
It’s been an exciting year of progress and development at Starlight and we’ve been able to make significant strategic changes to our services offer and the way in which we deliver them.

Towards the end of our financial year it was obvious that, like the rest of the world, we would need to rethink what we could still deliver and how we could meet a whole new set of challenges. Although the figures in this report focus on pre Covid-19 activities, it also felt important to share with you how we’ve continued to innovate under extremely trying circumstances and how what we’ve learned will have a positive impact on our services in the coming months and years.

Childhood is a critical time in anyone’s development. And when illness intervenes, it’s of critical importance to protect it. We’ve always been proud of the Health Play Specialists, families and, most of all, the children we support but, in this very difficult year for all of us, we have been in awe of the resilience, unrelenting cheer and unending thought for others that all of those we work with have shown.
Financial summary

£1.4m Gifts in Kind provided essential contributions to wishes and hospital services.

In the final quarter of the year, income and expenditure was affected by Covid-19. Wish-granting was suspended but demand for services in hospitals continues to increase.

The year ended with 6.6 months of reserves, with the policy of six months considered prudent.

The key risk in the year ahead is funding to meet charitable expenditure as demand for services rise through the Covid-19 crisis and income uncertainty.

We are confident that with refined plans in place, good management controls and a sensible level of reserves we can weather the Covid storm. There is no doubt that our services are needed now more than ever before”

Nick Mustoe, Chair of Trustees, Starlight
Life in hospital isn’t easy, especially when you’re young. We support frontline health staff with Distraction Boxes and Boost Boxes to help seriously ill children be themselves and feel more in control.

Our Distraction Boxes are portable toolkits filled with toys, puzzles and conversation starters that help nurses to distract children during medical procedures and engage them in conversation. Those who use the Distraction Boxes tell us that the most important outcomes are that they improve the experience of medical procedures for children, reduce anxiety and distress, and improve the rapport between children and their medical staff.

Our Boost Boxes contain toys, games, arts and crafts which are given to children by Health Play Specialists to keep them entertained in hospital or simply for play and comfort.

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, we had started to include Starlight bags in Boost Boxes, enabling children to have their own pack of toys to keep. This has proven invaluable during the pandemic as children are unable to share, and now they can have their own toys and games to enjoy safely.

As well as our traditional Boost Box, earlier in the year we launched two new Boxes to suit specific groups; one for children with sensory needs and the other adapted to the needs of older children.
The boxes are invaluable in distracting children from painful and stressful procedures as well as promoting positive hospital experiences. The children really enjoy the variety of toys which instantly spark interest. Being able to order refill packs to keep topping up the boxes is amazing. Please, please, please keep them funded. I do not think their value can be overestimated or true worth recorded.”

Health Professional

Health Play Specialist of the Year 2019

We make an impact in so many ways, but we can’t do it alone. Health Play Specialists work tirelessly to provide children and young people with a break from the routine and reality of treatment, and the Starlight Health Play Specialist of the Year awards each October acknowledge and recognise their hard work. In 2019 Janie Saunders was awarded the title due to her dedication to play and distraction.

Janie Saunders

Play creates moments of happiness when everything else feels so bleak. It’s proving to be a fantastic way to counteract the fears and anxieties of lockdown life.”

Paul Harries
Health play specialist

88% of health care workers agreed that Boost Boxes help to reduce distress and anxiety for children
Taking time to reconnect as a family can make the world feel like a safer place, but it is not easily achieved if you are dealing with serious illness every day. That is why, with the help of some generous supporters and a host of volunteers, we offer fun days, activities and treats throughout the year.

Our events are inclusive and accessible for families and we provide them with an experience they may not be able to have otherwise. By removing financial and logistical barriers, families who may normally find a day-out challenging are able to attend and really enjoy their time together.

We were able to offer 13 events this year (up from 8 last year). We had to cancel summer escapes in 2020 due to the pandemic, but we have managed to adapt some bespoke online events for different ages including parties with Captain Fantastic and Murder Mystery events for older children.

We also have some exciting plans for Covid-safe events due to take place in winter 2020. Although these events cannot offer the physical connection so valued from our regular programme, they still offer families the opportunity to take a break and have fun together.
1,625 children, young people and their families came to our Escapes this year.

"My daughter was so happy to be in an environment that was filled with a variety of fun things to do. Every time she sees her Starlight t-shirt at home, she exclaims with excitement – I believe from remembering the good time she had."

Parent

100% of families who rated our summer Escapes gave them 10/10!

"My daughter is terminally ill and we, as a family, have been shielding to keep her safe. Today’s on-line ‘virtual’ party was a real treat and a very welcome distraction."

Nicola, parent

Having to shield a child has a huge mental impact. Giving our family something we can look forward to and that is different from the daily routine is the greatest gift you can give."

Anita, parent
Storytelling and pantomime provides opportunities for children to get together, have fun and join in with physical activity in a hospital setting, which can otherwise be challenging.

Our touring group of trained actors are experts at operating in small spaces and finding different ways to engage even the quietest child. Everyone can take part in their own way, by singing, dancing or simply being absorbed in possibly the first ever experience of live performance.

This year we managed a small increase in both the number of shows (168 up from 166 last year) and the number of children reached (1,505 up from 1,500) although the spring 2020 Storytelling tour had been suspended because of Covid-19.
The Pantos really give the patients a chance to smile, laugh and be children. Even one hour of distraction is enough for them to feel normal again. Parents are so grateful as many in my area are unable to afford to take their children to see shows in theatres.”

Simran, King’s College Hospital

Hospitals and hospices told us our pantomime...

- makes the hospital a positive fun environment.
- is a distraction and something that children, families and staff enjoy.
- reduces anxiety and the need for medication.
- gives an opportunity to do something they otherwise wouldn’t be able to.
- allows the children and families to feel their normal selves.
- provides an opportunity for people to come together socially.

1,505 children in hospitals and hospices across the UK saw Starlight shows

178 shows put on by Starlight last year

100% of health care workers agreed that Storytelling had some therapeutic impacts for both children and families, including calming children’s and parents’ anxiety, and encouraging children out of bed.

98% of health care workers agreed that Storytelling offered children a break from the routine of treatment and illness, including as distraction from treatment or pain, or as a novelty to ease boredom.

The Starlight Pantomime provided a heart-warming family event at no cost to us. Parents as well as the children enjoyed the singing and dancing. One family were over the moon to watch their daughter dance for the very first time! All the families requested the same next year.”

Health professional, Nevill Hall Hospital

97% of families agreed that Pantomime makes hospitals and hospices a more fun place to be
We grant wishes to children with life limiting or life-threatening illnesses. Wishes bring back the magic of childhood and create happy memories for the whole family that last a lifetime. Treatment for a serious illness can take its toll on families, so being able to grant a once in a lifetime wish is truly incredible.

As a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have had to suspend a significant part of our wish-granting programme and given the uncertainty around travel, we are working with families to identify alternatives to their original wish choices. Despite these challenges, our wish-granting team have continued to give children and their families the best possible experiences.

We are taking the time now to understand how we can best use our wealth of knowledge, experience and the wonderful connections and relationships that we have made over the years to continue to provide a more sustainable model of offering unique experiences to seriously ill children and their families.

This year we granted 442 wishes (down from 641 last year) with some of this reduction being a consequence of the suspension of wishes in the last two months of the year.
When her wish was granted, we felt like we had our old Caitlin back. She was more chatty and excitable than we’d seen her in a long time. Over the last couple of years she has lost her sparkle, but this almost gave it back – she was so happy and so excited. It was like her batteries were recharged. She absolutely loved it.”

Caitlin’s parents

Five-year-old Luke from Manchester has severe epilepsy, a brain disorder that causes him to have recurring seizures when clusters of nerve cells in the brain send out the wrong signal. Luke is obsessed with Fireman Sam, and even enjoys watching it in Japanese and German!

Luke was over the moon when Starlight granted his wish to spend a day at the fire station in February this year and he got the chance to meet real life Fireman Sams. Luke participated in a practice drill, rode in a fire engine and even helped to put out a fire with the help of his fellow firefighters.

Cancer (196)
Genetic (109)
Chronic (67)
Neurological (51)
Cardiac (10)
Other (9)
Starlight is the leading UK charity that helps seriously ill children experience the joys of childhood.

Thanks to our brilliant supporters, we use the power of play to improve children’s experience of treatment in hospital. We do this through our hospital play and distraction services, wish granting and Starlight escapes programme. We help children and their families to escape the routine and reality of treatment.

"Starlight helps me do my job and so many families cope with illness and hospital. It is a magical charity that does magical things."

Laura, Health Play Specialist