



Challengers

Impact Report 2024-25



Welcome

A message from our CEO, Gen Dearman

The past year at Challengers has been an exciting one as we celebrated a milestone – the charity's 45th birthday – and launched a new 5-year strategy, setting out our strengthened commitment to our charitable mission and how we plan to bring it to life.

Over the last 12 months, Challengers has provided over 77,000 hours of essential support for disabled children and their families, and we continue to see a growing need for our services – the demands of which we cannot fully meet due to funding restrictions. I'm proud to say that our dedicated team has responded with creativity and determination, trialling new activities to help meet the needs of our community.

We've started initiatives that offer practical support to families, especially for those on the waiting list for our core services. These include new after school 'Stay and Play' sessions, providing opportunities for vital connection with other families, as well as our Healthy Parent Carer course which empowers parents with practical tools to prioritise their own wellbeing.

I'd like to extend a huge thank you to everyone who has supported Challengers over the course of this year. Without you, we wouldn't be able to have such a positive impact on the children and families we support. Looking forward, we're keen to progress toward the goal we set in our strategy – to provide 100,000 hours of support to 1,000 families by the time the charity turns 50 – and we have some exciting additions to our services on the horizon...watch this space!



A message from our Chairman, Russell Harvey

This year at Challengers has been nothing short of inspiring, marked by bold ambitions with the launch of our new strategy and unforgettable moments like the inaugural 'Orange Aid' family festival. As Chair of the Board, I'm delighted to have been witness to the team's hard work and dedication.

I had the pleasure of spending a day at one of our Youth schemes in the summer, and despite having known and admired the charity's work for many years, I was blown away to see first-hand the profoundly positive impact it has on the disabled children and young people who attend, and of course their parents and carers.

The staff members did everything they could to ensure that each young person could have fun and be included in activities, and it was a real golden moment to see a young man who was a wheelchair user enjoy a bouncy castle for the first time. It was a powerful and emotional reminder of what true inclusion looks like, and why our mission matters so deeply.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the ever increasing pressure on funding and fundraising, and I admire the team's resilience as they battle on all fronts to secure much-needed funds from all sources.



About Challengers



Our Vision



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



We will never exclude a child or young person from our services because of their complex needs or financial situation. We are dedicated to providing the right support for each child, ensuring they can fully enjoy their time with us through meaningful play.



Our Services



Pre-school: Ages 2 to 5

Play: Ages 4 to 12

Youth: Ages 11 to 18

555 Service: Alternative provision for young people who are currently out of education, ages 5 - 19

The Hub: Holistic support for families of disabled children

We support families in



Challengers' 5-year strategy

This year we were very proud to unveil our new 5-year strategy, which will shape our journey as we pave the way to the charity's 50th anniversary.

This new strategy marks a significant milestone in advancing our work, driven by an ambitious new charitable mission:



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



Our strategy focuses on how we will address the urgent needs of families and the increasing demand to access Challengers services. Our ambition is to grow to **support 1,000 families through 100,000 hours of support**, and we aim to do this by:

- **Enriching** the wellbeing and confidence of disabled children and young people
- **Advocating** for families and challenging the barriers that exclude them
- **Connecting** families together to reduce isolation and create a community of support
- Increasing capacity and securing the resources needed to **invest** in our vital services.

"Every child has the right to play, every child has the right to be themselves, and Challengers enables that. They're lifesavers."

Charlie and Lisa, Challengers Parents



Visit our website
and read the
strategy in full




Did you see our
launch video?


Watch to learn
more about
our strategy


Our impact at a glance


Our commitment to creating truly inclusive experiences for disabled children and their families is reflected in the impact of our services, and our Parent Carer Survey data clearly demonstrates how vital Challengers is to them.

What our parents say

93% say attending Challengers positively affects their child's happiness 

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

90% agree that Challengers helps reduce their child's loneliness and isolation 

 90% believe that access to Challengers is essential for their family

The issues families are facing

- 51% of Challengers parent carers told us that they have been excluded from other settings due to their child's disability, and worry that the lack of services available will reduce their child's social interactions and friendships.
- 79% believe they don't get the right level of support for their disabled child. This puts a huge strain on families, and 51% told us are worried about family breakdown as a result of this.

This year, we've provided

77,269

hours of support to

966

families

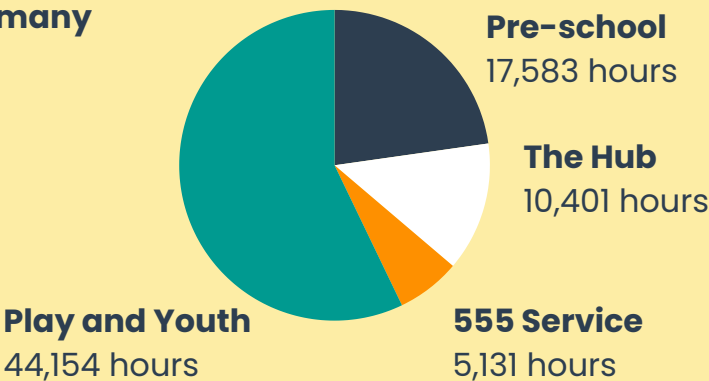


"We have extremely limited inclusion in wider society as a family, so Challengers has really been essential in feeling there is somewhere for our daughter to go and be happy. This has a huge impact on us as a family." *Comment from Challengers Parent Survey 2024*

We provide a range of inclusive services to support families of disabled children, and many parents refer to Challengers as a lifeline.

While children and young people are enjoying social and play opportunities at Challengers, their families get vital respite from their demanding care responsibilities – helping to keep them strong and together.

Hours by service





Our first Orange Aid Family Festival

In September we held “Orange Aid” – a festival designed specifically for disabled children and their families. Over 400 attendees came together and enjoyed a fun inclusive day, offered free thanks to sponsorship by ramsac and Bessler Hendrie. With the help of our brilliant Play and Youth workers, children were supported to take part in activities like build-a-bear, sensory trays, drumming and karaoke, while parents could relax. For many, Orange Aid signified a day where their disabled child’s needs were not just considered but celebrated, and we’re excited to make it an annual celebration for our families.

The Healthy Parent Carer Programme

We delivered multiple Healthy Parent Carer workshops this year, empowering parents of disabled children to prioritise their own wellbeing. These sessions, led by trained facilitators who are parent carers themselves, provided a supportive space for families to explore strategies for managing stress, navigating healthcare systems, and building resilience. By focusing on self-care and peer support, these workshops have helped parents feel more confident and connected.



“I highly recommend the Healthy Parent Carer programme. I found it really useful, with realistic goals that work around our everyday life and caring roles. I also met a lovely bunch of people, so was very grateful to be able to take part in this.” *Jenni, Programme attendee*

Stay and Play sessions

We were excited to launch new Stay and Play sessions at our Guildford and Farnham centres. These after-school sessions offer a welcoming space for children to engage in fun, themed activities – from multisports and dance to gaming, cooking, and lego – while giving families the chance to connect and share experiences. By tailoring sessions to different age groups and interests, and welcoming siblings to join in, we’ve created opportunities for families to build their own community of support, and offered a safe and inclusive environment where all children can have fun.



Enriching the wellbeing and confidence of disabled children and young people

86% of disabled children in the UK are socially isolated, which has a hugely detrimental effect on their wellbeing and confidence.

**Disabled Children's Partnership, 2022*

Meet Isaah

Isaah is 8 years old. He's autistic and has type 1 diabetes, which means he requires constant medical support. He's been coming to Challengers Playschemes in Kingston and Richmond since 2023, and mum Farah shares the positive impact it's had...



"Attending Challengers was the first time I've seen Isaah truly happy in a setting outside our home. He's always been anxious in group environments, and I've had to stay with him at other clubs due to the complexities of his diabetes, but Challengers changed all that. From the very first day, I was amazed to see him smiling, interacting and full of joy.

Isaah literally jumps up and down in excitement when we're getting ready for sessions! His confidence has grown dramatically, especially in how he communicates. That's something he has always found difficult, but at Challengers he feels heard and understood.



"The staff treat Isaah's health needs with such care and attention that I no longer feel the constant fear I once lived with. As a single mum, that peace of mind means the world."



When Isaah is at Challengers it enables me to work, as well as giving me time to take care of myself. I can relax knowing Isaah is safe, supported and thriving. Challengers is the first place that has been able to support all of his needs. It's been a blessing and has given us hope for what's possible with the right support. We honestly can't thank you enough."



Advocating for families and challenging the barriers that exclude them

Children with SEND are twice as likely to be excluded from school, often due to lack of appropriate support, and there are more than 400 children* with an EHCP in Surrey who do not have a school place for September 2025.

**Figure from May 2025*

Meet Sam

Sam is 15 and has autism and profound learning difficulties, requiring 24/7 care and 3 support workers at a time to keep him safe. He's been attending our Farnham Youth scheme for 12 years, and started coming to our 555 Service when his school placement broke down. Parents Anna & Ben share his story...

"As Sam has grown older and stronger, his behaviour has become harder to manage, leading to part-exclusion from school – but Challengers never gave up. When no other setting could cope with him, Challengers welcomed him with open arms. They've always fought for us.

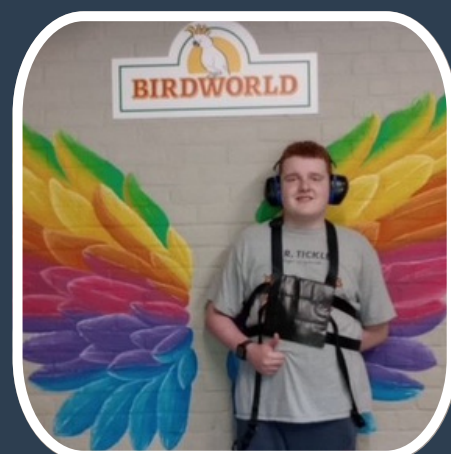
When school couldn't provide consistent support, the 555 Service gave Sam a lifeline and a crucial routine. For 3 days a week, Sam is engaged, safe and understood. It's the one place he's truly included and feels part of the gang.

Without Challengers, Sam's world, and ours, would be so much smaller. It's also our only source of respite and we wouldn't cope without it. Challengers has truly changed our lives by giving Sam a future, and giving us hope."



How we're helping families in crisis

We've been supporting disabled children out of education for over a decade through our 555 Service, however we're seeing increasing numbers of SEND children out of school and families in crisis. We've made the decision to expand our 555 Service to second location, launching in April 2025, with a focus on children as young as 5 without a school place to help meet this growing need.



Connecting families to reduce isolation & create a community of support

Loneliness is an epidemic among the UK's disabled children and their families, and a lack of community means that 87% of Challengers parents feel their mental health is negatively affected.

**Challengers Parent Survey 2024*

Meet Bruce



Bruce is 4 years old and is autistic and non-speaking. He's been coming to the family-focused events at Challengers alongside his siblings, including brother Frank who has ADHD. Mum Samantha shares the impact these events have had on their family...



"Attending the Family Fun Days and the Stay and Play sessions offered by the Hub have been a lifeline for our family. Having a safe space where all three of my children can run free, play, and be supported by staff who understand them has made a world of difference. Challengers support has been key in building Bruce's social interactions.

He gets essential time with other children outside of playing with his siblings and we've noticed a big change – he's more independent during sessions and not always looking for me.



We first learnt about The Hub offering through my sister, whose child is also autistic. It's great that we can attend the free events together, and it's reassuring to know that we have Challengers' supportive community around us.

When the children are playing, I get to have a moment to myself and have a drink. It's moments like that – being able to relax a little while knowing they're safe – that mean so much to families like mine. Every visit feels like a win and my kids always say, "When can we go back?"

While non-disabled children have access to clubs, hobbies and playdates, most disabled children have home, school and little else in between, and parent carers also miss out due to the demands of their care responsibilities. We're doing everything we can to build a community of support for these families, led by our work delivered via The Hub at Challengers. In the 2 years that we've offered support and events through The Hub, we're proud to have helped **283 families**, and 85% of our parents agree that Challengers helps to build a more inclusive community and connects them to others.



Learn how we're supporting families via The Hub

Investing in vital services supporting disabled children and young people

One of the best ways to invest in our services is to invest in our staff. Our 200+ staff base is the beating heart of Challengers, and we're committed to training so that we can deliver the highest quality care to disabled children and their families, while still bringing the fun!



We create customised training plans to ensure that every child can participate and have a great time, particularly those who require complex medical or behaviour support.

Without the medical training we give staff, some young people wouldn't be able to attend Challengers. Recently we've seen an increase in complex medical needs, so we've developed a role where one of our nurse trainers is on-site to support.

In 2024/25:

- We delivered 81 medical training sessions
- We trained 267 members of staff
- Challengers staff completed 4,200 hours of training

"Having a nurse on-site allows staff to focus on delivering an engaging play experience for our young people, while the nurse ensures that all medical needs are met separately and safely throughout the day."

Training Manager, Ash

Meet Letty



Letty is 4 and attends our Pre-school. She has a rare genetic condition (PTEN), is non-speaking, has developmental delays and is tube-fed via a PEG. Thanks to training, Letty's needs can be met and she can be fully included. Mum Jade shared:

"When Letty started, she couldn't walk and used a standing frame. Now she walks confidently and runs into Challengers with a smile! The Pre-school team feed her via PEG, but also support her to enjoy small snacks with her friends. This means she's still part of the lunch experience and feels included even though her feeding needs are different.

As a family raising two disabled children, the support from Challengers has been a lifeline. We've never had to worry. Our older daughter Winnie also attended Pre-school, and when she had a seizure the way the team handled it gave us total confidence. The staff are so well trained and we're truly grateful."

Read more of Letty's story



Staff spotlight



At Challengers, we believe every child should have equal access to play and social opportunities, and that starts with the people who support them. Joe is one of our Play and Youth Leaders, and his journey with us demonstrates the impact of our nurturing and passionate staff members.



Joe balances his role at Challengers alongside his studies as a medical student, currently undertaking a Master's of Research in Cancer, and dedicates his evenings, weekends, and school holidays to supporting disabled young people at Challengers.

He started as a play volunteer six years ago, supporting Challengers one Saturday a month, but quickly realised the profound impact the experience had, both on himself and the children he worked with. After his first shift he committed to volunteering weekly, soon stepping into a permanent Playworker role.

In 2021 Joe became Deputy Leader, and for the past two years has worked as a Leader across multiple schemes. He plays a key role in ensuring each day runs smoothly – from processing rotas and bookings to inducting new staff, organising activities, managing complex medical needs, and leading with energy and empathy on the ground.

Joe gets involved in all aspects of the day, and most importantly, joins in the fun with the children and young people, ensuring they are not just included, but celebrated.



Challengers has supported Joe with extensive training – from First Aid and safeguarding, to leadership skills – all of which are transferable to his future career as a doctor.

"I feel myself making little 'breakthroughs' all the time, whether it's understanding how to support a staff member, or gaining a parent's trust. I love the approach we have at Challengers – we show up for the children and families who need us, and that's what matters most."

Through his work with us, Joe has become a passionate advocate for inclusion, and will take this forward into his future practice.

From Play to Purpose

Meet Sophie

18-year-old Sophie attended Challengers for 13 years, and has a Chromosome 6 long-arm deletion, learning disabilities, developmental delay, epilepsy and hypermobility. Sophie has a bright and sociable personality, which made her the perfect candidate for work experience at our Farnham Pre-school!

We asked mum Simone to tell us more about Sophie's experience...

"Sophie first joined Challengers at Guildford Play and quickly fell in love with her time there. Over the years, she attended Farnham Family Days and later moved on to Youth sessions at Farnham, always looking forward to the next visit. She would count down the days and regularly ask - "When am I going back to Challengers?"

Her time at Challengers gave her confidence and friendships, and it was a place where she could truly be herself. I've always felt at ease knowing she was in a safe, welcoming environment where staff understood her needs and supported her fully.

When Sophie had the opportunity to return to Challengers for work experience as part of her sixth form programme, she was over the moon. She would come out of sessions smiling and say: "I'm exhausted, but the kids are adorable and they ALL loved me!"

I will forever be grateful that the Challengers team made this possible. The experience has given her such great feedback and confidence, that she can feel proud of, but she can also add this to a CV going into her adult life. "

Coming back to Challengers as an adult was a powerful full-circle moment for Sophie. We were delighted to welcome her back and see the confident young woman she's become, using her own experiences to connect with children at our Pre-school.

Her journey highlights the lasting impact of inclusive spaces like Challengers, and how attending our services helped Sophie learn practical skills and given her the confidence to thrive.



Sophie at Farnham Youth in 2021

Nurturing new talent

Challengers is committed to supporting young people from all backgrounds through meaningful volunteering and work experience.

These opportunities offer valuable insights into the charitable sector, help build skills and confidence, and highlight the many different roles that contribute to the impact we have as a charity.

Lucy (pictured) spent a week with our Fundraising and Comms teams, gaining hands-on experience – she even picked up a paintbrush to help refresh the Guildford centre!



“I had a fantastic and insightful time during my work experience at Challengers, seeing and learning about the charity’s incredible work first-hand. I spent time with different teams to understand more about their specific roles and helped with a variety of tasks. Everyone was welcoming, and it was such a warm environment to be a part of. I’m pleased to have helped out, even in a small way, and look forward to supporting more in the future.”

Lucy

Star Supporter

Celebrating 35 years of support

For over 35 years, Ken has been a passionate supporter of Challengers. His journey began in 1990 after a chance visit to our Guildford centre – an experience that left a lasting impression. As Ken fondly remembers, he couldn’t wait for the children to finish so he could try the soft play himself!

Since then, Ken has **raised over £10,000** through a mix of daring challenges and dedicated volunteering. From abseiling and firewalking dressed as Tigger, to volunteering and even playing Father Christmas, Ken has supported countless events while championing Challengers through our Business Club and the BEST Business Group. Most recently, he took on a 15,000 ft skydive, raising an incredible £3,613 toward a team total of £16,213.



Read more
about Ken’s
support over
the decades!



“Whatever I have raised has been part of “Team Orange” as a combined team effort. Without their support and guidance, I would have raised nothing!”

Ken

Corporate support

We've been fortunate to receive incredible support from our corporate partners this year, including generous gifts in kind, enthusiastic fundraising efforts, and hands-on volunteering.



In 2024 we welcomed our new Corporate Partnerships Manager Chris (*pictured*), who successfully re-launched our Business Club – a group of local and national companies who are dedicated to supporting Challengers while gaining valuable benefits to grow their businesses. We were also delighted that three new corporates joined the Club: Mattioli Woods, Albury Vineyard, and Lindon-Travers Associates.

We had four new Charity of the Year collaborations with Field of Fitness, Tempcover, GBH Law and Corrodere, and received generous gifts in kind including Easter Eggs from Setfords, Christmas presents from Fluor, and mobile phones from YUM! Group. Teams from Bessler Hendrie, Vestey, and BEST dedicated their time through volunteering days, helping us maintain and improve our facilities.

Corporate support plays a critical role in sustaining our services for users and their families, and we welcome conversations with business leaders who are keen to make a meaningful difference.



 See how you can get involved

Community support




From fundraising festivals to formal galas, our amazing community continues to show up and show off their creativity and generosity.

We were thrilled to celebrate 10th anniversaries of three flagship community events: the **Kelly's Cycle Challenge**, our annual **Motoring Event**, and the **Wood Street Jazz Festival**. Together the events raised an amazing **£68,602** and brought greater community awareness to our work.

Our '**Once Upon a Castle' Gala Dinner** at Farnham Castle in March was another standout moment, bringing together friends and supporters for an evening of celebration and generosity. We were also blown away by the incredible support from Effingham Golf Club (*pictured*), who raised over £33,000 for Challengers – what an amazing show of community commitment!

We'd like to extend a huge thank you to all of our community supporters for your efforts – we couldn't do it without you!



 Read more about our 10th anniversary events

The value of volunteers

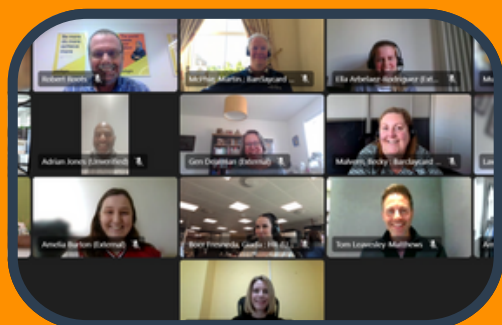


We have a diverse group of supporters – from students and community groups to retired individuals, as well as SMEs and large companies. They help us in a number of different ways – through volunteering, fundraising and taking part in our events.



Chris (*pictured*) has been a dedicated volunteer with the Fundraising team for over 10 years, generously giving more than 500 hours of her time to support us. Having followed Challengers work for decades, she decided to become a volunteer after retiring from work, and plays a key role in updating supporter records and preparing Gift Aid claims.

"I've learnt so much through volunteering, and I enjoy keeping up with new technology – the team are very patient with me. Some of my favourite memories include sunny summer events, Princess Beatrice's visit in 2019, and being surprised with gifts and a lovely card to mark my 10 years of volunteering. Volunteering makes me feel great, the team is so welcoming and my advice to any thinking about it would be just do it – you'll love it!" *Chris*



Pilotlight programme



Earlier in the year, Challengers took part in a 10-week project called Pilotlight Insight, delivered in partnership with Barclays.

The idea behind the project was for skilled professionals to support us to work through a strategic challenge, namely how we can increase volunteer engagement and bring in new volunteers to support the charity.

Participating in the programme was a fantastic experience. We had regular virtual meetings to share challenges, and quickly built a strong rapport with our "Pilotlighters". It was a collaborative, insightful process and the final presentation delivered has given us lots of food for thought on how to approach this important growth area. Huge thanks to the Pilotlight programme and Barclays for their support.

"We worked with Challengers over several weeks to help them address a challenge they were facing. It was inspiring to hear and see the impact of their inspiring work and the positive difference it makes to those who benefit from their services."

VP Corporate & Payments, Barclays



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