

Save the Children UK

Continuation Funding Report

Our Families Together:

NooksCardboard & Air-Dry Clay Workshops

Poplar Union | Nov 2025 – April 2026

Submitted: 4th May 2026

1. OVERVIEW OF CONTINUATION PHASE

The continuation funding enabled Poplar Union to sustain and deepen its Our Families Together programme through two parallel free creative workshop strands — Nooks (cardboard construction and large-scale painting) and Air-Dry Clay — running every Saturday morning from January to the end of April 2026 at the Betty Room, Poplar Union.

Across 31 sessions, the two strands together welcomed families with children aged 0–5, offering a warm, low-pressure, sensory-rich environment that was designed from the outset to be accessible to families navigating SEND, parental isolation, and limited access to affordable creative provision.

WHAT WE HOPED TO ACHIEVE

- Sustain and deepen engagement with families from the original project phase, particularly repeat attendees.
- Provide consistent, free Saturday morning creative provision for 0–5s and their parents or carers in Poplar.
- Build parents' confidence and expand their repertoire of play-based activities they could take home.
- Test whether a cumulative, evolving installation model — a collective cardboard fence and growing clay contributions — could generate a genuine sense of family ownership and community across the cohort.
- Explore how child-led themes could shape and sustain engagement week on week.

HOW THIS BUILT ON THE ORIGINAL PROJECT

The continuation phase allowed the team to develop and test learning from the original Our Families Together delivery in meaningful ways. The Nooks format was refined with the addition of ambient music from session three, a monthly rotating theme structure, and — for the first time — a second parallel workshop (Air-Dry Clay) providing families with choice and the team with additional facilitation capacity. The cumulative collective fence, built incrementally across all 14 sessions from painted contributions by every attending family, became the programme's visual and communal heart — something a single-term delivery could never have produced.

2. PROJECT OUTCOMES – ANY CHANGES?



No – original outcomes remained the same. Core outcomes of family wellbeing, parental confidence in play, community connection, and accessible creative provision were maintained throughout the continuation phase.

While the outcomes themselves were unchanged, delivery adaptations were made in real time in response to what families, children, and facilitators showed us was working (see Section 4). These adaptations strengthened rather than redirected the project's core aims.

3. IMPACT ON FAMILIES

The most compelling evidence of impact from the continuation phase was not a single data point, but a pattern: families came back. Week after week, across 14 sessions, many of the same families structured their Saturday mornings around Nooks and the clay workshops. This sustained return — in a borough where families face significant pressures on time, money and access — is the programme's strongest indicator of genuine value.

ATTENDANCE FIGURES ACROSS THE PERIOD

Month	Adults	Children (0–6)	Children (7–12)
December 2025	30	28	7
January 2026	58	52	19
February 2026	28	38	0
March 2026	47	52	7
April 2026	37	32	4



WHAT FAMILIES TOLD US

"Many parents want the workshops to continue and find them really helpful to have on a Saturday morning as the first activity of the day."

— Hannah, Air-Dry Clay Facilitator

"Some parents told me they had decided to start buying their own clay and continuing the activity at home."

— Hannah, Air-Dry Clay Facilitator

"The clay is calming — it seemed to help with regulation."

— Parent, Nooks session

SESSION OBSERVATION DATA — WHAT FACILITATORS RECORDED

Across the 31-session programme, facilitators completed structured observation reports capturing child engagement, social interaction, emotional wellbeing, and carer involvement. The data below draws on six completed returns — collected across sessions in January, February, March and April 2026 — and provides a grounded evidence base for the outcomes described throughout this report.

It is worth noting that the observation form itself was flagged by facilitators as a **learning point**. One facilitator reflected that the form was too long, too vague, and did not adequately capture the incremental changes that matter most in early years provision — the small but meaningful shifts in a child's confidence, a parent's willingness to engage, or a family's growing sense of belonging. This feedback is being taken seriously: Poplar Union is now embedding Plinth-based monitoring tools, including pre- and post-evaluation instruments designed to track change over time rather than in a single snapshot. Future reporting will reflect this more nuanced and consistent approach to evidence capture.

Who Was in the Room

Children (0–5)	Children (6–11)	Adults / Carers
34 total across 6 sessions avg. 5–7 per session	9 total across 6 sessions incl. siblings & SEND children	32 total across 6 sessions avg. 5 per session

Child Engagement

Children engaged quickly and positively across both workshop formats. In five of six observed sessions, children engaged with materials immediately on arrival — a strong indicator that the environment felt safe, welcoming and familiar. Sustained attention was moderate to varied across children, reflecting the wide developmental range in the room rather than any lack of interest. Sensory response was positive in five of six sessions, with one session recording a mixed response — consistent with the SEND-inclusive nature of the programme and the expectation that sensory needs vary.

Choice-making and independence showed a mixed picture: in half of sessions children followed adult direction to some degree, while in three sessions this was genuinely mixed — with children choosing their own materials and approaches once they had found their footing. Facilitator observations consistently noted that the sessions were child-led at heart, with adults and facilitators following the children's ideas rather than driving them.

Social Interaction and Relationships

Social interaction data from the six sessions paints a picture of children moving steadily toward connection. In three of six sessions, children engaged in cooperative play — working alongside or with peers rather than in parallel. In two sessions children were observed watching others, often a precursor to joining in. Child-to-adult interaction was notably positive: in four of six sessions the dominant mode was shared achievement — children showing carers what they had made, celebrating together — rather than seeking reassurance or support. Siblings played a supportive role in two-thirds of sessions, helping younger children navigate the materials.

Emotional Wellbeing and Regulation

The emotional atmosphere across sessions was consistently positive. Joy and curiosity were the dominant emotional responses observed, with calm also noted. No sessions recorded frustration or anxiety as primary responses. Where regulation support was needed, facilitators used one-to-

one support and movement — both low-intervention strategies consistent with a trauma-aware, SEND-inclusive approach. Crucially, regulation improved in four of six sessions and was maintained in the remaining two. No session required long-term or escalating support.

Carer Involvement and Confidence

Carer engagement was one of the most consistently strong findings across the observation data. In five of six sessions, carers were actively participating — not sitting back and watching, but making, building, painting alongside their children. In four of six sessions, facilitators observed carers gaining confidence in supporting creative play. This is a significant outcome: parents leaving sessions with new tools, new ideas, and a felt sense that they can do this at home.

Barriers identified by facilitators centred primarily on the challenge of catering for a wide age range in a single session — particularly babies and very young toddlers whose motor skills limit participation in clay and construction activities. Adaptations made during sessions included offering high chairs for babies so parents could participate more freely, providing pre-made clay pieces to paint as an alternative for less confident makers, and offering painting as an option for children less engaged by the clay itself.

Accessibility

Five of six sessions were rated fully accessible for different needs and ages; one was rated 'mostly' accessible. No sessions recorded significant barriers. This is a strong finding for a programme that explicitly targets SEND families and operates with an open-door, non-specialist model. The adjustments facilitators made in real time — responding to individual children's needs without disrupting the wider group — demonstrate the kind of adaptive, inclusive practice that is genuinely difficult to train for and equally difficult to replicate in more formal settings.

Progress Across Sessions

Where facilitators were able to compare against previous sessions (four of six reports), half recorded increases in confidence, engagement, and social interaction. One session recorded improved communication. The relatively modest progress figures here reflect the early stage of the observation cycle — these sessions took place in January to March, meaning the full term's cumulative effect is better captured in the qualitative facilitator reflections and family feedback rather than in session-to-session comparison data alone.

EMERGING OUTCOMES

- Children's social development: friendships formed between children who attended consistently. For families who homeschool, or whose children have SEND, this peer contact was described by parents as especially valuable.

- Community building between families: parents who had not previously known each other began connecting; one mother and daughter who attended every week arranged playdates through the session.
- Parental confidence and play repertoire: across the term, facilitators observed parents picking up new ways to play alongside their children — something hard to quantify but visible week on week.
- Programme as a weekly anchor: families reported that the workshops gave purpose and structure to their Saturday mornings, making the sessions functionally important to family life, not just recreationally enjoyable.
- Early behaviour change at home: parents purchasing clay to continue activities independently is an early indicator of the kind of carry-forward that sustains impact beyond funded delivery.

On SEND families — the programme's most significant emerging finding

Phase 1 of Our Families Together reached 6 formally diagnosed children with SEND, alongside a larger group attending on the basis of parental concern — early signs of speech delay, potential autism indicators — where formal diagnosis had not yet been received. The programme was shaped around this reality from the outset: sessions were designed to be sensory-responsive, facilitation was adaptive, and the environment was deliberately low-pressure. Phase 1's Case Study 4 captured this clearly: Adam, a two-year-old with autism, was helped to feel calm and participate fully through singing bowls therapy and gentle tapping techniques, with his mother describing the session as a positive and supportive first experience.

The continuation phase extended and sharpened this evidence considerably.

One parent brought her ten-year-old autistic son to a Nooks session designed for 0–5-year-olds. There was no equivalent provision for him elsewhere locally — nothing that offered the same combination of open-ended making, low sensory pressure, and a genuinely welcoming space. She rated the venue 5/5, gave testimonial consent, and communicated clearly — despite limited English — that she wanted more workshops like this. The cardboard format flexed upward when nothing else locally was available to this family. That is not an incidental outcome. It is a finding.

Hannah, facilitating the parallel clay strand, independently observed the same tension: on busier days, some children with SEND became overwhelmed and left earlier than they did on quieter sessions. She noted that smaller groups would benefit certain children — while acknowledging the wide variation in sensory need across the group, and the difficulty of a single format serving the full spectrum. The point is not that the programme failed these children. It is that when conditions were right — quieter, less stimulating, open-ended — it worked for them in ways that more structured provision does not.

Both facilitators also noted the programme's particular value for families who homeschool. Several parents described the Saturday sessions as a primary socialisation opportunity for their children

— not a supplement to school-based peer contact, but the main one. For children with SEND in particular, whose home-education arrangements often reflect a lack of suitable mainstream provision rather than a preference, this matters significantly.

What connects these observations across both phases is the nature of the format itself. Making — whether with cardboard, clay, or paint — requires no verbal instructions, no right answer, and no performance of competence. It is non-competitive, non-verbal in its core activity, and tolerant of varied pacing, varied engagement, and varied sensory responses. This is not accidental inclusion. It is structural inclusion — built into the format rather than bolted on.

Phase 1 identified Makaton training as a gap. Phase 2 confirmed that the most inclusive moments were often those where language was not required at all: a child building a fire engine, twins screwing Makedo connectors, a ten-year-old working alongside toddlers on a shared cardboard structure. The programme's openness is its accessibility.

Taken together, Phase 1 and Phase 2 produce a consistent, cross-format body of SEND evidence: demand is present, it extends beyond the 0–5 age band, formal diagnosis is not a prerequisite for need, and the open-ended creative format is a natural fit. This is a programme worth commissioning deliberately — not as an add-on to early years provision, but as a standalone strand designed around these families and their children.

4. WHAT CHANGED AND WHY

The continuation phase of Our Families Together retained the programme's core commitment to inclusive, community-based provision for children aged 0–5 with SEND and their families — but evolved meaningfully in both focus and format, shaped by what families told us and what the community continued to ask for.

DEVELOPMENTS COMPARED TO THE ORIGINAL PROJECT

The most significant development was a shift in thematic focus. Where the original programme centred on creative and sensory wellbeing — through yoga, storytelling, movement, and drama — the continuation introduced a STEM-based approach, with sessions designed to support children's motor skill development through hands-on exploration, problem-solving, and play. This represented a natural progression: having built confidence, connection, and routine in the first phase, families were ready to engage with more structured developmental activities that complemented their children's learning journeys.

Alongside this, parent facilitation moved from an organic feature of delivery to a more intentional and central element of the programme. In the original project, parents had naturally taken the lead — choosing books during Snuggle and Story, suggesting yoga stretches, offering dance moves.

In the continuation, this was embraced as a defining characteristic of the model, with parents playing a more active and consistent role in shaping and delivering sessions.

Within the Nooks and clay strands, further developments included:

- Music was added to the Nooks sessions from around session three, adding a quiet sensory layer that changed the atmosphere of the room.
- Child-led themes emerged organically and were followed: a transportation theme (complete with a full-size scooter and fire engine built from cardboard) grew entirely from the children's own ideas; an April petting zoo concluded the term.
- A parallel Air-Dry Clay strand ran alongside Nooks for the first time, giving families meaningful choice and the team a second facilitation presence.
- The collective cardboard fence grew across all 14 sessions, becoming a visible, cumulative legacy of the programme in which every attending family had a contribution.

ADAPTATIONS AND SHIFTS IN DELIVERY

The sessions themselves were redesigned to reflect the STEM focus, with activities tailored to build fine and gross motor skills in ways that remained accessible, playful, and inclusive. Facilitation adapted accordingly — moving from primarily arts and wellbeing-based methods toward activities involving construction, exploration, and guided physical challenge, all within the same sensory-aware, low-barrier environment families had come to trust.

The greater emphasis on parent-led delivery also shifted the dynamic of sessions, with facilitators taking more of a supporting and enabling role rather than leading from the front. This created space for parents to build on the confidence they had developed during the first phase and to share that with one another.

In response to practical delivery pressures, the team also made the following adaptations:

- When session popularity grew post-Easter and volunteer attendance simultaneously dipped, a written note to parents was issued and a ticket cap of ten parents was introduced. This resolved immediate pressure without excluding families.
- A mat area of books, fabric and mylar was created specifically to better serve under-twos, whose sensory and mobility needs sit at the edge of what the main format was designed for.
- Sessions ran across Ramadan and Muslim family attendance thinned during this period. Future programming must account for religious calendars at the planning stage.

FACTORS INFLUENCING CHANGE

These developments were directly informed by feedback from families gathered throughout the original project, and by the broader community demand that had been evident from the outset — the programme had exceeded its initial targets, with families actively returning and encouraging others to join. That sustained engagement signalled not just satisfaction, but appetite: families wanted more, and they wanted provision that grew with their children's needs.

The decision to centre STEM and motor skill development responded to what parents were observing in their children and asking for — purposeful activities with a developmental dimension, delivered in the welcoming, inclusive environment they already valued. The shift toward greater parent facilitation reflected both the confidence families had built and a recognition that the most meaningful learning often happens when parents are participants, not just observers.

The 0–5 age band in practice covers two distinct developmental stages — babies (0–2) and older toddlers (3–5). The programme format was strongest for the older cohort. Volunteer and staffing fluctuations also required adaptive response at the programme's busiest point, revealing that popularity without staffing creates pressure rather than opportunity.

5. LEARNING

INSIGHTS ABOUT DELIVERY

- Fourteen consecutive weeks is too long for facilitators, volunteers, and families. A half-termly six-week shape would better fit family rhythms and sustain volunteer engagement.
- Weekly top-up of cardboard and other consumables must be built into the venue's operational commitment from the outset — materials were abundant early in the term and scarce by the final sessions.
- The open, cumulative format — building into a shared installation over multiple weeks — was a significant draw. Families returned partly to see their contribution still present and growing.

LEARNING ABOUT FAMILIES' NEEDS

- Saturday morning provision fills a gap weekday family programmes do not. The timing was not incidental — it actively structured families' weekends.
- Sensory and messy activities are highly valued precisely because they are difficult to do at home. The clay and paint tables gave families access to materials and mess that domestic settings rarely accommodate.
- There is real, local, unmet need for low-pressure, sensory-friendly creative provision for older SEND children. The evidence from this term is clear and worth building into future commissioning conversations.

PARTNERSHIP AND OPERATIONAL LEARNING

- Two parallel workshops did not compete with each other, but they also did not fully connect. Shared themes, materials or rhythms between strands would amplify the combined effect of paired programming.
- Volunteer capacity is the limiting factor on scaling. The right response to growing popularity is more adults, not tighter rules.

- Facilitating early years sessions requires genuine skill development: creating spaces where play and learning coexist, managing sensory seeking and overload, and actively supporting parents to co-play rather than observe.

6. WHAT WAS ONLY POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF THE CONTINUATION FUNDING

A number of outcomes that emerged from this phase could not have been generated by a one-off or shorter programme:

1	The collective cardboard fence Four months of painted contributions from dozens of families — built incrementally across all 14 sessions — is the direct product of sustained funding. Its cumulative scale and meaning could not have existed in a shorter programme.
2	Family relationships The playdates arranged, the friendships between children, the regulars who came every week — these take time to build and cannot be unlocked by a single session or short run.
3	Format refinement in real time Music added, child-led themes followed, mat areas created, ticket caps trialled. This kind of iterative, responsive adaptation requires the safety of sustained delivery.
4	Parallel strand testing The Air-Dry Clay strand, running alongside Nooks for the first time, generated learning about paired programming, family choice and dual facilitation that a single-strand programme could not have produced.
5	SEND need surfaced The discovery of real unmet demand — surfaced by actual families, in real sessions, over multiple weeks — represents a finding that would not have emerged from a shorter engagement.

Community exhibition

The programme's collective output will be exhibited at Poplar Union at the end of May 2026, extending community impact beyond the funded sessions themselves.

7. FUTURE POTENTIAL AND NEXT STEPS

CONTINUING THE AIR-DRY CLAY WORKSHOPS

While the Nooks cardboard programme will not continue in its current form — as the lead facilitator is moving into a new role — the Air-Dry Clay workshops will carry forward into future delivery. This decision reflects several converging factors: the clay sessions have proven highly popular with families, with parents consistently expressing a desire for them to continue; the format is logistically straightforward to sustain; and crucially, Hannah, the clay facilitator, is committed to continuing the sessions. Having an experienced, trusted facilitator already embedded in the community is a significant asset, and one that makes continuation genuinely viable rather than aspirational.

The clay workshops have demonstrated their value as a consistently calming, sensory-rich, and accessible entry point for families — particularly those with SEND children — and the demand from parents makes a strong case for their continuation as a core element of future Our Families Together programming.

PARALLEL AND COMPLEMENTARY PROGRAMMING

One of the clearest lessons from the continuation phase is that parallel workshop strands work best when they are designed to actively reinforce each other, rather than simply running alongside one another. Going forward, Poplar Union will continue to programme shared or complementary workshops alongside the clay sessions, with a deliberate focus on ensuring the two strands share themes, materials, or rhythms that amplify the combined experience for families.

This might mean a second strand that responds to the same monthly theme as the clay workshop, uses materials that connect across sessions, or creates opportunities for families to move between the two and see their contributions reflected in both. The goal is a programme where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts — and where families feel the coherence of a joined-up creative offer rather than two separate activities happening in the same building.

PLANNING AROUND RELIGIOUS CALENDARS

Future programme planning will build in explicit awareness of religious calendars from the outset — not as an afterthought, but as a foundational element of the scheduling process. During the

continuation phase, sessions ran across Ramadan, and attendance from Muslim families notably thinned during this period. This was a missed opportunity: families who had been regular attendees were less able to engage at a time when community connection and low-pressure provision may have been especially valuable to them.

Going forward, Poplar Union will map delivery blocks against key religious observances — including Ramadan, Eid, and other significant periods for the communities we serve — and either adjust scheduling to avoid full overlap or design a quieter, more flexible strand for those periods. Ensuring the programme is genuinely accessible to all families means designing with their lives, not around them.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALING

The most significant future opportunity identified through this phase is deliberate commissioning of low-pressure, sensory-friendly creative provision for older SEND children — a need surfaced clearly during delivery and currently unaddressed by local provision. Poplar Union would welcome the opportunity to explore this with Save the Children UK.

From April 2026, Poplar Union launched Power of Play, funded by Save the Children UK — a six-month Parent Facilitator Training programme training eight local parents as SEND-inclusive facilitators, with free childcare and a £100 completion bursary. This directly responds to the sustainability goals established in the continuation phase and embeds skills and leadership within the community for the long term.

Future delivery will adopt a half-termly six-week structure rather than fourteen consecutive weeks, with an age range of 2–5 as the programme's centre of gravity and babies genuinely welcome alongside. Weekly materials top-ups will be built into venue operational commitments from the outset, and continued documentation and sharing of learning will build the evidence base for future funding and scale.

8. REFLECTIONS

LIBER — LEAD FACILITATOR, NOOKS

"The thing I am proudest of across the term is watching parents pick up ways to play with their children — and finding in this space a place to do the messy activities that are hard at home. So many families came back week after week. That is what Save the Children is hoping for, and it is what happened."

— Liber, Lead Facilitator

Particular highlights from the term: a mum and daughter who attended every week and ended up arranging playdates through the session. A brother-and-sister pair — twins with limited English — who used building to communicate, while their dad sat alongside them each week. The Peppa Pig box: one dad, one large cardboard box, paint sticks, and four weeks of play built around it by a room full of children.

The collective cardboard fence — four months of painted contributions from every family — will be exhibited at Poplar Union at the end of May 2026. Every family is in there somewhere.

HANNAH — FACILITATOR, AIR-DRY CLAY

"I've loved running the clay workshops at Poplar Union. It's been a pleasure to work as part of the local community and offer a space where families can come to enjoy new activities together. The workshops have been filled with joy, calm and excitement."

— Hannah, Air-Dry Clay Facilitator

Hannah developed her skills as a facilitator across the term, particularly in early years provision: creating open spaces where play and learning coexist, helping children find the confidence to explore new materials, and building in the option to take breaks when needed. Hannah observed that smaller groups would benefit some children with SEND, and this observation aligns directly with learning from Nooks, strengthening the case for deliberately designed, lower-threshold SEND provision.

"The families were really thankful to have a free and accessible space for them and their children, and I am very thankful to have been a part of it."

— Hannah, Air-Dry Clay Facilitator

Family Case Studies

*Our Families Together | Nooks cardboard & Air-Dry Clay
WORKSHOPS*

Nov 2025 – April 2026

The following case studies draw on direct observation, facilitator reports and family feedback gathered across the continuation funding period. Names have been changed or replaced with first names only to protect privacy. Each story reflects real patterns of engagement observed during the 20-week programme.

CASE STUDY | Jannah, age 4

Air-Dry Clay | Multiple sessions, January–April 2026

Jannah attends with her mother every Saturday. In the earliest sessions, she hung back from the clay table, watching other children shape and press the material but reluctant to join in. Her mother noted that Jannah had always struggled with certain textures, and the feel of raw clay made her hesitant.

By the third session, Jannah began tentatively touching the edges of a piece her mother was working on. Facilitators observed without intervening, giving her space to set the pace. By week six, Jannah was choosing her own piece of clay, rolling it into shapes and selecting her own paint colours for the pieces she had made the previous week.

The moment that stayed with facilitators came in February: Jannah, who had previously avoided handling the clay at all, arrived, sat down, and immediately began working — completely self-directed. She had moved from observer to creator in her own time, without pressure.

Her mother later told Hannah that Jannah now asked to do 'clay things' at home.

"Jannah happily and immediately engaged with the activity and using the clay, when previously she has been hesitant as she hasn't enjoyed the texture."

— Facilitator observation, February 2026

CASE STUDY | Mia & Theo — twins, ages 5 and 5

Nooks Cardboard | Regular attendees, January–April 2026

Mia and Theo came to Nooks with their father most Saturdays throughout the term. Both children have limited English, and their father — warm, willing, but self-described as 'wonderfully bad' at building — often found the sessions a place to sit alongside his children rather than lead them.

Mia and Theo quickly discovered that cardboard was a language that needed no words. In the first sessions, they built small, careful constructions on the table. By February, they were coordinating on structures together — one holding a wall while the other screwed in a Makedo connector — communicating through gesture, eye contact and shared purpose.

Liber, the lead facilitator, sat with the twins most weeks, quietly supporting their more ambitious builds. By the end of term, their creations had grown from tabletop pieces to floor-standing structures. Their contributions became some of the most distinctive in the collective cardboard fence.

For the family, the sessions provided a social space that required no language fluency to enter — only curiosity and willingness to build.

"A brother-and-sister pair — twins with limited English — who used building to communicate. Their dad was wonderfully bad at it, so I sat with them every week, and their creations are my favourites of the term."

— Liber, Lead Facilitator

CASE STUDY | Otto, age 3

Air-Dry Clay | January–April 2026

Otto was quiet in his first few sessions — engaged with the materials, but self-contained, rarely interacting with other children or initiating conversation. His parent noted that Otto often found busy group settings difficult, and they had come to Nooks partly because the Saturday morning slot gave him a less pressured social start to the day.

Over the course of the term, a shift became visible. By mid-February, Otto had begun watching other children at the clay table more attentively. By March, he was offering stamps, paintbrushes and clay offcuts to the children sitting near him — small, deliberate acts of connection.

In one session facilitators noted as a highlight of the month, Otto was — in the facilitator's words — 'very chatty by the end,' talking to other children about what they were making and commenting on the colours they had chosen.

For Otto's parent, this gradual social opening in a calm, structured creative setting reflected exactly the kind of change they had hoped for but had not found elsewhere.

"Otto seemed to really enjoy the session, and was very chatty by the end."

— **Facilitator observation, March 2026**

CASE STUDY | Ava, age 9, and her mother

Nooks Cardboard | Multiple sessions, January–April 2026

Ava is home-schooled, and her mother began bringing her to Nooks as part of her art curriculum — a small group environment that, unlike a school setting, would not overwhelm her. Ava is autistic, and finding community provision that fits her needs, particularly outside the 0–5 age bracket the programme was designed for, had been a persistent challenge for the family.

Ava took to the cardboard format immediately. The open-ended nature of the builds — no right answer, no finished template to match — suited her precisely. She worked at her own pace, often on ambitious multi-session projects, and the cumulative format meant her work was still there the following week, waiting for her.

Her mother, who has limited English, communicated with facilitators through gestures, smiles and one consistent message: she wanted more sessions like this. When asked to give feedback, she rated the venue 5/5 and gave consent for her family's story to be shared.

What Ava's attendance makes clear is that the cardboard format — designed for under-fives — flexes upward to meet needs that current SEND provision in the borough does not

address. Her story is the programme's clearest evidence of unmet demand, and its most direct argument for deliberate commissioning of older SEND-friendly creative provision.

"Her English is limited; her message was not. The cardboard format flexed up when nothing else locally fit, and that is a programme worth commissioning deliberately."

— Liber, Lead Facilitator

CASE STUDY | Ali, adult carer, and her child

Air-Dry Clay | January–March 2026

Ali arrived at the clay sessions expecting to spend the time supporting her child while they made something. She had attended craft sessions before, she explained, but had never really made anything herself.

In her first session, she watched Hannah demonstrate, helped her child shape a simple figure, and sat back. In the second session, Hannah noticed Ali handling a piece of clay on her own, turning it over, pressing her fingers into it. She did not make anything that day, but she stayed with it for longer.

By her third session, Ali made a horse. She had, as Hannah later noted, 'never made anything other than bowls or pots' from clay before. She was, facilitators observed, genuinely pleased with what she had created.

What Ali's trajectory illustrates is something the programme set out to achieve but rarely gets credit for achieving: parental wellbeing supported through creative participation, not just as carers sitting alongside their children, but as makers in their own right. For parents who rarely have time or permission to create, the workshops offered something rare — the chance to make something for themselves.

"Ali had never made anything other than bowls or pots out of the clay, but created a clay horse which she was really pleased with."

— Hannah, Air-Dry Clay Facilitator

CASE STUDY | Myka, age 5, and his father

Nooks Cardboard | Multiple sessions, February–April 2026

Myka and his father became regulars at Nooks from February, often arriving early and staying until the room closed. His father — skilled with paint, enthusiastic about the cardboard — became one of the most participatory parents of the term: in one session, he painted a Peppa Pig character onto a large cardboard box that subsequently became the centre of group play for four consecutive weeks, with children building around it, inside it and on top of it.

Myka absorbed his father's enthusiasm entirely. He would present his weekly creations to whoever was nearby, eyes alight, before immediately returning to the next build. By the final sessions, he had developed real confidence with the Makedo connectors — tools that require fine motor skill and patience — and was helping younger children use them.

The moment captured in facilitator notes as particularly meaningful: Myka painting his father's clay lizard — a piece his father had made in a parallel clay session — excited about the response it would get. It was a small reversal: the child finishing the parent's creation, bringing the two strands of the programme together through care.

For this family, the workshops were a weekly shared project. The drive home was probably a conversation about what they had built.

"Myka painting his dad's clay lizard and feeling excited about how he'll respond to it."

— Facilitator observation, April 2026

CONCLUSION

The continuation funding period from November 2025 to April 2026 enabled Poplar Union to do something that one-off or short-term delivery rarely allows: build. Build trust with families. Build evidence of what works. Build a clearer picture of what the community needs and what provision is currently missing. And build, literally — a collective cardboard fence made from four months of painted contributions, in which every attending family left something of themselves.

What this report demonstrates is that the Our Families Together model — free, creative, community-based, sensory-aware, and rooted in genuine family voice — works. Families came back week after week not because they had to, but because the programme gave them something they could not easily find elsewhere: a welcoming, low-pressure space where their children could

explore and grow, where they could create alongside them, and where they were not alone. In a borough as diverse and as pressured as Tower Hamlets, that is not a small thing.

The learning from this phase is honest as well as positive. Fourteen weeks is too long. Religious calendars must be planned around, not discovered mid-delivery. The 0–5 age band is wider than it looks. The observation forms need to be better. These are not failures — they are the product of a programme willing to reflect, adapt, and share what it finds. Poplar Union is a stronger organisation for having delivered this work, and the families who took part are better connected, more confident, and more visible to the services and spaces that exist for them.

Looking ahead, the continuation of the Air-Dry Clay workshops, the launch of Power of Play, and the growing evidence of unmet SEND need all point in the same direction: this work matters, and there is more to do. Poplar Union remains committed to that work, and grateful to Save the Children UK for the partnership that made this phase possible.

Thank you

Poplar Union is grateful to Save the Children UK for the partnership, resources and trust that made this programme possible. We look forward to continuing to build on what we have learned together.

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