

# THE LONDONERS

A photograph of a group of children, likely of African descent, protesting. Two children in the foreground are holding large white signs with the words 'KEEP KIDS SAFE' in bold, dark blue, hand-painted capital letters. The child on the left is wearing a red sweater and has their mouth open as if shouting. The child on the right is wearing a green sweater and also has their mouth open. In the background, other children are visible, some wearing blue hoodies. The overall scene suggests a protest or demonstration for children's safety.

DECEMBER 2025

Why the school run  
can be a child's most  
difficult journey  
&  
The fight to keep  
London's shopping  
centres  
alive...



## News

- Page 4 All aboard the extension express
- Page 6 Children injured during the school run
- Page 10 How nepotism is construction's worst enemy amidst economic crisis
- Page 14 Where is the diversity in sports media?
- Page 15 Building trust among young men and boys
- Page 16 'Britain's children are not moving enough'
- Page 18 Friendly socials don't have to be awkward

## Lifestyle and Culture

- Page 19 Combating loneliness through culture
- Page 20 Is the NATO alphabet still prevalent in everyday life?
- Page 22 Unpeeling the facts of the London banana
- Page 26 Smoke and Mirrors: I quit smoking so you don't have to
- Page 28 Are nerds back?
- Page 32 Twickenham cranks up the volume

## Arts

- Page 33 25 years of the London Palestine Film Festival
- Page 34 Viral double decker bus-turned-cafe raises awareness in aid of mental health
- Page 36 Crochet is bringing generations together one stitch at a time

## Sport

- Page 38 Why London is crucial to the future of British basketball
- Page 42 Capital clubs' Premier League review
- Page 46 AFCON 2025 Preview: The Challengers
- Page 48 Going for gold

## Festive

- Page 49 Anyone got a brick on their Christmas list?
- Page 50 Is Hyde Park Winter Wonderland the most instagrammable Christmas market?
- Page 51 Local charity delivers food to families in need this christmas





# All aboard the extension express

By Maliyah Alcide-Clarke

The Bakerloo line extension could improve life for south east Londoners

South London is about to change drastically. Instead of travelling a great distance to the nearest train station just for your journey to be barely half-way over, catching a tube may become easier. With the new Bakerloo line extension, South Londoners will be able to travel from door to door without the extra hassle of transport changes.

From 2019, TfL proposed an extension of the Bakerloo line to the government as a means of stretching tube routes through South East London. The line already existed previously, commuting between Harrow and Wealdstone and Elephant and Castle. Currently, the line cuts

through West London to get to South, passing major stations like Wembley, Paddington and Waterloo. However, TfL have proposed extending the line to Lewisham via Old Kent Road and New Cross Gate, cutting through most of South East London. They are also considering a second phase where the line will be further extended to Hayes and Beckenham. The company has said that the extension will have many benefits, including improving journey times, creating new jobs and offering better connections

into central London. Most locals seem to embrace the change, commenting that the line extension will benefit their day-to-day life.

When asked about the proposed plan, Shelley Peynado-Clarke, who works in a hospital in Lewisham borough, said: "I think it's been a long time coming. Personally, I think it's a really good idea; It's [South London] been disregarded, the tube runs through every other part of London, but south, so I think it would be a welcome option." She added: "It would open up more options for me to get to work. If I do take transport to get to work I currently have to take the train, then either walk or take the bus."

Although many government officials welcome the extension and praise its benefits, there has been little discussion about the project's funding.

*I think it's been a long time coming*

In the autumn budget of this year, Chancellor Rachel Reeves highlighted taxes on electric vehicles and a freeze on rail fares.

However, there was no mention of the line or the plans to update it. In September of this year, the Bakerloo

bus was introduced. A brown bus which served as a temporary replacement covering the areas that the train will once it's established.

When discussing the Bakerloo, Sadiq Khan, mayor of London, said: "A Bakerloo line extension will take years to build, and I don't want to wait any longer to improve transport connections for Londoners." Mayor of Lewisham, Brenda Dacres, also said: "For too long, our part of London has been left behind. While other parts of the city enjoy easy access to the Tube, Lewisham and neighbouring communities have been cut off. That lack of connection is not just inconvenient – it is unfair."

Although the plans are promising, there are definitely some concerns for the future of affected areas. Peynado-Clarke said: "Are the costs gonna stay the same? Building a line is not gonna be cheap, they're gonna want to get the money back somehow." A completion date for the line extension has not yet been decided.

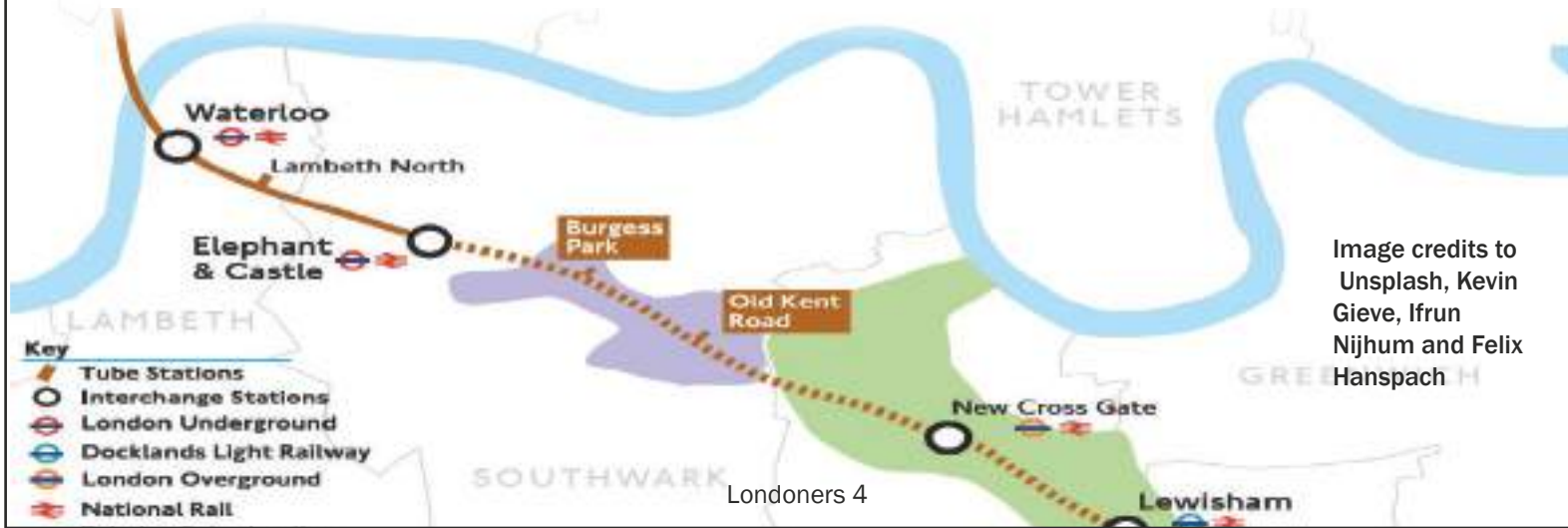


Image credits to Unsplash, Kevin Gieve, Ifrun Nijhum and Felix Hanspach

# Fight for change or fight to remain

By Maliyah Alcide-Clarke



Lewisham People's Assembly protesting outside of Lewisham town hall, image credits to Lewisham People's Assembly

We think it'll be a nightmare." This is what the secretary at Lewisham People's Assembly, John McGrath, said when talking about the future of Lewisham Centre. But what is actually happening in Lewisham?

Lewisham Town Centre and its shopping mall play a major role for those living there and those in South East London. It is a place where many come to shop and attend markets, which are held outside the shopping centre.

In October 2025, Lewisham Council approved plans for the shopping centre to be demolished and replaced by 1,700 new homes. Centre owners Landsec also plan to 'reimagine' the shopping centre with its main focus on providing housing.

They have also commented that they will take the needs of the community into account.

Whilst some may not see these changes as a big deal, the proposed plans to demolish the shopping centre have been the main topic of conversation in Lewisham for many years. The centre is not only a place where

locals shop, but it also stands as a cultural hub for the borough. It hosts over 65 local stores as well as markets and independent stores in the town centre, which contain many different international stalls, including cultural foods and other items. The shopping centre also holds quite a significant history, with the Battle of Lewisham taking place outside the newly built centre in 1977. The Migration Museum was also at home in the centre, which explored how the movement of people to and from the UK has shaped the country's identity today. However, it has now closed.

A large portion of the borough's residents are against the change, with Lewisham People's

Assembly even starting a campaign called 'Save Lewisham Shopping Centre.' The group have been campaigning since October and have gained over 2,000 signatures in their appeal to stop gentrification in the area, with a planned council debate in March 2026.

John said: "Our big concern is the lack of affordable and social housing

in the development. We think that the shopping centre should be refurbished, but it's [the plans] a little bit excessive." The people's assembly often goes door-knocking as well as holds multiple events in Lewisham to spread awareness. McGrath added: "It will make Lewisham less affordable and take away a community hub at least for 10 years. We have a very international high street and if they sterilise that by just putting up a lot of luxury flats, it'll sterilise Lewisham. But more importantly, it will push out residents who have been here, and that will especially be people of colour and young people." They also use social media, mainly TikTok, to share their campaign and petition.

In response to the campaign, the Mayor of Lewisham, Brenda Dacres, said: "We are on track to deliver 2,000 new homes across the borough by 2026. Each one represents stability: children able to stay in their school; parents able to plan their futures; families able to put down roots."

Opposingly, the campaign has also seen support from people both in and outside of Lewisham. Those include Islington MP Jeremy Corbyn, Lewisham's National Education Union and the local Green party in the area.







# Why the school run can be a child's most difficult journey

By Florence Cutts

As soon as the school gates open, the afternoon commute back home commences, the air full of the sound of children chatting, excitement at the afternoon of freedom ahead. Two years ago the typical after school commute back home to the Kennington Ethelred estate began for then 12 year old Aaishah Mohammed, but what happened next changed her family's life as they knew it.

After walking her younger sister, then aged eight, home from school, Aaishah who is now 14, turned around to go to football practice on Black Prince Road in Kennington. A grey car came speeding around the corner and threw her to the ground, causing her to hit her face on the bonnet as she fell.

She was bleeding from the mouth with broken teeth as the driver drove off.

***There was blood everywhere... She looked so scared***

Aaishah received 24 stitches in her gum and 22 in her chin after emergency dental surgery, as well as a prosthetic tooth. The Mohammed family were left traumatised after the incident and Aaishah even missed several weeks of school, falling behind in class.

Aaishah's mother added: "It made me so scared to let my daughters out again.

"We have to do something to make our roads safer for our children."

Police only came after a couple of days but no further action was taken against the driver who claimed the child was fine.

"I was left so angry about how little was done to punish the woman who did this and to prevent this from happening again." Farhia said.

She is retelling the event for the first time as new research has come to light,

uncovering that every year 443 children in London suffer injuries on the school run alone - a number of injuries equivalent to an entire primary school.

16% of these - 72 children - are seriously or fatally injured on the London school run.

Fariah and Aaishah Mohammed are not alone in their trauma. Katy Heald has also shared the story of how her four year old son, Ben was nearly crushed under an SUV whilst riding on his bike at the end of the school day.

Katy and Ben were at a traffic light waiting to cross the nose to tail traffic. The pedestrian lights switched to green and Ben rolled forward to cross the road on his bike whilst Katy followed with her toddler in the buggy. The traffic suddenly began to shift forward and an SUV driver, who had already crossed the yellow line, followed the traffic ahead without checking the crossing to see if anyone was there.

Katy said:

***I screamed but by the time she realised what she'd done she had driven over the front wheel of Ben's bike***

The wheel and front fork of Ben's bike was crushed, coming dangerously close to his leg, and the driver had no idea that he was there until his bike was under her car because of the car's high bonnet.

"Ben was distraught and so was the driver, who had her own kids in the back of the car."

In total, 6,181 children suffered injuries on the road across London, with 1,328 of these taking place during the

school run. Examples of 'serious' injuries are fracture, internal injury, severe cuts, crushing, burns (excluding friction burns), concussion, severe general shock requiring hospital treatment, or detention in hospital as an in-patient.

It is important to note that all of the data recorded has been drawn from police records of road incidents rather than from hospitals. According to TfL Guide to collisions data, evidence suggests that non-fatal injuries are under-reported by police meaning that the real number of child injuries during the school run could be much higher.

Research suggests that up to a fifth of casualties reported by the police are unrecorded by them. It has also been recorded that police often under-estimate the injury level of an incident due to the difficulties of distinguishing the severity of an injury at the scene of an incident.

Children walking and cycling to school in London equate to 57% of all school run journeys whilst making up 78% of school run casualties meaning that children are disproportionately at risk if they walk or cycle to school.

For many parents in London, the fear of the dangers of the school run has sparked anger and resistance. Stories like Aaishah's and Ben's are impossible to ignore and parents feel it is time to take things into their own hands.

Parents have been holding vigils across London calling for safer streets across the capital, with protests happening across Lambeth, Lewisham, Twickenham, Camden, and Hackney to bring awareness to the danger that children are facing whilst travelling to and from school.

Solve the School Run, a parent-led charity, and Clean Cities, Europe's largest network of organisations pushing for cleaner and safer cities, are calling for all councillors in London to commit to a 'Safer Streets for Kids' manifesto ►

Lewisham protests for safer streets  
Photos taken by Becky Mursell





Lambeth parents and children ask for safer streets  
Photos taken by Becky Mursell

The manifesto calls for three main changes:

An effective school street for every school - meaning the closure of certain streets to traffic during the school run; access to a cargo bike for every family through subsidies, secure parking, or bike share schemes; and the reallocation of kerb space so children can see and be seen, as well as parking tariffs to discourage SUVs and

carspreading. The school run has been found to be one of the most difficult trips many children make according to analysis of Transport for London road collision data by parent campaigners at Solve The School Run.

Claire McDonald, co-founder of Solve The School Run said: "We wanted to shine a light on the very real danger that children face getting to school... we

wanted to turn that experience into numbers that councils can understand, to demonstrate the need for immediate action."

The campaign demands are clear, and by putting children and their safety at the front of the narrative, parents are able to highlight the importance of safer streets for children all across London, reframing the numbers and data as real people and stories.

Will Norman,

London's Walking and Cycling Commissioner, said:

**Every death and injury on London's roads is a tragedy, and especially when it involves a child**

He assures that progress is happening with London now having over 800 school streets and a cycle network of over 400km, and says that they are currently transforming dangerous junctions and pedestrian crossings across the capital.

He added that the Mayor, TfL and London Boroughs are eliminating deaths and serious injuries on the roads through their investments, reducing road danger and making it easier and safer for children to walk, cycle and scoot to school.

"Councils have the power to transform the journey to school for thousands of children. And many of them are already doing it, with school streets, bike lanes and increased parking tariffs on SUVs. But we want more," said Claire McDonald. "We want councilors to pledge to save children's lives, give them back their independence and bring the joy of freedom into their lives. They can do this by committing to our pledge." ▶



Lewisham protests for safer streets  
Photos taken by Becky Mursell

Every child deserves to attend school worry-free and parents deserve to know their children will arrive safely home at the end of the day. Parents and campaigners are continuing to plead for more safety measures to be put in place to keep school children safe through protests London wide.

A protest took place in October near the A316 at Margaret's Roundabout in Twickenham, after a driver fell asleep at the wheel and crashed through roadside barriers in January of 2024.

The driver narrowly missed mother Rosie Greaves and her children who were aged one, four, and seven at the time of the incident.

The barriers at the Margaret's Roundabout are said to be frequently out of action, and Rosie Greaves thinks it is just a matter of time until someone is killed.

For parents looking for ways to get involved, Solve the School Run are presenting solutions to allow for parents to complete the school run in safer ways including group cycling or walking as well as tips on how to campaign for a school minibus, cycle lanes, zebra crossings, and signing schools up for behaviour change schemes such as Travel for Life and Modeshift stars.

For families like the Mohammeds and the Healds, the school run should be a safe and stress-free part of daily life, not a dangerous journey with incidents waiting to occur around each corner.

Their stories are just a few of hundreds of children who are seriously injured each year highlighting the urgent need for change. Through community campaigning and protests, parents are making a difference and putting plans into action to make the streets of London a safer part of daily life. ●

Protest outside the Rosendale Pub  
Image Credit: Becky Mursell



# AMONGST THE RUBBLE

## How nepotism is construction's worst enemy amid economic crisis

By Mackenzie Whittaker

In 2023 it was reported by the Family Business Research Foundation (FBRF) that family-owned construction businesses in the UK account for 95.7% of all private sector firms nationally. This means that as of 2023 there were 833,188 legacy firms operating within the UK.

These generationally led businesses make up over half of all private sector employment within the UK, seeing 156,888 firms providing jobs for 1.67 million people. These businesses make up over 80% of all construction sector employment.

*Money talks*

If the jobs these family-owned construction firms provide to members of the British public isn't enough to think wow what an overlooked sector, maybe money can do the talking.

Family businesses in construction accounted for the greatest share of Gross Added Value (GVA) at 85.3% throughout the entire sector, contributing £117.5 billion to the government - directly adding to the UK's GDP (Gross Domestic Product). GDP is a key measure of the size and health of the economy, the total of all goods and services produced within the country over a specific time. On top of this, the cumulation of tax paid by family-owned businesses, across all sectors, gave the government a lovely little top up of £422 billion in 2023. Yuck.

Unfortunately, taxes imposed on family-owned companies are not getting any lighter. An article by Construction News in January revealed just how damning changes to Business property relief (BPR) rates will be on family-owned construction firms that will all, at some point, face inheritance tax.

Businesses already fairly contributing to the government through GVA will lose potential BPR from April 2026 which will see only the first £1m exempt from inheritance tax, after that, nepo-babies will be ripe for the picking. With Mrs Reeves bargaining herself a 20% cut out of fragile and uncertain land.

Speaking to Construction News, Keith Miller of Cavana Homes said allowing this tax to come in will lead to fewer houses being built as firms will not have the capital to match previous figures.

Despite the seemingly positive output figures, there is a not so secret- secret that is tearing down the industry.

*Nepotism*

The practice of favouring relatives and sometimes friends for promotions and other piss-taking activities sim-

ply because they're better connected. In construction this is rife, and the effects are detrimental to the success of companies nationwide. Roles filled on a



whim of promises made by fresh faced and eager nepo-babies are often those at the top of the food chain, the leaders, the decision makers, the 'top-dog' some may say. These roles fuel constructions cesspit of 'macho-culture' and so forth, exacerbate toxic workplace culture leading to the failings of yes, companies in general, but more specifically - family-owned construction companies.

An On The Tools white paper: Behind the high-vis outlined how a number of participants reported a sense of pressure to maintain a 'macho' appearance when at work. However, when you're feeling like the king of the world as the freshly appointed director of your grandfather's £3B company, the tone changes and heads get lost.

In conversation with Mark Downes, an employee of a family-owned construction firm, we spoke all things nepotism in construction and his opinions of the sector.


When asked what

it is like working for a family-owned company, Mark said: "Second and third generation children tend to enter a company when it is in a more financially sound position, they are removed from the day to day leading up to their employment and therefore have no knowledge of the struggle during the establishment of a company that some of the workforce will have been there to experience. This causes them to make bad decisions financially as they have less fear of the impact, also some do not want to be put under pressure so will pay above the odds to make their life easier. This could be put down to a lack of experience in the build-up of the business."

When discussing how nepotism affects the sector Mark said: "Nepotism definitely has different effects based on the individual involved, sometimes it can be positive because the person is willing to learn about the trade whilst also adding modern touches in certain areas of the business for example, with their use of social media for promotion.

However, unfortunately in most cases, nepo-babies fall for the entitlement trap that comes with large scale promotion in the workplace. And ultimately because of this sense of entitlement, staff relationships with leadership tend to sour which can have a detrimentally negative impact on the running of the company and often lead to the business losing key staff who may have vital client relationships.

"Ultimately the failure of companies at the hands of nepo-babies comes down to decisions being made in business based on the experience of being scolded as a child, it may be bad at the time but it will be forgiven. Also, they have the support of the other parent and are aware that no matter what, their job is safe." ▶







## The downfall of a rising sector

At the same time as this rise in nepotism and the shortcomings of family-owned construction firms, construction activity in the UK is facing its longest period of decline since the 2007 Global Financial Crisis and big shock... no one is talking about it.

October statistics released in the S&P Global Construction PMI, which measures the economic health of the construction sector revealed that construction has declined at the fastest rate since May 2020, this comes during a period of huge strain on the sector through rising costs and increased workload.

It has been just over two years since Kier Starmer and his constituency revealed their plans for 1.5 million new homes to be built across the UK. And now? Over 100,000 construction companies across the UK are in 'significant' financial distress.

Recent figures from Begbies Traynor's Construction Red Flag Alert also found the number of companies in 'critical' financial distress has risen 70% year on year in Q3 bringing the total to 7,361 firms nationwide.

However, construction isn't just falling short because of its finances or inactivity. As previously reported on the Londoners, it is at the forefront of one of the UK's most prolific mental health battles, which



has seen 7,000 tradespeople die by suicide in the past decade.

***Nepo-babies fall for the entitlement trap that comes with large scale promotion***

The S&P Construction PMI surveyed 150 construction firms, revealing total industry activity measured at 44.1 in October, down from 46.2 the previous

Tradespeople on the Isle of Wight

month. October marked the tenth consecutive month below the no-change mark of 50.0 – the longest period of continuous decline since the Global Financial crisis that took place from 2007-2009.

Civil Engineering has revealed itself as the weakest performing subsector within construction after having seen the largest decline in activity in April, August, September and now, October. This comes as respondents shared a growing concern for lack of new work in the books to replace completed projects.

Shockingly, in a time when the Government has promised the UK 1.5 million new affordable homes, residential work continues to decrease only, October saw the greatest decline for eight months from 46.8 in September to 43.6 in October.

Economics Director at S&P Global Market Intelligence, Tim Moore said: "Business activity expectations for the year ahead were among the lowest since the end of 2022, suggesting that construction companies remained cautious about the near-term outlook and have yet to see a turning point on the horizon. Many survey respondents reported caution among clients ahead of the Autumn Budget and a general reluctance to commit to major capital expenditure projects against a subdued domestic economic backdrop."

To gain a deeper understanding of what is happening at the epicentre of the nation's construction sector, I spoke to Andrew Curtain, Founder of Construction Wave, which provides news and in-depth insights across the UK construction industry.

We sat down for a chat about failing in construction, succeeding in construction, where the gaps form, and what it would take for them to close. When asked broadly

why he thinks construction finances and activity is at such a low right now, Andrew said: "Lately there are numerous things, you have a lot of contractors locked into pre-COVID prices, so like pre-COVID and pre-Ukraine prices. So, you're stuck in a contract, and say you're building a high rise in central London, then it's 4 or 5 years and you've signed the contract then all of a sudden, material prices go through the roof and you don't have access to the same raw materials anymore. And then

***All of a sudden, material prices go through the roof and you dont have access to the same raw materials anymore. And then very very quickly your profit starts to erode.***

very, very quickly your profit starts to erode. So that's probably the most recent one."

As well as this, Andrew went on to share his views on how pricing strategies used in the construction sector have played a relevant role amidst growing financial difficulties. However, he did agree that technological advancements in the industry have played a huge role in improving companies' ability to fairly and accurately price jobs.

Relating back to the issue of nepotism in construction, Andrew

said: "Also, on the softer side, construction is one of those industries where nepotism is ripe. You have the wrong people in the wrong seats at the wrong time. If you look at the top four or five contractors, they all have pretty steady margins because they're all very well governed. They have a strong leadership team in place.

"Where the collapses seem to happen more is in family businesses and legacy businesses. If you ask any restructuring company, when one of these companies comes into difficulty, they're very poor at asking for help. You know, they think we can ride it out, whereas they really need to reach out to someone like KPMG or someone like that with a restructuring team and say listen we're in a bit of bother here. There's this lads type of attitude that still lingers in construction."

Meanwhile, a massive problem affecting all parts of the sector, but more specifically smaller, family-owned businesses is retention. In speaking with Andrew, he was positively minded that this is becoming less of a problem as the government is beginning to crack down on it, but it is still a huge factor in the shortcomings of the industry and something that is massively unfair and overlooked.

He said: "Imagine you've finished a project and delivered whatever engineering work you agreed to do, then all of a sudden you can't get your £1M back because they start making up things that are incomplete. When you're a small business and you're missing that £1M 'deposit' you could call it, the effects can be detrimental as those businesses are still being taxed as if they have it." ●





# Where's the diversity in sports media?

A call for the sports media industry to back its own future

By Rashad J

Fifteen years after launching with one aim, to make the UK sports media more diverse and inclusive, the Black Collective of Media in Sport is making its clearest and most urgent call yet.

In an open letter to industry leaders, BCOMs warns that progress since 2020 has been welcome but nowhere near enough, and that without meaningful support, the future of the organisation, and the future pipeline of diverse talent is at risk.

BCOMS has spent more than a decade building pathways where none have existed, creating masterclasses that have launched careers, and championing the idea that sports media should reflect the audiences it serves. But while the work is delivering results, without sustained industry backing, the sector risks slipping backwards.

BCOMS last wrote to the industry in 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the global reckoning sparked by the Black Lives Matter movement. That letter, signed by major figures including David Beckham, Dina Asher-Smith and Ian Wright, challenged sports media organisations to confront their own structural inequalities.

Five years on, BCOMS says some progress has been made. There is more diverse on-screen talent, gender representation has improved. A handful of organisations have partnered with BCOMS to give young people from underrepresented backgrounds their first real chance to break into the industry. And some of those young people are now shaping the sports coverage this country sees every day.

BCOMS applauds those gains but the letter makes it clear: the deeper issues remain untouched. In its latest assessment, BCOMS outlines the areas where progress has stalled or even moved backwards:

- Retention and progression of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic employees



Picture of BCOMS founder Leon Mann  
Credits: BCOMS

***"After 15 years of impact, we need stronger backing to go further"***

remains a major problem.

- Senior and middle-management roles continue to be overwhelmingly white.
- Gender progress in the industry has not extended to Black women.
- The written press remains one of the least diverse spaces in British sport.
- There is still no industry-wide data on ethnic diversity or the sports-media pay gap.

BCOMS reports that:

- 70% of young people who complete its Masterclass programmes go on to paid roles in sports media.
- More than 450 young people have taken part in the Masterclass pathway, with another 50 currently enrolled.

Its alumni now work across the big-

gest media organisations in the country.

This is, in every sense, a proven talent pipeline, one the industry claims to want. But as founder Leon Mann MBE explains, almost all of this has been built on limited funding and vast amounts of voluntary work. Support from ITV Sport, BBC Sport, News UK, Nike and the Chelsea Foundation has kept the academy alive, but not at the scale the industry needs.

BCOMS wants organisations to recommit to diversity, inclusion and equity as core business priorities, support the development and retention of talent from underrepresented backgrounds, become corporate members of BCOMS to help sustain and scale its work and treat diversity as a measurable metric, not a PR exercise.

If the industry wants to continue celebrating diverse faces on screen, hearing fresh voices in commentary boxes, and benefitting from a richer, more representative newsroom culture, then it must strengthen, not just admire, the pipeline that made it possible.

# Building trust among young men and boys

Mentoring campaign secures heavyweight backing from football and beyond

By Rashad J

Six months after launching a national campaign to confront what it calls a "generational crisis" facing teenage boys, the Lost Boys Taskforce has secured its biggest breakthrough yet.

The UK government has now committed to ensuring 500,000 more young people will have access to a trusted adult, supported by £15 million of new investment. For a campaign founded to address the alarming number of boys growing up without guidance or belonging, this is a pivotal moment.

The Lost Boys Taskforce was formed in early 2025 by major figures in British sport.

Its central argument is simple: too many boys feel isolated, unsupported and vulnerable, and as a result, are increasingly drawn into harmful online spaces or destructive behaviours.

According to the Taskforce, more than 630,000 young people in England say they do not have a "trusted adult" outside their home life, someone they feel safe confiding in, or turning to when life becomes overwhelming.

The Taskforce argues that this lack of stable support leaves many boys more susceptible to exclusion, mental-health difficulties, disengagement from school, and online radicalisation. Football Beyond Borders, one of the founding partners, describes the situation as a "ticking time bomb," warning that influencers such as Andrew Tate are filling the void for boys searching for identity and purpose.

The Taskforce brings together a cross-sector coalition. Among its most recognisable voices is Paul Barber, Chief Executive of Brighton & Hove Albion FC.

Barber has spoken openly about how he once struggled after his father left home when he was 13, and how teachers and coaches became the adults who helped him regain confidence and direction.

Alongside Barber, the coalition



includes senior figures from the FA, former athletes, educators, and researchers studying the widening gap in outcomes for young men in the UK.

The centrepiece of the Taskforce's proposal is the Trusted Adult Guarantee, a national plan that prioritises long-term, relationship-based support.

The guarantee calls for:

- 10,000 trained trusted adults placed in schools, grassroots sports clubs and community settings.
- A focus on boys growing up in poverty or at highest risk of disengagement.
- Incorporating trusted-adult access into national school surveys.
- Embedding the system into existing inspection and safeguarding frameworks.
- Partnering with football and youth-work organisations to deliver relationship-driven mentoring, rather than short-term interventions.
- A combination of factors, social media pressure, rising online misogyny, widening educational gaps, shortages of youth services and increased isolation after the pandemic, has created what some experts describe as a "man-

hood vacuum."

Research cited in the Taskforce's launch articles outlines troubling trends:

- A rising number of boys disengaged from school.
- Increasing exposure to online extremism and misogynistic influencers.
- Higher rates of youth violence and vulnerability among unsupported young men.
- Major disparities in educational outcomes for boys compared with girls.
- Growing concerns about mental health, body image and identity.

This is the environment the Lost Boys Taskforce was created to address. Taskforce members and partner organisations say that real progress depends on ensuring trusted adults are not simply introduced, but embedded.

This means training, safeguarding, time, support and system-level change, not short-term mentoring or brief interventions.

The ambition is clear: no boy should reach adolescence without at least one adult outside the family home who believes in him, listens to him and stays present. ●



# 'Britain's children are not moving enough'

New survey reveals 'still work to do' in mission to make kids more active

By Taaseen Choudhury



The latest Active Lives Survey, released this morning, shows England's children are now more active than at any point since records began in 2017-18.

It is a rare piece of good news in a landscape often dominated by warnings about rising childhood obesity, mental health struggles, and the long-term impact of Covid-era inactivity.

According to the survey, more young people are taking part in sport and physical activity than ever before.

Less than half of children 49.1% meet the Chief Medical Officer's recommended levels of daily activity.

For a country that prides itself on sporting culture, this is a troubling statistic.

If only half of England's children are getting the movement they need to stay healthy, what is happening to the rest?

The capital may be home to world-class sporting venues and Olympic legacies, but it's also a city where access to green space varies dramatically depending on your postcode.

A child in Richmond grows up surrounded by open parks compared to a child in Tower Hamlets that has some of the lowest green-space access in the country.

***It gives us hope progress is being made...changing attitudes about the importance of movement, play and sport in children's education***

That gap filters directly into activity levels, participation confidence, and long-term health.

Schools and youth clubs across the city report a slow but noticeable rebound from pandemic inactivity.

More London schools are reintroducing extracurricular sport, and many have seen spikes in interest in football, netball, and athletics.

In areas like Lewisham and Camden, community clubs say demand is at its highest in years.

But the city's inequalities cast a long shadow. Children in outer boroughs often travel long distances to reach facilities. Inner-city pupils face overcrowded playgrounds, limited safe outdoor space, or high local crime rates making unsupervised play impossible.

The Youth Sport Trust, one of the leading national voices calling for sig-

nificant change.

Sport England's annual survey shows that participation in organised sport is rebounding from pandemic numbers. Schools are offering more extracurricular activities. And community clubs have seen a rise in new joiners.

But on the other hand, large numbers of children remain inactive, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, children with disabilities, and young people living in areas with limited access to open space or safe play facilities.

"It is hugely significant this latest Active Lives Children and Young People data shows an increase in physical activity levels," says Ali Oliver MBE, CEO of the Youth Sport Trust.

"It gives us hope progress is being made and the work of charities and organisations like ours are helping increase opportunity, improve experience and foster changing attitudes about the importance of movement, play and sport in children's education and development."

PE programme reforms and community sport partnerships, the Youth Sport Trust has long championed the idea that sport isn't just an add-on to education it's essential to it. Movement improves mental health, builds confidence, boosts concentration, and builds lifelong habits.

"Our Class of 2035 report recently issued a warning about the impact of increasingly sedentary lifestyles," Oliver says. The report outlined a stark future scenario: rising developmental delays, worsening mental health, chronic diseases emerging earlier in life, and obesity rates climbing year on year.

The new Active Lives data may show improvement, but as Oliver puts it, "Far too many children still remain inactive and are suffering as a consequence."

The heart of Oliver's message is simple children cannot become active on motivation alone. For millions, daily activity is not a realistic choice.

"Inactive children need more than encouragement; they need support and

opportunities to make movement part of their everyday lives," Oliver says.

This means safe environments where children can play freely and healthy, active schools that prioritise PE instead of sidelining it. Also, communities with accessible facilities, not just for the few.

Positive early experiences, Oliver argues, are the single most powerful factor in building healthy habits. If a child's introduction to movement is stressful, humiliating, or intimidating, they often disconnect from sport for life.

"Every day we delay action, the economic and social costs increase," Oliver warns. Chronic diseases, mental health crises, and long-term inactivity place huge burdens on public services.

There is, however, a unique opportunity on the horizon. With the government planning a refreshed curriculum, an enrichment framework, and a national network of PE and School Sport Partnerships, the Youth Sport Trust sees a rare chance to make structural change.

This could be a turning point, when schools receive the funding and frameworks needed to integrate movement throughout the day, and communities gain the spaces and programmes that make healthy living accessible to every child.

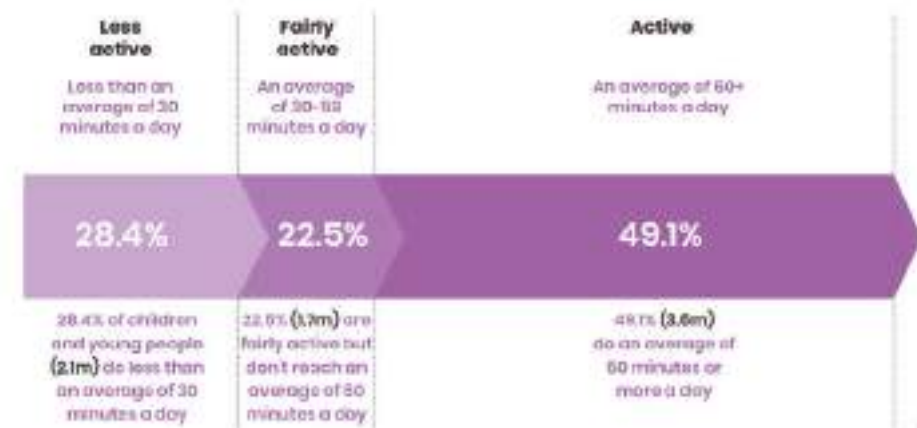
More children are moving. The upward trend shows that years of campaigning, investment, and community effort are working.

But the other half of the story the half about children still inactive, still struggling, still left behind cannot be ignored.

The playgrounds may be full this morning. But for millions of children, the path to movement is still blocked.

The question now is whether policymakers, educators, and communities will step up or whether the warning signs highlighted today will become tomorrow's crisis. ●

Below: graphic from the Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2024-25 Academic year





# Friendly socials don't have to be awkward



Arcade photo by Denise Jans via Unsplash and, below, Shaheena Uddin with Traitors, Fozia Fazil

By Taaseen Choudhury

At a time when making genuine connections in a bustling city like London can feel overwhelming, London's Collective is rewriting the play-book on community and belonging. A social events hosting organisation in London that

Londons Collective founded by Inayah began as a mission born from her own struggles navigating life in London after graduating university in her early twenties.

The small network has grown into an inclusive social community that welcomes people from all walks of life that offers closure and connection to young adults.

The networks goal is at building a strong sense of community and channelling experiences into a safe, welcoming, relaxed space where individuals could meet and learn from one another.

The Londons Collective has hosted a vibrant array of events that embody this mission in the past.

In June 2025, they brought people together for an Eid Market at Casa Café, celebrating a religious cultural

event and bringing together community. It included small businesses with handcrafted jewellery, natural oils, and

## The night began with bingo and ended in backstabbing

unique gifts it sows unity and local entrepreneurial support.

A Summer Market in Leyton drew in over 300 attendees, showcasing small business talent from London and encouraging community engagement.

The Collective engages people in creative ways. A bracelet making evening, gives an artistic space for attendees to craft meaningful pieces while striking up new friendships.

In September, their first mixed event with men and women, a founders creatives networking event at Kismet Café brought together entrepreneurs, makers, and thinkers.

In November, a collaborative Ex-

change Night in Covent Garden united London's Collective with other community groups for a board games night, their largest event of the year.

Also a traitors themed gam night was hosted by Londons Collective at Kismet Cafe, last month. Participant Shaheena Uddin said "the night began with bingo and ended in backstabbing betrayal and pizza." she added we did manage to clock about four traitors which was really satisfying."

Looking ahead, London's Collective continues to expand its offerings, with more social gatherings, creative workshops, and networking opportunities on the horizon each designed to deepen connection and celebrate the diverse stories of Londoners. ●



# Combating loneliness through culture

Inside the new platform aiming to unite people by making African culture accessible to everyone

By Mackenzie Whittaker

A first of its kind platform built exclusively to turn African culture, identity and social connection into bookable micro-experiences aims to reduce loneliness and cultural disconnection this Christmas.

As of 2021 there were 1.5 million Africans living in the UK. Meanwhile a recent survey in the UK and US conducted by the university of Bath and advocacy organisation Africa No Filter, revealed that western thoughts of Africa were far less positive compared to Europe.

Over 40% had negative thoughts of the continent which they linked to nature and wildlife rather than looking at its human and cultural diversity

culture in everything we do, our food, humour, stories, music, and the way we move through life. These things have value. Kulturely gives Africans a way to earn from who they already are, without changing themselves to fit anyone else."

The survey found there was a clear and significant lack of understanding and appreciation for the diversity of the continent, as well as the culture that it brings not being seen as cause for interest or celebration. Only 33% of 1,701 responses listed society, economy and culture when asked what comes to

## A safe and unforgettable way to experience culture

their mind when they think of Africa.

The organisation hopes to bring Africans living abroad a flexible income route that relies on cultural exchange and strengthening communities instead of the typical need for qualifications and previous experience to earn an income through their ability to host and advertise events via Kulturely.

As well as giving students, new arrivals, long-term residents and members of other cultures and ethnic groups a safe space to feel a sense of familiarity, belonging or to satisfy an urge to step

outside of their comfort zone whilst trying new things.

Co-founder, Genesis Etoroma said: "For travellers, students, and locals, Kulturely offers a safe, human, and unforgettable way to meet Africans and experience culture in real time. And for Africans, it unlocks a flexible income engine that doesn't require qualifications, only authenticity." ●



# phonetic alphabet

<b>A</b> alpha	<b>B</b> bravo	<b>C</b> charlie
<b>D</b> delta	<b>E</b> echo	<b>F</b> foxtrot
<b>G</b> golf	<b>H</b> hotel	
<b>I</b> india	<b>J</b> juliett	<b>K</b> kilo
<b>L</b> lima	<b>M</b> mike	
<b>N</b> november	<b>O</b> oscar	<b>P</b> papa
<b>Q</b> quebec	<b>R</b> romeo	
<b>S</b> sierra	<b>T</b> tango	<b>U</b> uniform
<b>V</b> victor	<b>W</b> whiskey	
<b>X</b> xray	<b>Y</b> yankee	<b>Z</b> zulu

With this NATO alphabet chart you will no longer use “M as in Mancy” during a support call with your mom, or while defusing a bomb.



**semaphore**  
Pre-electronic flag letter signals for naval communication represented in a circle. The peace sign was created by combining the letters N (Nuclear) and D (Disarmament).

OUTSIDE OPEN



**international morse code**  
The world's first digital code. The length of each letter's code corresponds to the frequency of that letter's usage in Morristown, New Jersey's newspaper in 1837.

Download this poster at [outsideopen.com/alphabet](http://outsideopen.com/alphabet)



**international code of signals**  
These maritime flags are used to visually communicate letters and messages while maintaining radio silence.

CC BY NC ND

# Is everyone else embarrassed too?

Is the NATO alphabet still prevalent in everyday life? And should you feel embarrassed if you don't know S is for Sierra?

By Mackenzie Whittaker

Today on my to do list book the car in for a diagnostic's test and go to Morrisons.

I got to my local Beamer garage feeling the same sense of imposter syndrome I get every time I drive my car cause well... I'm not a middle-aged man nor do I drive like a knob.

I'm just a girl that hysterically scoured Autotrader for a storm bay grey 1 series.

I sat down, reamed off my issues, she asked for my reg.

No issues arose until she checked it back with me and had mistaken the V for a B. Immediately panic stricken. I'm trying to remember all those times I've listened to my elders spurt out the NATO alphabet with such ease and aura. I'm sweating, I'm uncomfortable and I'm 21 doing big girl things that I'd so much rather my mum do for

**87% of 16-24 year olds have no confidence in using the NATO alphabet**

me. I think it's funny how we all want independence and to be respected as an adult but the second it's my adult self's time to shine I fumble it, like be honest Kenz no one is respecting what you've got going on right now.

I'm thinking yeah this poor customer service woman knows I can't pull the V for Victor move – she probably doesn't care, but I do.

I still can't remember what V stands for.

Beyond ashamed and not really sure how to overcome this palava I've found myself in, I decided that V for Verruca Salt was a solid alternative. A niche reference but still, a 10/10 movie.

She laughed and I felt like we bonded over that but let's be real, It's not great



is it. On my drive home I unfairly called mum out, demanding answers as to why she never got onto me about not knowing what I now know as the NATO alphabet but, was prior to today known by me as the 'that alphabet you know the bravo delta'.

It got me thinking though, has gen-z's reliance on texting and tech made us completely useless at adulting?

Surely to God I can't be the only one that can't spell my registration number using the 'bravo delta' alphabet.

What did I do to ease my mind of wonder you ask? I made a survey.

In a desperate attempt to make myself feel better, I discovered I am not the only one and this alphabet is long out of common knowledges sight these days.

As it happens, out of 75 members of the Gen-Z community, a staggering 87% of 16–24-year-olds have absolutely zero confidence in using this alpha-



bet. 110 people were surveyed with ages ranging from 16–50+ and, out of them, only 37% of all participants were able to correctly answer what M stands for.

Some of my favourite alternatives include monty, moose, movember and, best of all, the hyper-alert participant letting me know I had misspelled definitely – I don't remember sending out my survey to the spelling police but I'm here for whatever makes you happy!

However, not as many older participants knew it either.

Over half of 25-29 year olds felt little to no confidence. And after this? Just 44% of ages 30-50+ said yeah...I'm confident spelling out my reg with this alphabet.

When asked how much of the alphabet participants would say they know, only 44 out of 110 said they know more than 50%. ●



# Unpeeling the facts of the London banana

Sketchy or profound? We find out whether the polarising sketch squares up to the statistics

By Christopher Chalmers

In the late summer, Londoners homed in on a curious new meme: a bright, boomerang-shaped curve drawn over a map of the city, marking the “best” areas to live and visit. The concept - dubbed the London Banana - was created by Journalist Saul Sadka, who posted the original map on X. In his post, he argued that life is considerably better inside this banana — and warned that “almost everything outside the banana is horrible these days.”

The Tel Aviv based hack was most insistent, and his ‘back of a fag packet’ sketch certainly sparked debate. But the conversation quickly became polarized, and seemingly everyone took a side of the fence.

But the time is now right to ask: does his theory really stack up? Or is it just a load of, err...bananas? Let’s unpeel the headlines and find out whether the stats agree.

*Does the banana discriminate against race and class?*

That’s a tricky one...

The original banana probably wasn’t created to comment on race. Rather as a “quality of life” visualization, based on one person’s measure of desirability.

But in London - where class, and to a lesser extent ethnicity, often

determine where one lives - deciding which areas are “good” and which are “bad” was always going to ruffle feathers.

The banana sweeps through some of the wealthiest, whitest, most privileged areas in the capital. It bypasses the east and the more ethnically diverse areas in the west.

A canter through the latest census backs this up. Every single area within the banana is still majority white. Many areas outside the banana, such as Newham, Croydon and Hounslow, are majority non-white.

This is not to say that the banana doesn’t include areas shaped by migration. Within its bounds sit Golders Green and Hampstead, both synonymous with synagogues. But this is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. For the most part, the banana scoops up London’s least diverse areas. Richmond upon Thames, for example, is over 80 percent white, high for Greater London and even approaching the national average of 81.7 percent.

*Does the banana discriminate against wealth?*

Yes...

According to the Office for

National Statistics, the average income in Kensington Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham tops £63,000 a year, three times the national average. Nowhere outside the banana gets anywhere close.







Left: An S-Class mercedes sweeps through Richmond Park.

Right: Extensive Christmas decorations in the banana

This wealth isn't about the banana. Haringey and Islington show an average income of just over £30,000. Still above the national average, but then it needs to be, given London's gargantuan cost of living.

But you can't escape the fact that those living in the banana

nana typically earn much more than those outside it, which brings us to our next question...

### *How about property?*

If you mean value then yes, areas in the banana are usually more expensive. Hampstead consistently ranks among the richest places in London. The average house price in the area stands at around £1.5 million, significantly higher than the London-wide average of £530,000.

But when it comes to property desirability, the banana comes up short.

Recent data from the property site Rightmove shows that eight of the ten most in-demand London

neighbourhoods among prospective buyers fall outside the banana, with purchases less concerned by their post code's snob value, instead looking for a better deal.

### *Does the banana reflect crime statistics?*

Not really.

Westminster showed more than 41,000 reported crimes from January to June this year (26,000 theft), by far London's highest. Camden came in second with 20,333 offences in the same period.

Both areas are inside the bounds of Sadka's sketch.

Of course, some might argue that these areas are skewed by pick pockets and other petty crimes

against tourists, which are less relevant for those who live in London. What about specific offences?

Well, let's look at the ever-trendy knife crime...

Data from the ONS shows that Westminster boasts 440 knife offences for every 100,000 inhabitants. Bexley (outside banana) has just 79. In fact, Westminster is by far the worst borough for knife offences, beating Lambeth, Lewisham, even Hackney.

This isn't to say that if you step foot in the banana, you will be stabbed immediately... Richmond and Kingston are the lowest risk, with a rate of 70 and 78 respectively.

But what it does show is that crime in London does not follow a single pattern and is no respecter of a hastily sketched banana.

### *What do Londoners think?*

Although so much of the data refutes Sadka's claim that nearly everything outside the banana is horrible, do real Londoners know this?

Ben Hanson – a sports coach who has lived inside and outside the banana has his doubts

"Sure, there are certainly more Range Rovers and electric gates within the banana, but for young people I think that pushes them away from certain areas.

"Who wants to live surrounded by snobs? I want to live somewhere with a bit more buzz, somewhere cosmopolitan, with decent bars, a good music scene."

Not everyone agrees with Mr Hanson. His mate Callum, from Feltham, voiced considerable support.

"I'm not really interested in stats to be honest... I reckon if you ask most people in London whether the yellow areas are nicer than the others, they will say yes. Like... who thinks Peckham is nicer than Primrose Hill?"

### *What do I think?*

It's a load of nonsense, and bears almost no scrutiny when it comes to statistics. But having lived outside the banana for three months, and inside for the last two years, I can see how personal experience molds individual perceptions. Is everything outside the banana 'horrible'? No. ●



# SMOKE & MIRRORS

Cigarettes were my first true love, but with new year's resolutions fast approaching, can I finally shake off a six-year habit?

By Christopher Chalmers

You were told at school that smoking is not cool. You know that it's the primary cause of lung cancer, that it's linked to at least 15 other types of cancer, and that it increases the risk of heart disease. The picture on the packet tells you so, with its inelegant images of warts and bruises on wrinkly old skin.

You know it's ruinously expensive - A pack of 20 Marlboro Gold is nearly 18 quid in London: a 5-daily habit costs you £1,640 a year. With around 80% of that being tax, the only winner is His Majesty's Treasury.

I know this too, yet I'm still one of Britain's six million smokers. I know it does me, the people around me and my wallet a great deal of harm. I know my friends and family would rather I quit.

## *Moderation in all things...including moderation*

As 2026 draws nearer, and quitting smoking remains the most popular new years' resolution, I thought I would give it a trial run. So, for the next fortnight I won't touch a cigarette. I won't vape or use any other means of administering nicotine, I will be going 'cold turkey'. Every four days, I will note the psychological and physical effects of the change. Here goes...

### *13th November*

For once I don't have a cigarette with my coffee for breakfast. No matter though, I just remember the good times; The love affair started when I was 16. The first highlight was the Silk Cut I shared with a mate in my old English classroom. The beautiful oak-panelled room was atop the school; the view stretched from Edinburgh Castle to the Firth of Forth, the magenta sky illuminating that crisp November evening. Puffing away, completely at peace, the stresses of adolescence seemed to drift away.

A cigarette scratches an itch that gum, nicotine spray and even vapes can't reach. Cruising along with the roof down, sipping a cold beer on the beach, strolling through Richmond Park - all are just that little bit more pleasurable with a

tab between the index and middle finger.

### *16th November*

It's been four days. I should have been more strategic when scheduling my experiment - because yesterday was my sister's wedding.

One of the happiest, most joyful occasions of my life to date and I couldn't share a Marlboro with my new brother-in-law. On the plus side, Grandma didn't rumble me having a crafty one, so no tuts of disapproval.

Socially it is a bit of a setback - I can't use it as a handy 'get-out-of-boring-conversation card'. For once my euphemism about getting some air is a statement of fact. Sunday was easy because I never smoked when hungover.

But by Monday the train back to London was beaconing, and I was feeling tense. British trains being what they are, a quick puff beforehand would have been nice...

It was on the train where I first noticed a physical effect, my left leg wouldn't stop hopping up and down, and I was fidgeting more. I also felt hungrier and snacked more.

### *20th November*

One week down, one to go. By my calculations I have saved 18 quid now, but I've spent it all on snacks instead. I'm no richer, but I am fatter.



I met my aunt in town yesterday for lunch. Because she lives abroad and meeting is a rarity, lunch turned into drinks, which turned into more drinks...

By nine I was staggering to an Uber. She sweetly booked one of the posh ones with a chauffeur who insisted on opening the door. The S-Class had acres of leg

***For every pound a smoker costs the NHS, they pay three pounds in tax..***

room, vodka-bar mood lighting and, peculiarly, ash trays.

My driver admitted he allowed customers to smoke, which explained the cigar aroma.

The drive from Mayfair to Twickenham took 40 minutes, and as I rested my sloshed head on the pillow and watched the smart bits of the Monopoly board glide smoothly by, I again thought: 'How much better would this be with a Marlboro to keep me company'. Then I got quite cross - the one time I could smoke in an Uber I couldn't, all in sacrifice for you, my reader.

### *24th November*

The 'withdrawal symptoms' are not as bad now, but I am getting increasingly angry about the unfairness and persecution of smokers. Obesity costs the NHS around £11.4 billion per year - smoking only £2.6 billion - yet the fatties do not pay an 80 percent levy on their crisps and chocolate. In fact, the taxpayer will soon be footing a much fatter bill for their Ozempic too.



Tax receipts from the tobacco industry total around 8 billion a year, so for every pound a smoker costs the NHS, he pays three pounds in tax.

### *27th November*

As of three pm yesterday I am a free man. Free to puff away at will. And gone is any illusion that I might kick the habit for good. Last night I was reunited with my Marlboros. Seven of them, in fact.

By my calculations, I have saved about 38 quid. Rachel Reeves will be 30 pounds worse off, but how have I fared?

During the fortnight I was more irritable, I snacked more and consequently put on two pounds of weight. What cash I saved was quickly spent on chocolate pretzels, confirming my pathetic lack of willpower.

What is the point in quitting anyway? I know too many people who never smoked and died far too young. Conversely, both my grandparents smoked prodigiously and made it well past ninety.

And even if quitting would prolong my life, where does that argument cease? Alcohol does me no good, neither does a juicy steak. But why go without life's purest pleasures just to prolong your time on earth? Who would choose 100 years of bland misery over 60 or 70 years of joy? Not me. ●





# Revenge of the nerds

By Maliyah  
Alcide-Clarke

Image credits to  
Animeleague events  
and Jaybob's  
Photography

## Has the 'weird' really become mainstream?

At one point in time, being different was one of the worst things you could be. If you liked alternative music, you were emo, if you liked plays/ musicals, you were a theatre kid, and if you liked things like comics and anime, then you were a nerd. But what if I tell you that we aren't in those times anymore and that now being a nerd is cool?

The basic definition of a nerd is described as 'a person who is extremely interested in one subject, especially computers and knows a lot of facts

**Things like anime, comics, and gaming used to feel like private hobbies, but now they're everywhere**

about it.' (Cambridge dictionary) Throughout the decades, the meaning of this word has seen many different iterations; the 70s portrayed nerds as people with high intelligence in scientific subjects. But nowadays, the term overlaps more with 'geek', which is defined as people who are interested in a particular subject.

People who were considered nerds usually went against the grain of what was liked socially. So, instead of liking football, makeup, and gossiping, DnD, anime and Marvel comics were some of the interests at the forefront of 'nerd culture.'

Whilst being different may have granted you a side eye from society, being considered different and weird almost made you a complete outcast. Some may think that the treatment towards nerdy characters in movies and TV shows are an exaggeration of real life.

And while that is definitely true, there was definitely a more covert disdain towards nerds. I remember being in secondary school and seeing people who expressed their love for nerdy things be treated slightly differently. Instead of straight-up bullying and verbal assault, these people were more likely to be victims of snide giggles, strange looks and backhanded comments.

This reached a point where many people kept their interests to themselves, opting to enjoy

themselves at home or in small, safe spaces—for example, clubs or with friends.

Mel Rowlands at Anime League said, "Things like anime, comics, and gaming used to feel like private hobbies, but now they're everywhere. People aren't just watching or reading on their own anymore — they're sharing online, going to events, and making it part of their social lives."

As someone who had their own obsession with all things Marvel and anime at the time, I definitely made sure not to discuss my favourite movies and shows out loud to avoid any scrutiny.

That was just the thing to do. That was until around 2021, when I noticed a shift with the majority of people in my class discussing the newly released season of the anime Attack on Titan.

The real culprit of this shift was COVID-19 and the pandemic, as always.

When the lockdown occurred, people were forced into isolation, which, in turn, forced them to look into themselves and find new things, such as hobbies and interests.

When looking back now, we may cringe, but 2020 was definitely the year of self-expression through social media. People were combating the depressive state of the world through simply being themselves.

With celebrities being on live more often and other netizens sharing their daily activities during the pandemic, social media (es-

pecially TikTok) became a way for people to express themselves more and share more about them-



selves. This is one thing that led to the growth of fandom culture.

With no one able to socialise in real life, people turned to social media to share their interests and find like-minded people, which helped them to create

**Social media gave fans a way to connect and celebrate together**

or expand already existing fandoms.

Along with social media, anime was one of the things at the forefront of this cultural and societal shift in opinion towards certain types of media. Many people ended up discovering a love for anime during this time, due to factors such as boredom; people were yearning for new things to watch after cinemas and other places of leisure had been shut down, as well as social media, as people were forming communities and posting moments about their favourite shows, which then attracted the interest of non-anime watchers. ►







Once shows like Jujutsu Kaisen and the fourth season of Attack on Titan were released towards the end of 2020, it created a new craze of fandoms, which is still seen to this day. Rowlands said: “Social media gave fans a way to connect and celebrate together. Cosplay photos, memes, fan art — it all spreads so quickly now. It’s made fandom culture visible and normal, and that’s helped it grow.” The popularisation of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is also something that contributed to the rise in nerds across the world. I personally noticed the MCU got more popular after ‘Avengers: Endgame’ was released. It was such a monumental and iconic film that changed the Marvel timeline and somewhat changed the way action movies were seen for a while. The hype for this film was so great that it also attracted non-Marvel watchers to witness Endgame, not as a canonical climax but as a great movie.



Because of this, more people got to experience the (for the most part) well-crafted story lines as well as amazing action and vivid visual effects. And this continued all the way through to 2025, with shows like Loki, WandaVision and MoonKnight leading the popularity fad and becoming the most watched shows on Disney+. Marvel is still globally popular with the highly anticipated Avengers: Doomsday due to land in cinemas next year. Even leading to a brand of DC movies, James Gunn kicking

it off with Superman, a very successful film that grossed around £600 million in cinemas worldwide, compared to Joker: Folie a Deux, which made less than half of that. And these are only two aspects of nerd culture that gained traction in the past few years. In the post-COVID era, that shift in nerd culture is still evident even in daily life. In terms of anime, it became more mainstream with Netflix introducing and expanding upon its anime category after 2021. The streaming service that only housed a select few Ghibli movies and the live-action Death Note remake now houses a range of anime, including Demon Slayer and My Hero Academia. Many businesses have also profited from the rise in nerd culture. Mainstream stores, such as Primark and HMV, have incorporated more collectable and wearable merchandise, such as a range of Funko Pop figures and One Piece hoodies. But small businesses and independent stores are the ones who have gained the most from this zeitgeist. There has been a rise in comic and collectable stores around London, along

with a growth in customers, showing that people are becoming more interested in ‘nerd culture’ and this allows new businesses to flourish. Anime League also benefited from this shift as a business. Rowlands said: “Yes, we’ve noticed bigger and more diverse crowds at our events. People who might never have gone to a convention before are now curious and excited to join in. It’s made the atmosphere even more vibrant.” While more people embrace ‘nerdy’ interests, some may question whether the very concept of a nerd will even exist in the future. Some may argue that the term should be eradicated, feeling it reflects the isolation of those who like different things, but a large number of people have seemed to embrace the term ‘nerd,’ now wearing it as a badge of honour instead of a title to be ashamed of. One notable instance of this is the company ‘Sexy Nerds’. They are a company that hosts events and parties with a twist, where partygoers can dress in cosplay, play some vintage games, and spend time with a community of like

minded people. Whether the term is embraced or condemned, the reality is that this change should be welcomed, as it allows people to enjoy what they love judgment-free. It also allows people to pursue new business and creative ventures. For example, creating anime-themed cafes or hosting Dungeons and Dragons game nights or even new comic stores. ‘Nerd culture’ is something that is often susceptible to change but after looking at the last few years, it seems that nerds will continue to be embraced. Anime League’s Mel Rowland added: “I think they’ll

keep getting bigger and more creative. Fans want experiences, not just stalls and panels — so we’ll see more immersive exhibits, interactive shows, and ways to blend online fandom with in-person fun.” ●

Images of a convention in the UK, hosted and organised by Animeleague  
Image credits to Animeleague





# Twickenham cranks up the volume

We step inside the UK's first School of Rock and discover what makes London's latest addition more than just another music school

By Christopher Chalmers

Can you think of a more juxtaposed replacement for a staid old Barclays branch than a 'School of Rock'?

I can't, but then good things often come with radical change...

Twickenham has always had music in its heart. Still famed for the thunderous gigs on Eel Pie Island in the 60s, which hosted Pink Floyd, The Who and The Rolling Stones, the TW postcode has always attracted artists who push boundaries and crank the amps.

Now, its musical legacy is getting a fresh addition: the UK's first ever School of Rock has officially opened on York Street, transforming a once conservative Barclays branch into a vibrant cultural hub.

The dearth of this kind of centre is what drew Matias Puga-Hamilton to southwest London. A drummer and entrepreneur who has already launched more than 20 School of Rock franchises across Latin America, Puga-Hamilton speaks about the school less as a business venture, more a cultural project.

## But why here and why now?

Far from just a music school, the old bank has been reshaped into a maze of rehearsal rooms, performance spaces and sound-proof booths. The focus

is practical: students learn by playing together, by stepping onto a stage, and by understanding how the different parts of a band fit together.

For Puga-Hamilton, this mission is deeply personal. He first encountered School of Rock when his daughters joined as students, sparking a transformation so profound he became determined to spread it globally. "Music is an international language that changes lives," he says. "I've seen its impact on my family and on students all over the world. Bringing this to the UK—home of so much of the music we teach—is incredibly exciting."

Part of the model involves hiring local musicians—guitarists, drummers, vocal coaches and even lighting and sound technicians—to work as support teachers and crew.

Puga-Hamilton estimates around 20–30 jobs will be created in the first year, with more as the programme expands. In an environment where arts work can be sporadic and venues come and go, the prospect of stable, paid roles for creatives is a rare bright spot.

This forecast certainly cheered Richmond Councillor James Chard, who described the project as a welcome boost to cultural life and local employment.

Yes, I think so. Primarily because the school is not only for children

and teens. It's open to everyone, of all ages. Just think of the X and Y

## So...will it work here in little old England?

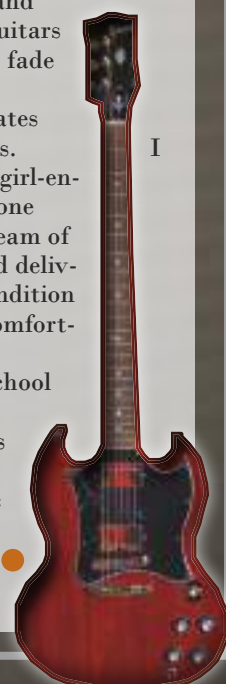
generation? The people for whom life got in the way of musical passion and ambition. The ones who wanted to be rockstars but for whom the dream was never realised.

And think of the ones who were told to learn the piano at school, but who yearned to stum like Mark Knopfler or hammer the drums like Stewart Copeland? There is surely appetite from them to reignite their passion for music, especially in well-heeled Richmond upon Thames.

That said, youngsters will always want to be pop stars, and the allure of electric guitars and drumkits won't to fade any time soon.

As a teenager my mates had metal flake fenders, went for less cool, less girl-enticing violin. Perhaps one day I'll live out my dream of learning the guitar and delivering a note perfect rendition of David Gilmour's Comfortably Numb.

It's places like the school of rock which allows these forgotten dreams to find some oxygen and bring joy to music lovers. I wish them every possible success. ●



# 25 years of London Palestine Film Festival

The importance of storytelling as a platform for empathy

By Florence Cutts

For as long as we have recorded history, storytelling has been the bridge between experiences, increasing human connection and understanding through stories. One of the most important spaces for increasing this understanding today is through film festivals.

Cinema lights dim and audiences are drawn into a world of the creator's design, telling stories of life, dreams, survival, art, loss, and resistance.

The London Palestine Film Festival (LPFF) has established itself over the last 25 years as a space to celebrate filmmakers from across the globe and highlight rich stories of Palestinian life, culture, and resistance.

Khaled Ziada, Founder and Director of LPFF, and Executive Producer of Together for Palestine said: "As somebody living in the diaspora I felt there is a need to show all this beautiful work from Palestinians or non-Palestinians to the audiences of the city I'm living in."

## Today Palestine is not only about the injustice in Palestine, but also it's about injustice in many other countries

Inside cinemas across London, increasingly diverse audiences spend the two week long festival witnessing stories of Palestinian life and art, connecting and learning through the art of film.

"Because of these things, people go to the film festival to learn more, to see other things about Palestine"

## It's not only what they see in the news or in the papers or in social media, but they want a firsthand story...you can live more with the Palestinians through cinema

Over the past few years, festival attendance has continued to grow, with younger audiences in particular increasing in size.

Ziada said: "It's so amazing that for the last few years we can see the audience's interest in cinema on Palestine is becoming more diverse."

This year's LPFF took place from 14-28 November, and opened with a full house screening of The Voice of Hind Rajab at the Barbican Centre, culminating in an emotional standing ovation.

The festival also saw the UK premiere of The Mission and Once Upon a Time in Gaza, and extended its programming to Liverpool for the first time.

Ziada said: "To me what matters

most is to bring the right narrative and the right advocacy for the Palestinian rights and Palestinian-pol-

ities and society and culture through films and bring it to the public.

"I just want them to have a wider understanding about Palestine and the Palestinians through the cinema."

The London Palestine Film Festival remains an established part of London's cultural calendar, and will continue to share stories across borders and bring audiences together year after year. ●

Image Credit:  
Sounds of Gaza



# Viral double decker bus-turned-cafe is uniting creatives in aid of mental health

By Florence Cutts

A retired double decker bus-turned-cafe and now theatre, the Moving Mug, recently launched a series of short film screenings in aid of mental health. In collaboration with Munchie Lunchie Productions, ‘Movies on the Moving Mug’ aims to celebrate ordinary people transforming the everyday into something extraordinary.

When discussing raising money for local charity Hammersmith, Fulham, Ealing and Hounslow (HFEH) Mind, Luke Derbyshire, Owner of the Moving Mug said:

“This charity has been involved with different aspects of my life so to be able to give back to this great cause in such a special way is a really rewarding feeling.”

The Moving Mug began when a group of young entrepreneurs, Maddy Harris and brothers Toby and Josh Jones, nicknamed the Professional Idiots, transformed a retired bus into a fully operational cafe, with their journey receiving millions of views online.

They used their own resources and spent over £25,000 renovating the bus for their friend Luke Derbyshire who dreamed of starting a business and running a coffee cart.

Movies on the Moving Mug was launched as part of a series of evenings on the bus to raise money and awareness for Mental Health in partnership with Tinman Productions, Munchie Lunchie Productions, and HFEH Mind.

It began in November with the premiere of Route 23, a film written and directed by Joshua Shea, known for playing Young Newt in Fantastic Beasts.

The film follows Greg, a bus driver inspired to do something extraordinary and fight against the closure of his bus route.

Route 23 was shot on the Moving Mug, bringing the story full circle with its premiere celebrating the film and the bus’s completion and raised awareness about mental health, a cause close to everyone involved’s hearts.

Discussing this full circle moment, Joshua Shea, Writer & Director of Route 23 and Founder of Tinman Productions, said: “It was amazing.

“I think even just getting the chance to film on [the Moving Mug] was a massive privilege and it was a fun coincidence in terms of the writing process and then finding the work that Luke was doing

through the Professional Idiots...

“I was just so happy that we could make that happen and that he was up for letting us host it there.” When asked about the film’s connection to mental health and the collaboration with HFEH Mind, Shea said: “One of the big things in terms of the film, and its themes is it really resonated with me in terms of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

“That was the main focus of the event, which I think in terms of mental health is quite integrated into that; finding inspiration to do stuff and having that community spirit was a massive part of it. ▶



*I thought that was just really inspiring as a story*

“That really links into mental health, especially in the creative fields where there’s not necessarily that much support for young creatives so I think having that community is a really good part to foster.”

The Movies on the Moving Mug series is also in collaboration with Munchie Lunchie Productions, a production company whose mission is to create

“I met Luke [Derbyshire], who is the owner of the Moving Mug, and he told me that Josh [Joshua Shea] has a film that he’s premiering, and whether we would be interested in working together...”

“That was the beginning of an awesome, awesome collaboration between me, Josh and Luke, and then Nick [Nicholas Smith] came on board with

and wellbeing related topics and storylines.

Nicholas Smith, Head of Marketing and Communications HFEH Mind, said: “Everything we’re doing is really

*This project was just incredible... we really look forward to having more in the schedule next year*



Moviegoers, left, attended Route 23 premiere. Pictures: The Moving Mug

equitable and diverse stories representative of the varied cultures in the UK and around the world.

When asked about the origin of the collaboration, Karim Hadaya, Producer, Writer, Actor and Company Director at Munchie Lunchie Productions said:

HFEH Mind.” Through HFEH Mind’s various programs like Story Telling Studio which launched last year and Movies on the Moving Mug, Mind are providing a platform for independent creators, producers and production companies to highlight mental health

just trying to elevate the local community and bring people in and get them talking and inspired.”

These events are part of HFEH Mind’s Thirty for 30K Campaign, which aims to drive thirty thousand conversations around mental health across West London through programmes like HFEH Mind’s Storytelling Studio which champions independent filmmakers to talk about tough topics and spread the mental health message.

The Movies on the Moving Mug series allows for short film submissions to be showcased at each event, providing a brilliant opportunity for young and emerging creatives to get their work seen. If you have a short to submit make sure to contact one of the organisers to be involved. ●







# Crochet is bringing generations together one stitch at a time

By Maliyah Alcide-Clarke

When you think of crocheting, you may picture an old woman bundled up in her little rocking chair, stitching an itchy jumper for her grandchild. And you wouldn't be the only one.

Research has shown that the average age of people who crochet is around 40 and above. Although in recent years, there has been a rise in young people participating in the activity. Georgia Grieve at MyWeekly noted that the fastest growing age group of crocheters is between 16-34 years old. In 2025, crochet is very popular among the youth and is still growing. But let's explore how and why this has happened.

Crochet is the art of using a hook to create fabric. Many people use yarn, but some use threads and other strands of material. The origins of this art form are somewhat unknown, with some resources mentioning Arabian influences, whilst others hint at a Chinese and South American birth. However, we can confirm that crochet saw its popularity grow during the 19th century in Europe. At the time, it was seen more as an art and as a fashion statement, being used to add hems to blouses and as a method to make purses. But it would only grow into the notable hobby that we know today.

Crochet is mostly associated with older women, as it was a popular activity partaken in a few decades ago. It was even taught in schools, and according to Jodie Morgan at the website CrochetPenguin, women were also encouraged to crochet during both world wars as a contribution to soldiers and those on the front lines. Throughout the 60s

***It's great to see more people enjoying crochet. It fosters creativity and mindfulness in a busy world.***

and 70s, crochet became more fashionable and was seen as more of a hobby. Most of the time, these skills would be passed down for many generations as useful, but they slowed when fast fashion was introduced.

In more recent years, crochet has definitely seen a resurgence in popularity, especially with the youth. Many people's love for the hobby actually

blossomed during the formidable era of the pandemic circa 2020. The London Crochet Club, a group that organises hands-on crochet classes and drop-in sessions on themes like Amigurumi, Granny Squares, and Corner-to-Corner techniques, have seen this first hand.

Elisa, event manager at the club, said: "We first noticed this change around 2020-2021, during the pandemic, when many people turned to crafts for relaxation." With people being unable to properly socialise during the pandemic, video calls and Zoom were at an all-time high. But once that got boring, everybody began to turn to hobbies. From baking cloud bread to dalgona coffee, many activities were explored during this time, as well as arts and crafts, including crochet.

It soon became a way to combat boredom. This was also a time that many people found very difficult. With work and schools closed, people found it hard to socialise. Being quarantined in your own home made it much harder as people were unable to see family/ friends and miss out on some monumental events (birthdays and even funerals). Constant isolation from the world lead people to develop many stresses and, in some serious

cases, conditions such as depression and anxiety. According to the Office for National Statistics, one in five adults were likely to be experiencing some form of depression during the pandemic. This number had doubled from before the world shut down (July 2019-March 2020).

With these feelings being felt worldwide, people turned to crochet as a method of relaxation and stress relief. The idea of having something to focus on allowed people to distract themselves from the hardships they were facing at the time.

In addition, people may have felt a sense of pride and happiness from completing a project, leading to their concentration and aiming to create something better. Betty Houtman, a nurse writing for Anxiety Resource Centre said: "New neuro pathways can be created and strengthened by learning new skills and movements."

"As they become stronger with use, we 'change our minds' to become quieter and more relaxed."

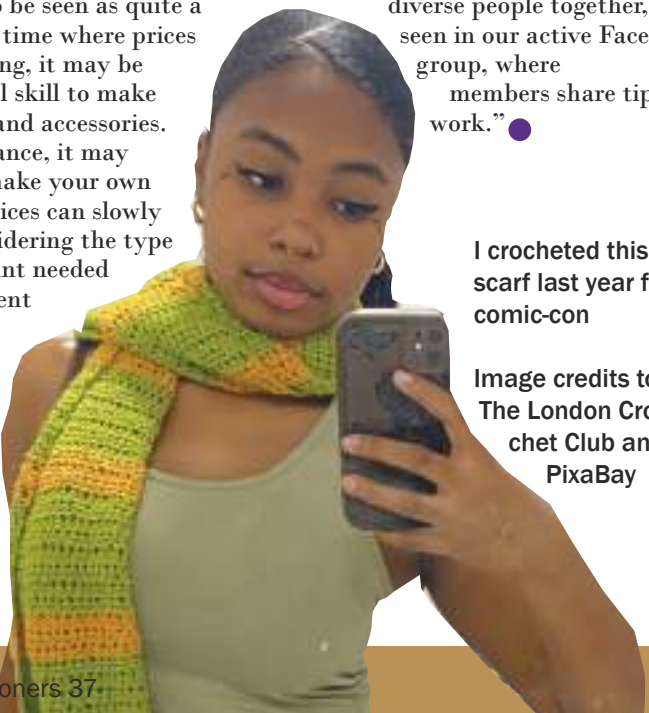
Social media is also a factor in the rise in crochet. Around the same time, there was an influx of tutorials, teaching people how to crochet. The wide range of tutorials on YouTube and

other platforms provided an accessible way for some to learn how to crochet because many were unable to travel to classes at the time, and due to the cost of living post-COVID, people couldn't afford to pay for classes on top of rising living costs. Elisa said: "Social media has played a major role, with platforms like TikTok and Instagram sharing quick tutorials, patterns, and inspiring projects that make crochet accessible."

Crochet can also be seen as quite a useful hobby. In a time where prices are constantly rising, it may be considered a useful skill to make your own clothes and accessories. though, at first glance, it may seem cheaper to make your own items; however, prices can slowly add up when considering the type of yarn, the amount needed and other equipment needed. It is also quite expensive in terms of time, but people mainly enjoy crochet for artistic purposes anyway.

In more recent times, the crochet community

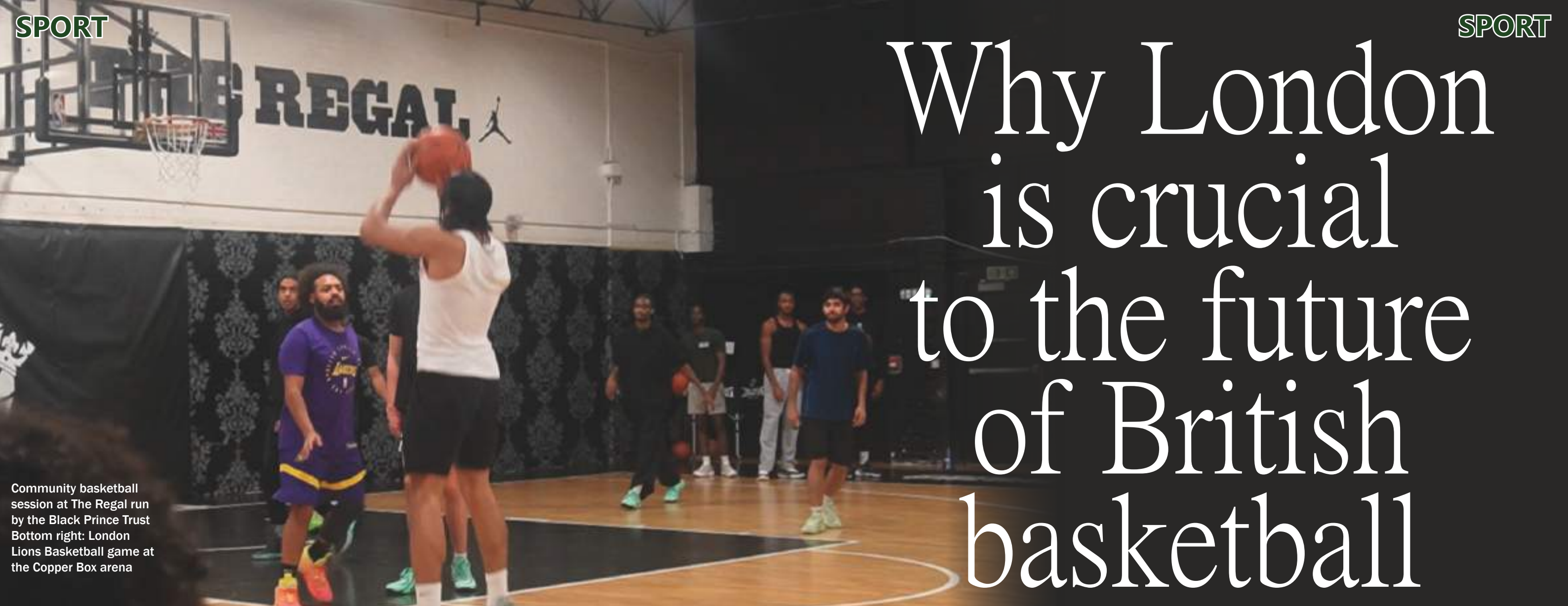
is thriving. There have also been larger turnouts in crochet-related events, meaning that there are still people becoming interested in the craft. Event manager Elisa said: "It has positively affected our business. We've seen increased interest, with our subscriber base growing to 2759 members and solid turnout at beginner classes." She added: "It has strengthened the London crochet community by bringing diverse people together, as seen in our active Facebook group, where members share tips and work." ●



I crocheted this scarf last year for comic-con

Image credits to The London Crochet Club and PixaBay





# Why London is crucial to the future of British basketball

Community basketball session at The Regal run by the Black Prince Trust  
Bottom right: London Lions Basketball game at the Copper Box arena

How the sport in the UK is being affected by mismanagement and why it is

*By Taaseen Choudhury*

On a crisp winter evening beneath the glaring floodlights of Finsbury Park, the courts are overflowing. Teenagers playing pick-up basketball after school, some still in uniform as grime beats rattle out of portable speakers. This is London, the epicentre of British basketball’s cultural heartbeat. Here, basketball isn’t just a pastime. It’s identity. It’s a community. It’s an escape. Despite the buzz around the sport in the capital, the sport has been plunged into one of the most chaotic governance crises in its history. In recent months, the British Basketball Federation (BBF), the body responsible for the Great Britain national teams, collapsed under the weight of administrative failures, financial mismanagement, and conflicts with international governing bodies. In October, Great Britain’s men’s team found itself suspended from competition altogether, fixtures cancelled, and fans across the country questioning

how it fell apart. London, with its rich basketball history felt the impact most deeply. Londoners make up a large proportion of Britain’s basketball participants, club players, and national team talent. Basketball in the capital has always survived on passion, not governance. That passion is what continues to elevate the city beyond the national system that keeps letting it down. The first major shock came when FIBA, the global governing body of basketball, announced the suspension of the British Basketball Federation. It was a dramatic move. The suspension meant that Great Britain’s men’s national team was no longer eligible to participate in upcoming international fixtures. The GB Men’s scheduled matches traditionally hosted in London venues such as the Copper Box Arena or occasionally at The O2 were immediately cancelled. The announcement hit the city’s basketball fans hard. London

doesn’t just host these games, it packs the stands. Reports of financial mismanagement, inadequate leadership structures, and years of unresolved friction between British Basketball’s various regional and national bodies. Before long, the BBF entered liquidation. ***You got a federation that’s been run into the ground... I would say it’s a new low for this sport*** For a brief period, Britain did not have a functioning national governing body for basketball. The Mayor of London’s basketball taskforce member, hoopfix founder Sam Neter said: “You got a federation that’s been run into the ground... I would say it’s a new low for this sport.” Then FIBA announced

now at a crucial point with the NBA about to bring a game to the capital...

it would recognise the current British Sports Leagues Britain (SLB) to ensure the national team could continue to play fixtures. Lifting the suspension games resumed. In 2024, Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, launched the London Basketball Taskforce to revive, rebuild, and reimagine basketball across the capital. Its aims: to develop grassroots pathways, upgrade local infrastructure, attract world-class events, and create opportunities for youth, especially in communities where sport and chance are often hard to come by. Behind the scenes, City Hall has utilised resources, technical support, strategic guidance, and partnerships. In July 2025, the London Lions Basketball club unveiled plans for a purpose built basketball arena in the capital. A multi-purpose venue to house men’s and women’s teams, elite competition, grassroots programmes, community events a home for basketball in London. ►





The club would no longer use multipurpose built venues like the Copper Box (built for 2012 Olympics) with limited capacity and scheduling constraints.

It is set to be an arena seating at least 15,000 spectators, paired with a secondary community arena with 3,500 seats and a youth hub.

The numbers behind the plan are striking, analysts project the arena could deliver £3.4 billion in economic impact over 13 years, plus around 1,000 full-time jobs.

On 17 September 2025, the UK government and the NBA announced a historic partnership to invest in the sport across England, explicitly including basketball, not just football-led grassroots programmes.

Under the new plan, the government’s £400 million Community Sport Facilities Programme will allocate £5 million in its first year (2026/27) to create basketball-led and multi-sport facilities.

The NBA will match that with £5 million of its own investment through to 2028.

The collaboration is meant to open doors to demographics such as women and girls, people with disabilities and ethnic-minority communities that are often ignored by traditional sports funding.

The timing is no accident. The NBA is due to return to London for a regular-season game in January 2026 the league’s first UK game since 2019.

The UK government and NBA believe that return will help spark fan engagement while the infrastructure plan builds from the ground up.

The Mayor’s taskforce aims to bring major basketball events NBA games, FIBA tournaments, 3x3 competitions to the capital.

The long-term ambition is clear a UK basketball ecosystem where grassroots, elite performance, community access and global spectacle exist together.●

London mayor Sadiq Khan



A child dribbles the ball. Picture: Semyon Borisov via Unsplash



Proposed plan for a new purpose built basketball centre from London Lions website



The Regal Basketball scrimmage



London Lions fans at the Copper box



# Capital clubs' Premier League review so far

As we approach the packed Christmas stretch of the Premier League fixture list, the season so far. From title challengers to bottom dwellers, here's a review of it is the perfect time to look back at how London's seven clubs have handled how they have fared so, with some help from local fans...

By Rashad J

**ARSENAL**  
Easily the best performing Premier League team from London this season so far, Arsenal top the PL table as they mount a serious title challenge.

15 games in, they've only lost two - with nine goals conceded the best defensive record in the division.

With Man City hot on their heels, Arsenal fan Mikhel believes that it will go down to the final matchweek.

He said, "Haaland is just too good to ignore. We have the best defence in the league but we sometimes struggle to take our chances in attack."

"But this is our best chance in years, so I am hopeful!"

Standout players include world class Declan Rice who has a strong argument for being called the best midfielder in the league, backed up by his 7.46 rating on sports analytic website Sofascore, a score only bettered by Erling Haaland and Bruno Fernandes.



That Arsenal still hold 1st place having faced an injury crisis with as many as 5 starters out at one time, as well having already faced tough teams such as Liverpool, Man City and Chelsea at this point of the season strikes as good news for those hopeful Arsenal fans come May.

*The Londoners' Grade: A*

**CHELSEA**  
The next best performing side from London hail from the West side of London, Chelsea are in and amongst it at 5th but just three points separate them and 12th.

Approaching year four of their new American ownership, Chelsea are still in their rebuild stage, with a team full of exciting young players who may be lacking the experience to mount a serious title challenge at this stage.

Chelsea fan Hashim sees a positive future but believes it is too soon to be placing big expectations on a side with the average starting age of 24 years



Photo by James Kirkup on Unsplash

old.  
"We have world class players like Cole Palmer, Reece James and Moises Caicedo and some of the best talents in the league such as Estevao but the team isn't ready to compete with Man City and Arsenal yet."

"I think we will finish strong in the top 4"

Ignoring his reckless red card against Arsenal, Moises Caicedo has without a doubt been Chelsea's best player in the Premier League this season, with a Sofascore rating of 7.31.



*The Londoners' Grade: C*

Credit: Sky Sports Premier League Youtube

**TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR**  
North London side Tottenham Hotspur have had a wild ride these last couple seasons, with their lowest finish in the Premier League era coming in the same season they won their first trophy in 17 years.

This season has been no different, with former Brentford manager Thomas Frank newly at the helm, they sit at a middling 11th position in the table.

With a 4-1 loss away at Arsenal and key players such as Dejan Kulusevski, Dominic Solanke and James Maddison



out long term, things haven’t been all sunshine and rainbows for Spurs.

But there are some positive signs, with Richarlison back to scoring and Djed Spence continuing his good form that saw him make his England debut earlier this year.

I spoke to Spurs fan Kallum who admitted this wasn’t an unusual experience with the club.

“We’re very used to the constant highs and low lows and this season hasn’t been any different.”

“I still believe we should give Thomas Frank more time, he has to be able to implement his style on the squad and the injuries haven’t helped.”

“We’ve seen what he was able to do at Brentford, it’s just about getting the right players in during the windows.”

Cristian Romero is currently the highest rated Spurs player on Sofascore with a rating of 7.28 while new signing Mohammed Kudus impresses with the 2nd most assists in the league whilst also averaging the most successful dribbles per game.

*The Londoners’ Grade: D*



CRYSTAL PALACE

FA Cup holders Crystal Palace had the season of their dreams in 2024/25, winning their first trophy in 164 years and they don’t seem to be waking up.

A consistent midtable team, they’re defying all odds as they sit in 4th even as rumours around Oliver Glasner’s and Marc Guehi’s futures persist.

Crystal Palace fan Jeffrey is loving life.

He said “This is definitely the best it’s ever been, the fact that we’re in European competition and 4th on the table, 15 games in, is ridiculous.”

“We know how good some of our players are so we will enjoy them while we have them.”

Standouts have been England internationals Adam Wharton and club captain Marc Guehi who hold 7.17 and 7.40 ratings on Sofascore respectively.

*The Londoners’ Grade: A*

FULHAM

A gulf has emerged between Crystal Palace and fellow perennial middle tablers Fulham evidenced by Crystal Palace’s 2-1 at Craven Cottage this weekend.

15th placed Fulham seem to be

reaching the end of their current project, with all signs pointing to Marco Silva, manager since 2021, leaving at the end of the season as he seems uninterested in signing the contract extensions offered to him by the Fulham ownership.

With their run of seven losses in the last 10 games is the worst under the Portuguese boss, there needs to be improvements or there’s a chance that Fulham could be cutting ties before the end of his contract.

Fulham fan Joe said “We seem to have hit the ceiling with Silva. He is a great manager, but if he doesn’t want to stay on, we can move on and replace him.”

“Otherwise, we’re stuck in this impasse not knowing whether he will stay or go, I don’t think we should change manager mid season - but a decision should be made soon.”

Scorer of spectacular goals, Harry Wilson, did it again in their loss against Crystal Palace while consistent midfielder Alex Iwobi continues his run of impressive performances for the West London side.

Highest rated player is AC Milan loanee Samuel Chukwueze who turned heads with his 6 minute double against Manchester City in their 4-5 loss at Craven Cottage.

*The Londoners’ Grade: C*

BRENTFORD

With the trio of Thomas Frank, Bryan Mbeumo, and Yoanne Wissa leaving this summer, many thought Brentford would seriously struggle this season - especially when they promoted their set piece coach to replace Frank, with no previous head coach experience.

However, former Irish international Keith Andrews, has been one of the positive surprises of the season as they sit in a comfy 14th place.

The goals of Mbeumo and Wissa have been replaced by a resurgent Igor Thiago, who has had an incredible run of form with 11 goals in 15 games, only bettered by Erling Haaland in the league - he currently has a 7.08 rating on Sofascore.

Veteran Jordan Henderson has impressed, bringing a wealth of experience to a side populated with young talents such as new attacking signing Dango Ouattara, throw-in specialist Michael Kayode and Mikkel Damsgaard.

Brentford fan David is pleased with things as they are.

He said “After our two best players



and manager left, we thought we would be battling relegation, but things have looked really good so far under Andrews.”

“It’s the Brentford way to promote from within and even though a lot of us were sceptical, it’s a move that seems to have paid off so far.”

*The Londoners’ Grade: B*

WEST HAM

Things haven’t looked up for East London side West Ham since David Moyes left at the end of his second stint in May 2024.

After admitting the Graham Potter experiment hadn’t worked, he was sacked just 5 games into the Premier League season with just one win.

After leaving Nottingham Forest due to friction with the owner, Nuno Espirito Santo was immediately brought in as a replacement however he hasn’t fared much better with just 2 wins in 10.

West Ham sit 18th in the league with a serious chance of being relegated for the first time since the 2010–2011 season.

They do have quality in the side however, with controversial character Lucas Paqueta still putting in good performances after being cleared of gambling charges by the FA, although he was sent off for a nonsensical double yellow in a 2-0 loss against Liverpool.

Callum Wilson and Jarrod Bowen sit on 4 goals each while Matheus Fernandes is their highest rated player with a Sofascore rating of 7.11.

Their real problem is conceding goals with just one clean sheet in 15 games, in a game where Nuno Espirito Santo was in the opposite dugout, coaching Nottingham Forest early in the season.

However, Nuno is a defence specialist and there is belief that things could get better before they get worse.

*The Londoners’ Grade: F* ●

Can Chelsea mount a title challenge this season?- Credits: Photo by Simon Reza on Unsplash

Pos	Club	P	GD	Points
1	Arsenal	15	19	33
2	Man City	15	19	31
3	Aston Villa	15	7	30
4	Crystal Palace	15	8	26
5	Chelsea	15	10	25
6	Man Utd	15	4	25
7	Everton	15	1	24
8	Brighton	15	4	23
9	Sunderland	15	1	23
10	Liverpool	15	0	23
11	Spurs	15	7	22
12	Newcastle	15	2	22
13	Bournemouth	15	-3	20
14	Brentford	15	-3	19
15	Fulham	15	-4	17
16	Leeds	15	-10	15
17	Nottingham Forest	15	-11	15
18	West Ham	15	-12	13
19	Burnley	15	-14	10
20	Wolves	15	-25	2





Photo by Emilio Garcia on Unsplash

# AFCON 2025

## Preview:

## The Challengers

With the January tournament fast approaching and squads soon heading off to Morocco, it is the perfect time to look ahead at the countries most likely to lift the African Cup of Nations trophy in early 2026. From defending champions to hungry challengers, here's a breakdown of the major contenders going into AFCON 2025.

By Rashad J

### MOROCCO

As hosts and one of Africa's most premier footballing projects, Morocco enter the tournament with enormous expectations. Favourites for the trophy, Morocco are fielding one of the most gifted squads in their history, and playing at home only heightens expectations. Under Walid Regragui, Morocco remain one of the most organised teams on the continent. Their run to the 2022 World Cup semi-final set the standard for African national teams, and the core of that squad is still intact. Morocco boast depth, crowd support and a spine used to tournament football. If they're able to handle the pressure, they are as strong a favourite as any. However, despite the depth of quality, all the anticipation revolves around a single figure: Achraf Hakimi, the most influential Moroccan footballer of his generation.



can

The final squad list left notable absences, including Hakim Ziyech and Sofiane Boufal, both left out of the squad. Even so, the atmosphere surrounding the announcement made clear that the true suspense came from Hakimi's medical situation and whether he would be able to compete. On paper, they're one of the tournament's elite sides. But AFCON isn't always about paper.

### IVORY COAST

The defending champions shocked Africa in 2023 after scraping through the group stage and then knocking out Senegal and Nigeria on their way to the title. The reigning champions return with an experienced, well-balanced squad and every intention of defending their crown. Their 28-man team is stacked with top-level European talent across the pitch, giving them one of the deepest squads in the competition. The backbone of their team remains strong: Sébastien Haller leading the line, Franck Kessié dominating midfield, and Evan Ndicka anchoring a promising defence. Young talents like Amad Diallo and Yan Diomande provide

added spark on the wings. Wilfried Zaha returns for his first Ivory Coast call up in nearly two years while Sunderland winger Simon Adingra, who was a breakout figure when Ivory Coast won the title in 2023, has not been selected. Nicolas Pepe, is also a shock exclusion given his good form for Villarreal.

### SENEGAL

The 2021 champions didn't enjoy their 2023 campaign, going out on penalties to hosts Ivory Coast in the Round of 16, but Senegal remain the most complete squad in Africa on paper. With Édouard Mendy in goal, Kalidou Koulibaly organising the backline and a midfield enriched by rising star Lamine Camara. Senegal mix experience with emerging talent better than almost anyone on the continent. Hero Sadio Mané is now in the latter stages of his career, but even without him at full power - Senegal have attacking options in abundance with talents like Ismaïla Sarr, Nicolas Jackson, and Iliman Ndiaye ready to pick up the mantlepiece. Their structure, physicality and experience mean they will be able to handle

knockout matches better than most.

### NIGERIA

The Super Eagles experienced heartbreak at the 2023 AFCON, losing the final to Ivory Coast and recently learnt that they won't qualify for the 2026 World Cup. Armed with this knowledge, Nigeria will throw everything at this AFCON, hoping to end their 12 year wait for a trophy. Captain William Troost-Ekong announced his shock retirement from international football a mere weeks from the beginning of the tournament with players like Alexander Iwobi and Victor Osimhen expected to step up and cover the loss of his leadership. With Nigeria never far from controversy and unfortunate injuries, it will be a testing time of unity and togetherness for a squad that have players who have spent up to a decade on international duty together. The Super Eagles are unpredictable, they can blow teams away or struggle against compact, physical sides, but if their big names arrive healthy, they are absolutely title contenders.

### EGYPT

Egypt don't always convince in qualifying or friendlies, but when AFCON comes around, they become a different beast. With seven continental titles, they know exactly how to survive knockout football. Everything still revolves around Mohamed Salah. At 33, he remains one of the most influential players in world football and continues to deliver elite numbers for club and country, although this season has been increasingly difficult as he undergoes a spat with the leadership of Liverpool. The goal threat is undeniable, but the lack of creativity around him has been Egypt's Achilles heel for years. Defensively, Egypt have improved since 2023, with a tighter, more experienced backline and a clearer structure under coach Hossam Hassan. They will make every game difficult, keep everything tight, and bank on Salah to decide the key moments.



Photo by framopia on Unsplash

The Grand Stadium of Al Hoceima (Morocco)



# Going for Gold

The inspiring story of the underdogs who came home champions

By Christopher Chalmers

**G**old: Superlative. The very best. When it comes to international sport, a gold medal is the dream of every athlete.

When Brentford Barbell Club entered the 2025 Powerlifting World Championships in South Africa, such heady highs may have seemed out of reach.

But this small powerlifting club, modest on paper, returned from Durban with four gold medals—and three world champions—all representing Great Britain.

At the centre of this remarkable achievement is Coach Ali Hasanazade - the club's founder - who not only coached the athletes but successfully defended his own world title.

We met at Chosen Gym in Hounslow on a bleak December evening; the unassuming entrance betrays the gymnasium's spectacular interior, with swathes of weights, machinery, and other equipment that baffles fatties like me. This environment allowed the club to train, and ultimately become champions.

The headline achievements came from two lifters. Lifters who, on first appearance, might never have been expected to reach the world stage.

At just 21, Tanya Khan stood on the podium twice, securing gold in both the Junior and Open women's 56kg Raw categories. Her path there was anything but straightforward. She started at the club with no powerlifting background. And at one stage medical professionals advised her not to pursue the sport at all. But Tanya was stoic and undeterred...

"Powerlifting can be a very intimidating sport; when you see the people who compete you see big strong men or women, screaming and shouting... there's a lot of rage in that sport. Because I'm petite I thought it wasn't a sport for me... But once I got into it I saw a different side to the sport."

On the other end of the age spectrum is Jason Riley, who picked up the sport at 52. A builder by trade, Riley played ice hockey professionally for 17 years, a sport not famed for its gentle nature. With more than a dozen

injuries from those days, he thought his physical potential was behind him.

"After ice hockey I spent 15 years not really doing anything... not doing any exercise.

But once my kids had grown up, I thought I had to get fit again... I found powerlifting."

Now 54, he's a world champion, having won the 55 Masters category. Living proof that fitness needn't have an expiry date.

For Brentford Barbell Club, these victories represent more than just medals. They're proof that champion status doesn't exclude the underdog. A 21-year-old with only a year's experience, and a 50-something who transformed his physical fitness in only a couple of years.

Hasanzade hopes the attention generated by these world titles will offer his athletes—and the sport itself—greater visibility. He doesn't want powerlifting confined to niche corners of the fitness world, instead for the sport to welcome new members from every walk of life.



Left: Coach Ali preparing Jason for action.

Right: Tanya Khan proudly displays her silverware.

# Anyone got a brick on their Christmas list?

New poll reveals the worst gifts... and what can be done to put them to use



Bad gifts are common at this time of year. Picture: Leukaemia Care

By Taaseen Choudhury

**E**very year, we unwrap Christmas presents with excitement and curiosity. According to new research from Leukaemia Care, the UK has a gifting problem. And not the charming, festive kind.

The charity's nationwide study of 2,000 adults reveals that almost half of us (49.25%) regularly regift unwanted presents a ritual many of us suspected, but few would confess to it.

Even more striking, over a third (37.1%) say they would rather donate to charity than buy a novelty gift.

Among the UK's strangest ever Christmas presents are: a single sock, a potato with the recipient's name written on it, a literal brick, blow up boyfriend, a concrete rabbit, cable wire, and a custom bobblehead of someone's boss.

We all endured the toiletries, novelty mugs, and Knick knock stationery but a cheese shop sign?

That's a new level of festive chaos. What's the strangest Christmas gift you

received? The data is both hilarious and genuinely concerning.

Nearly a quarter of people (23.7%) receive up to two unwanted gifts each year, and over 60% admit to buying last minute panic presents, just to avoid

**Nearly 50% regularly regift unwanted presents**

turning up empty handed.

Women, according to the survey, feel this pressure most with 46.8% saying they overspend at Christmas compared with 42% of men.

Beneath all the wrapping paper shows a contrast in ethics and generous Christmas spirit.

Only 15.1% of people say they give to charity or help others without telling anyone suggesting that our culture of giving what can be wrapped, tagged and displayed is not very giving.

Around festive times millennials aged

25 to 34 years old are the most caring demographic when it comes to unseen acts of kindness with 44.3% having helped a friend or neighbour in need in the past year, and 16 to 24 year olds being least likely to help out.

In total 37% of those surveyed said they've helped a friend or neighbour in need in the past year.

This is where Leukaemia Care's winter campaign, The Unseen Gift, steps in.

The charity is encouraging people to support those affected by blood cancer to help fund helplines, patient support, and expert guidance.

"We know people want to show they care, but many are tired of the pressure and excess," says Colin Dyer, the charity's chief executive. "A gift doesn't have to be seen to truly matter."

Perhaps, as the data suggests, Britain is already beginning to agree.

To leave your own unseen gift this year visit the Leukaemia Care website. ●



# An Instagram-worthy Winter Wonderland

Christmas lights, hot chocolate, and chilly evenings can only mean one thing. In the words of the Christmas icon Mariah Carey...It's time

By Florence Cutts

As we approach the big day, it feels like Christmas markets are popping up on every corner in London, but I feel like just one immediately comes to all of our minds.

Hyde Park's Winter Wonderland has become a hotspot in London's Christmas scene and it is clear to see why.

With endless food and drink options, fair ground rides and photo opportunities everywhere you turn, it's no surprise Hyde Park Winter Wonderland has been found as one of the UK's 'most instagrammable' Christmas Markets.

By analysing Instagram hashtags for the country's most popular festive destinations, Trtl ranked each market according to the number of times it's been tagged and shared on Instagram, with Hyde Park Winter Wonderland coming in third with 38,200.

Second place was attained by Edinburgh East Princes Street Garden's 58,200 hashtags and in first place is Manchester City Centre's 63,600 hashtags.

So what makes Hyde Park's Winter Wonderland one of the most 'Insta-

grammable' Christmas Markets?

Since its opening in 2005, Winter Wonderland has transformed and expanded into the major attraction it's now known to be with its iconic ferris wheel, ice skating rink, and even its own Bavaria village.

In an age of social media where the aesthetics of an event majorly affect its overall success, Winter Wonderland has grown and shifted its assets to reflect this need, with various photo opportunities, viral food stalls, and endless festive displays, creating the perfect spot for social media buzz.

**We understand that visitors want more than just a market; they want a truly memorable experience**

Suzy Griffiths, Vice President, Arts & Entertainment at IMG, said: "We're thrilled that Hyde Park Winter Wonderland is consistently recognised as one of the UK's most Instagrammable Christmas destinations.

"From the glittering canopy of lights to the dazzling frozen sculptures in the Magical Ice Kingdom, every corner of Winter Wonderland is designed to be a picture-perfect moment, ensuring our guests leave with wonderful memories."

She added that this year, features like the lighting installation in the new Luminarie Lane provide the perfect backdrop for capturing festive magic at the park.

So if you are looking for the perfect festive photo in London this December, it seems like Hyde Park's Winter Wonderland is the place to be!

Because if you didn't post it, did it really happen?

Hyde Park Winter Wonderland is open from 14 November 2025 to 1 January 2026 and is expected to see 2.5 million guests. Off-peak tickets are free and peak times cost £7.50 per person. ●

Festive ice skaters enjoying the Hyde Park winter sun

# Stars shining bright this Christmas time



Local charity delivers food boxes to families in need this Christmas

By Mackenzie Whittaker

A community initiative now in its fourth year aims to raise £6000 through community donations, funding the delivery of 120 hampers to families across the borough that may otherwise go without this Christmas.

What's inside the hampers you may ask? Everything needed for families to celebrate a traditional Christmas, including pantry essentials, fresh produce such and vegetables and meat as well as some lovely festive puds and treats, finished off with Christmas crackers for the kids to enjoy.

Shepherds Star, a Richmond based charity is asking locals to support fundraising efforts for their annual Christmas initiative in partnership with achieving for children and the Chelsea Foundation.

Each box is carefully packed and delivered by volunteers to families facing financial hardship. These families are identified through Achieving for Children and other frontline agencies. The boxes ensure enough food for Christmas Eve, Boxing Day and of course the main spread.

This year, to increase their

reach to more families than previously thought possible, Shepherds Star have teamed up with local businesses, residents and the Chelsea Foundation as part of their Magic of Blue Campaign. The Foundation are campaigning against loneliness in London over the festive period, focussing on bringing people together and spreading kindness during a time of year that can feel increasingly lonely.

Laura Cordingley, CEO of the Chelsea Foundation said: "Organisation's such as Shepherds Star know how to support people who are experiencing isolation and hardship and that's why it was so important for us to collaborate with them on our Magic of Blue Campaign.

"Our role is to lean in and support the incredible work they're already doing. By coming together, we can be greater than the sum of our parts. Smaller charities often go unsung and unseen, so as a club, we're proud to help raise awareness and share with our fans the amazing work happening locally."

Shepherds Star is a charity dedicated to decreasing

levels of isolation, social anxiety and empowering adults to overcome challenging times. They arrange community initiatives previously reported by SW Londoner such as a winter ward-

**By coming together, we can be greater than the sum of our parts**

robe scheme as well as weekly 'Good Friday' events, and monthly 'Table of Hope' events which provides isolated adults with a safe warm space to socialise and ensure they have a warm meal.

The Volunteer-led initiative began four years ago when Shepherds Star was inspired by residents in their local community to launch a Christmas funding campaign, supporting families in need over the festive period.

Director and Co-founder of Shepherds Star, Desiree Shepherd said: "We are absolutely delighted to have the support of Chelsea Foundation for our 2025 Christmas Box campaign. This collaboration will enable us to reach even more families who might otherwise struggle to celebrate Christmas."

Donations can be made online via the Shepherds Star website. ●





# THE LONDONERS



*Credits to reporters:*

*Maliyah Alcide-Clarke - Florence Cutts*

*Mackenzie Whittaker - Chistopher Chalmers*

*Taaseen Choudhury - Rashad J*

*Picture credit:  
Guillermo Bresci  
via Unsplash*