



# THE BEST POSSIBLE EXPERIENCE FOR CHILDREN

A workforce development strategy for play services supporting babies, children and young people in healthcare



I struggled during the weekends, with not having the play specialist there to help me for operations and cannulas...they weren't there, and I'd really struggle about that. I wasn't sure what to do.

McKenzie O'Reilly, patient.



Health play staff support children through therapeutic play ... (which) reduces anxiety and the risk of psychological trauma. Whether you are a health playworker, assistant or health play specialist ... you'll build relationships with children and help them have the best possible experience ...

NHS Careers

## OUR MESSAGE TO BABIES, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE\*

### This strategy is for you.

We know hospitals and hospices can be scary places, with big challenges on top of the pain and worry of being sick.

But we also know that none of these things stop you being a child or young person, wanting and needing to live as normal a life as possible, every day. This includes playing and having as much fun as you are able. We know how important this is – how play can make all the difference.

We want health play services to protect play for you when you are receiving healthcare, and for play specialists to use their special training to support you during the most difficult parts of your journey.

To do that properly we need:



#### More staff – when you need them

We want there to be more health play specialists and playworkers to support you, 7 days a week.



#### Better skills

We want all health play staff to have the right training, skills and qualifications to do the best job they can for you.



#### Higher standards

We want health play staff to have what they need to be able to provide you with high quality, professional services.



#### Greater recognition

We want the importance of play, and the staff who support you to play, to be better recognised by other health professionals, the NHS and the public.

We want to work with you, your families and your health professionals to develop and implement this plan to provide the health play services you need and deserve.

\*Health play staff support babies, children and young people from birth – 17. Where the shorter term 'children' is used in the document, it should be understood to include this full age-range.

## THE CURRENT 'STATE OF PLAY' IN HEALTHCARE

In England, the employed health play workforce consists of **FEWER THAN 1200 STAFF**, including 570 health play specialists

There are **651** registered health play specialists in the UK (as at March 2024)

Around **50%** of health play specialists work **PART-TIME**

Only **15%** of NHS Trusts have play service policies or guidance

Because the profession is not regulated, some providers employ **UNREGISTERED PRACTITIONERS**

Many play services only open **5 DAYS A WEEK** with no cover at weekends

**72%** of children's healthcare settings lack a designated budget for play resources

Around **3000** new full-time play staff are needed to provide an optimal service in acute NHS settings England; more for 24/7 cover in A&E

Data from Starlight research, 2022-4

## OUR VISION

Imagine a future where no child suffers avoidable distress or trauma from their healthcare.

**Our vision is for all babies, children and young people in healthcare – whether hospital, hospice or community – to be fully supported by adequately resourced health play services, 7-days a week.**

These services should be delivered by sufficient numbers of skilled staff, working to recognised standards and supported by a strong, accountable professional body.

We believe a well trained, fully recognised professional workforce is the key to extending the reach and quality of health play services to provide the best possible experience of healthcare for all children.

This workforce development strategy is proposed as an important step towards making this vision a reality.



## BACKGROUND

In 2022-23, NHS England (NHSE) and Starlight jointly convened a new taskforce\* on children's play in healthcare, to work with the professional bodies NAHPS and HPSET (now merged as the new Society of Health Play Specialists, SOHPS), the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), Sophie's Legacy, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and a wide range of health professionals, to develop new guidance and standards for health play services.

That work is complete. A toolkit for commissioners and providers, comprising the new guidance and standards produced by the taskforce, is expected to be published soon by NHS England.

The third workstream of the taskforce was to develop a new strategy for the health play workforce. That work continued beyond the taskforce, led by Starlight, in close collaboration with SOHPS and a new workforce development group that brought together the key training providers, the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) and others, to build consensus and collaboration across the sector and to develop these joint proposals.

### AIM

These proposals are to enable, over time, the NHS to provide **7-day a week health play services as the norm** for children's acute inpatient care. To do this we estimate there is a need for **1,000** new health play staff over three years (3,000 over 9 years), with the training, qualifications and professional support to deliver on the new guidance and standards.

### SCOPE

NHS England commissioned Starlight to explore the implications for workforce development of proposed new guidance and standards for health play services. The proposals for the NHS and any implications for government policy are specific to England. However, the professional register held by SOHPS is UK-wide. The training and qualifications elements of the strategy should therefore be seen as relevant to all four nations.



\*A Common Purpose, The report of the taskforce, can be read here: [www.starlight.org.uk/assets/documents/Starlight-Taskforce-Report\\_Sept-2023.pdf](http://www.starlight.org.uk/assets/documents/Starlight-Taskforce-Report_Sept-2023.pdf)

## 4 PILLARS



### Capacity

1000 new health play staff over 3 years

New guidance and standards

Review of commissioning specifications

Growth in professional infrastructure



### Capability

Accessible training and qualifications

Apprenticeship schemes

Capability frameworks

Continuous professional development



### Professionalisation

Develop and refine the professional register

Independent accreditation

Job evaluation and banding guidelines

Support for professional members



### Recognition

Awareness raising

Research and evidence

Information and advocacy for children and families

Policy and practice development

Collaboration and ally-ship with MDTs





## PROPOSALS TO GOVERNMENT AND THE NHS

We propose that this strategy be adopted as supplementary to the 10-year NHS workforce plan, to include the creation of an initial 1000 new health play jobs over three-years, and:

1. Publication and dissemination of the proposed new guidance and standards for health play services.
2. A review of commissioning specifications for health play services to reflect the new guidance.
3. More infrastructure and support for the health play profession.
4. A review of current policy on the statutory regulation of health professions, to consider the case of health play specialists.

## PROPOSALS FOR THE HEALTH PLAY PROFESSION, ITS PARTNERS AND ALLIES

The health play sector will match this commitment from the government and the NHS by working to:

1. Grow and develop clear and accessible career pathways via a cohesive, transparent national training and qualifications framework.
2. Continue to develop health play apprenticeship schemes, and standardise these across the country.
3. Develop capability frameworks for multi-modal continuous professional development.
4. Continue to refine the professional register for health play specialists, working closely with the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) to secure independent accreditation.
5. Continually review the requirements and processes for registration and annual re-registration.
6. Continually listen and respond to the experiences, needs and aspirations of children and families.
7. Continue to promote and advocate for the importance of this profession within policy and practice for children's health services.
8. Further develop the research and evidence base for the role of children's play in their health and healthcare.
9. Develop high quality up-to-date information and support on policy and practice for health play staff and their service providers.
10. Liaise with other health professions to embed knowledge and understanding about the role of play in children's healthcare within multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs).



## NEXT STEPS

A key to delivering on the vision and ambitions contained in this strategy, as much as the creation of new jobs, will be the extent to which the professional infrastructure for this part of the children's health workforce is supported and strengthened.

The lead partners in this work, Starlight and SOHPSs, are both charities. Starlight's work draws on its funds which otherwise deliver vital health play resources to children across the country, and direct support to the health play teams working with them. SOHPS, the professional body, is run by volunteers who freely and willingly give their time, knowledge, skills and expertise to raise the profile and standards of the profession through the provision of registration, accreditation, education and mentoring.

Together, we will continue to play our part as fully as we are able to lead this strategy towards implementation; but, according to official guidance going back to 2002, the health play workforce is an integral part of health services for children, the responsibility of the NHS.

The next steps are, to a large extent, dependent on the response of government, commissioners, and the NHS. We strongly recommend this should include support for workforce development.

Depending on that response, and the results of a wider consultation that we are launching with this publication, we will develop and publish a fuller strategy and implementation plan at a later date. Please turn the page to see how you can get involved.

**Thank you!**



# WORKING TOGETHER,



# STEP BY STEP



# WE WILL GET THERE.



Please tell us what you think about this strategy and its proposals by scanning the QR code or clicking [here](#).

Thank you!

This strategy was produced by Starlight in close collaboration with the Society of Health Play Specialists (SOHPS) and its predecessors, NAHPS and HPSET, with the support of Skills for Health who produced the first draft. It represents the collective contributions, efforts and vision of the Health Play Workforce Development Group, convened in 2022-23 by Starlight with support from NHS England:

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## STARLIGHT

TRANSFORMING CHILDREN'S HEALTH THROUGH PLAY

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