



# Challengers★

Impact Report 2023-24



# Welcome

## Gen Dearman Chief Executive Officer



As we conclude another impactful year at Challengers, it has been a year marked by an ever-growing demand for our services, financial constraints and a tough fundraising environment for all charities. The biggest effect has been felt by the families themselves, as well as our staff team who continue to do a fantastic job at putting smiles on the faces of the children and young people who attend.

We are proud to have delivered over 70,000 hours of play across our services this year, including 37,000 hours of respite for parents through short breaks. We have innovated by welcoming the whole family to Challengers through our Family Fun Days and Family Cooking Breaks. We are piloting a new way of working with Surrey County Council, where parents can use direct payments given to them by social care to book additional sessions at Challengers – offering them greater choice and flexibility. This year we celebrated the completion of our new playground build in Guildford – an inclusive, accessible space where all young people can come and play safely and freely, and the first space in the UK with a revolutionary We-Go-Swing which allows wheelchair and non-wheelchair users to play together. In April, we launched 'The Hub', which provides families with holistic support and the chance to meet each other. At the end of the year we were delighted to refresh our charitable mission to better reflect our work, and we look forward to developing our strategy at the start of next year.

We are so grateful to everyone who has been part of the journey over the last 12 months, thank you for being part of Team Orange!



## Russell Harvey Chair of Trustees

Reflecting on the past year at Challengers, I am humbled by the resilience and dedication displayed by our team, supporters, and the families we serve. The current environment is challenging for charities, but despite facing increasing demand and financial constraints, Challengers' commitment to providing essential services for disabled children and young people remains unwavering.

Gen and the team have been ambitious and creative, ensuring that we reach as many families as we can to provide the greatest impact. From delivering thousands of hours of vital play and respite, to piloting new initiatives like our transition project and collaboration with Surrey County Council, we continue to push boundaries and make a real difference in the lives of those we support. The completion of our inclusive playground in Guildford and the launch of 'The Hub' exemplifies our dedication to supporting disabled children and their families, as well as the wider community.

As Chair of the Board of Trustees, I'd like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has contributed to our success over the past year. Your continued support enables us to continue our vital work, bringing joy and laughter to the children and young people who attend, and giving their families essential respite from caring – thank you.



# About Challengers

## Our Vision

A world where all children and young people can play together, freely.



## Our Mission

To transform the lives of disabled children, young people and their families through the power of play.



Challengers will not exclude any child based on their additional needs, even if they are multiple and complex. We are committed to finding ways to support every child, and ensure they have the opportunity to play and enjoy their time with us.

## Our Services

Pre-school: ages 2 to 5

Play: ages 4 to 12

Youth: ages 13 to 18

555 Service: ages 8 to 19  
(alternative provision for young people who are currently out of education)



## Our Locations



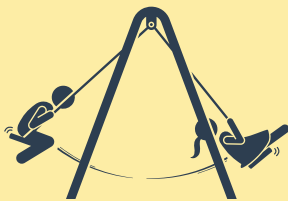
# 2023/24 in numbers



This year we  
delivered

**75,817**

hours of play



Play: **21,590 hours**

Youth: **17,214 hours**

Transition days: **354 hours**

555 Service: **6,288 hours**

Pre-school: **30,371 hours**

We've  
supported

**752**

young people

We've  
organised

**18,036**

sessions



We've planned  
and run

**32**

events

We've received  
support from

**70**

volunteers



92% of parents say  
attending Challengers  
positively affects their  
child's happiness



90% of parents say  
attending Challengers  
helps reduce their  
child's isolation  
and loneliness



95% of parents say  
Challengers helps  
their own mental  
health as a  
parent/carer





## Guildford Playground opening

We officially opened our new state-of-the-art playground in September 2023. It's a versatile space which is equipped with features designed to facilitate fun and adventure for disabled and non-disabled children alike.

We are especially proud to have installed the UK's first We-Go-Swing, enabling wheelchair and non-wheelchair users to play together. To mark the occasion, we held opening parties where families and funders could come along and enjoy everything the new playground has to offer.



### Did you catch us on TV?

If you missed our BBC News feature, you can watch it here



"Every mum wants to see their children play. For us, it's incredibly difficult to see that in normal day-to-day life."

Natasha Morris, Parent Ambassador, speaking on our new playground

## The Hub

We were excited to launch The Hub, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, to provide holistic support to local families. The Hub hosts events every week, including 1-1 support sessions, coffee and crafts, parenting workshops and family fun events – all completely free and open to everyone! The idea behind The Hub is to encourage peer-to-peer support, bringing families together to help reduce isolation.



# Pre-school

## Meet Chase



Chase is 4 years old, has autism and is non-verbal. He has been attending Challengers' Farnham Pre-school for 15 months, and his mum Selina has seen a huge improvement in his development since coming to us. She told us more about his Challengers experience...



Chase loves Challengers! He runs straight in and doesn't look back. The team set up so many different and exciting activities for the children, and he enjoys playing with water, sensory and messy play. As he's non-verbal, it can be difficult for him to communicate and he gets easily frustrated.

Since coming to Challengers, he has improved massively with behaviours like scratching and lashing out. Thanks to the support from the team, he's also getting more used to using PECS cards and it's amazing to see him trying to communicate in his own way.

When Chase is at Challengers, it gives me some time to reset and do jobs that I can't do with him around. It also gives me the space to support my own mental health, and time to do something I enjoy like going for a run.

**Being a parent carer of a disabled child can be exhausting, and Challengers gives us respite which is really important for our family. I can relax knowing Chase is safe to play and be around others, in a place where he will never be judged.**

The staff have been amazing with Chase and have also been a great support to me. They are so kind and helpful with paperwork or anything else I need help with. They truly are angels in disguise.



Chase with his brother and mum Selina





## Meet Sara



Sara is 10 years old and has been attending Farnham Play since 2018. She has a learning and physical disability that impacts all areas of her development. She is also non-verbal and has complex communication needs.



### We asked mum Shelley to share her story...

Attending Challengers has been immensely helpful for Sara's mental health. It's something she always looks forward to. She's happy and animated when she lines up to go into the Play scheme and tired when she comes out – both signs of a great day for her! It's especially beneficial to us as a family, as it's becoming increasingly difficult to find activities for her to do out and about.

Challengers provides a safe, caring, and non-judgmental environment for Sara. She can enjoy the things that she loves, specifically the soft play and sensory room, and it gives her a chance to interact with children who have similar needs. Although she has not expressed this verbally due to her communication difficulties, I'm hopeful that she has built connections with other children who attend.



**While Sara is at Challengers, both her father and I have some much-needed respite and time to focus on our other children. We know she is in safe hands, and having some time for ourselves means we are able to continue working and keep that very important part of our individual identities.**



**Sara with her brother**

# Youth

## Meet Matthew

Matthew is 17 years old and has a rare genetic condition – a micro deletion of his chromosome 3. This results in a brain disorder, autism and severe learning difficulties, as well being non-verbal, doubly incontinent, and having low muscle tone.

Matthew's mum Jacqui told us...

Read more about Matthew's experience  
of attending Challengers



Matthew has a sunny personality and loves socialising, nursery rhymes, books and Toy Story. He enjoys everything about Challengers and is always excited and happy to attend, running to greet the staff on arrival.

Matthew enjoys the activities and socialising with everyone at Challengers. We love that it has given him some independence away from his family, and the ability to make friends and enjoy a wide variety of activities he wouldn't usually get to do.

A huge benefit of attending is the access he gets to a community. Matthew really enjoys being with his friends and has grown in confidence since going to Challengers. We've also noticed he's more physically active and willing to try new things, including different food which he is very reluctant to do at home!



**When Matthew goes to Challengers, we get to spend time with his siblings and to have some much-needed time off from caring for him, safe in the knowledge that he's having fun and his needs are being met.**

The leaders and staff are so professional, caring and thoughtful, which enables us as parents of a vulnerable, non-verbal young person to have peace of mind that he is having a great time and being well cared for at Challengers.



## Meet 'A'



'A' is 17 and has been attending Challengers' 555 Service twice a week since September 2023. He is profoundly autistic, non-verbal, and has complex needs which means he requires 24/7 care and supervision. Here A's mum Jo shares his story...

My son A's needs are extremely complex. He has no sense of danger, is easily triggered, and at times he can be extremely violent. As a single mother raising A by myself with no family or friends to help, I was sinking...that was until we started at Challengers.

Every school he has ever attended has failed us, and being out of school is hugely detrimental to his development and our family's wellbeing. Until Challengers came along, no one had ever truly helped us. They have brought an immense amount of joy into our lives, and I can't begin to explain how much it means to have consistent and reliable help from people who I can only describe as miracle workers.

While A is in the safe care of his amazing Youth workers, I can stop worrying, switch off and relax. I have never seen anyone have such a positive impact on my child before. He has never enjoyed being looked after by other carers that treat it as 'just a job'. Everyone who works at Challengers genuinely seems to want to be there, and it's clear that they pour their heart and soul into it.

**Challengers was the only place willing to take on the challenge of my son, and after years of hearing how difficult, dangerous and impossible he is, I'm now hearing that he is a delight to look after – words which heal my heart.**

I was on the verge of a breakdown last year, and there's no exaggeration in me saying that Challengers is the **only** thing that keeps me sane. We are both so grateful to have Challengers in our lives.



Read more about A  
and Jo's story



# Staff spotlight



We are lucky to have a team of almost 200 staff members who make it possible for us to deliver our vital work, transforming the lives of disabled children and their families.

Olivia has been working at Challengers for 5 years at our Farnham Play and Chichester Youth schemes, alongside training to become a primary school teacher with SEN specialism. Here she tells us more about her experience of working at Challengers...



It all started when I was at college and looking for a flexible and enjoyable job. I never expected that five years later I would still be here, approaching my final year of university. I get to work with inspiring children and young people who have a wide range of disabilities, needs and personalities, and ensure that their personal, health, social, and emotional needs are met while they're at Challengers.

What I love most about my role is that I get to have fun and play, but working with the young people has definitely taught me a lot about patience, courage and how to simply enjoy living in the moment!

**Each day at Challengers is unique, and that's what makes it a fantastic place to work. I absolutely love my job because it's highly rewarding and has allowed me to learn transferable skills that will benefit me in my future career as a teacher. It has also boosted my confidence and helped me grow, personally and professionally.**

Knowing that I work for a charity which makes our society a more inclusive place is even more meaningful. The most rewarding aspect of my role is that I get to support children with complex impairments to access play opportunities that they would struggle to use otherwise. It's heartwarming to see the young people forming friendships too.

One of my favourite memories at Challengers has been supporting a young child with a physical disability, using one of our specialist swings. He had never been able to use a swing before, and seeing his face light up over an experience that so many people take for granted was definitely one of my highlights!



# All about training



Staff truly are at the heart of everything we do at Challengers, and we wouldn't be able to make such a positive difference to families without our highly trained team members.



The majority of our training is provided in-house, with training programmes designed to enhance staff knowledge and equip them with the necessary skills to fully support our young people. There are different levels of training relating to different levels of responsibility, and each training module helps staff to increase their confidence and ability to provide a high-quality service which our children and young people can enjoy.

We create customised training plans to ensure that **every** child can participate and have a great time at Challengers, particularly for children who require complex medical or behaviour support. These are child-specific and involve working closely with our teams to create protocols, plans, and training sessions to make everyone feel safe, while also having fun.

**Ash, our Training and Safety Lead, said:**

"Our training ethos revolves around empowering our team with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to provide exceptional care, so that everyone can contribute to creating a safe and inclusive environment where all children can thrive.

**We are consistently praised by parents, local authorities and other related SEND services for our high-quality training, and we are proud that Challengers' training is considered to be 'best of the best' in our field."**

Fun learning all about hoists in our  
'Moving People' training



**"Challengers staff are a brilliant group of dedicated, kind, understanding, patient and fun people. They are the heart and energy that makes Challengers such a life changer for so many families." Parent survey 2023**

# Volunteer impact



This year we were lucky to receive support from 70 volunteers, who together gave more than 1000+ hours of their time to Challengers.

70 volunteers



1,279 hours

Volunteers play a crucial role in helping us achieve our charitable mission to transform lives through the power of play. Volunteering isn't one-size-fits-all either. We have volunteers who help out at events, at our services and in the office, as well as our Trustees and Parent Ambassadors.

Event Manager Becky explains why volunteering is so important...



"Having dedicated volunteers to help at our community outreach and fundraising events is tremendously important. As a small team, we can only do so many things at once, and having volunteers to help us means we can reach more supporters and raise more vital funds to support disabled children and young people."

Challengers' Finance team has benefitted from having volunteer Will to help since December 2022. He provides valuable assistance to the team by processing transactions, helping to keep the whole team on track. Head of Finance Andy said:

"Will has gained practical accounting experience during his time with us and we've seen his knowledge grow quickly, so he's been able to take on more tasks like posting journals and reconciling our bank account – skills which are great for his CV and experience.

As a valued member of the team, Will often participates in office life and joins social events outside of work. He enjoys coming into the office, and we hope the experience he has gained with us will help him in future roles."

Finance volunteer Will

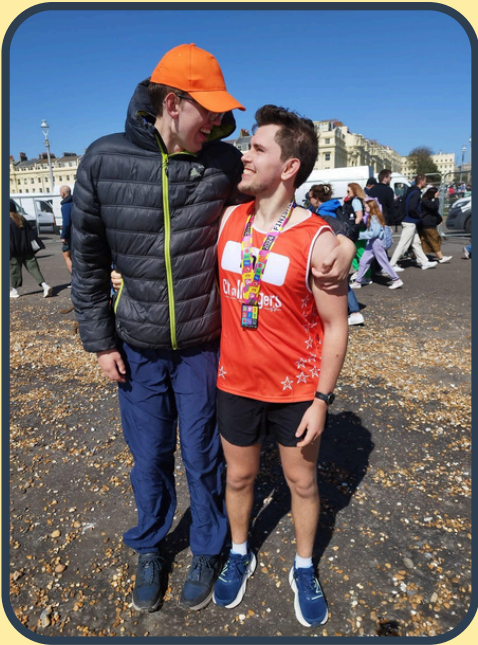


Another form of volunteering which is hugely beneficial is providing professional services free of charge. Read more about Jake Hatt, CEO and Producer at Free Bird Film, who has kindly used his professional skills to produce impactful videos to support our fundraising campaigns.





# Star fundraiser



Tom and Matthew

Supporter Tom first took up running as a hobby during the 2020 lockdown. Four years later he completed his first ever marathon – running for Challengers! In April Tom proudly took on the Brighton Marathon running in orange, inspired by the difference the charity made to his and his brother Matthew's life.

Matthew has a learning disability and attended Challengers schemes for 14 years. For most children, play is a constant in their lives, however for young people like Matthew, opportunities to play, be themselves and socialise are almost non-existent.

At Challengers, we passionately believe that every child has the right to play and be included, and that's why our work is so important to the families who depend on us.

Here's what Tom had to say about his experience:

"Matthew and I were both extremely fortunate to grow up with Challengers in our lives. For 14 years, it meant that while Matthew was having loads of fun, my family was thrown an important respite lifeline.

My Mum and Dad got the chance to have a break from their caring responsibilities, I got to have them to myself for a bit, and we were able to do stuff together that Matthew didn't enjoy or just couldn't cope with. It felt great to give back to a charity which has given our family so much."



Tom's brother Matthew



To see what Challengers means to families like Tom's, watch our 'Free To Be Me' campaign video

# Community support



Every year we celebrate Challengers with a month of all things orange – Orange October!

It's a fun-filled celebration where we encourage schools, workplaces, and individuals to join us in 'turning orange' and raising funds to support disabled children and young people at Challengers. From bake sales and parkruns, to pumpkin carving and fancy dress – we loved seeing our supporters get creative and having fun in aid of a great cause.

We want to extend our gratitude to everyone who took part this year, including:

- St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School
- Freemantles School
- Onslow Infant School
- St Nicolas' 9th Guildford Scout Group
- Guildford parkrun
- Hilly's Tea Shop
- The Olive Tree, Sutton Green
- ramsac
- PGL Marchants Hill
- Azets UK
- Howden Insurance



Our friends at Hilly's Tea Shop all dressed up in orange



Parent ambassador Natasha and daughter Lilly enjoyed the orange parkrun



Our families carved some amazing Challengers pumpkins for Halloween



St Nicolas' 9th Guildford Scout Group organised their very own orange day



Supporter Emma hosted an orange themed street party





We're grateful to have benefitted from some fantastic partnerships this year which have included generous gifts in kind, fundraising, and volunteering from our corporate supporters.



# Corporate support

## Charity of the Year

We had three remarkable Charity of the Year partnerships with Fluor, Azets, and Stevens & Bolton – all sparking exciting initiatives that brought staff together to raise money. From golf days and staff BBQs, to toy collections and (our personal favourite) a wet sponge the boss fundraiser!



Thank you to ramsac, our long term supporters



## Challenges

Staff at ramsac completed a 24-hour gaming marathon; Ethos Metrics tackled the Three Peaks Challenge – scaling mountains in support of our mission; and Brewers Decorator Centres, RBS and Azets courageously took part in the Spinnaker Tower abseil.

Brave team members from Azets and Brewers



An egg-cellent gift from Skipton and Metro Bank



Stevens & Bolton cycled for Changers



## Gifts in Kind

Skipton and Metro Bank organised an Easter egg collection for our children, Waverley Blinds donated an electric blackout blind to our Farnham Pre-School, children loved the free Xbox and games donated by EA Games, and we were delighted to receive 100 wrapped Christmas presents donated by staff at Fluor!

Christmas presents kindly donated by Fluor









If you would like to make a donation to Challengers  
to support our work, please visit our website:

[www.disability-challengers.org](http://www.disability-challengers.org)



- 
-  [facebook.com/DisabilityChallengers](https://facebook.com/DisabilityChallengers)
  -  [instagram.com/Challengers1979](https://instagram.com/Challengers1979)
  -  [twitter.com/D\\_Challengers](https://twitter.com/D_Challengers)
  -  [linkedin.com/company/disability-challengers](https://linkedin.com/company/disability-challengers)

Challengers, Stoke Park,  
Guildford, GU1 1TU

**Registered Charity Number: 1095134**  
**Company Number: 4300724**

**Disability Challengers is a charitable  
company limited by guarantee.**