



The Charity for Disabled Children

DOROTHY  
PAMELA  
SMITH

Community Play Pilot

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# Introduction

**Newlife identified a clear need to expand access to play opportunities within communities, ensuring more children and families could benefit from inclusive, high-quality resources.**

Many settings already working with children highlighted gaps in provision and a reliance on donations or limited funds, meaning opportunities for play were often restricted. Thanks to the generous funding opportunity provided by Dorothy Pamela Smith, the Community Play Pilot was developed to address this—working directly with community organisations to provide both the resources and the knowledge to unlock their full potential.

By combining funding for toys and equipment with specialist training and education, the pilot aimed to do more than simply increase the quantity of play resources. It sought to transform how play is delivered, ensuring staff and volunteers felt confident and equipped to use toys in ways that supported children's development, emotional regulation, and family connection.

Across ten settings, the pilot created opportunities for thousands of children to access sensory, engaging, and inclusive play. Families described moments of joy, calm, and connection; staff and volunteers reported increased skills, confidence, and motivation. Most importantly, children who might otherwise have missed out were able to explore, interact, and thrive through play.

This report captures the impact of the pilot—showing how targeted investment, coupled with training and support, has created a lasting difference for children, families, and the community settings that serve them.



# Pre pilot questionnaire

During discussions, some settings described how they were working in communities with social and economic challenges. 63.6% reported being based in economically deprived areas, and 54% said they support a high proportion of low-income families. The children they work with are predominantly aged between four and fifteen years old. When asked about the types of toys that would be most beneficial, settings consistently highlighted sensory, portable, and outdoor toys.

**100%**  
**of settings said they  
could reach more children  
with better toys and play  
resources**

Several settings reported that hundreds of children could benefit from the Community Play Pilot, with 45% estimating that more than 500+ children who use their services would regularly engage with the toys. They explained that toys would primarily be used for fun, clubs, and activity groups, while also recognising their value in supporting education and emotional regulation. Fun was identified as the main intent, followed by educational and emotional benefits.

All settings emphasised that they currently rely entirely on donations and fundraising to purchase toys, and many spoke of depending heavily on volunteers, with an average volunteer contribution of 60% across settings. On average, they felt their current toy provision was limited, scoring 39% against a 100% fully stocked benchmark.

When reflecting on the potential impact of receiving the grant, 100% of settings expressed confidence that it would enable them to reach more children, expand the range of clubs and activities they provide, and create new opportunities for families. They also highlighted the grant's potential to help build stronger community partnerships and ensure the long-term sustainability of their charities.



# Wishlist and outcomes

Each participating setting was invited to create a wishlist through our preferred supplier, TFH. The guidance was to select items that would not only bring immediate benefit to children, but also provide lasting impact by supporting wider access and future development plans. This approach ensured that investment was shaped by those who best understand their service users needs, empowering settings to choose resources that enrich play and learning now while strengthening their capacity to support growth and development well into the future. The full set of wishlists can be accessed via the following link: [newlife.support/community-play-wishlist](https://newlife.support/community-play-wishlist)

## Most Requested Items

Across the 10 settings, a number of popular choices emerged, reflecting a shared focus on sensory play and immersive environments. The top five choices were:



## Investment Overview

Average spend across settings: £9,921 (reduced to £7,552 with discount)

**Highest-value purchase:** £5,245 – OmiVista System. This versatile interactive projection system can transform any floor or table into an engaging sensory surface. Pre-loaded with the Sensory Suite of over 300 apps, it offers activities designed to stimulate, engage, and relax children of all ages and abilities.

**Lowest-value purchase:** £6 – Rainbow Pin Art. A creative and accessible resource, it allows children to press objects into neon pins to create instant 3D rainbow images.

## Ordering Patterns


On average, each setting ordered 43 toys. Ladybug Lodge placed the largest order with 86 toys, while Parks for Play ordered 22 items. This variation reflects the different scales and priorities of each setting, but collectively demonstrates a strong focus on resources that can deliver both breadth and depth of impact.

# Training and education

**The training delivered by Newlife has resulted in measurable improvements in both understanding and confidence across volunteer-led and staff-led settings. In total, 66 participants engaged in the training and education.**

Volunteer-led settings, Blast and Spencer's Farm, recorded the highest change in understanding the cause and effect of toys within a play setting, with Spencer's Farm showing the largest increase at 61% improvement.

Among paid employee-led settings, the most notable change came from Liberty Jamboree, an organisation that offers meaningful paid employment opportunities to individuals who have previously benefited from their services and who themselves have additional needs. Providing this training to Liberty Jamboree staff not only enhanced their professional skills but also reinforced the life-changing value of equipping former service users with the knowledge and confidence to support others. Their results were exceptional, showing a 75% improvement in understanding the cause and effect of toys.



**"It's not just about receiving money for new equipment - it was nice that Newlife came out to share ideas on how to effectively utilise the new sensory equipment."**

When looking at familiarity with the educational purposes of toys, results showed variation between volunteer-led and paid employee-led settings. Collectively, Telford Pods, Spencer's Farm, Liberty Jamboree, and Blast achieved a 73% improvement in understanding the benefits of the educational purposes of toys.

Across all settings, the average improvement from pre- to post-training was 44% for understanding cause and effect, 44% for confidence in using toys in sessions, and 47% for familiarity with the educational purpose of toys. These figures highlight the broad impact of the training, with meaningful gains achieved regardless of whether the setting was volunteer-led or paid employee-led.

Settings shared that Newlife's visit offered "different ideas on how to use the toys for educational purposes" and extra insight into their purposeful uses, such as calming strategies, beyond the "typical/expected use." Staff valued learning how to engage a child's attention for longer periods and support self-soothing or stimulation through the new sensory equipment. The training sessions were described as "very informative, and easy to understand," with effective interaction and were non-judgemental.

Many people appreciated the opportunity to try the toys, watch children learn and explore, and gain ideas around cognitive learning "which perhaps wouldn't be as obvious on first glance." Talking through each new piece of equipment helped settings enter sessions confident in how to use and develop play.

*See appendix 2 for individual results*

# Family Feedback

A total of 97 families across 10 settings responded to the survey which ran throughout the duration of the pilot, representing a sample of all children reached. Children's primary diagnoses varied: 64% neurodiverse, 23% with physical disabilities, 5% sensory impairments, 3% learning disabilities, 3% with multiple disabilities and 2% other conditions. This reflects the wide-ranging needs of children attending the settings, with many settings supporting children with different disabilities.

Engagement with the sensory toys was extremely high, with 96% of children using the toys provided during their visit to the settings. Families reported favourites such as bubble tubes/walls, Whizzy Dizzy, Cosy Cavern, and light-based toys, showing that children were particularly drawn to visual, tactile, and movement-based experiences.

Parents and carers reported multiple benefits, with calmness, joy, and emotional regulation being the most frequently observed among their children. Toys also promoted exploration, curiosity, and social interaction, demonstrating broad impacts on children's mood, engagement, and self-regulation. One parent shared: "My daughter was quite upset before we entered today's group...as soon as she discovered the sensory den, she instantly calmed and sat there for 10 minutes until she felt regulated enough to join in."

Children's responses to the toys were overwhelmingly positive: 81% reported their child absolutely loved the toys, and 19% (18 families) reported that their child showed an interest. No negative responses were recorded.

**"The toys encouraged them to join in and play with others, which is a big thing for our family."**



**"He laughed when he was watching the bubble tubes. Seeing him happy makes my day."**



The sensory toys enhanced the overall family experience, with 98% of families reporting visits were easier and more enjoyable.

Overall, family feedback demonstrates that the sensory toys granted provide meaningful benefits, supporting children's engagement, emotional regulation, and enjoyment, while enhancing the family experience. Even in this sample of respondents, sensory play spaces create moments of joy, learning, independence, and connection, leaving lasting positive impressions on children and carers.

# Community settings feedback

The following section draws directly on feedback from the settings that took part in the six-month Community Play pilot, capturing the impact they have seen on children, families, staff, and volunteers. Settings reported that 4,180 children are expected to benefit from the granted toys over a 12-month period, demonstrating both the scale of reach and the potential for lasting change.

Through their reflections, settings highlighted how access to high-quality play resources has enriched children's experiences—supporting developmental progress, encouraging independence, and creating opportunities for meaningful family engagement. Staff and volunteers also described the difference the pilot has made for them, from building confidence and skills to making more effective use of resources and improving the overall quality of service delivery.

Together, these insights provide a clear picture of the value and benefits of the Community Play Pilot as reported by those most closely involved in its delivery.

## Transforming Staff & Volunteer Experience

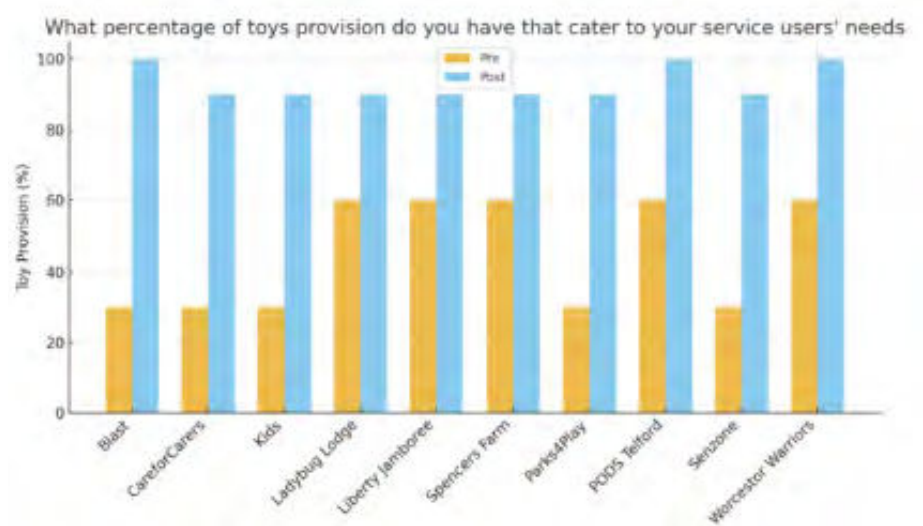
The pilot has had a transformative effect on staff and volunteer confidence, engagement, and satisfaction. Across all participating settings, 100% of staff and volunteers strongly agreed that the pilot positively impacted their experience. Senzone reported staff feel “happier and excited having our sensory equipment out for families to enjoy... we have gained more confidence in running our activities and creating a fun space for families.”

Spencer's Farm described a volunteer who called helping a child with new sensory equipment “one of the most rewarding things I have done,” demonstrating how the donation not only benefited children but strengthened volunteer commitment.

Across all settings, staff and volunteers now feel equipped with tools to facilitate play, encourage interaction, and support children's emotional regulation, directly enhancing the quality of care and engagement children receive.

## Maximising Resources & Planning

The toys have had a profound effect on the settings' ability to plan and deliver engaging sessions. Before the donation, on average only 35% of available toys met the needs of the children in each setting. Following the donation, 70–100% of toys now cater to the diverse needs of children, showing that resources are now carefully matched to each setting, based on the needs of their services users.



Settings emphasised that without these toys and play equipment, developing sensory play areas would have taken far longer, limiting children's experiences. Senzone highlighted the ability to run activities without additional costs, while Worcester Warriors Foundation reported that the expanded toy range allowed better available resources for SEN schools and families. Liberty Jamboree highlighted that children with more complex needs, including wheelchair users, are now able to engage fully, a shift that would not have been possible without the donation.

The toys also freed up resources and funding. Settings could invest in staffing, and other essential elements of their sessions. As Senzone stated:

"The donation has helped us create more cost-saving activities, create a relaxing safe space for children, and encourage communication skills. We simply wouldn't have had the funding to create these special moments for families."

## Enhanced Service Delivery

Across all settings, 100% strongly agreed the toys increased engagement, and over 70% reported improved educational use during sessions. The settings reported that children benefited most across social, emotional, cognitive, and motor skill areas. Parks for Play noted that the toys and equipment "have been a huge improvement... providing opportunities for self-soothing and self-regulation for children with SEND."

### Specific examples of impact witnessed across settings include:

- A child at **Senzone** performed a happy dance in the ball pit, overcoming anxiety to engage fully for two hours.
- A family at **Spencer's Farm** called the trampoline "her favourite place in her favourite place," highlighting inclusion and joy.
- Liberty Jamboree saw a previously disengaged young person fully participate in group activities for the first time.
- These examples illustrate how the Community Play Pilot enhanced engagement, created meaningful developmental opportunities, strengthened family experiences, and transformed children's confidence and independence.

## Pilot Delivery Satisfaction

The pilot delivery phase for Newlife and TFH received exceptional feedback from settings.

**Newlife Service & Support:** Rated 5/5 by all participants, reflecting outstanding responsiveness, professionalism, and support throughout the pilot.

**TFH Service:** Rated 5/5 by 9 participants and 4/5 by 1 participant, indicating overall high satisfaction with the quality and appeal of the toys provided.

The pilot demonstrated strong operational execution and product quality, confirming both Newlife and TFH are well-positioned for successful broader implementation. Participant feedback underscores the effectiveness of the service and the value delivered through the toys.

## Overall Impact

The Community Play Pilot has demonstrated that inclusive, high-quality play is transformative. Reaching 4,180 children over a 12-month period shows the scale at which well-matched resources can create meaningful developmental, social, and emotional benefits.

The importance of the pilot extends beyond the children themselves. Staff and volunteers are now more confident and empowered, able to deliver activities that meet the needs of every child. Families experience greater inclusion and enjoyment, with children able to participate fully regardless of ability.

Critically, the pilot highlights the lasting value of targeted investment in play resources. Centres are now better equipped to plan activities, optimise resources, and embed inclusive practice into everyday provision, ensuring that the benefits continue long after the pilot.

**In short, the Community Play Pilot demonstrates that play is essential for fostering development, confidence, and wellbeing. Its impact is visible in every child reached, every family moment created, and every empowered staff or volunteer, leaving a tangible legacy of inclusion, engagement, and community benefit.**

## Moments of joy

“One of our autistic children who attends 3-4 times a week is very touch / physical play orientated. He relies on repetitive movement and material-body contact to help him remain calm and engaged with the things around him, and to also self-regulate when he is feeling bored or anxious or struggling with the sensory overload of being part of a group. Since we were able to introduce the two swings his overall mood has been more relaxed and at ease in the group space.

**He always comes into the setting with a huge smile on his face and makes straight for the swings. He has been learning about the necessity of turn-taking when other children want to use the equipment as a result of these negotiations has been making a real effort to communicate more and to use more words.”** - Parks4Play



"Two families who each have a young boy (age 3/4) with a diagnosis of Autism and ADHD regularly attend sessions and on occasion have interacted with each other or recognised each other within the building. **Over the Summer, this relationship continued to grow, with them both becoming more comfortable with each other and beginning to communicate.** On the last day of our summer provision, both boys were at the Blue Water Tray Table playing with a variety of sea animals and sponges. **Both boys were in hysterics of giggles, passing each other animals, naming the animals in the tray and then eventually saying the other child's name!** Both their parents have blossomed their relationship over the six-week summer period and arranged an out-of-Ladybug Lodge play date due to how much their relationship has grown." - Ladybug Lodge



# Conclusion

The Community Play Pilot has delivered a powerful and lasting difference for children, families, and community organisations. What began as a response to limited resources has grown into a programme that has transformed opportunities for play, development, and connection. The grant funding opened the door to high-quality toys and equipment, but it was the training and education that ensured these resources were used to their fullest potential. Together, they created a step change in how play is understood, delivered, and experienced.

Across every setting, children were not only more engaged but also calmer, happier, and more confident. Families described feeling more included, more able to enjoy time together, and more supported in their children's needs. Staff and volunteers reported being inspired, more skilled, and better equipped, with training giving them the knowledge and confidence to unlock the true educational and emotional potential of play. These combined outcomes show that the pilot has strengthened both provision and practice, leaving a legacy that extends far beyond the initial donation of toys.

**The difference is clear: thousands of children now have access to opportunities for play that would otherwise have been out of reach.** Families have experienced joy and connection, and staff and volunteers feel empowered to continue delivering inclusive, impactful play. By uniting resources with training, the pilot has not only levelled access but also built the capacity for long-term change, proving that play—when understood, resourced, and embedded well—can transform lives and strengthen communities.

Looking forward, the success of this pilot shows the potential for wider roll-out, ensuring even more children, families, and communities can benefit from the transformative power of play.



# Message of thanks

We really cannot say 'thank you' enough times! We knew that we needed this equipment but had struggled for years to find the right funding source or someone who could make this donation. It really has made a massive difference to the work we do so 'thank you' once again. - **Parks4play**



We would like to sincerely thank the Dorothy Pamela Smith Trust for their generosity in funding this project. Your support has made a real difference to the lives of the children and young people we work with. The sensory toys have opened up new opportunities for play, learning, and calm that we simply could not have provided without your donation. Your kindness has brought joy, comfort, and confidence to children who face daily challenges, and the impact is clear to see in their smiles and engagement. We are deeply grateful for your commitment to helping disabled young people thrive. - **Liberty Jamboree**



I would like to thank them from the bottom of my heart for their generous donation, without it we would never have been able to afford the Omi Vista which has literally been a complete game changer for us. All of the children and young adults who use our hub absolutely love it, regardless of age and ability, it engages everyone. Thank you very much. - **Telford PODS**



Just to say how grateful we are for the donation and to say thank you on behalf of all of our families. - **KIDS**



To all at The Dorothy Pamela Smith Trust, with the donation you have given you have made so many children smile this Summer. They have come together on the trampoline or spent time regulating alone in the Sensory Room. Either way your donation has helped these children to be safe and happy in a place where their needs are accepted and accommodated. This then allows their families to spend some precious time relaxing, knowing that their children are safe and smiling. - **Spencer's Farm**



We cannot thank you enough for giving us the opportunity to buy the sensory equipment for our families. It has made a real difference in how we create our activities making them more fun and playful with no added costs. Creating a space for children to relax and feel more comfortable in. The toys have helped those who struggle in social situations and has encouraged them to participate in the active have provided (e.g animal man). This means the family get to have an experience where they might not be able to in the community. We are so proud of our equipment and love seeing the children and families playing together, which is always the most special outcome to anything we do. So thank you from the bottoms of our hearts in helping us grow our group and make out families so happy. - **Senzone**

We are grateful to Newlife and the Dorothy Pamela Smith Trust for their amazing donation. It has allowed us to create a beautiful sensory room (the best in the area in our opinion!) and given local parents/carers a wonderful space to bring their children. - **Welovecarers**



As such a small charity (only one year old when we were first contacted by Newlife) we feel incredibly grateful for the Dorothy Pamela Smith Trust for their donation. Our setting has been thoroughly enhanced by their donation and our members of the board, staffing team, and our families will forever be grateful for the donation of such wonderful, high quality and enriching toys. - **Ladybug Lodge**



# WORCESTER WARRIORS FOUNDATION SENSORY ROOM

We cannot thank everyone enough for  
the support; it has truly changed lives.  
**Worcester Warriors**

# Appendix 1

Setting	Overview
<b>Telford Pods</b>	Based in Telford, the hub offers a variety of clubs and activities for children with complex disabilities. The charity supports both children and their families, ensuring they receive the help they need and that their voices are heard.
<b>CareforCarers</b>	Provides support and care for unpaid carers, running a play scheme called <i>CHAOS</i> that offers respite. Also runs youth clubs for ages 13–25, Saturday clubs, summer programs, and <i>Little CHAOS</i> for children aged 0–2, alongside a range of playgroups.
<b>Kids</b>	A national charity with local groups, offering five after-school and youth clubs from Monday to Thursday, as well as Saturday family fun days. Activities include play schemes, activity clubs, trips, and seasonal events.
<b>Liberty Jamboree</b>	Established 10 years ago, providing independent support, activities, and opportunities for children with disabilities.
<b>Spencer's Farm</b>	Offers inclusive outdoor and indoor play for children with disabilities, along with their families and siblings. Facilities include a sensory room and farm activities such as feeding animals. Relies on donated toys. Space available for private hire for a small fee.
<b>Senzone</b>	Supports children with neurodiversity through day outs and activities delivered as a fully mobile service from community hubs. Small group sessions sell out every week.
<b>Parks4Play</b>	Promotes social inclusion for children with disabilities and their families by offering outdoor play, activities, and an indoor sensory playroom in a socially deprived area of Birmingham.
<b>Blast</b>	The largest autism support group in Staffordshire, run entirely by volunteers. Supports children with neurodiversity and their families, offering Lego-based activities for out-of-term provision.
<b>Ladybug Lodge</b>	Provides term-time and holiday programs for children with additional needs, delivered through local authority settings or schools. Founded by Josie, inspired by her sister with complex needs, to support other families.
<b>Worcester Warriors</b>	Offers a large sensory and soft play area that families can book privately for a small fee. Provides adapted sports and curriculum-based PE lessons, and visits hospices to deliver sport-based play and exercise sessions.

# Appendix 2 – Results of training by setting

