FROM FEAR TO PURPOSE: ENFIELD STUDENT WHO ONCE CROSSED THE ROAD TO AVOID DOGS NOW CALLS A DOG HOTEL HIS “WORKPLACE”

Thursday 13 August, 2026

Alfie’s three-year placement at Halo Dogs has helped turn fear into confidence, independence and belonging — as a new government report warns that young people with SEND are around 80% more likely to be out of education, employment or training

****ENFIELD, LONDON:**** A young person who once became so frightened by dogs that he would cross the road to avoid them now looks forward to spending every Monday at an Enfield dog hotel he proudly calls his “job” and his “workplace”.

For around three years, Alfie, a student at Oaktree School, has taken part in a regular supported placement at Halo Dogs. What began as an unfamiliar and daunting environment has become the highlight of his week — a place where his mother says he has developed confidence, trust, independence and a powerful sense of purpose.

“Every single Monday is the highlight of his week,” said Alfie’s mother, Samantha Clydesdale. “He talks about Halo Dogs constantly and, as far as Alfie is concerned, it is his ‘job’ and his ‘workplace’. He is so incredibly proud of what he does there, and seeing that sense of purpose and happiness means the world to me.”

The change is all the more remarkable because Alfie was once terrified of dogs.

“If he saw one while we were out, he would cross the road and often become very upset,” Samantha said. “I never imagined there would come a day when he would look forward to spending time with dogs every single week. The confidence and trust he has developed through Halo Dogs has been incredible to watch.”

Alfie’s favourite is Stanley, a sausage dog he talks about at home. But the significance of the placement goes far beyond learning to feel comfortable around animals. Its value lies in returning to the same real-world environment, with familiar people and meaningful routines, week after week. Alfie does not describe himself as a visitor: he sees Halo Dogs as somewhere he belongs.

His story comes at a critical moment. The Government’s newly published *Young people and work: interim report* says the UK is approaching one million 16- to 24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training. It also reports that young people with special educational needs and disabilities are around 80% more likely than average to be in that position. In 2024/25, 29.6% of disabled young people were not in education, employment or training, compared with 8.7% of non-disabled young people.

Halo Dogs founder Justin Kumaran believes Alfie’s experience shows what can happen when local organisations offer young people consistency, patience and genuine participation rather than a one-off visit.

“Alfie did not need a staged experience; he needed somewhere he could return to until the unfamiliar became familiar and fear gave way to trust,” said Justin. “The most important thing is that he does not see himself as a visitor. He sees himself as part of the team. That sense of belonging is what every young person deserves.”

Oaktree School’s careers programme says its students work with Halo Dogs to build confidence around animals and gain experience in a working environment. Halo Dogs has supported weekly placements for Oaktree students since 2021.

Justin is now encouraging more employers and community organisations to work with SEND schools to create sustained, properly supported opportunities.

“Too many young people with SEND approach adulthood having repeatedly heard what they cannot do,” he said. “A meaningful placement can change the question from ‘What are the barriers?’ to ‘What can this young person become with the right environment?’ Businesses do not need to have every answer on day one. They can start by opening a door, listening to the school and making one young person feel

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expected, useful and valued.”

Alfie is due to begin his final year at Oaktree School in September, and his family hopes he will return to the place he regards as his workplace.

“After 11 wonderful years at the school, I can honestly say that his experience at Halo Dogs has been one of the most valuable parts of his education,” Samantha said. “It has given him confidence, independence, responsibility and, most importantly, something he genuinely loves.”

For Samantha, the transformation can be expressed in one simple image: a young person who once crossed the road to escape a dog now cannot wait for Monday morning — and for another day at work alongside Stanley.

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