from company challenges and payroll giving to unrestricted grants - helps more children overcome barriers and thrive. We welcome organisations that can make a lasting difference."
– Cesca Keynton, SOHK Corporate Partnerships Manager

FEARLESS FUNDRAISERS

From treacherous ultramarathons to 100km cycles and munro missions, our fearless fundraisers go above and beyond to help support our mission and we could not be more grateful.

Havant RFC IOW cycle

The Kemmis Brothers

2024/25 EVENTS

NOVEMBER

Harrow School Tournament

JANUARY

Cardiff Supporters
Gaucho Lunch

FEBRUARY

SOHK Long Lunch
Sports Charity
Scotland Gala

MARCH

Varsity Matches &
Eton Manor Tournament

APRIL

Wales festival

MAY

Scotland Festival
6HR Touch KO
Investec Champions Cup final

JUNE

Surrey Golf Day
Havant RFC IOW Challenge
South Downs Challenge

AUGUST

Fire & Ice Challenge
Kemmis Brothers

SOHK Staff
Conference

THE SOHK TEAM

The SOHK team - from frontline staff to behind-the-scenes heroes and our brilliant trustees - all bring passion, skill, and true team spirit.

2024/25 STAFF

30	17	7
Squad members	delivery team	fundraising & comms

THE LAST WORD

If you've read all the way to this point of our report then I'm fairly confident that you have at least some interest in our work and the impact we are having on the lives of so many young people.

It is a matter of huge concern to us that school attendance is at a point of national crisis and, as ever, it is the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people whose long-term futures are most adversely affected by this.

Even when young people get to school, there is a world of difference between being physically present and engaging positively! This is what we are all about at School Of Hard Knocks – combining rugby, expert 1:1 support and genuine care, to the highest degree, so that, at least with our participants, the direction of travel may be changed for the good.

It is hard to express how proud I am of all our team: those who work brilliantly day-to-day with our young people, those who tirelessly work behind the scenes to enable growth, and of course our brilliant trustees. I am biased of course, but for me, SOHK is the living embodiment of the word 'TEAM'.

My hope is that you can see the value of School Of Hard Knocks and maybe get a sense of our unique and, dare I say, groundbreaking approach. We are all incredibly excited for what lies ahead and hope that you may consider joining us in that journey by advocating for us and sharing our news - indeed supporting us in any way you can as we seek to deliver on our plans to support more young people who need us.

Ken Cowen, Founder & CEO
School Of Hard Knocks

OUR SUPPORTERS

SOHK is grateful to everyone who has generously supported the charity in 2024/25. In particular, we would like to thank all our donors and the corporate partners listed here, as well as our schools. We are also especially pleased to welcome new partners Firethorn and Civica, who joined us in summer 2025.

Corporate Partners

Trusts & Grants

Lennox Hannay Trust
Shanly Foundation
Wooden Spoon
William Wates
Harrow School
Joan Ainslie Trust
Garfield Weston Foundation
Charles Hayward
Vintners Foundation
Fidelity
Millenium Stadium Trust
Moondance Foundation

Partner Schools

England
Ashlyns School
Bacon's College
Barnwell School
Bishop Thomas Grant School
Canons High School
Evelyn Grace Academy
Hatch End High School
Hertswood Academy
Marriotts School
Monk's Walk School
Onslow St Audrey's School
Ridgeway Academy
Westminster City School

Scotland
Broughton High School
Broxburn Academy
Castlebrae Community High School
Clydebank High School
Craigmount High School
Craigroyston Community High School
Lochgelly High School
Newbattle High School
Portobello High School
St Paul's RC High School
Whitehill Secondary School

Wales
Cantonian High School
Cardiff West Community High School
Idris Davies School
Risca Community Comp School
Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Is Coed

Trustees

James Cameron
Victoria Griffin
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Dr Mikel Mellick
Shaunagh Brown
Karen Neale
Kirstin McNutt
Chris Webb
Tom Walsh
SOHK President Deborah Griffin OBE

We are firmly rooted in our purpose to create enduring worth. Our partnership with School Of Hard Knocks is intended to level the playing field and, through rugby, drive lasting benefits for young people and communities.

– Jennifer Whiteford
Head of Brand, Investec

THANK YOU

With your help we can level the playing field.

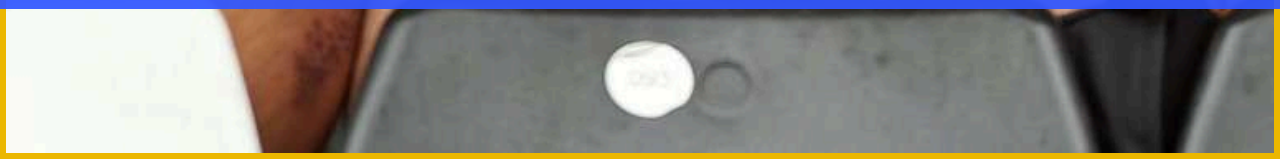
For more information about supporting our work go to sohk.org.uk or email info@schoolofhardknocks.org.uk

SCAN ME

SOHK HQ, 15 The Melting Pot, Edinburgh, EH8 8DL

@sohkcharity

www.sohk.org.uk



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