

ANNUAL REPORT

Project Play

2025

project-play.org





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LETTER FROM THE TEAM



2025 was, yet again, an extremely challenging year for all those living on the UK-France border. The increased violence which led to record deaths in 2024 continued, and saw yet further fatalities. At least 72 were killed this year, of whom XX were children. Each death is an avoidable tragedy, and our thoughts and solidarity are with the friends and family of all those impacted by hostile border politics.

The political landscape on both sides of the Channel has continued to become more fraught, with further far-right violence in the UK, and indeed in northern France. Legislative changes, not least the so-called “one-in-one-out” deal between France and the UK, has placed people - including children - at increased risk of harm and criminalisation. These changes have profound impact on people-on-the-move in northern France, and indeed on solidarity organisations working to support them.

At Project Play, we have worked to meet these challenges - continually adapting our service to best meet the needs of the children and families we encounter, and reified our advocacy work to campaign for attention to the dire state of children’s rights in this space. We are extremely grateful to the children, families and volunteers who made our report, *We Want to Be Safe*, possible. This report made its way to the hands of politicians on both sides of the Channel, and international legal actors, and 2026 will see us build on this momentum to campaign for an end to violence against people-on-the-move, and for children’s voices to be centred in policy-making.

As a team, we’ve been excited to welcome new faces and ideas, and to go on the journey of welcoming a Board for the first time. We have felt the impact of the commitment and care of all our team members - translating into an ability to continually improve our service, and better support each other.

Finally, as always, we remain inspired by the curiosity, imagination and energy of each child we work with. They each face unthinkable challenges, but each session is a small moment of joy and resistance in a deeply hostile context. Our work is driven by the children we encounter, and by the desire to see a world in which no childhood looks like this.

We would like to extend a huge thank you to each and every person who has supported us this year - we really couldn’t do this without you.

Thank you all!

Big love from the Project Play family x x

FINANCIAL REPORT

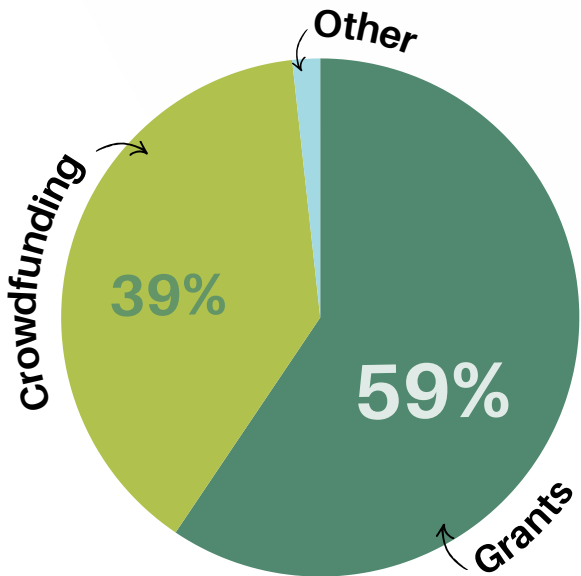
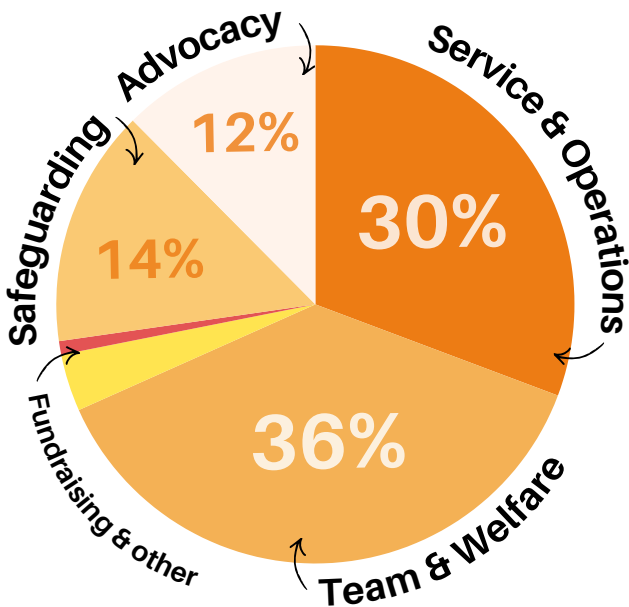
SUMMARY

2025 was a year of sustained growth for Project Play. The generous support of Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) CIC was yet again invaluable, enabling us to run another matchfunding campaign - “Play it Forward” - providing unrestricted funding essential to running our service. This was bolstered in no small part from grants from the Bill Crews Foundation, MSN fund and the steady income from our generous family of monthly donors.

Balance Year Start	€ 50,877.92
Total Income	€ 90,428.19
Total Expenditure	€ 84,850.62
Balance Year End	€ 56,578.03

**All figures are an aggregate of our two EUR and GBP accounts, using an exchange rate based on year average (1.18)*

BREAKDOWN





OUR YEAR IN PLAY!

we worked with

1083

children*

we ran

247

sessions

we facilitated

663

hours of play

THE CHILDREN WE WORKED WITH

In 2025 we worked with 1083 children in both informal living sites and independent safe houses/ day centres. On average, 11 children attended each session we ran. These numbers represent a slight increase from 2024, reflecting sustained high numbers of children living on the UK-France border.

The average age of children we worked with in 2025 was **just under 6.5 years** old - this is a drop from nearly 8 years old in previous years.

6.4
average age

143

activity bags

THE SESSIONS WE RAN

Conditions for these children are hostile, violent and a threat to mental and physical well being. Our report, *We Want to Be Safe*, documents some of these challenges. Reaching as many of the children present at the border we can is a primary focus of our work, ensuring that they can access spaces to play, relax and process their emotions.

In 2025, we ran sessions in seven different locations around Calais and Dunkirk. We worked to adapt our service to overcome challenges, including new and numerous barriers to running sessions at key living sites. Our team also distributed 143 activity bags to children when normal sessions were not feasible to run.

SAFEGUARDING

INCREASED VIOLENCE AND INSTABILITY

In 2025, the situation in Calais grew increasingly hostile for children and families at the French-UK border. Escalating police violence, repeated evictions, and the persistent absence of stable accommodation created a climate of profound instability that directly undermined the safety and wellbeing of the children we work with.

The state no longer provides temporary accommodation for families, even during harsh winters. Consequently, most families live in tents without access to toilets or running water. These sites face frequent evictions. While limited spaces exist in private safe houses, families can typically only stay for brief periods or in extenuating circumstances, as demand far exceeds availability. The lack of safe shelter intensified exposure to risks and harm, which became starkly evident during our play-based sessions. As families endured repeated displacement, children's access to support services was disrupted, and they faced violence and dehumanising treatment. Prolonged insecurity and stress visibly impacted children's psychological wellbeing, undermining their ability to feel safe, regulate emotions, and engage consistently in supportive activities.

At Project Play, we adapted our services to meet these realities. Despite instability frequently limiting children's ability to attend sessions consistently, we maintained regular schedules, substantially increasing the impact of our work. This consistency enabled us to build trust, deepen engagement, and better support children in processing their experiences. Through play, children continued to express fear, confusion, and distress, yet also demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity in the face of ongoing adversity.



FAMILY SUPPORT

Recognising that children's wellbeing is inseparable from their family environment, we increased our support to caregivers and families. Supporting families remains one of the most effective ways to improve children's experience and safety and there is much research which shows the protective natures of parent-child relationships for children on the move.

Collaborating with accommodation and reception facilities allowed us to strengthen child-friendly practices and safer environments where possible. To improve communication and accessibility, we engaged cultural mediators to better adapt our services to families' linguistic and cultural needs.

ISING HOSTILITY FROM THE FAR RIGHT

The year was also marked by a rise in hostility from far-right groups, both from France and the UK. Families repeatedly told us they did not feel safe and reported experiencing racism and harassment from residents, leading many to move again in search of safer areas. The resulting climate of violence and intimidation directly impacted our operations, forcing us to temporarily suspend activities in certain locations where we assessed it was unsafe to expose children to such conditions.

In response, Project Play reviewed and strengthened its security and evacuation protocols and sought new partnerships on the ground. These collaborations were essential in helping us create spaces that were as safe as possible for children, even within an increasingly volatile context. We also continued to invest in staff support, training, and welfare to ensure our team was equipped to respond safely and sustainably to the challenges they encountered.



WIDENING CAPACITY AND PROVISION AND BUILDING OUR NETWORKS

Throughout the year, we strengthened our safeguarding and child protection work. As members of Keeping Children Safe, we reinforced our commitment to high safeguarding standards and a strong 'do no harm' approach. We also developed clearer referral pathways for psychological support, ensuring children with heightened needs could access specialist care.

Within the complex of some cross-border cases, we have had to work closely with social services and child protection actors from other countries, always prioritising the best interests of the children we encountered. Despite the increasingly restrictive and violent environment, Project Play remained committed to standing alongside children and families at the border. In a context where state systems continue to fail to provide adequate protection, our work aims to restore moments of safety, stability, and dignity, ensuring that children, even in crisis, are given space to play, express themselves, and feel safe and empowered.

Our Core Areas:

ACTIVITIES

When planning sessions, we consider how to support children to engage, relax and have fun! With children not accessing other forms of education or safe spaces to play, we also consider how to support them to develop key skills. From emotional awareness and regulation, to teaching them about health and self-care, to fine motor skills - we strive to make sessions impactful. An objective is always hidden in all the fun! Some 2025 highlights:

SENSORY PLAY

During our sessions, we meet many children who are stressed and nervous due to their living conditions and the traumas they have experienced. In recent months, we have made progress with sensory play. We have even created emergency sensory bags that each playworker carries in their pocket for children. These bags contain playdough, bubbles, noisy paper and other tools that provide direct sensory stimulation and help children calm and connect.



DISTRIBUTION DE JOIE (SPREADING JOY!)

In December we launched a new project at a living site near Dunkirk. Here, there are no day centres accessible to adults, and very few places for displaced people to relax and have fun. During the winter months, there are fewer families and children staying in living sites, so our activities as a child-based service are reduced - and we decided to open up access to our games and leisure activities to adults! We do this with two gazebos - one remaining solely for children, maintaining a safer space, and the other is for adults. We bring table football, chess, card games and musical instruments for the adults, facilitated by a team of Project Play volunteers and people from partner organisations. Our Distribution de Joie has been a huge success and we hope to continue throughout the winter!



CIRCUS WEEK

Another theme we love is circus week. This summer our new friends at Spoon Circus taught us some great facilitation tips and tricks that we have worked on throughout the rest of 2025.

This theme is colourful, cheerful, quickly brings a smile to everyone's face, and can often end with physical circus tricks such as rolling through hoops or walking on small stilts. A theme that is both creative and athletic...the clowns in us come out as soon as it's circus week!

SPACE WEEK

Space Week is one of our favourites because we can walk like astronauts with our alien masks! We love this silly, shared experience! The masks are painted, coloured, decorated with stickers or other paper decorations to be as representative as possible of each child we meet. What's more, the children can keep the masks at the end of the sessions as a souvenir, something of their own and also something to play with!

We always find that space ignites the children's imaginations - from the youngest to the oldest and it's a great theme to get creative, enjoy using our imaginations and learn about the universe.



Our Core Areas:

ADVOCACY

The governments of France and the UK have a legal obligation to respect and protect the rights of all children. Despite this, the children we work with on the France-UK border experience violations of their rights on a daily basis. In 2025, we have continued to document and speak out against the state's failure to protect children, strengthening our efforts in response to increasing violence.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ON THE UK-FRANCE BORDER

The situation for children's rights on the UK-France border is catastrophic. Every day, we work with children denied access to asylum, shelter, food, water, sanitation and the support they need to grow and develop healthily. This is the result of increasingly hostile policies pursued by the UK, France and countries across Europe.



2025 saw continued and heightened violence. Children have regularly told our team that they have experienced being tear gassed by the police, often acting out these scenes or describing how it hurts their eyes, throats and chests. Many others also recalled their experiences of police stabbing their boats.. This includes at sea, a practice which continues to be illegal under maritime law, despite attempts from the French and UK governments to change this during 2025. Such a move would put children in particular at acute risk of harm. We have also worked with more children facing severe physical injuries, including life-threatening burns from engine fuel. Yet, many of the families we work with have struggled to access the care and support they need.

At least 42 people on the move have lost their lives at this border in 2025, of whom at least five were children. More remain unaccounted for*. We have felt the impact of these deaths in the community in Calais, and in the children we work with, who have been exposed to violence, witnessed tragedies or been aware of these events.

In response to the increasing violence disproportionately affecting children on the border between the UK and France, our advocacy team has further strengthened our voice in 2025, using our position as the only independent organisation working with children age 0-18 on the border to advocate for the respect of children's rights, and for governments to uphold their obligations under international law.



"WE WANT TO BE SAFE"

In July 2025, we published *"We Want to be Safe"*, documenting the increased violence against children on the border by centering the voices of the children and families we've worked with. Our research highlighted that UK taxpayer money, to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds, is being used to fund this violence and directly harm children. The need for cross-border accountability was a central recommendation - the UK and French governments are together complicit in knowingly creating an environment that puts people, including children, in danger.



MEDIA & POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The reception to our report was fantastic, and allowed us to significantly strengthen our media and political engagement, increasing awareness and understanding of the situation children face on the UK-France border. Project Play was featured in reports from the Guardian, ITV News, Channel 4 News, the Independent, Sky News and others. We were in particular pleased with the collaborations with ITV and Channel 4, who worked closely and sensitively with families to produce reports that centered the experiences of children in an informed and ethical way.



We engaged extensively with key political stakeholders, securing a private audience with Lord Alf Dubs, presenting to a cross-party group of French députés to inform an ongoing parliamentary enquiry, and were panelists at the UNHCR's regional NGO consultation.

It was also fantastic to work with partner organisations to welcome Zack Polanski and other leaders of the Green Party to Calais in December, and to be part of a UK Parliamentary launch event for Human for Right's Network's report documenting border violence.

LOOKING TO 2026

In early 2026 we will launch an update to *"We Want to Be Safe"*. We are deeply grateful for every child, parent and loved one who has entrusted their stories to us, and hope that we are able to amplify their voices and work for change. This work has only been possible thanks to improvements in our testimony taking process. Playworkers receive detailed training on the situations the children we work with may face, and how to talk about these issues sensitively with a power and trauma-informed approach.

Our Core Areas:

TEAM & WELFARE

In 2025, our team grew significantly. We welcomed a new Board, and new team of five psychosocial support workers. Over the year, we were joined by eighteen volunteer playworkers, including many teachers, artists, and skilled professionals who brought their creativity and expertise to our sessions. We are grateful that many of our playworkers continue to support us remotely after leaving our team in northern France.

THE BOARD

Our new board brings together six professionals with diverse experiences, to provide Project Play with accountability, oversight, support, and expertise. Christina brings 16 years of social work experience, specialising in the support of unaccompanied asylum seeker children; Holly is an expert in the delivery of play sessions; Miriam, Vice-Chair, is a HR and strategic planning specialist within the humanitarian sector; Meg, Chair, a previous Project Play volunteer and current playworker, specialising in meeting complex needs; Sara, a humanitarian operations and protections specialist; and Savannah, who brings safeguarding know-how and data analysis skills.

We look forward to three more members joining the board in 2026: Aggie, joining the board with expertise in charity governance and social change; Marie, Fundraising Lead, bringing financial experience and hands-on work in child-friendly spaces; and Zahir, Treasurer, with over a decade in finance and administration for human rights and civil society organisations.



PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT TEAM

As our previous team of psychosocial support workers completed their year-long commitment in November, we welcomed five new members to this team, who bring diverse experience - and collectively speak six languages! They are able to provide online 1:1 sessions for the entire Project Play team, as well as group talking circles, helping to create a supportive workplace environment. We have extended this support to Kaleidoscope's team members, one of our partner organisations, working in Dunkirk and Calais to provide psychosocial support to young people.

TEAM MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Kizzy first started working with Project Play as a volunteer playworker in 2024. One year later, she returned for a further two months, bringing energy and professionalism to the team, helping us to work well together during a busy period.



With a background in both psychology and SEN primary education, Kizzy has played a key role in strengthening our approach to behaviour management; working closely with our remote team, she has developed a series of trainings tailored specifically to our operational context, and provided resources to use on sessions for children we encounter with disabilities and/or SEN needs.

We're very excited that Kizzy is now one of our five new psychosocial support workers, and we're so grateful for the skills, care, and dedication she continues to bring to Project Play!





OUR GOALS FOR 2026

In 2026, we want to use this to continue to build our resilience and visibility, whilst strengthening service user participation to ensure we are centring - at all times - the voices that matter most.

DEEPENING CHILD PARTICIPATION

We will prioritise strengthening ethical and meaningful child participation, adapted to our challenging, transient context. We will continue to develop safe, accessible and creative initiatives which ensure children and families are centred in the delivery and development of our service, safeguarding and advocacy - reinforcing our child-rights based approach and ensuring that our work and voice is grounded in the lived experiences of the children we support.

CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION

We will deepen our cross-border work by strengthening networks and partnerships with organisations operating both in the UK and France. Prioritising collaboration on safeguarding and advocacy, we aim to build partnerships which will improve information-sharing and inform collective responses to the harms faced by children on the move, whilst amplifying shared advocacy at bi-lateral, European and international levels.

EMBEDDING VALUES THROUGH PRACTICE AND STRUCTURE

We will build on the organisational structures developed in recent years to strengthen how they function in practice. We will embed our values - transparency, reflectivity, compassion and intersectional solidarity - across all areas of our work, with a particular focus on how our commitment to anti-racism is translated into everyday practice so that we actively challenge inequality rather than reproduce it.

SPECIAL THANKS



Once again, Project Play has been strengthened by the incredible support of individuals and organisations alike. From working hands-on with children to offering remote support or partnering with us to create moments of joy and connection, every contribution has played a crucial role. Your commitment and generosity have made it possible for us to continue our work.

To all of our volunteer playworkers: your enthusiasm, expertise, creativity, and compassion have made an immeasurable difference. A heartfelt thank you to: Ella, Leah, Laura, Kizzy, Alan, Natasha, Mirinda, Milo, Isadora, Jess, Charlie, Fred, Nabila, Ahmed, Beth, Maggi, Eleanor, Freya, Lily and Léa. Special gratitude to Ella, who made some beautiful designs that were used on t-shirts, stickers, and prints, helping us to raise over £2,000, and to Charlie, who took many of the amazing photos throughout this report!

To our team of coordinators: your leadership, care, and determination have guided us through every challenge and success this year. You've shown immense dedication to both the team and the children we serve. Thank you to: Lily, Caro, Elena, Ilias, Mhairi, Kate, Valou and Violette. We extend special thanks to Elena for her two and a half years on the coordinator team and three summers of volunteering, leaving a lasting legacy and significant impact on the organisation.

To our remote volunteers: Thank you to everyone who has supported us remotely in 2025 - by providing translations, running events, sharing our work, joining working groups... the list is endless! Particular thanks to our outgoing team of amazing psychosocial workers, Max, Camilla, and Chiara.

Lastly, a huge thank you to Katie and Rachel, our incredible remote coordination team, who do so much to keep Project Play running smoothly behind the scenes. A special shout-out to Katie for stepping up and taking on so many roles during Rachel's maternity leave - and a huge congratulations to Rachel for welcoming her beautiful new addition!



We also want to recognise the partner organisations who have welcome us into their spaces to deliver our sessions, allowing us to develop meaningful relationships with children and their families. Thank you to Maria Skobstova House, Maison Sesame, La Margelle, and Secours Catholique for continuing to provide children with the space to play, learn and rest.

A special thank you to the incredible projects that visited us and brought unique experiences to the children. Spoon Circus and Changing Stories, your music, theatre and creativity have left lasting smiles and memories. You have equipped our team to better incorporate these elements into our own sessions, and we look forward to collaborating with you again in the future!

We are also immensely grateful to the organisations we work with daily to provide child protection and safeguarding services in Calais and Dunkirk. Thank you to Refugee Women's Centre, Ecpat, CHIP, Médecins du Monde, Medecins Sans Frontieres, and Kaleidoscope for your partnership, expertise, and shared commitment to supporting children on the move.

Finally, to those without whom our advocacy work could not happen - Humans for Rights Network, Asylum Matters, Cross Border Forum, Secours Catholique Calais, Utopia56, Refugee Women's Centre, La Croix Rouge, ECPAT, Youth Kaleidoscope, Médecins Sans Frontières, Human Rights Observers, Solidarité Internationale, Calais Migrant Solidarity, Refugee Action, Duncan Lewis Solicitors, Chtam, FAST, the InterAsso group and more.



Finally, we want to thank partners who have supported us financially - without you this project would not exist. Amber and the forRefugees team who are invaluable to our sector; Michael from OPAL, whose support, advice and belief is unwavering; Bill and Olwyn, whose support from across the world is so appreciated - we're excited to welcome Bill to visit us in January too!

Project Play's work is a collective effort, powered by a community that believes every child deserves a space to laugh, grow, and dream. To everyone who has supported us this year - thank you. Together we will continue to bring play to children on the move - and continue to advocate for change.

**LE PLANNING FAMILIAL
NORD-PAS-DE-CALAIS**



MARIA SKOBTSOVA HOUSE



PLAY AGAINST BORDERS.



Project Play is a French registered association,
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We operate in the UK under the umbrella of
forRefugees, Charity No: 1168435