

Short Breaks Test and Learn Fund

Impact and Learning Report

2025-26





1,322

children accessed Short Breaks provision.

66%

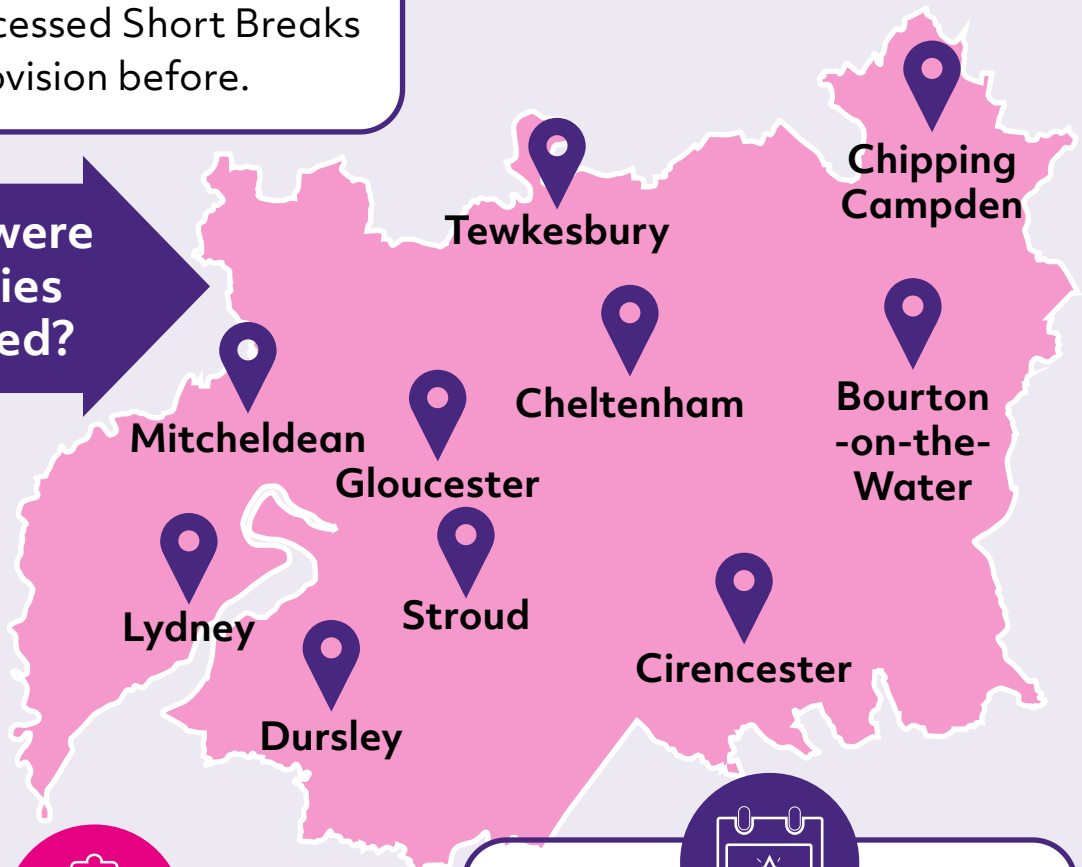
of these young people had never accessed Short Breaks provision before.



£575,332

was spent to deliver Short Breaks across all parts of the county.

Where were activities delivered?



1,200

families involved in co-design.



500+

sessions were delivered between 1st April 2025 and 31st March 2026.

Summary of Impact

The Short Breaks Test and Learn Fund has delivered wide-ranging impact for disabled children and young people, their families, providers, commissioners and the wider system in Gloucestershire. With **£575,331.99** invested in the first year, the programme has so far reached **1,322** unique young people, including **873 (66%)** who accessed Short Breaks for the first time, and supported more than **500** sessions across the county.

For young people: Short Breaks increased confidence, participation, emotional regulation, friendships and belonging. They created safe, SEND-aware environments where young people could try new activities, build independence and develop skills, including pathways into volunteering and paid support roles for young adults with lived experience.



For parent-carers: The programme provided meaningful respite, reduced isolation and burnout, and helped families reconnect through supported play and shared activities. It also reached families who had not previously accessed Short Breaks, including those without formal diagnoses or who had experienced exclusion from other provision.



For providers: Funding enabled VCSE organisations to start or expand Short Breaks provision, increase staffing ratios, offer more flexible sessions and support young people with more complex needs. It also strengthened community capacity, partnerships, workforce development and opportunities for young adults with lived experience.



For commissioners and funders: The programme generated practical insight into what makes Short Breaks accessible and valuable, including the importance of personalisation, transport, specialist staffing, flexible funding, trusted relationships and ongoing co-design. The Community of Practice created a shared learning space that strengthened collaboration across the sector.



For the wider system: Learning from the fund is beginning to influence schools, leisure providers, Holiday Activities Fund partners and wider commissioning conversations. Examples include neuro-affirmative practice spreading into schools and commercial venues being supported to become more inclusive for families beyond Short Breaks sessions.



Summary of learning

The Test and Learn Fund has generated practical learning about what enables Short Breaks to be accessible, inclusive and valuable for disabled children and young people and their families.

The strongest learning is that effective Short Breaks are relational, flexible and personalised: they work best when providers have time to build trust, understand each child and family, and adapt the offer around real lives rather than fixed service models.

Access and inclusion: Families are more likely to take part when barriers are actively reduced through proactive onboarding, clear information, predictable routines, consistent staff, sensory-aware environments, flexible attendance, affordable pricing, refund policies and transport support. Co-design is most effective when it is ongoing, lightweight and relationship-based rather than reliant on formal surveys alone.

Relationships and trust: Short Breaks depend on skilled, trusted staff and providers who can offer trauma-informed, unhurried and child-led support. Familiar staff, strong relationships with families and partnerships with schools, community organisations and local venues all help to make provision safer, more accessible and more responsive.

Value and sustainability: The value of Short Breaks cannot be understood only through cost-per-head. Specialist ratios, adaptive resources and trained staff carry costs, but they can also prevent escalation, reduce isolation, support school attendance, enable parent-carers to work or rest, and create wider community benefits. Flexible funding is essential because it allows providers to respond to need rather than deliver against over-specified outputs.

Personalisation and flexibility: Personalisation emerged as the strongest enabler of access. Provision needs to flex around age, need, anxiety, regulation, transport, family circumstances and preferences. This can include 1:1 support, teen-appropriate activities, home or familiar-space approaches, remote or low-pressure participation options, and offers that either give parent-carers respite or support families to reconnect together.

Learning into action: Providers are using learning to adapt and improve delivery in real time, including testing different formats, developing new partnerships, creating social stories with leisure venues, exploring remote options and identifying emerging needs such as support for transitions. The Community of Practice has strengthened shared learning, trust and collaboration across providers, funders and commissioners.

Implications for commissioning: Future commissioning should protect flexibility, invest in specialist staffing and training, recognise hidden costs, support transport and accessibility, and create space for ongoing co-design with families and young people. Year 2 learning will focus on recommissioning, transferable learning for wider system partners, culturally appropriate and anti-racist practice, costs and parental contributions, family stories and hearing more directly from disabled young people.

Introduction and background

In 2022, Barnwood Trust completed its [Barriers to Short Breaks research](#), capturing the experiences of parent-carers, disabled young people and Short Breaks providers in Gloucestershire. In 2023, a co-design group involving disabled young people and parent-carers, alongside members of the Barnwood team, drafted a brief for the Short Breaks Fund. This brief prioritised co-design, widening access, choice, voice, and innovation to test ways of overcoming the barriers highlighted in the research.

The same group joined a panel to recommend which organisations should receive the Short Breaks Fund. Consequently, 6 VCSE (voluntary, community and social enterprise) organisations were awarded up to £70,000 each to deliver 'test and learn' projects across Gloucestershire for one year. After the first year, there was a pause to gather learning and publish a report summarising the impact and learning gathered from this programme as well as the implications for provision, practice, and commissioning in the county. Learning from the pilot projects highlighted ways of overcoming some of the barriers families experience in accessing Short Breaks. It also raised further questions and opportunities to learn more. In response, Barnwood Trust, Gloucestershire Children's Services and Gloucestershire VCSE Alliance came together to build on this learning. The partnership aims to apply insights from the pilot within a local authority context, particularly to inform the recommissioning of Short Breaks by GCC throughout 2026. Gloucestershire VCSE Alliance has contributed in-kind support and an independent VCSE perspective, helping to shape the programme throughout.

The partnership involves Barnwood Trust match-funding Short Break projects with Gloucestershire Children's Services in Gloucester and Tewkesbury/ North Cotswold. Barnwood also decided to extend funding on the original 6 projects through to April 2027. A total of £727,000 was invested in 8 providers, with up to £75,000 available per year for each project. The funding included a ring-fenced accessibility fund (£10,000 per project), encouraging providers to experiment with different ways to widen access to their provision.

“Crucially, this level of provision would not have been possible without Short Breaks funding. The funding enabled the programme to maintain the specialist staffing ratios, safety measures, and adaptive resources required to meet the complex needs of participating children. Without this financial support, the costs passed on to families would have been significantly higher and would have created a major barrier to access.”

Provider

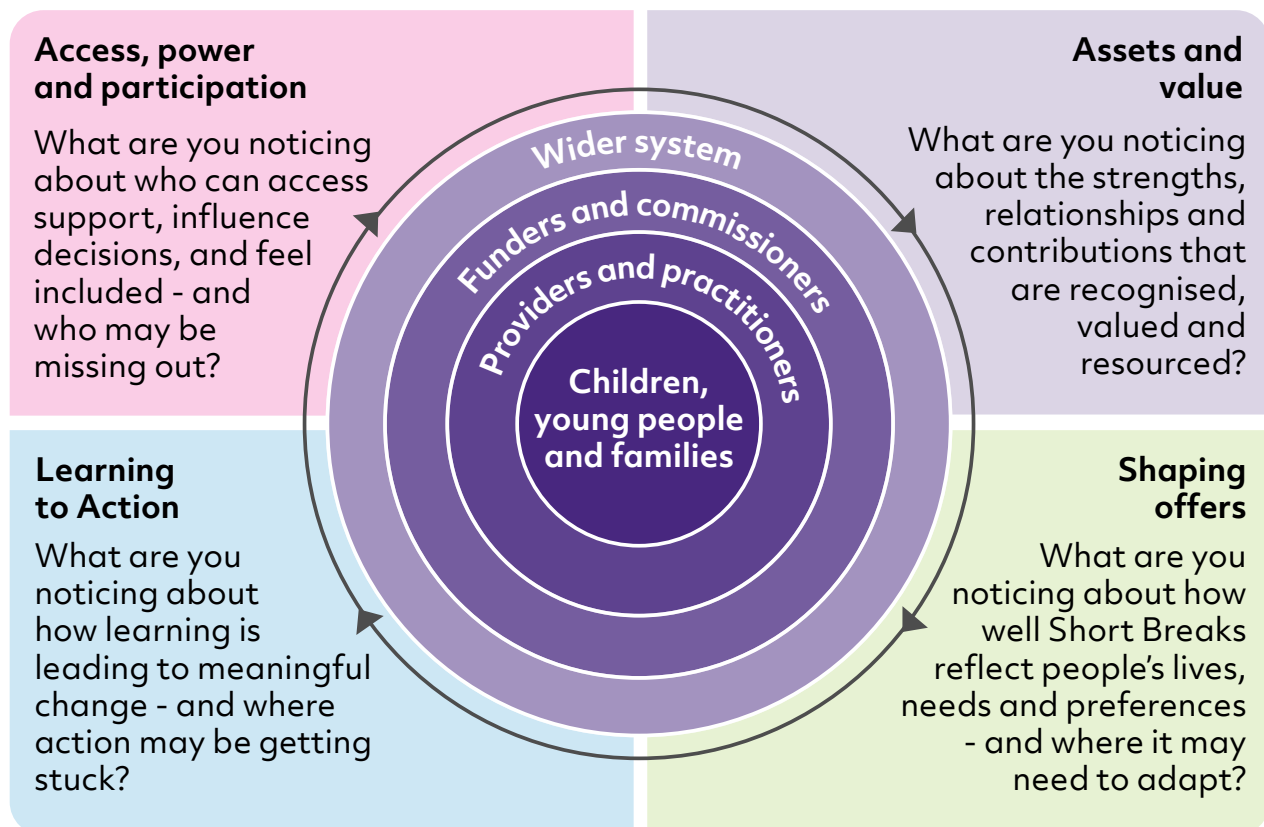


Gathering learning and understanding impact

To maximise learning from the funding, providers were asked to become part of a Community of Practice (COP), meeting regularly to share learning. The Partnership also appointed Collaborate CIC as an Evaluation and Learning Partner from July 2025. Over the year we have been collecting insight from providers, funders, and where possible, from parent-carers and young people through:

- Attending the Community of Practice
- Interviews with providers
- Visits to providers to engage with families
- Analysis of annual funding reports

We also developed a Framework with COP members to help us with making sense of the insights we were gathering.



The framework helps us to make sense of all the different evidence and insights we are gathering. It was developed with our partners and providers. It makes space for the perspectives of all the groups that care about Short Breaks. It is based around four big questions when it comes to how Short Breaks are provided, and helps to structure this report:

- Who can access support and whose voices are heard?
- What strengths, skills and relationships already exist?
- How can support reflect people's real lives and needs?
- How do we use learning to make meaningful improvements?

This report shares learning and outcomes from Year 1 of the new Test and Learn funding, running from April 2025- April 2026.

We would like to thank all the funded providers for their innovation and commitment to this Fund and to sharing their learning, to improve the opportunities available to disabled children and young people and their families in Gloucestershire.

If you would like to know more about this programme, or what is happening next, please email socialchange@barnwoodtrust.org

What are Short Breaks?

'Short Breaks' provide specialist activities, care and support to families of disabled children and young people so that:

- unpaid carers receive breaks from their caring responsibilities to maintain their resilience, and their physical and emotional wellbeing
- disabled children and young people have opportunities to socialise independently in an environment that is safe, secure and suitable for their needs.

Short Breaks supported by the Test & Learn Fund

Short Breaks provision funded through the Test & Learn Fund is very varied:

Activities include:

- Creative arts and music
- Sports and physical activity
- Nature-based experiences
- Stay and play sessions
- Weekend and holiday clubs
- Visits to leisure and cultural venues
- Residential opportunities

Approaches include:

- Group and 1:1 support
- Open access and targeted provision
- Providers who offer both specialist and mainstream opportunities - and pathways between them
- County-wide delivery and more local approaches
- Activities shaped with families and young people

Who is supported:

- Children & Young people **aged 4–25**
- **Neurodivergent** children & Young people
- Children & Young people with **learning disabilities**
- Children and Young people with **physical needs**
- Children and Young people with **complex needs**
- Children and Young people with **emerging needs or no formal diagnosis**

Understanding Impact

The Short Breaks provision supported through the Test & Learn Fund has had impact across every group that cares about Short Breaks in Gloucestershire.

Impact for young people



- Increased children/young people's **confidence, participation and emotional regulation**, with many excited to attend and feeling safe and accepted.
- Built **friendships and peer networks** (including older young people acting as role models) and reduced isolation through consistent, SEND-aware environments.
- Created **new opportunities for young adults with lived experience** - e.g. recruiting a 16–25 participant into a paid/session support role for the 4–11 team, building skills and jobs.
- Supported **growing independence and skills** (e.g. travelling to sessions, advocating for others, volunteering/employment pathways)

“ He felt really part of everything... he was safe, made friends and enjoyed himself. ”

Parent

“ He was super regulated... which is hard for him in a new environment. ”

Parent

“ Every child is celebrated for their individual strengths... my son has found a place where he feels like he belongs. ”

Parent



- Provided **meaningful respite for parent-carers** (time with siblings, reduced burnout, and supported **ways to reconnect with their children through facilitated play**).
- Reached **families new to Short Breaks**, including those previously excluded or without formal diagnosis, supported by neuro-affirmative/trauma-informed and relational approaches. 66% of the children and young people accessing projects funded through the Partnership had never accessed Short Breaks before.
- Demonstrated that **transport, specialist staffing/training and flexibility** are key enablers of access - with strong demand indicating appetite for more sessions.
- Families **discovering new strengths and talents** in their children.
- Provided parent-carers with **connection, peer support and networks**, helping them feel accepted and not judged.
- **Reduced stigma and judgement** around their children's behaviour and enabled them to make use of mainstream leisure and cultural provision.

“ Stay and Play has helped parents to develop networks. ”

“ It's wonderful just to see the children be free and have fun judgement free. ”

“ How wonderful the staff are, they are so kind and compassionate about our situation. ”

“ Getting out in nature, spending quality time as a family, it was very restorative for both the children and adults. ”

“ Whilst not everyone accesses our space for the purpose of getting time away from their young person, accessing our space gives them a break in other ways. ”



- Some providers were enabled to provide Short Breaks **for the first time**. For others, funding enabled widening their hours, for example weekend offers
- Strengthened **community capacity** (volunteers and wider community connections).
- **Strong peer role-modelling and empathy**: young adult staff instinctively 'hold space' with younger children, reducing anxiety and strengthening belonging.
- Enabled **provision for young people with more complex needs** and provide increased staffing and support to ensure that they are able to take part in these activities.
- Funding allowed for **greater flexibility in accessing diverse funding streams**. This has supported our aim of building a sustainable legacy beyond initial grant funding.
- The model demonstrates the value of **deep, reciprocal partnerships** - both formal and informal - and provides a blueprint for future collaborative work across the county.
- Utilisation of trained school staff who already know the young people has **enabled professional growth** for staff with less experience.

“ An unexpected outcome was the creation of job opportunities for young adults with lived experience; a powerful example of community led legacy building. By running our own sessions, we needed sessional workers to help run these events and this seemed like a fantastic opportunity to upskill our disabled young adults by giving them valuable job opportunities and training and help their job prospects in the future. ”

Provider



- The project **strengthened relationships with families, schools, health professionals and other providers**. Participation in the Community of Practice supported shared learning around demand, gaps in provision and successful models. Working within a collaborative environment encouraged reflective, transparent practice.
- There was considerable **learning about how to make co-design work** for disabled young people and their families. Full co-production is the aspiration but can be difficult to attain due to time/pressure and communication challenges. Ongoing adaptation in response to feedback works best.
- Commissioners gained access to **a rich source of insight and new ideas** about what Short Breaks can look like and what a 'good' Short Break is from the point of view of families.
- **Funding enabled change in the sector**, empowering VCSE organisations to move into new areas of provision and **catalysed a new and collaborative relationship** with the Council.

“

Being part of the Community of Practice is a highly valuable shared learning space where trust grows, relationships form and new potential is sown. This takes time and careful facilitation makes this possible, without being outcome focussed. Funding organisations to be able to confidently attend is essential. Being part of a group who meet regularly enables some really important things to happen.

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Provider



Systems change necessarily takes longer than change at other levels and is harder to track. We are probably not yet aware of all the ripples that the Short Breaks Test and Learn is sending through the wider system which supports disabled young people and their families in Gloucestershire, but here are a few examples we have seen or heard about.

- **Neuro-affirmative practice is rippling into schools.** A teaching assistant in a local high school has been learning about the Being Me clubs through her students who attend.
- **Commercial leisure providers** have been supported to become more inclusive, enabling more families to enjoy their facilities outside of Short Breaks.
- Links and synergy have developed and learning has been shared with **Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF)** commissioners and providers.
- The **creation of the Support, Health and Resources Framework (SHaRe)** – a single, integrated commissioning framework providing an overarching structure for commissioning a range of services that naturally align including: Short Breaks, floating support, HAF, inclusive services, Crisis Resilience Fund, and Access to Resources.

While the SHaRe Framework is still in development, it represents an important shift towards a more connected approach to commissioning. Its vision is to create a more inclusive and responsive system for children, young people and families, where services are easier to navigate, providers are valued as partners, and support is designed to respond earlier and more effectively to emerging needs.

“

As part of this project, we worked in partnership with Birdland, to improve accessibility and engagement for families attending our events. Our support enabled them to better understand and address the barriers families may face, resulting in a more inclusive and welcoming offer. A key outcome of this collaboration was the development of a series of social stories hosted on their YouTube channel, which provide clear, step-by-step guidance to help families prepare for and feel confident about attending.

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Provider



Access and Inclusion

What are we noticing about what's helping people feel included, find support, or have a say in how things work?

- **Co-production with parent-carers** is desirable but challenging, due to time/pressure; feedback needs to be lightweight and relationship-based, with parent-carer and young people's voice shaping provision continuously.
- **Co-design that is relationship-based** (ongoing conversations, sessions shaped in real time), with multiple low-effort feedback routes rather than relying on surveys alone.
- **Proactive onboarding reduces anxiety** (pre-booking calls, clear pre-event info/PECS, predictable routines, consistent staff) and when delivery stays flexible and child-led.
- **Predictable routines, consistent staff and SEND-aware, sensory-friendly environments**, with flexible pacing and 1:1 support when needed.
- **Trauma-informed, unhurried practice** that prioritises time, trust and flexibility—especially for families previously excluded or facing cultural/mistrust barriers.
- **Financial and practical barriers matter**: affordable pricing with refunds/subsidies to remove financial risk, full refunds, and transport support are critical enablers—especially for rural and poorer families.

“ A key enabler of access was the programme's full refund policy, which greatly reduced financial risk for families managing uncertainty around their child's needs, regulation, or day-to-day wellbeing. This flexibility allowed parents to book sessions without fear of losing money should their child struggle to attend at short notice. ”

Provider

Assets and Value

What are we noticing about what's being recognised, supported or resourced — in terms of strengths, relationships or contributions?

- **Flexible funding enables access:** Short Breaks test and learn funding supports specialist ratios, adaptive resources and safe delivery; affordability measures (subsidies and full refunds) reduce financial risk for families.
- **Strengths in workforce and relationships:** using skilled staff who know and understand their young people, supporting professional growth and safer staffing ratios; valuing trusted, relational practice (Short Breaks must be relational, not transactional).
- **True value beyond cost-per-head:** benefits include prevention/avoided escalation, fewer referrals, improved attendance and enabling parent-carers to work; specialist skills and higher ratios drive costs.
- **Inclusive workplace culture and lived-experience leadership:** neurodivergent/autistic staff supported to be authentic, progress into roles and become role models; neuroaffirmative practice spreading into other settings.

“ It needs to be recognised that ‘value for money’ can’t be measured on a price per head basis. It’s extremely difficult to measure what has NOT happened as a result of the Short Breaks funding and therefore the inherent cost savings generated. e.g. less referrals for anxiety support, more children able to attend school, more parents and carers able to work. ”

Provider

Shaping Offers

What are we noticing that's helping services or systems respond well to people's needs, preferences or circumstances?

- **Personalisation is the number one enabler of access** according to COP members. Disabled children and families are all different, and Short Breaks work best when they are tailored, personalised and flexed around the individual and their family.
- **Provision must adapt to age/need** (e.g. teen-appropriate venues/activities) and to fluctuating regulation, often requiring higher staffing ratios and personalised 1:1 support.
- **Flexible funding without over-specified outputs and KPI's** allows for continuous adaptation and tailoring to groups and individuals, increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes and value for money.
- **Specialist training widens inclusion:** ongoing SEN/disability, communication, behaviour/sensory, medical and safeguarding training enables participation for more complex needs.
- **Creating alternative, low-pressure ways to participate** (e.g., at-home 'Being Us' newspaper) for young people unable to attend due to anxiety.

“ The project also generated key insights for the redesign of Short Breaks commissioning in Gloucestershire. Administrative and onboarding work was significantly more time-intensive than expected, highlighting the need for realistic costing and dedicated staffing. The importance of transport, flexible funding, and investment in specialist training was reinforced throughout delivery. ”

Provider

- **Using consultation and ongoing communication** (incl. parent steering groups) plus professional input and pilot sessions to refine provision.
- **Partnering with trusted organisations/schools and community hubs** to improve venue suitability, staffing and reach.
- **Reducing barriers by meeting families where they are** (home/ familiar spaces), prioritising relationship-building before attendance, and flexing transport to what's realistic.
- **Treating families as experts** — co-designing offers that provide either separate activities or supported connection depending on need.



Learning into action

What are we noticing that's helping people or organisations reflect, learn, or make meaningful changes?

- **Identifying emerging needs through delivery** (e.g. supporting autistic young people with transition to secondary school).
- **Adapting delivery based on prior learning** — moving away from standardised venues or transport assumptions towards flexible, responsive, 'meet families where they are' approaches.
- **Testing, learning and iterating offers** rather than dropping them: e.g. trialling different drama formats, then shifting to more accessible comedy approaches and co-delivering with inclusive partners.
- **Using pilots and partnerships** to improve inclusion (e.g., working with Birdland to create social stories that help families prepare and feel confident).
- **Building future strands from learning** (e.g. exploring online/remote options for families facing extreme anxiety or transport barriers, fundraising for an accessible venue).

“ With increased visibility [...] we've been approached for conversations to develop new work and partnerships. Through these partnerships, we're able to share what we're learning, so our neuroaffirmative practice can ripple way beyond the clubs. ”

Provider

Next steps and new questions

The work this year has thrown up new questions and areas to explore. There will be several areas of focus for our evaluation and learning in Year 2.

We will be observing and learning from the re-commissioning of Short Breaks throughout the Summer and Autumn of 2026.

We will be seeking to understand and share the transferable learning from the project to other commissioners and wider system partners.

We need to understand more about how Short Breaks can be made culturally appropriate and anti-racist. Some providers are specifically testing new approaches and partnerships to address this.

We are doing deeper analysis into the costs of providing Short Breaks, particularly the hidden costs, and seeking feedback on how to develop a fair approach to parental contributions.

We want to do some deep dives into specific stories from families using Short Breaks, to understand more about the impacts and value for those families.

We want to hear more from disabled young people themselves – and are learning directly from Short Break providers on the best ways to approach this.

Authors: Naomi Diamond and Grace Cline, Collaborate

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If you would like to know more about this programme, or what is happening next, please email socialchange@barnwoodtrust.org

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