

**STARLIGHT**

TRANSFORMING CHILDREN'S HEALTH THROUGH PLAY

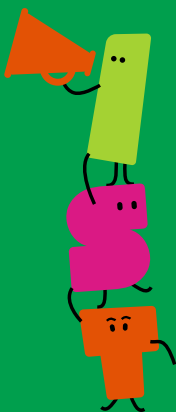


**IMPACT**

**REPORT**



**2025**





**When children arrive, they're often scared. They don't really know why they're here, and that fear can build fast. But if you bring in play, it changes everything. It helps them feel safe, comfortable and distracted in the best way."**

Jenny, Staff Nurse,  
Moorfields Eye Hospital



# TRANSFORMING CHILDREN'S HEALTH THROUGH PLAY



**CATHY GILMAN**  
Chief Executive

**Starlight's vision is for a time when no child experiences trauma as a result of their healthcare.**

Healthcare can be frightening for children. Unfamiliar environments, painful procedures, and a lack of understanding can leave children feeling scared and powerless. When children feel afraid, they are less resilient and less able to engage positively with treatment, which can affect both their immediate experience and their long-term wellbeing.

It's very likely that **the majority of children will attend hospital before the age of 16**. Given how many children come into contact with healthcare services, it is vital that we do everything

possible to prevent avoidable trauma. Negative healthcare experiences can have lasting consequences, shaping how children feel about medical care well into adulthood.

This year, we published new research that clearly demonstrates the urgent need for play in healthcare settings to prevent trauma. **Our findings show that interventions previously considered a last resort – such as physically holding children down during medical procedures – are being used routinely or inappropriately.** These practices can cause avoidable trauma and contribute to long-term mental health difficulties. As a result, many children and their families are left distressed and fearful of future healthcare experiences.

Evidence from another Starlight report shows that integrating play into children's healthcare can significantly reduce stress and discomfort during medical procedures. Play helps children understand what is happening, manage their emotions, build resilience, and retain a sense of childhood, even in clinical environments. Importantly, these benefits also support healthcare services by enabling smoother and faster procedures, reducing cancellations, improving outcomes, and supporting quicker recovery.

Last year, in partnership with NHS England, we published the **Play Well Toolkit**. This sets out clear guidance on commissioning and designing health play services, alongside recommended standards and a quality checklist. However, with intense and competing pressures across the NHS, guidance alone is not enough.

We continue to address immediate needs by ensuring **more than 900 healthcare settings** receive our toys, toolkits, and technology to support treatment preparation and distraction, while also investing in the training and professional development of health play workers. Alongside this, we have significantly strengthened our advocacy through a parliamentary roundtable, a drop-in event, a debate, and a planned meeting with the Minister for Public Health and Prevention. Together, these actions move us closer to our ambition of embedding play in every child's healthcare experience.

**There is much more to explore in our Impact Report, and we are deeply grateful for the role you have played. We can only achieve our vision of a time when no child experiences trauma in healthcare with your continued support.**

**Thank you.**



# MOMENTS THAT MATTER



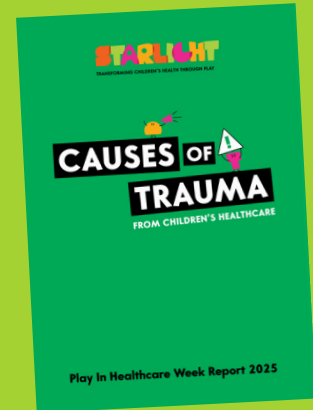
## OUR POLICY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS WORK

### A huge year for our advocacy work:

- We launched the **Play Well Toolkit** with NHS England as part of a shared ambition to embed standards for play in healthcare.
- We hosted two parliamentary events to raise awareness among decision makers.

For more information go to p10-11

## NEW RESEARCH



**Our report highlighted the most prevalent reasons behind children's trauma and revealed a shocking over-reliance on holding children down to deliver treatment and unnecessary use of general anaesthetic and sedation, when many children could undergo a procedure awake with play support.**



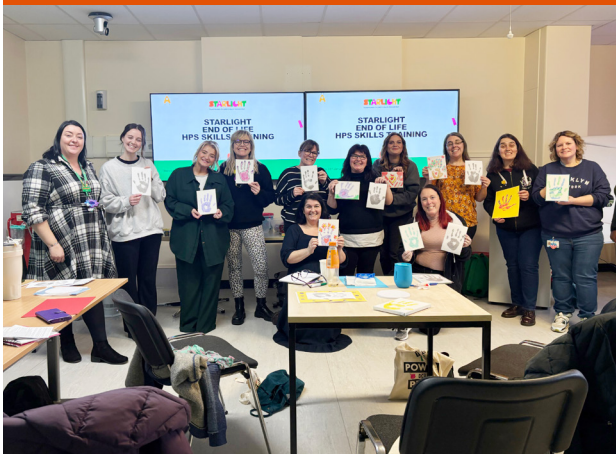
# OUR SPECIALISED TRAINING OFFER



## END OF LIFE TRAINING

**We provided training for health play specialists at Leeds General Infirmary.**

The creative and interactive session has equipped them with essential skills for supporting children and families in what is a very difficult and challenging time.



## BRICK CAFÉ

**For health play professionals who had attended the Brick-by-Brick® Certified Facilitator Training Programme endorsed by the LEGO Foundation, the Brick Café was a forum to share best practices, tips, and guidance on how to apply the training in their day-to-day work.**

It also provided an opportunity for Starlight and Play Included, the leading provider of LEGO brick-based therapy, to gather insights to shape and better support therapeutic play professionals.



## TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF NURSES IN PLAYFUL APPROACHES

**Having delivered 'train the trainer' sessions to nursing lecturers at the University of Chester in 2024, it was the turn of the lecturers to take their playful approach learnings to the next generation of nurses.**

At the start of the year, Starlight attended and assessed the lecturers, awarding them their accreditation as Starlight 'playful providers'.

With funding from the **Rangoonwala Foundation**, we hope to roll out the training to 12 trusts and health boards with a programme that will run into 2027.

# MOMENTS THAT MATTER

## HEALTH PLAY INNOVATION AWARD



### Our inaugural award recognises innovative practice in the health play sector and celebrates the people behind these ideas.

We received high quality submissions demonstrating how play addresses a challenge, issue or gap in existing paediatric healthcare provision. Submissions had to provide data and evidence to support how play had positively impacted children and young people's healthcare experiences.

The winning submission was the **VIP PASS** (Very Important Plan – Procedural Anxiety Support Scheme) for children with procedural anxiety. Pioneered by **Tracey Martin, Health Play Specialist at Leeds Children's Hospital**, it is a physical pass which alerts healthcare staff to scan a QR code which explains that the child with the pass has a plan for adjustments, which they should refer to in order to provide the correct support for the young patient.



**Patients are more likely to cooperate when they feel safe, listened to and understood. With the VIP PASS, patients have the reassurance that their needs will be incorporated into their care. It reduces unsuccessful attempts of procedures, but most importantly it reduces the risk of potential trauma.**

Tracey, Health Play Specialist



# OUR NEW PRODUCTS



## PREP BOOKS AND ANIMATION

**We created a fun animation and colourful printable preparation books. Parents and healthcare staff can use these with children to guide them through hospital visits and stays.**

The animation is supported by the books which allow children to learn more about various hospital experiences such as going to an outpatient appointment or having surgery.

## BUILD & FEEL PLAY BOX



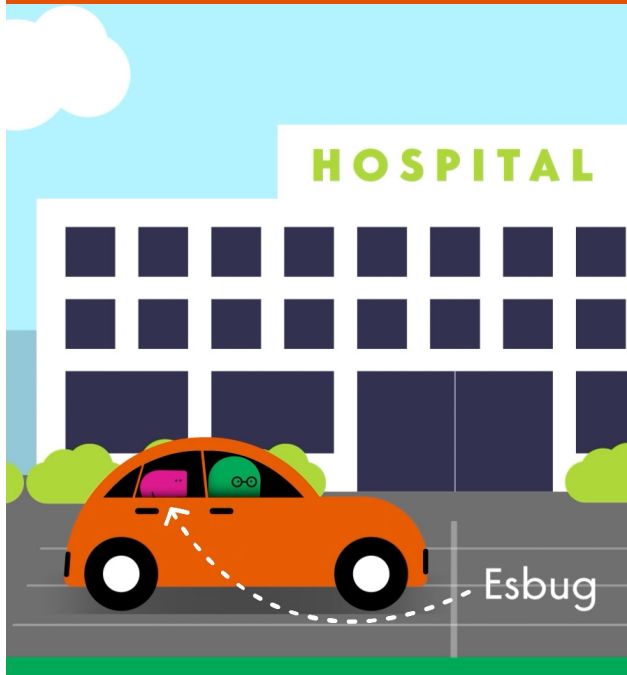
**A new therapeutic play resource for healthcare professionals designed to support children's emotional wellbeing during hospital visits and treatments was created.**

The new Build & Feel Play Box, supported by the LEGO Group, includes activity packs, sensory toys and LEGO® sets, which aim to build resilience during healthcare journeys.



**The experience I've had with these so far has been very positive, it really builds a bond with the child and completely distracts them from worrying situations.**

Ryan, Healthcare Assistant,  
Alder Hey Children's Hospital



# FILLY'S STORY

**"THAT HOLISTIC CARE... WAS JUST AS IMPORTANT AS THE MEDICAL TREATMENT."**



**Filly was diagnosed with leukaemia when she was three and a half years old. After weeks of being ill with a number of symptoms including a cough and a high temperature, she was rushed to A&E a week before Christmas when her condition deteriorated. On 23 December, a bone marrow biopsy confirmed she had cancer.**

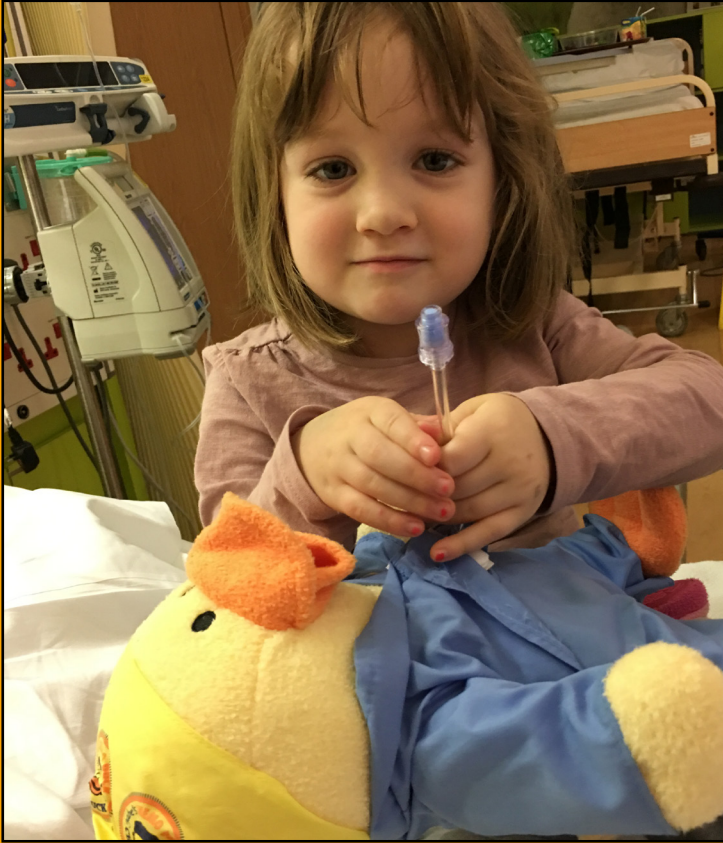
That Christmas, the whole family (parents and 7-year-old sister) stayed at the hospital. A member of the play team assured Filly and her sister that Santa knew the way to the hospital and ensured both children did not miss out on Christmas festivities or presents.

Throughout the years of treatment, Lyndsey, Filly's mum, recalls **how the play team used therapeutic play during hospital appointments and stays so Filly could understand, at an age-appropriate level, what was happening to her.** They used Chemo Duck (a cuddly toy) to demonstrate a central line and gave her a syringe to practise on her duck. The health play professionals were proactive about the subject of hair falling out and played with Filly with Barbies, wigs, hats and bandanas. They were always there ready to play or distract whenever she needed blood tests or a transfusion.



**That holistic care – wrapping around us as a family – was just as important as the medical treatment. Cancer felt like an area where getting it wrong meant kids became institutionalised. And cancer steals so much. But from the beginning, I was determined it would not steal Filly's childhood. It wasn't going to steal her spirit or her freedom. Play was about keeping it light, protecting her childhood so she didn't become an institutionalised patient. And she didn't. Play supported Filly and minimised her distress.**

Filly's mum Lyndsey



# IN CONVERSATION

WITH...



## SARAH OWEN

### Policy and Public Affairs Manager

**Sarah is part of our Policy and Public Affairs Team. Her work involves collaborating with the health and play sectors to ensure decision-makers and the Government understand the importance of health play, and to persuade them to implement practical measures to turn Starlight's vision to end trauma in healthcare into reality.**



It has been a momentous year for the team. In June, NHS England published the Play Well Toolkit, co-produced with Starlight. This was followed by two parliamentary events – a roundtable and a drop-in. The Government was also asked about play in healthcare via several parliamentary questions raising the issue at the highest levels, which culminated in a debate in Westminster Hall at the start of 2026 and a planned meeting with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Prevention.

### How do you feel about the publication of the NHS Play Well Toolkit?

After three years of painstaking work, we were over the moon. It was created in collaboration with the Society of Health Play Specialists (SoHPS) and a taskforce of more than 60 health professionals and young people over three years.

The toolkit sets out guidelines for commissioning and designing health play services; recommended standards and a quality checklist. The aim is to transform children's healthcare through making high quality therapeutic health play available to as many children as possible, and the documents tell NHS decision-makers and the health

workforce why it's important and how to make it available. Health play specialists across the UK are already bringing the documents to their managers, building a case for more resources and creating change in their teams and departments.

### What was the roundtable like?

It was an amazing opportunity to bring together health play professionals, clinicians, academics, young people and MPs to discuss the importance of health play, including what it's like when it's not available, the transformative impact it can have on children's healthcare experiences and what needs to be done to improve access to it. We are so grateful to **Alistair Strathern MP** who hosted this event for us along with the drop-in event a few months later. His support has been instrumental in bringing our message to the heart of government.

### How did the Westminster drop-in event go?

It was so impactful. The proudest moment for me was bringing our policy ask to life through the voices of incredible children, young people, parents and practitioners to over 40

MPs, ministers and peers who dropped in.

The stories shared landed with so much heart and resonance.

We now have a broad allyship of parliamentarians who understand the vital role of play in children's health and healthcare, who heard directly from children and young people – who this matters to the most. The government's 10-Year Plan for the NHS focuses on tackling ill health through prevention – therapeutic health play is a powerful way to help achieve this.

## What was it like to see play in healthcare debated in Westminster?

It was incredible to be supported by 11 MPs who backed our arguments, including my **MP Calvin Bailey**, and really encouraging to hear the Health Minister **Ashely Dalton MP**, support our call to put play at the heart of every child's healthcare experience. It was an important moment for Starlight and testament to years of dedicated advocacy. We have much more planned for the coming year – so watch this space!



**It's been a pleasure to host parliamentary events for Starlight and to see so much progress made on this issue. There are so many benefits from therapeutic health play but provision is unequal across the country. I'm determined to keep putting this higher and higher up the Westminster agenda to achieve significant change.**

Alistair Strathern MP



**The experience of speaking in parliament was so extraordinary and something I would never have imagined for myself. I enjoyed being able to share my voice and hear the experiences of other important people who all value play in healthcare. I am truly thankful to Starlight for providing me with these opportunities.**

Annika Solanki, 18, former Starlight Youth Panel member who attended the roundtable and drop-in

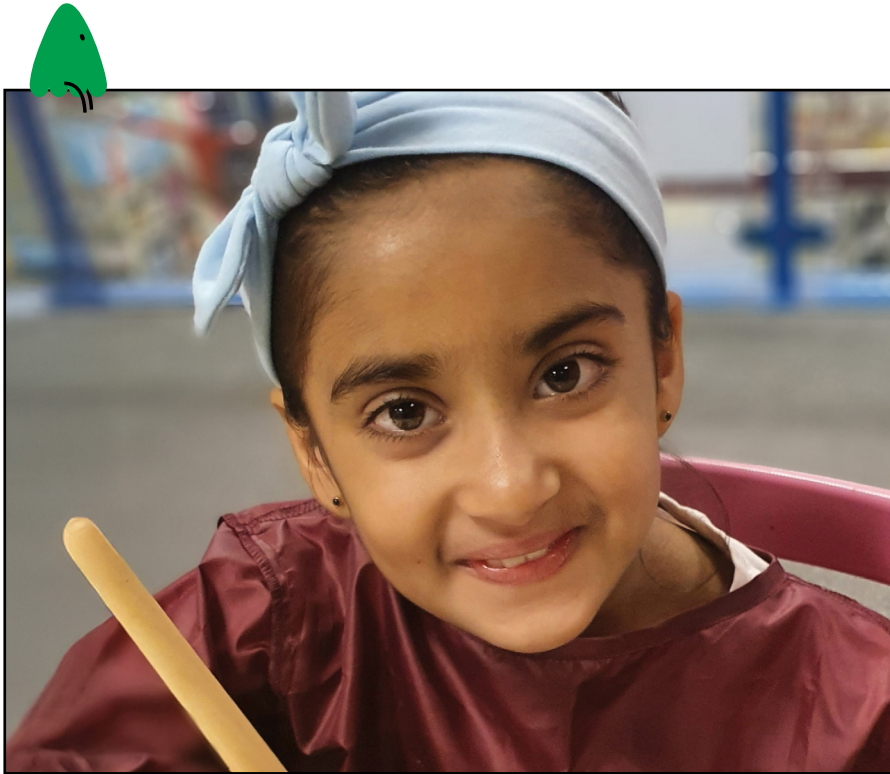


**There is growing evidence that therapeutic play can mitigate risks of trauma. We recognise that play services are integral to paediatric care, not a nice-to-have. I stand ready to work with NHS England, with my honourable friend [Calvin Bailey MP who led the debate] and Starlight to make this a decisive year for children's health.**

Ashley Dalton MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Prevention, Westminster Hall Debate, 6 January 2026

# SFIYAH'S STORY

**"IT'S ALL THANKS TO THE HEALTH PLAY PROFESSIONAL WHO BROUGHT THE HEALING POWER OF PLAY."**



her, she had to be pinned down and the way she was held down, they didn't notice she was having a panic attack. She was utterly traumatised. It's taken her three years to gain the courage to have a blood test without fainting or having a panic attack."

A few months after her diagnosis, Sfiyah was admitted to hospital on Christmas Day due to complications from chicken pox.

Parvina continues: "She was so sad, she refused to eat and have her medication. It was so hard to see Sfiyah so upset and the impact it had on her mental health."

**A nurse suggested Sfiyah see one of the health play professionals. Her mood changed from the first visit. She managed to forget her worries, relax and open up about the things that bothered her.**

"My daughter hadn't laughed in such a long time because deep down she was always anxious. It was such a relief to see Sfiyah be her true self again. It's all thanks to the health play professional who brought the healing power of play."



**A world without play is a world without fun. Play brings out the child in us and we can forget about our worries.**

Sfiyah

**Sfiyah, from Newport in South Wales, was diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis when she was nine. It means persistent joint pain and a weakened immune system so she can get very sick from common illnesses such as chicken pox. As a chronic condition that can flare up, she has ongoing treatment and has been in and out of hospital multiple times.**

Sfiyah's diagnosis was a result of various blood tests that were taken in A&E where there were no health play professionals.

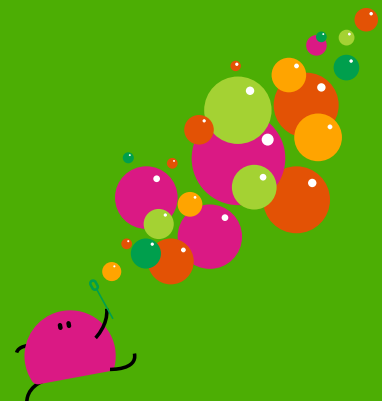
Her mother Parvina recalls how the blood tests caused Sfiyah long term trauma, which could have been prevented had a playful approach been used to prepare and distract her daughter. She said: "It was a really traumatic experience for





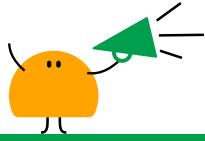
At the Westminster drop-in event with Jessica Morden her MP

The positive impact of play on Sfiyah's healthcare experience has led her to becoming a vocal advocate for Starlight and using her lived experience to raise awareness of the vital importance of play for children undergoing treatment.

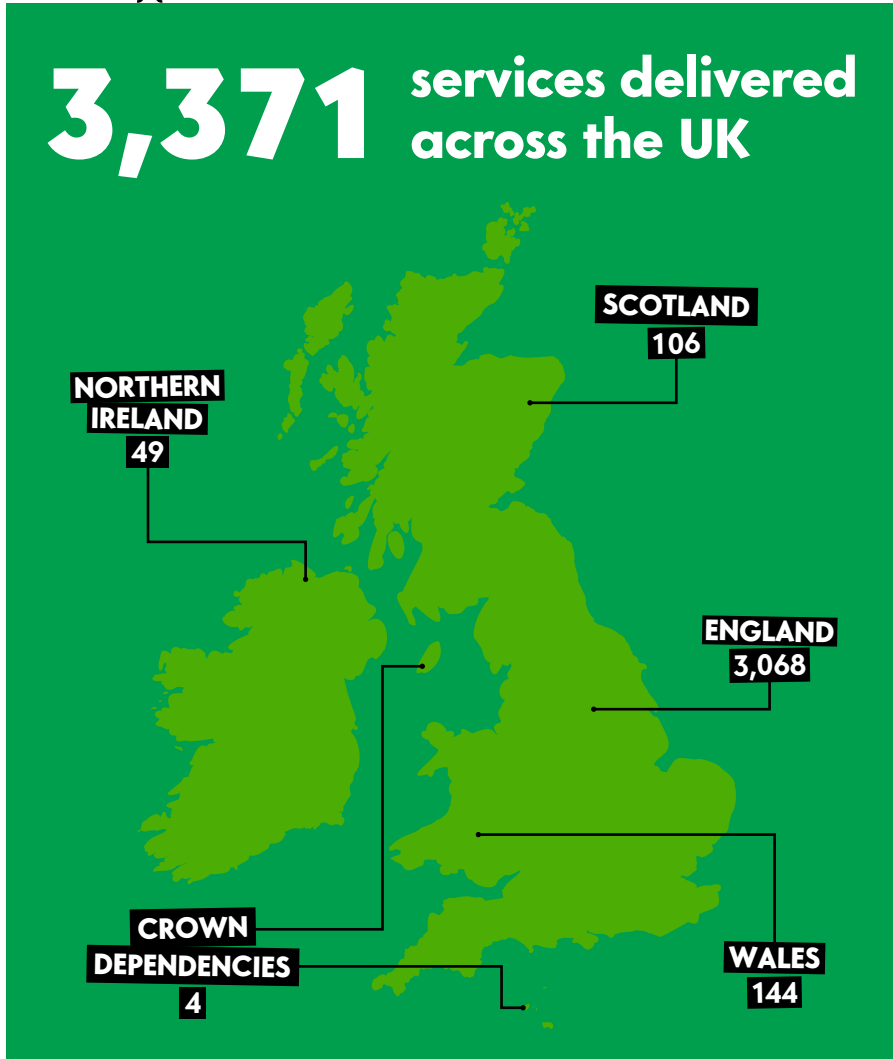


# OUR IMPACT

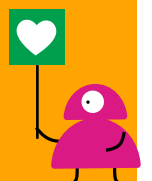
## IN NUMBERS



**3,371** services delivered across the UK



We estimate  
**our services**  
were used nearly  
**1.2 million times**





There is very little to no funding for play in hospital so resources like these (Starlight boxes) go a long way into helping us provide play opportunities to our patients.

Senior Health Play Specialist



## From the health professionals we surveyed about our services...

(sample: 188)

**90%** agreed they helped to distract children

**89%** agreed they created a more positive healthcare experience for children

**87%** said they were used to develop relationships with their young patients

**86%** said they made treatment easier to complete

**80%** said they reduced trauma, anxiety and distress

# STARLIGHT

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## Starlight Children's Foundation

The Ark, 201 Talgarth Road

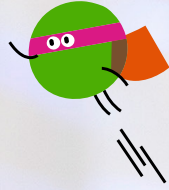
London W6 8BJ

020 7262 2881

[talktous@starlight.org.uk](mailto:talktous@starlight.org.uk)

[starlight.org.uk](http://starlight.org.uk)

Company limited by guarantee 02038895  
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transform children's  
healthcare.

