

A person is climbing a green rock wall. They are wearing a yellow t-shirt with a graphic that says "FULL OF BEANS" and a cartoon bean character. They are also wearing grey pants and climbing shoes. The background is a green rock wall with various climbing holds. The text "IMPACT REPORT 2024" is overlaid on the image in large white letters.

IMPACT REPORT 2024

development
through
challenge

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WELCOME

It hardly seems any time at all since I was writing my letter for last year's report. The time has passed so quickly, and I'm pleased to say our work here at Development through Challenge continues to grow apace.

Personally, I've been privileged to represent Development through Challenge at various events throughout the year - the highlight of which was a banquet at the Mansion House, as a guest of the Worshipful Company of Horners (who nominated us their charity partner for the year). It's always an honour to share the stories around our work, especially with new people. I find that explaining what we do causes me to stop and reflect on our purpose, and consider new, innovative ways to develop and expand our work.

This progression and potential diversification grows ever more important with the increase of commercial, big money players in the indoor climbing business. Mile End Climbing Wall remains the main focus and centre for the delivery of our work. Remaining an independent force for good rather than part of a commercial machine is more important than ever before. We've kept our focus on grassroots climbing within our local community for almost 40 years and as the commercial interests of others change the landscape around us, we need to stay relevant; true to ourselves and our mission.

With this in mind, I'm pleased to present our updated charitable objects, alongside our new vision, mission and values later in this report. As a charity, we've spent a lot of time reflecting on our mission and how we react to the new norm in our sphere of work, and these new statements clearly outline our intent and purposes to remain relevant and a force for good for many years to come.



DEAN STRAW

CEO *Development through
Challenge*



ROD LEEFE

Chair of Trustees *Development through Challenge*

The past year marked a period of important reflection for Development through Challenge. We renewed our charitable objects, vision, and mission to remain relevant and responsive to our community's evolving needs and future services. The local climbing scene is changing. New commercial walls are appearing, often with significant investment. To maintain a thriving climbing community, we must collectively encourage participation. Otherwise, wall visits may decline or prices increase - unwelcome during a time of constrained household budgets.

Our updated medium-term objectives focus on greater accessibility. We are determined to make our climbing wall more welcoming to individuals who have historically found it difficult to engage with climbing. Opening up climbing, and other activities, as tools for development to new groups is a reinforced priority. We are most grateful for the generous support of the Worshipful Company of Horners. Their funding, secured during our year as the Master's charity in 2024, directly supports this crucial work.

Climbers tell us they value the strong sense of community at the Wall, alongside the excellent climbing; with route setting, already good, having improved further this year. To enhance this community benefit, we now have two saunas and are exploring additional health, wellbeing, and developmental activities for our users.

There are three main collectives without whom Development through Challenge and Mile End Climbing Wall would not be the unique organisations they are. Firstly, our climbers make the place buzz and contribute in many ways above their entrance fee. Some are on the Stakeholders group, others volunteer behind the scenes, and every penny they spend supports the facility and our charitable aims. Secondly, my thanks go to my fellow trustees. Their commitment, expertise, and collaborative spirit make for an effective board. Finally, I thank the exceptional staff at Mile End Climbing Wall. Without their talent, dedication, and focus, the Wall would not be the special place that it is.



VISION

Inspiring personal growth through physical and mental challenges for a fitter, healthier, and more inclusive community.

MISSION

Embracing our roots within indoor climbing and adventurous activities...

- We provide facilities, programmes and opportunities for people to be challenged, get active, and improve their physical health and mental wellbeing,
- We work to remove barriers to participation, and
- We work in collaboration with others, who share our values.

OBJECTS

1. The promotion of community participation in healthy recreation and sport by the provision of inclusive and accessible public recreational and wellbeing facilities in Tower Hamlets and beyond.
2. To support the development and diversity of the climbing community.
3. The advancement of education of the public, including developing people's skills, capacities and capabilities to enable them to participate in, and contribute to society.

VALUES

Adventurous

Pioneering

Togetherness

Authenticity

OUR PROJECTS



Mile End Climbing Wall is our main project and where we deliver most of our charitable activities. Our mission is to make climbing accessible to all.



The Sauna is our latest venture, offering affordable wellbeing facilities in Tower Hamlets.

2024 FINANCES

INCOME

£1,241,262

EXPENDITURE

£1,205,183

WHY WE EXIST

Development through Challenge is proud to call Tower Hamlets home. For nearly forty years, we've been rooted in this vibrant borough through operating Mile End Climbing Wall and, more recently, our saunas. Whilst our borough faces some of the toughest health inequalities in London, the climbing scene is becoming increasingly commercialised and has a long way to go, and huge potential, in terms of accessibility and inclusion.

IN TOWER HAMLETS...

48%

of children in the borough are living in poverty after housing costs, the highest in London

57.8
years

healthy life expectancy for women, the lowest in London

25.7%

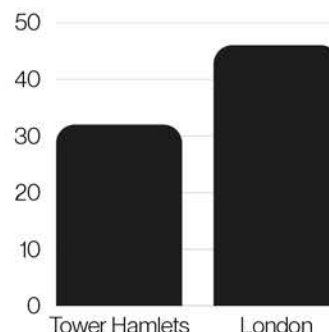
of households had at least one disabled person living within them



69% of residents are from global majority backgrounds (41% are Bangladeshi)



Around a quarter of adults have poor mental health



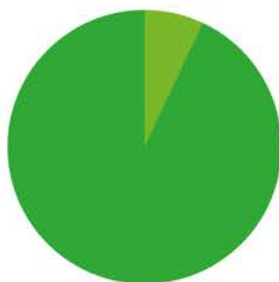
% level of physical activity for children and young people

We offer positive activities that support healthier lifestyles and lifelong wellbeing. Climbing improves both physical and mental health through exercise, challenge, and problem-solving, while also creating a strong sense of community. Our centre is open and accessible to all; a welcoming space to be active, build confidence, and discover new opportunities, regardless of background or ability.

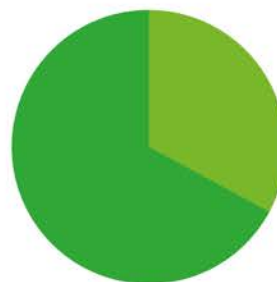
IN CLIMBING...



72% climbers have an undergraduate level or above degree



7% of climbers are from global majority backgrounds



32.8% of climbers are women

Climbing offers significant health benefits, including improved physical fitness, cardiovascular health, and reduced anxiety, but more needs to be done to make climbing spaces accessible for more people to experience these benefits.

We are uniquely positioned to make a difference, creating accessible spaces that promote health, resilience, and connection through climbing and wellbeing activities while fostering inclusivity and diversity on a local, national, and international scale.

SOURCES

Tower Hamlets Borough Profile 2024

Trust for London, Child Poverty 22/23

BMC, Your Climbing Counts 2024 Survey

Tower Hamlets Annual Public Health Report 2022

The Health Foundation, Map of Healthy Life Expectancy at Birth 2018-2020

NHS East London Data Pack 2023

London Sport Tower Hamlets Profile 2024

OUR 2024 IMPACT

WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF HORNERS



Last year, we introduced our partnership with The Worshipful Company of Horners. Their 2024 Master, Dr Barry Maunders was inspired by paraclimbers at his local wall and chose Development through Challenge as his charity of the year. Over twelve months, the Horners raised funds through gravel rides, quiz nights, a Lloyds building abseil, raffles, and personal donations - raising an incredible £23,931.17. This will directly support disabled participation in indoor climbing, including work with Metro Blind Sport and our new climbing summit, Aim 2 Change.



We can't thank the wonderful people of the Horners enough for their generosity and kindness.

CLIMBING PRICE FREEZE

In response to the ongoing challenges of inflation and rising living costs, at the end of 2024 we committed to freezing our climbing prices until at least June 2025. This means we have maintained our current pricing for over 18 months, with no planned increases unless absolutely necessary.

This decision was made with our community in mind. We understand that now, more than ever, people need accessible ways to stay active, connect with others, and enjoy themselves - climbing offers all of this and more. By holding our prices steady, we hoped to ease the pressure on our users and ensure continued access to the wall.

CENTRE IMPROVEMENTS



CLIMBING FACILITIES

We added over 230 new climbing holds, alongside upgraded cleaning equipment to keep them in top condition. These new holds introduce a variety of shapes, textures, and challenges, giving climbers of all levels fresh opportunities to refine technique, body positioning, and movement.

SAFETY AND SUSTAINABILITY

We invested in additional training and new equipment to ensure we continue to exceed industry safety standards. We also replaced all carpets across our matting areas with safer, more

sustainable materials, whilst maintaining as much of the original foaming as possible, to improve performance and our environmental footprint.

ECO AUDIT

We committed to sustainable growth. In partnership with the City Bridge Foundation, we completed a comprehensive eco-audit to assess our carbon footprint and identify meaningful ways to reduce our environmental impact across all operations.

SAUNA EXPANSION

We built a second sauna, aptly named Kaksi (Finnish for 'two'). Operating at 99°C but with a gentler feel, it's the ideal introduction to the world of sauna for first-time users or those seeking a more social, relaxation-focused experience. As our sauna corner expands, so does its potential for more accessible events and workshops.



QUEER CLIMB

Queer Climb continued to thrive, offering a welcoming space for LGBTQ+ climbers to connect and climb. Led by team member Elliot Douglas, we ran monthly sessions throughout the year and helped remove financial barriers with a reduced entry fee and free shoe hire - offering a number of fully subsidised spaces each month.

In 2025, we aim to grow the groups impact by promoting our free spaces more widely, working with LGBTQ+ charities and organisations supporting those facing financial hardship, collaborating with other Queer Climb groups in London, and launching an ambassador scheme to strengthen the community. We're also committed to supporting Elliot's development, helping him pursue his Climbing Wall Instructor certification and coaching journey.

"This group has been really wholesome and welcoming queer space for me as someone relatively new to London, the range of experience levels makes joining climbing much less intimidating and the pub social after is great fun." *Jake*



Sessions held:	Climbers:	Free spaces:
12	344	41

"I've had so much fun at queer climb, I've made lots of friends. It's a lovely event that is very chill and is a great way to meet new friends. And Elliot and Amy are wonderful at making everyone feel welcome." *Alicia*



Sessions held:	Climbers:
52	300

WOMEN'S CLIMB

Women-only climbing socials create a relaxed, welcoming space for climbers to get women-focused tips, build confidence, and connect with others. These sessions offer a great first step and can help to remove the anxiety of going it alone. Led by instructor Fran Newman-Day, we continued to run weekly Monday Women's Social climbs which are free to attend on top of regular entry.

"I love the women's social climbing. Massive shout out to Fran for all her support and patience helping us." *Women's Social Climber*



AN UPDATE FROM EL

Last year, we announced our co-funding of El Temple as Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Manager at the Association of British Climbing Walls. Since then, El has made major progress embedding an ‘inclusion first’ mindset across the sector. Highlights include launching Accessibility Guidelines for Climbing Walls, tailored EDI support for centres, and a pioneering BSL climbing video. El hosted the ‘Improving Accessibility’ webinar, led an EDI panel at ABC Conference 2024, and supported access for underrepresented groups.

El also works with EDI Steering Groups to drive change and is now partnering with us on Aim 2 Change, a new summit focused on practical inclusion strategies.

FOSSIL FEST

In collaboration with Rock On, we hosted the first-ever Fossil Fest in 2024 - an informal climbing competition for older climbers aged 40+. The event celebrated classic-style problems, offering a welcome alternative to today’s dynamic and jump-heavy trends. With no digital scorecards or flashy award ceremonies, the emphasis was firmly on quality climbing and community.

Over 100 climbers took part, making Fossil Fest an undeniable success and revealing a clear appetite for more inclusive, age-positive competitions.



MILE END SQUAD

We continue to support the Mile End Squad, a team of 24 young climbers, to develop and progress in their climbing with subsidised training from our expert coach Bradley on a weekly basis. We are also proud to sponsor home-grown athletes who progress to the Team GB Programme.



ASKA

Aska made fantastic progress in 2024, competing in a number of competitions, including the British Lead Championships, and winning both the Women's Bouldering League (Parthian) and the Stronghold Tottenham Hale Comp.

Now on the Team GB Pathway as a member of the England National Squad, she's had a strong start to 2025, placing fourth for the Women's category in the Team GB Squad Training Comp, sixth in the Scottish Boulder Championships and third in Blokfest.

"Being part of the squad in 2024 has been an incredible journey of growth, pushing my limits both physically and mentally. Reflecting on my progress, I'm focused on building on my strengths and overcoming challenges. I'm ready to keep adapting and pushing my climbing in 2025."

FINN

Alongside the Mile End Squad, Finn is a member of the England Regional Squad and is working towards joining the Team GB squad by the start of 2026.

In 2024, Finn not only placed first in lead and second in boulder in the England Squad Trials, but also competed in a number of local and national competitions including the Youth Climbing Series where he achieved first for the London Region and overall fifth in the Grand Final (securing first in the Lead), the Blokfest Finals where he secured sixth in the seniors category, and England Team End of Year Comp where he took first.





LUCA (SQUAD ALUMNUS)

Luca, a proud alumnus of the Mile End Squad, continued to make his mark as a Team GB athlete. In 2024 and into early 2025, he secured impressive results, including first place finishes at both Big Comp 2024 and Mighty Oak 2025. He placed fourth at the British Boulder Championships 2024 and reached the finals at the Graz Youth Cup. On the European circuit, Luca achieved fourteenth at the Rome EC 2025, fifteenth at the Genova EC 2024 (where he placed first in qualifiers), and twentieth at the Munich EC 2025.

“Development through Challenge’s support has been invaluable to my development as an athlete, allowing me to properly focus on becoming the best climber I can be through a brutal winter training cycle with many setbacks. GB team climbers aren’t well supported financially by the national body, having to pay for accommodation, flights, competition fees and training so being supported by Development through Challenge has been truly paramount to my continued participation and success in the sport.”





YOUTH CLIMBING SERIES

In October, we hosted Round Three of the Youth Climbing Series, a national competition for young climbers aged 8-16. The series is a major stepping stone for young athletes, combining rope and bouldering challenges across four regional rounds, followed by a two-day Grand Final. Hosting was a brilliant opportunity to support young athletes and the future of British climbing.

The Mile End Squad delivered strong performances throughout the series, with standout results at our hosted round including Josephine's personal best fourth place, Finn's third, and Danny's impressive second place. At the Grand Final in Leeds, Finn secured a impressive fifth overall in Category A. We're proud of the squad's determination, sportsmanship, and continued progress throughout the competition.

ENGLAND SQUAD DEVELOPMENT DAY

We hosted an Open Development Day for young aspiring athletes in collaboration with the England Development Squad, bringing together seventy young athletes from across the country. Purpose-set blocs designed to mirror competition-style routes enabled young climbers to push their limits, work with peers of similar or higher ability, and benefit from direct feedback from Team GB coaches.

"Thank you very much for hosting us. The day was a huge success - bringing together climbers from across the country and truly highlighting the best of our community. It felt like we created a safe and inspiring space where athletes could give their all on some incredible blocs... Having worked with GB now for 6 years this event felt like the best one we've put on, showcasing the amazing youth competition community across the country. A huge amount of that is the support from you all at Mile End." *GB Climbing Coach*

PLAS Y BRENNIN

We supported the Mountain Adventure Fund in delivering a transformative five-day residential for young people at Plas y Brenin (the National Outdoor Centre in Snowdonia) for students at Mulberry Trust School.

Following a free session at Mile End Climbing Wall to become climbing ambassadors at their school, the young people visited Plas y Brenin and immersed themselves in a full programme of outdoor adventure with two of our instructors, taking part in activities like canoeing, paddling, climbing, and gorge scrambling.

By creating access to the outdoors for young people, we're helping to build confidence, resilience, and lifelong positive memories - helping young people grow through challenge.

"Your team have given [our son] happy and positive memories he will have for the rest of his life."

"I cannot express how grateful we are. The last few months were quite tough for [our daughter], so you have helped her enormously without realising how much goodness you are doing for her. We have not seen her being so happy for quite long."

"[Our son] had an absolutely amazing time... We really see MECW as a family and he loves being with such great, kind, and nurturing instructors. Kudos to you all."



SCHOOLS PROGRAMME

Our reduced-cost schools programme has continued to expand in 2024, supporting 18 schools across a range of educational settings.

A key highlight was the continuation of our partnership with City Foundation School for Girls, through which we've offered free weekly climbing sessions and provided a consistent opportunity for students to engage in physical activity and learn new skills in a supportive environment.

School Partnerships:	14
Students taking part in PE and GCSE:	298
Schools accessing programme for free:	1
Schools accessing programme for at reduced rate:	13

We also delivered a tailored PE programme to four schools, including two Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools and one Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), reaching 98 students in total - 14 from SEN settings and 12 from the PRU.

Our GCSE climbing module was delivered to over 200 students across nine schools, supporting both curriculum outcomes and the development of essential life skills like teamwork, focus, and perseverance.

By creating access to the outdoors for young people, we're helping to build confidence, resilience, and lifelong positive memories helping young people have the chance to grow through challenge.

"Indoor Climbing is a fantastic games option for our pupils. It is offered to our 14- to 18-year-old boys and is always oversubscribed. The pupils love the option and they make great progress under the superb instruction of the centre staff. Many pupils now climb outside of school because of the positive experience they have at the Mile End Climbing Wall. As Director of Sport, I have found the centre staff to be wonderfully positive, reliable, and fully focussed on providing the pupils with the best experience possible all delivered in a safe and professional atmosphere" *City of London School*

A photograph of a woman with short grey hair, wearing a red tank top, climbing a dark grey rock wall. She is smiling and looking upwards. Her right arm is extended, holding a green climbing hold. Her left hand is also on a green hold. The background is slightly blurred, showing an indoor climbing gym setting.

COMMUNITY STORY

MEET STEPHANIE

Stephanie is a dedicated climber and member of our Stakeholder Committee. This group plays a vital role in shaping our direction, offering valuable insights, providing feedback on our initiatives, and holding us accountable to our mission.

We caught up with her to learn more about her personal climbing journey and what it means to contribute to the future of our charity.

To start off, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I have been climbing for many years. I try to climb outdoors as often as possible, but as I live in Hackney, it's mainly indoors. Climbing is a big part of my life and I climbed through two pregnancies and make time for it at least twice a week. My 10 year old daughter caught the climbing bug and is now part of the MECW Squad. The teen also enjoys it, but prefers outdoors. Bouldering alone can be great, but meeting new people of

all ages and backgrounds is part of the appeal of climbing.

How did you first discover Mile End Climbing Wall?

When I started climbing, there were not as many indoor climbing walls as there are now, Mile End Climbing Wall and The Castle were the closest. Mile End had, and has, a great community feel and it is easy to go alone and 'never feel alone' - friendly staff and regulars. I always enjoyed the setting, and that part is only getting better!

What is it about climbing that keeps you coming back?

I only started climbing in my mid-thirties and got hooked straight away. It's the mix of flowing (dance-like) movement, balance, using muscles from toe to finger tips. It requires full focus and precision and it helps to calm the mind, there are moments of flow. I see climbing as a rare opportunity for play. It is non-competitive and other climbers are very supportive. Non-overwhelming fearful experiences release dopamine and trigger 'acute happiness'. Even the odd adrenaline surge feels exhilarating - climbing is 'positively addictive'!

Have there been any standout moments in your climbing journey so far?

I feel that I still keep improving and learning new skills, like working on dynamic moves. I also started to take part in (fun) competitions - Blokfest and Fossil Fest, which added a layer of ambitious drive. It is such an amazing feeling to keep developing strength and movement skills well into middle-age. Learning to discern and silence my inner critic was quite monumental. Climbing is excellent for that!

You're part of the Stakeholder Committee for Development through Challenge. What inspired you to get involved and what does it involve?

I always respected the commitment of the management and staff at Development through Challenge to make it a welcoming space for a diverse set of climbers, engaged with the community, with a drive to make climbing accessible to underrepresented groups and people with less means.

I wanted to support these efforts, with my experience as an older, female, neurodivergent customer, as a climbing instructor and with professional experience working in an equity, diversity and inclusion related role.

Looking back at 2024, what was your highlight of the year?

I participated in the Fossil Fest last May and loved the setting and atmosphere and seeing so many (outstanding) older climbers.

One of the core goals of Development through Challenge is breaking down barriers to participation. Why is this mission meaningful to you?

Indoor climbing can be a hugely positive experience, but it can feel exclusive due to the cost. It also might still be an intimidating space for many individuals. The last couple of years have brought a lot of positive change, but still more can be done to make climbing walls more welcoming and provide a feeling of safety and belonging for diverse climbers of all abilities!

What are you most excited about looking to 2025?

The focus on making climbing, the climbing wall, more accessible for climbers with disabilities to reinforce the idea that climbing is for everyone!! A key element will be working with people with lived experience to achieve this.

LOOKING TO 2025...

Our main focus going in to 2025 is on building stronger partnerships in our local community and with other organisations who align with our vision, mission, and values. Here's a snapshot of some of the projects we're working on at the moment.



From London to Lusaka: A Tale of Two Walls

We've partnered with Pa Mitengo Climbing and Calisthenics, Zambia's first indoor climbing wall, to support the emerging climbing community in Lusaka, foster grassroots sport development and connect climbers across the world.



Aim 2 Change – A Climbing Inclusion Summit

We're organising a summit with the Association of British Climbing Walls dedicated to making indoor climbing more inclusive and accessible. Our aim is to share actionable strategies, led by Deaf and disabled people, to implement meaningful change and grow a network of climbing walls committed to building a more inclusive climbing culture.

Metro Blind Sport Partnership

We've partnered with Metro Blind Sport and have been delivering a programme together for visually impaired and blind climbers to climb together at Mile End Climbing Wall. So far, Metro Blind Sport have delivered a training session for our instructors and we have delivered a six week climbing programme. We are in the process of organising a monthly social climbing club and further programmes.

"I love the atmosphere at Mile End – the walls, the different textures, the variety of routes. The trainers are fantastic, and it's just a really welcoming place for everyone. But what I've found especially important is how accessible everything is, from the layout of the gym to the support systems in place... the staff go out of their way to make sure that there's support every step of the way, and that really makes a difference." *Kinnari, Metro Blind Sport*

SUPPORT US

BECOME A MEMBER A MILE END CLIMBING WALL

Simply by climbing at Mile End Climbing Wall, you are supporting our work. For those wanting to go the extra mile, become a member with our charity memberships. Simply add an extra donation on top of your usual membership every month. Speak to reception for more information about signing up for this membership.

MAKE A DONATION

Make a donation through JustGiving or at our centre. Your money will go towards funding our community initiatives and help us make climbing, and other wellbeing activities, more accessible for all.



FUNDRAISE FOR US

Whether you want to take on your own climbing challenge, run a quiz, or take part in a running or walking challenge - raise money for Development through Challenge. We'll support you every step of the way with your fundraising.

PARTNER WITH US

We're looking for local organisations, charities, and social groups in London to partner with us. Whether you're interested in fundraising, working with us to achieve our charitable aims, or you think that your organisation or group could benefit from our work, we'd love to chat. To find out more, email Dean at dean@mileendwall.org.uk.

THANK YOU

Thank you for supporting us in 2024. We'd like to extend a special thanks to our incredible staff team, our board of trustees, our stakeholder committee, our climbers and sauna users, and our donors for their enthusiasm, energy, and support.

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physical and mental
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