

Chairs Report November 2025 Wealden Works

Introduction

This annual report has been compiled with the input of the Co-founders, Lisa Crozier and Victoria Bowdler to reflect the work and results which have been achieved with the many supporters over the past year. As an interim chair who is standing in to support the current Chair in his sabbatical, in the short time I have worked with the team I have been hugely impressed by both Lisa and Victorias hard work, dedication and passion they have for the charity and those they support. As I have not been in role for the whole year therefore it was important that this report is produced with them both to reflect the achievements for the whole year in which I needed their help and support to report as part of the chair's annual duty.

Context

I am keen to highlight in this report the many achievements which have been made by a small charity which is operating in a difficult climate. The office for National Statistics reported in April – June 2025, 12.8% of 16-24 year olds in the UK were NEET, totalling 948,000 which was an increase of 24,000 on the previous quarter. 13.1% of young men and 12.4% of young women were reported not to be in Education, Employment or Training.

There has recently been reports via the media that this figure is now in excess of over a million with the figures continuing to rise in what is an extremely difficult context with many employers reducing their staff numbers due to the increase in the National Living Wage and National Insurance increase on employers. Wealden Works has seen this reflected in our local employers and supporters' ability to offer paid work opportunities.

However, over the year whilst the environment the charity is operating in has been challenging we do have much to celebrate.

Achievements

I am proud to report that this year our co-founders have achieved the following with hard work and the help of our supporters which include our local employers across Wealden and beyond, our volunteers who offer up their time as role models to speak to our young people, our local Ambassadors, our funders and generous donors and our Trustees who have provided much needed skills and experience to an extremely small workforce of 2!

- This year we have supported 1022 young people of which 62 we worked with intensely over many months providing support in both work and life skills, moving us close to supporting nearly 2500 NEETs since inception in 2017

We have been delighted to welcome on board our newest ambassador and great addition, local celebrity Joe Marler, who has a passion for supporting and mentoring young people in achieving their aspirations.

Another highlight of 2025 was the achievement of winning Ashdown Radios 'Charity of the year' award, attending the prestigious event as a nominee, we were surprised to be called out as the winner of this category.

Our final achievement for the year has been the successful application to the National Community Lottery to expand the support we can provide and the recent recruitment of Wealden works newest full time team member, welcoming Rachel Thorne as our new employment coach, assisting with the expansion plan into Polegate, Rachel has a wealth of experience and passion for supporting and guiding young people into employment and will be an amazing addition to the team.

Being successful in our National Community Lottery application, with an award of £328,000 to set up a new offer in Polegate will ensure we can reach more 16-24 year olds in an area in Wealden which has good transport links but is an area which has noted deprivation and an increasing population but good economic opportunities. We are grateful for the National Community Lottery's support in our application and will also allow us to recruit a further 2 part time mentors to facilitate the programme in Polegate in 2026

Since January we have raised £47,924.50 in funds in addition to the lottery grant which we are hugely grateful for from generous donations and grants

We have also estimated that this year we have received over 500 hours of volunteering from our local supporters who have generously given their time to come in and speak to our young people and our trustees who have helped guide and support us with their skills and experience and our local ambassadors.

Finally as a board of Trustees we felt it critical that as we expand as a charity it was important that we consider how we are set up to support the charity going forward and as such have reviewed how we are working and will be introducing new role profiles, are currently considering what training we need to undertake and how best to strengthen the board. As such we have recruited 3 new Trustees and set up a working group to ensure the new Polegate office is set up and running in time for its first intake in Spring 2026.

Future Plans

A 3 year plan has been developed and is supported by the board, but in 2026 we will look to consider beyond this and how to future proof the charity to ensure we can continue to support both the Heathfield and Polegate Office along with new income generating activities. We also plan to develop a fundraising and engagement plan as we recognise the grant from the National Community Lottery is time limited and as with all charities, we recognise the need to ensure we both keep our current generous donors engaged with how their support is utilised but also seek out potentially new donors and supporters.

Conclusion

This has been a successful year but this would not be possible without the hard work from the Co founders, Lisa and Victoria and the support from a number of organisations and people including, local businesses, residents , local Parish, Town and District Councils and other grant makers and foundations who are all acknowledged on our website, along with those people who give up their time to support us with their knowledge, skills and experience. The passion from everyone involved in this charity really has made a difference in giving confidence, belief, purpose and direction along with work experience and often gainful employment to local young people.

Thank you and if you would like to continue or join the cause to help more young people into work then please do reach out as we would love to hear from you.

Linda Bonner
Interim Chair - Trustees
Wealden Works

