



Starting Well

Lessons from local areas on how to ensure all children are school ready

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Foreword

The first few years of a child's life are not simply a prelude to what comes next. They are the foundation on which everything else is built: health and happiness, learning and relationships, aspiration and opportunity. What happens in those early years, and whether children and families have the support they need to flourish, shapes trajectories that persist long into adulthood. Getting it right early is not just the right thing to do, it is the most powerful lever at our disposal to break the cycle of disadvantage and unlock the potential of every child.

That is why the Government's school readiness target in its Plan for Change – for 75% of five-year-olds to achieve a good level of development by 2028 – matters so much. It represents a clear and bold ambition for our youngest children and a recognition of the importance of getting that support right. It places children at the heart of Government's missions to break down barriers to opportunity, and sets high aspirations not only for children, but for the systems that serve them. We welcome that ambition unreservedly.

But ambition, on its own, is not enough. As this report makes clear, the distance between the target in 2028 and where we are today is significant and remains stubborn: only 68% of children reaching a good level of development last year, and progress has been slowing down. Closing the gap in the next two years will require not just sustained political will, but a fundamental rethink of how local and national systems work together to support children and families from the very start of life.

The disadvantage gap, already visible by age five, has also proved stubbornly resistant to progress. Growing up in poverty and with special educational needs and disabilities remain two of the strongest predictors for school readiness, yet the gap between these children and their peers persists, and in some cases continues to widen. Without decisive action now, it will only become more entrenched: children will face limited life chances simply because of their circumstance.

We set out in this report what we have learnt about the conditions required for success in boosting child development, and what it will take to achieve the 2028 target. Across the country, local authorities and their partners, those at the frontline of this challenge, are working tirelessly to deliver on Government's school readiness target and ambitions set out in the Best Start in Life strategy. What we heard most often was that success was not attributed to specific interventions, but rather to ways of working as a system that strengthened the offer of support for children and families.

But we also heard from local authorities that their efforts remain hindered by barriers that can undermine best efforts and good practice: a fragmented early years landscape, a fast-changing childcare market, an early years workforce that is underfunded and undervalued, and persistent structural and systemic barriers to integrating health services. Our report addresses each and sets out a roadmap for removing those challenges to deliver real improvement by 2028.

The Best Start in Life strategy has given local areas a chance to reimagine their early years systems; many areas have used this to redesigning the support offered to children and families.

But there remain systemic and structural barriers to progress. The Government must seize this moment and use the focus, alignment and momentum that have been created to go further.

The strategy has also provided a hook for Government to think more radically about how we prioritise early childhood. The evidence is clear on the impact of getting it right in the early years – not just for school readiness, but for life. This must now be reflected in Government’s approach: a societal strategy for preconception to age five. That means bringing together the full range of government departments and local partners, underpinned by the infrastructure to break down silos and drive forward change. In short, we are calling on Government to make supporting our very youngest children everyone’s responsibility.

With the right investment, the right systems and the right partners around the table, every child can get a great start in life. This report shows how to make that happen.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "H. Chowdry". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Haroon Chowdry

Chief Executive, Centre for Young Lives

Acknowledgements

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We are also very grateful for the invaluable feedback, perspectives and expertise provided by the members of our Expert Advisory Group: Alice Jones-Bartoli (National Children's Bureau); Amanda Highland-Portland (Rochdale Council); Catherine Mole (Dingley's Promise); Chris Wellings (Thrive at Five); Debbie Adams and Kirsten Watters (Camden Council); Flora Wilkie (Local Government Association); Isobel Howe (Association of Directors of Public Health); Keith Reed (Parent-Infant Foundation); Matt Buttery (Triple P); Sarah Cattan (Institute for Fiscal Studies); Sarah Ronan (Early Education and Childcare Coalition); Sophie Metcalfe (Institute for Government); and Tammy Campbell (Education Policy Institute). The opinions and recommendations expressed in this report remain those of the Centre for Young Lives, not the Expert Advisory Group.

We also wish to acknowledge our fellow research and policy colleagues in the early years space – including those from Nesta, the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, the Institute for Government, the National Children's Bureau and others – who continue to be leading voices in advocating for better policies and outcomes in the early years.

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Executive Summary

The experiences children have in their earliest years – from birth through to starting school – shape their cognitive, social and emotional development in ways that have lasting consequences for health, learning and life chances. Two-fifths of the disadvantage gap visible at age 16 is already present by the time a child turns five.

In 2024/25, 68.3% of children in England reached a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of their reception year – meaning almost one-in-three did not. Progress has slowed considerably since 2021 and, more concerning, inequalities are widening as some cohorts of children start school further behind their peers. The Government’s Best Start in Life (BSIL) strategy, backed by over £1.5 billion, sets out how Government plan to meet its ambitious milestone to give every child the best start in life and raise the proportion of children achieving a GLD to 75% by 2028.

It has brought welcome focus, alignment and investment to the early years, placing children and families at the heart of Government’s Plan for Change. Local authorities have been given specific targets to improve outcomes in their areas. This report assesses what will be needed – nationally and locally – to achieve that ambition.

To inform this report, we conducted interviews with local authorities which had made progress in their GLD rates in recent years. We selected local authorities that met a range of criteria including those whose progress was above the national average, and local authorities who had been successful in closing the gaps in school readiness between cohorts of children. These interviews sought to understand the conditions for success in raising early childhood outcomes across a local area - and what still stands in the way.

It was clear that local authorities are working tirelessly to achieve their local target and meet the overall ambition of giving every child the best start in life. More often than not, local authorities attributed their success not to specific interventions or programmes, but the ways of working across the local early years system that join up and strengthen the offer of support for children and families. What was also clear is that often they feel as though delivering that strong offer was an ‘uphill battle’, in the sense that it is hindered – rather than enabled – by existing systems and structures.

Our conversations with local authorities, and the resulting key findings, gravitated around five key themes:

1. Strategic leadership in the early years
2. Access to high-quality early education and childcare
3. Integrated health services to join up support children and families
4. Strengthening early identification to support early childhood development
5. Reaching families and embedding support into communities

The report addresses each theme to identify what is working locally and the challenges that can hinder local progress. Our recommendations seek to address those challenges and support local authorities to give every child the best start in life.

1. Strategic leadership in the early years

Setting a bold and ambitious local vision for early years support, supported by strong governance structures and system infrastructure is key to driving improvements in boosting child development.

Conditions for success: In our interviews with local authorities which had seen improvements in their GLD, we identified a range of system-level factors that have been crucial to driving progress: prioritisation of early years by placing early years accountability and oversight at senior leadership level; strategic, system-wide governance underpinned by mechanisms to encourage joint working and raise the profile of the early years across local services; and the retention of early years infrastructure in creating the solid foundations on which to deliver Best Start Local plans and achieve the target.

Challenges: Many local authorities told us of the challenge they face when having to simultaneously deliver on BSIL, SEND reforms, the updated Healthy Child Programme, children's social care reform and the Child Poverty Strategy. In the absence of a coordinating framework set by central government to align these policies, it was felt that this could create confusion and competing priorities locally. Short-term and programme-specific funding cycles can also undermine long-term systems change. In the specific context of the school readiness target, local authorities described lacking sufficient control over the levers needed to deliver the target they are responsible for.

2. Access to high-quality early education and childcare

The expansion of government-funded childcare has doubled investment into entitlement and is a key policy for Government. Given the evidence on the impact of early education and childcare on child development, the childcare market is a fundamental lever at the government's disposal in delivering the school readiness target.

Conditions for success: Several local authorities attributed some of their progress to diverse, locally rooted mixed economies of early years provision across their locality, as opposed to the dominance of large chains. Partnership working between local authorities and local providers – built on strong ongoing relationships – was identified as supporting a shared ethos of collective responsibility and establishing a high-quality and consistent offer across local settings/

Challenges: However, the nature of this market – increasingly dominated by large chains and private providers which are more likely to be of low-quality and compound issues of childcare deserts in deprived areas – can risk undermining the ambition of giving every child the best start in life. Likewise, an underfunded and undervalued early years workforce will also risk limiting the impact of the expansion, creating challenges in recruiting and retaining a qualified workforce to meet demand – particularly for children with additional needs.

3. Integrated health services to join up support for children and families

Integrated services are widely recognised as central to a joined-up offer of support for children and families, enabling early identification of need, smooth transitions between services, and

stronger outcomes. Delivered well, integration supports early intervention from pre-birth onwards and helps local authorities maximise finite resources. However, structural and systemic barriers continue to limit progress without national action to create the right conditions.

Conditions for success: Local authorities delivering the strongest integration combined co-location of services in Family Hubs with robust governance and commissioning structures. Joint commissioning, integrated leadership models, and clear data-sharing agreements create collective accountability and avoided duplication. Where live birth data is being shared effectively, services can proactively reach vulnerable families earlier. To address specialist workforce shortages, some authorities have developed innovative system-wide approaches, such as tiered speech and language programmes and telephone helplines, which have dramatically reduced waiting times and upskilled the wider workforce.

Challenges: Effective data sharing remains a persistent barrier. Local authorities cite a lack of clear central government guidance and a data-sharing framework, inconsistent IT systems across partners, confusion around GDPR, and insufficient training as key obstacles.

4. Strengthening early identification to support early childhood development

Public health plays a critical role in the earliest years of a child's life, with strong evidence that the first 1,001 days from pregnancy to age two are foundational to a child's cognitive, emotional and physical development. The 2-2½ year review has the potential to serve as a key early identification tool and intervention trigger, however structural issues like workforce shortages, inconsistent coverage, fragmented data infrastructure and barriers to integrated delivery undermine its impact.

Conditions for success: Local authorities delivering the strongest early identification combined co-location and integrated delivery of health visiting within family hubs with whole-system training across health, education and family hub staff. Several areas worked to maximise the 2-2½ year review as an intervention trigger and developed targeted, proactive outreach to underserved families least likely to engage independently. Reframing the review as an 'offer' to families, rather than a check or assessment, was identified as an effective way to boost uptake among those who would benefit most.

Challenges: Coverage remains a postcode lottery, while the check itself does not align closely with the EYFS Profile used to measure school readiness at age five. Shortages in the health visiting workforce mean that even when the review is taken up, it's impact can be limited. Fragmented data infrastructure between health and education continues to obstruct early identification, with local authorities lacking a clear picture of children's unmet needs, making it harder to plan provision and target support.

5. Reaching families and embedding support into communities

The success of the Best Start in Life strategy will depend in large part on whether services can reach the children and families who need them most. Local authorities consistently recognise that some families remain hard to reach, and that meeting school readiness targets requires

not just a joined-up system, but a fundamental shift toward treating parents, carers and communities as equal partners in supporting early child development.

Conditions for success: Local authorities that have made progress have invested in the 'connective tissue' of the early years system: retaining in-person roles to help families navigate services and support transitions and delivering locally and culturally specific outreach to build trust between families and services.

Challenges: The fragmented nature of the early years system creates a confusing landscape for families, compounded by weak data infrastructure that forces families to repeat their story at each new service acting as a barrier to engagement. Negative perceptions of statutory services, felt most acutely by vulnerable and marginalised communities, further undermine engagement.

Recommendations

Drawing on the above findings, our report seeks to identify solutions and recommendations which, if supported with clear direction from central government, will create the conditions needed for local authorities to improve early childhood development outcomes. In doing so, the government can empower local authorities to drive improvement, giving them the levers across the early years system to deliver for babies, children and their families.

Recommendation 1: Increase support for local areas to better integrate early years services

Progress in the early years depends on local systems working together, yet too often this relies on the strength of individual relationships rather than a coherent and well-designed system. Structural barriers to integration, particularly around data-sharing and misaligned national policy, must be addressed centrally, if local authorities are to fulfil their role as system-leaders.

Recommendation 1A: The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should establish joint guidance for local authorities and partners on programme alignment and multi-agency collaboration relating to national policies in the early years, including a national mandate and guidance to support effective data sharing.

The guidance should:

- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of each partner across health, education, local authority teams, early years settings and wider voluntary and community organisations, and set out how duplication can be avoided and how local areas can maximise resource and capacity including through joint-commissioning and pooled-budget arrangements.
- Cover all relevant national policies and programmes, including Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies, delivery of the Healthy Child Programme and the Schools White Paper on SEND reform (as they relate to the early years), Families First, and neighbourhood health.

- Be supported by a mandate from central government on data sharing across services to support early identification of need and smooth transitions between services for children and their families.

Recommendation 1B: Review the 2-2½-year health and development review to ensure it can be used as a meaningful early identification tool and intervention trigger for targeted support for children falling behind their developmental milestones. The 2-2½ year review is not delivering on its potential as an early identification tool and intervention trigger. Working well, it could be a vital opportunity for local authorities to identify the children not on track to reach a good level of development at age five and target interventions to support them. The Centre for Young Lives will publish a framework for the 2-2½-year health check later this year.

Recommendation 2: Align the early education and childcare system to give every child the best start in life

With Government now controlling the prices of around 80% of early education and childcare – up from 50%, there is a significant opportunity to leverage that investment to shape the market in the interests of children, particularly the most disadvantaged who would most benefit from access to high quality care. The current system risks entrenching disadvantage by directing the expansion of entitlements away from the children who need it most and, by failing to address the deep structural challenges facing the workforce, the government risks undermining the potential impact of the £9bn it spends each year on childcare.

Recommendation 2A: The Government’s Childcare review should deliver reforms to ensure that the market is delivering on the Best Start in Life target, and the broader ambitions in the Best Start in Life strategy. The review should have a core focus on removing barriers in access to high-quality provision for disadvantaged children and children with SEND in particular.

In particular, the review should:

- Establish greater requirements on early education and childcare providers in receipt of Government funding to drive up quality, address workforce challenges, and improve equal access to provision.
- Co-produce, in partnership with the sector and Mayoral and Strategic Authorities, a framework for regional and local childcare market stewardship.
- Set out a long-term plan for opening up access to high-quality early education and childcare by reforming eligibility requirements to remove barriers to children from disadvantaged backgrounds – including children of parents not in work, or parents in education and training.
- Review the scope of Ofsted’s role as regulator in supporting and setting the standard of high quality early education and childcare. A new and expanded national framework for quality improvement should strengthen and clarify the role of local authorities and relevant local partners in quality improvement.

- Build on the commitments in the BSIL strategy to establish a long-term early years workforce plan to build a sustainable, high-quality workforce to deliver on the target. The plan should set out clear roles for national, regional and local governments in supporting and shaping the workforce.

Recommendation 3: Secure the future of the early years

The BSIL strategy has created a moment of genuine focus and investment in the early years. As we get closer to 2028, the Government must now look beyond the GLD target and put in place the long-term foundations – legislative, financial and strategic – to sustain and build on what has been achieved. This requires a fundamental rethink of how we prioritise our youngest and most vulnerable children. Doing so will not just deliver on ambitions in BSIL but will have long-term and wide-reaching impacts across government and for wider society.

Recommendation 3A: The Government should establish a joint committee to oversee progress towards achieving the BSIL target, to assess all the levers at Government’s disposal to achieve better outcomes for young children and deliver on the target. The Committee should bring together relevant Secretaries of State and Ministers and be supported by a corresponding delivery board of senior government officials.

Recommendation 3B: The Department for Education should establish the long-term stability and security of Best Start Family Hubs by placing all children’s centres and family hubs on a consistent statutory footing under the Best Start Family Hub model. This consistent statutory footing should include a duty on both local authorities and ICBs to commission these services, creating a stable financial future for Best Start Family Hubs.

Recommendation 3C: Building on the Best Start in Life strategy, Government should develop a long-term, cross-government societal strategy from pregnancy to reception. This would drive cross-government collaboration beyond Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care and establish clear roles and responsibilities for a wide range of departments on supporting and improving early childhood.

This strategy should:

- Be underpinned by cross-departmental collaboration on joint-funding, including a thematic cross-departmental spending review on the Government’s mission to give every child the best start in life, with a view to establishing joint funding across government departments for the early years. The review should include the Department for Education, Health and Social Care, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Department for Work and Pensions, Home Office and the Ministry of Justice.
- Be supported by comprehensive guidance for local authorities and the full range of local partners to establish clear roles and responsibilities, support joined up working, and avoid duplication of working across services.

- Be underpinned by a mandatory, strengthened common outcomes framework for babies, children, young people and families – building on the work of the Common Outcomes for Children and Young People Collaborative.
- Involve a small number of ‘test and learn’ local system transformation pilots, focused on the local areas with the lowest GLD rates. Funding for the pilots should support local partners, convened by local authorities, to develop a model of strategic governance and oversight for the zero to five space, establishing clear roles and responsibilities for improving agreed and shared child outcomes for partners across health, education, children’s services, policing and criminal justice, employment and welfare and wider housing and planning services.

Introduction

The experiences children have from birth – the relationships they form, the environments they grow-up in, the support their families receive – shape their cognitive, social and emotional development in ways that have lasting consequences for their future health, learning and life chances.

The Government’s Best Start in Life (BSIL) strategy, backed by £1.5 billion of investment over three years, sets an ambitious target to raise the number of five-year-olds reaching a Good Level of Development (GLD) – or being ‘school ready’ – to 75% by 2028. The strategy and target are a welcome step towards putting children and families at the heart of Government policy.

But there is a long way to go to achieve the target. Last year, 68.3% of children in England reached this threshold; this was only a modest increase on the previous year. As things stand, the government is not on track to hit the target in time.¹

Perhaps more concerning is what lies beneath the headline figures. Some cohorts of children – those growing up in poverty and children with Special Educational Needs (SEND) as the strongest predictors – are far less likely to be school ready at age five. And the gap is widening. As the Government delivers its BSIL strategy, and strives to meet this target, these children must not be overlooked.

Over the past six months, the Centre for Young Lives conducted interviews with 18 local authorities we identified as having marked improvement in their GLD outcomes across a range of criteria including overall progress and progress in closing the attainment gaps between cohorts of children. We set out to identify the conditions of success that local authorities identified as key to driving improvements in early child development outcomes.

What came through clearly from our interviews was that where local authorities are making progress, success is often attributed not to any single programme or intervention, but to the conditions that enable the wider system to work well: strong strategic leadership, long-term investment in early years infrastructure, and sustained partnership working across health, education, children’s services and the voluntary sector.

Many local authorities identified ongoing barriers that limit progress and can undermine efforts to deliver best practice: a fragmented early years landscape in which national policy across does not align and instead can encourage siloed working across health, children’s services and the childcare market; and an early years workforce – early years practitioners and health visitors - that is underpaid and undervalued despite the crucial role they play in supporting child development.

This report is structured around four areas that our research identified as central to improving early childhood development outcomes: strategic leadership in the early years; access to high-quality early education and childcare; integrated health services; and support for parents and the home-learning environment. For each, we set out what local areas told us works well, what

¹ GOV.UK (2025) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Result 2024/25; Department for Education; [Release home - Early years foundation stage profile results - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

challenges they face and what Government action is needed to rocket boost progress across every local authority and deliver on the target by 2028.

Our recommendations focus on three priorities. First, Government should do more to support local areas to integrate early years services – providing clearer national guidance to enable data-sharing, aligning policy across health and education, and strengthening the role of local authorities in leading their early years systems. Our upcoming report, due towards the end of Summer, will set out a framework for how early identification and support can be strengthened through more effective delivery of the 2-2½ year check.

Second, Government should align the early education and childcare system more directly to child development outcomes – addressing workforce pay and conditions, improving the quality and reach of funded provision and ensuring the childcare market operates in children’s interests.

The third recommendation looks beyond the target in 2028 and reaches to the centre of the BSIL strategy: how we can give every child the best start in life, not just for the children turning five in 2028, but every child.

We set out how the Government can build on the momentum in the BSIL Strategy, learn from its successes and its potential downfalls, and think more radically about what we want life to be like for our youngest children. This requires making outcomes in the early years – from pregnancy to five – not just the responsibility of the Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, but the collective responsibility of every government department that will benefit from investing in the early years. Locally, this means putting our youngest children and their families at the heart of local systems and strategic decision making.

The Government’s school readiness target and BSIL strategy have created a genuine moment of focus and alignment around the early years. Local authorities, health partners and the wider sector are ready to build on it. With the right national framework to support them, there is good reason to be confident that progress is within reach - not just for the 2028 milestone, but for a lasting improvement in outcomes for children and families.

Methodology

The findings and recommendations set out in the report draw on interviews with local authorities over the past five months. The majority of interviews were conducted with the local authority early years teams, but several also included a range of other colleagues across education, public health, early years improvement, Best Start local leaders and Directors of Children’s Services.

In order to select local authorities for interviews, we analysed national Early Years Foundation Stage data in order to identify local authorities which have experienced relative progress in recent years in terms of their rate of children achieving a good level of development (GLD). In the first instance, we identified the top ten local authorities which had the most progress in overall GLD (in percentage points) across the following time periods: 2014/15-2019/20; 2021/22-2024/25; and 2014/15-2024/25. We selected local authorities which met one of the criteria in Table 1 (this was in order to cast the net wide in how we define ‘success’ i.e. overall progress, closing the gaps, progress from high or low baseline).

Criteria 1:	Local Authorities which matched or exceed the national absolute GLD growth between 2021/22-2024/25).
Criteria 2:	Local Authorities that have consistently met or exceeded the annual GLD percentage of 65% (2021/2022 national baseline) across all years, from 2021/22 to 2024/25.
Criteria 3:	Local Authorities experiencing even growth between groups. Local Authorities are classified as experiencing even growth when the difference in GLD growth between groups is small (gap \leq 1p.p) but slightly favours eligible children (closing the gap). This criteria considered children with SEN, FSM and EAL.

Table 1: Criteria to identify local authorities for interview

We conducted interviews with representatives from eighteen local authorities across England. The sample of local authorities included:

- At least one local authority from every region in England.
- At least one local authority of each type of council (Metropolitan, Council, Unitary, London Borough).
- Local authorities in urban, mixed and rural areas. The sample was weighted towards urban localities, and we only spoke to two local authorities which had part coastal populations.
- Local authorities across varying levels of deprivation, including at least one local authority from the top ten most deprived areas ranked along Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Throughout this report, we identify only a few local authorities by name where we draw on a specific example of what works locally and where the local authority has given consent to be named. Beyond those specific examples, the insights throughout this report reflect key and recurring themes, successes and barriers across all interviews and are informed by the wider literature.

What is school readiness and why is it important?

The emotional health and physical wellbeing, social skills, and cognitive and language capacities which develop during the first few years of a child's life form the foundations for them to thrive in school and in later life.² Two-fifths of the disadvantage gap visible at age 16 is already present by the time a child turns five.³

Which children are 'school ready' and which are not?

A child is considered 'school ready' when they have achieved a GLD by the end of their reception year, as assessed by their teacher using the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework. The Department for Education (DfE) considers children to be school ready if they have achieved a GLD by the end of Reception, measured against Early Learning Goals (ELGs). The ELGs span three 'prime' areas - Communication and Language, Personal, Social and Emotional Development, and Physical Development - alongside four specific areas: Literacy; Maths; Understanding the World; and Expressive Arts and Design.⁴ In practice, it reflects a child's ability to manage everyday tasks independently like dressing themselves, using the toilet and eating, as well as if they exhibit early social and learning behaviours like listening, playing and communicating with adults and peers.

In 2024/25, just over two in three children (68.3%) were reaching a GLD by age five, a slight increase on the previous year's figure of 67.7%.⁵ While not directly comparable with measures of GLD prior to the pandemic, the overall trajectory of the numbers of children reaching a GLD has been positive over the past decade. However, since 2021, progress in boosting the rate of GLD has slowed – rising by only 3.1 percentage points.⁶

While the direction of travel is positive, 31.7% are not reaching a GLD, arriving at school without the fundamental building blocks they need to succeed. Likewise, the headline figure masks deep inequalities, as some groups of children already far behind their peers by the age of five. Disadvantage – alongside SEND - remains one of the strongest predictors of a child reaching a GLD by age five.

² Cattan, S. et al (2024) Early Childhood inequalities; [Early childhood inequalities | Oxford Open Economics | Oxford Academic](#)

³ Carneira, P. et al (2025) The short- and medium terms effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes; [The short- and medium terms effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes](#)

⁴ GOV.UK (2025) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results 2024/25; Department for Education; [Release home - Early years foundation stage profile results - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Centre for Young Lives analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results 2024/25

Children left behind: what does the most recent data show?⁷

Socioeconomic status: There is a 21.2 percentage point gap between children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and those not eligible. The gap widened by 0.7 percentage points on the previous year.

Gender: 75.3% of girls were school ready, compared to only 61.6% of boys – a gap of 13.7 percentage points. While the gender gap decreased in the most recent year, it has widened by 0.5 percentage points since 2021/22.

Ethnicity: Irish Traveller, Gypsy/Roma, African, Caribbean and ‘any other Black/African/Caribbean background’ have the lowest proportion of children reaching a GLD. The gap between the highest and lowest attaining ethnic groups widened from the previous year to 46.9 percentage points this year.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND): Only 20.6% of children with SEND reached a GLD, a 55.9 percentage point difference compared to children without SEN. For children with EHCPs, only 4% achieved a good level of development. As with the broader overall trend, across each category of SEND, boys are falling behind girls.

Compound disadvantage: Intersecting factors can layer disadvantage and widen the gaps between cohorts. For example, boys eligible for FSM face some of the worst development outcomes. Only 43.5% of boys eligible for FSM reached a GLD in 2024/25 compared to 66% of boys not eligible. For girls eligible for FSM, while still higher than boys, their progress has stagnated in recent years, decreasing this year from 60.1% in 2023/24 to 59.3%.

Term of birth: There is a 14.4 percentage point gap between the proportion of children born in the Autumn term reaching a good level of development (75.6%) and Summer-born children (61.1%). The assessment can be sat by children who have just turned five, and those who are closer to six.

Region: the North of England continues to have the lowest share of children reaching a GLD. The North West region is at the lowest, with on average 65% of children reaching a good level of development. This is compared to regional averages of around 70% in Inner and Outer London and the South East.

The Government’s BSIL strategy rightly recognises that too many children are starting school not equipped with the tools and fundamental skills they need to thrive. It set out an ambitious package of support as a vehicle to achieve the Government’s key Plan for Change milestone: raising the proportion of children reaching a GLD to 75% by 2028. Underpinned by an investment of £1.5 billion over the three years, the strategy set out an ambitious package of support for children in the early years and families, including a renewed network of integrated

⁷ GOV.UK (2025) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results 2024/25; Department for Education; [Release home - Early years foundation stage profile results - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

family support through new Best Start Family Hubs, and plans to expand and improve access and quality of early years education and childcare.⁸

What factors shape child development?

Childhood development is shaped by a wide range of interacting factors spanning parenting, parent-infant interaction, a child's home environment, family circumstance and access to quality early education and care.

Crucially, the home-learning-environment (HLE) has been found to be a stronger and more consistent predictor of children's development at age four and a half than any aspect of their early education and care experience. Evidence shows that the quality of the HLE is a key predictor of a child's future success in terms of early speech and language development, attainment into their later childhood, and has an impact on a child's social and emotional development in the early years which continues until age 16.⁹

However, income related inequalities exist as disadvantage can shape a child's HLE. An enriching HLE are consistently associated with family income and parental education, with children from middle and upper-income families more like to have experienced parent-infant interactions that boost childhood development. Other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – including experience or exposure to abuse, including domestic abuse, poor parental mental health, parental substance abuse and neglect – can have lifelong impacts on development when they occur in the critical early years period.¹⁰

There is a substantial and consistent evidence base demonstrating that high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has beneficial effects on boosting child development, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds as it can mitigate the potential impacts of a child's home-learning environment on their development. Evidence shows that some pre-school experience, when compared to none, enhances all-round development and that an earlier start, high quality of provision, and hours attended are all associated with better development outcomes for children.¹¹

What local authorities told us: the target brings welcome ambition and aspiration; now we need the tools to deliver it

Every local authority welcomed the overarching ambition and direction of the BSIL strategy in bringing overdue attention and recognition to the early years, setting a clear and bold ambition both nationally and locally, and aligning focus and efforts behind a single, shared outcome – boosting child development.

⁸ GOV UK (2025) Giving every child the best start in life; Department for Education

⁹ Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., & Siraj, I. (2015). Effective pre school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+), 50. Retrieved from:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre_school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf

¹⁰ NHS (n.d.) Adverse childhood experiences and the lasting impact; [Adverse childhood experiences and the lasting impact - NHS Safeguarding](#)

¹¹ Ibid.

Many local authorities also highlighted a range of concerns about the target, and the GLD measure itself which may pose risks to the effectiveness of the strategy.

GLD as a measure can mask the specific context of a child

Several local authorities raised concerns about the ability of the GLD measure itself providing a comprehensive and holistic picture of a child's development. Local authorities highlighted that the assessment captures a snapshot of a child's attainment and in reducing their development to a pass/fail outcome, it can mask a child's ability and cause parents to assume their child is 'behind'.

A recurring concern was that the GLD measure is simply not designed to reflect the diversity of many children's circumstances and backgrounds – for example children with SEND, with English as an additional language, born in the Summer term, from deprived backgrounds or children with experiences of trauma as a result of ACEs – which are all factors that can impact the rate of and shape a child's development.

The one-off, short-term nature of the target risks creating perverse incentives for local authorities

Several local authorities raised concerns about the potential risk the target brings in unintentionally creating perverse incentives for local authorities as they strive to meet the target within the short timeframe and confines of the attached funding. They often referred to trade-offs between 'quick wins' to achieve the target and decisions which, while they may not result in meeting the 2028 target, will deliver longer-term improvement to children's outcomes.

Two examples which local authorities highlighted as a potential risk were prioritisation of children turning five in 2028 who will be measured at the target year, or otherwise children who are close to reaching a GLD and may just need low-level additional support. Prioritising efforts and investment in this way risks overlooking or potentially diverting support for children aged zero to two or children much further away from reaching a GLD who would most benefit from intervention but will likely be more long-term and costly. This therefore risks widening the gaps that already exist between children at age five.

Most local authorities we spoke to were aware of the risks of this approach. Some had adopted a dual-pronged approach: supporting those children who just needed a bit of extra help, while also working longer-term with children at the sharper end. Others were choosing to adapt their priorities to reflect their local context. For example, one local authority with historically higher GLD outcomes had decided to focus their efforts on closing the gaps between children eligible for FSM and those who weren't – as opposed to ensuring equal distribution of improvement as per the target.

Some local authorities, and stakeholders across the early years sector, were also disappointed to see that the target did not include ambition to close the disadvantage gap in GLD between children eligible for FSM and children not-eligible – which remains significant and growing, instead requiring progress be equally distributed between children eligible for FSM and those who are not.

The target is welcome, but some local authorities feel as though they have been handed responsibility without power

Local authorities that we spoke to were clear: the targets are welcome, but now they require the tools to deliver them. Beyond the measure itself, many local authorities identified the challenge of having “accountability without power”.

As we set out throughout this report, the early years system is made up of several key actors all essential to supporting children’s development and therefore meeting the Government’s target. Under BSIL, the statutory targets to raise child development outcomes sit with local authorities. Yet, our interviews show that local authorities agree that they have not been granted the additional powers needed to deliver meet Government’s target.

This challenge is the core focus of this report: how Government can support and empower local authorities to pull on the levers of change at their disposal and convene the early years system to deliver on ambitions for school readiness.

Lessons from local authorities

What works to boost childhood development and what challenges are preventing progress?

Strategic leadership in the early years

In our interviews with local authorities which had seen improvements in their GLD, as classified by our criteria, we identified a range of system-level factors that have been crucial to driving progress: strong governance; strategic leadership; and sustained investment in early years infrastructure. However, local authorities also highlighted several persistent challenges that undermine these factors. Fragmented cross-government working, the nature of national policy- and political decision-making, and decades of funding cuts to early years services, all act as a barrier to the conditions that are required for success.

Conditions for success: lessons from local authorities

Improvements in child development outcomes were often attributed to system-level factors that created the conditions needed to boost child development outcomes, rather than specific interventions.

Fast-paced national policy development and changing fiscal contexts have the potential to destabilise local progress. Building a robust local system with the ability to withstand those external pressures, adapt to new contexts and policies, and drive continuous improvement was identified as a core condition of success.

Local authorities which have these systems in place often have strong governance, strategic leadership, and sustained investment in their early years infrastructure that which create solid foundation from which to deliver the BSIL strategy.

Strategic leadership focus in the early years

The strength of governance and oversight over the early years at local authority level was seen as a key factor in success. Accountability and oversight that was shared across a wider range of partners and placed at a senior level within the system was identified as key to driving improvement across the early years system.

Recent government guidance calls on local authorities to lead change and support better coordination between services as they deliver ‘mission-oriented’ plans and join-up across systems and sectors. Every local authority we interviewed had in place strategic oversight mechanisms that were embedded in the system before the introduction of BSIL and the requirement to deliver Best Start Local Plans to establish plans to meet school readiness targets. These governance structures bring together a range of early years partners across health, (early) education, children’s services, and the voluntary sector to provide clear strategic direction and support joined-up delivery.

Two factors were identified as conditions for success: accountability and oversight being placed at a senior level - for example a named priority in the Council’s Children and Young People’s Plan and standing agenda item at Board-level meetings, and a strategic governance mechanism or framework that spanned the full range of partners to support coherence, joint working, identification of gaps and removing duplication in the zero to five space.

Where both of these conditions are met, it serves to raise the profile of the early years across system partners and encourage local-level decision making that reflected a more holistic approach to supporting children and families.

Case Study: Strategic Alliance for Babies, Children and Young People

One local authority established the Strategic Alliance for Babies, Children and Young People. Introduced initially for three years, it was extended to become a ten-year plan which was politically endorsed at a local level and sustained through a change of local governance.

The plan contains seven priority areas: Best Start in Life, Best Education for All, Good Care Provision, Safe at Home and in the Community, Local Family Hubs, and Best Place to Live – identified as the conditions required to make the local authority the best place to live for children and families.

The Alliance is distinct in function from the safeguarding partnership (which responds to urgent escalations and safeguarding matters). It sets out a long-term vision for babies, children and young people to support ways of working which strengthen the offer of support, including strategic commissioning and national programme alignment. Partners represented on the Strategic Alliance include justice, probation, public health, the Integrated Care Board, health providers, early years representatives, secondary school-age representatives, Fire and Rescue, the Ambulance service, the Care Council, and parent voice. The Alliance is underpinned by Memoranda of Understanding with all strategic partners and progress is monitored through regular deep dives.

A further layer of governance operates through Local Alliance Groups, which are a hyper-local embodiment of the Strategic Alliance at community level in a 'locality model'. Each group holds grant funding to allocate locally, with an explicit mandate to prioritise children and young people, working to embed strategic priorities at community level.

Government guidance for Best Start Family Hubs sets a clear expectation for local authorities on how they can most effectively deliver Best Start Local plans and convene the system to meet the targets. It requires local authorities to deliver a Best Start Local plan which establishes a co-produced vision for early years children and families, underpinned by strong local partnerships, clear governance arrangements including joint commissioning plans and outcomes-based accountability.¹² Every local authority agreed that the expectations set out in the guidance are bold and ambitious, and the gold standard for how local authorities should deliver policies effectively. To fulfil this ambition, however, local authorities told us that they needed more than just guidance from central government: they also wanted Government to empower them to take up their role as system leaders, which will require support to remove the structural and systemic barriers prevent local progress.

¹² GOV UK (2026) Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies: Guidance for local authorities; Department for Education; [Best start family hubs and healthy babies - guidance for local authorities](#)

Retaining physical and relational infrastructure

Another factor identified as a condition of success is the extent to which local authorities had managed to retain their early years infrastructure, including local authority early years teams and physical buildings like children's centres. This was seen as key to providing a strong foundation on which to take on new policies and contexts, maintain strong relationships with system partners, and embed themselves more firmly into communities to encourage families in reaching out for support when they need it.

In some cases, but not all, local authorities have retained their early years staff, giving them greater capacity to oversee the wider early years system, provide support to settings and schools, and overall play a greater strategic role in shaping the local early years offer for children and families. Likewise, retention of physical infrastructure like children's centre buildings established under Sure Start provides a strong foundation to adopt government policy under the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme and support the rollout of new Best Start Family Hubs.

However, we recognise that for many local areas this is not the reality. Cuts to funding for overall public services have impacted local authorities across the country. Funding is still due to be lower in real terms by 2028/29 than it was in 2010.¹³ Cuts have also disproportionately impacted more deprived areas: spending power for the most deprived decile of local authorities fell by a third (32.8%) in real terms between 2010/11 and 2019/20 compared to 13.7% in the least deprived decile of local authorities.¹⁴

Likewise, between 2009/10 and 2023/24, local authorities cut spending on preventative services like children's centres and services for young people by 78.6% in real terms.¹⁵ In the same period, 38% of council-run children's centres (1,168) closed and prior to BSIL, spending on children's centres and Family Hubs was around one-quarter of what it was under the peak of Sure Start.^{16 17}

These cuts have undoubtedly shaped local authorities' ability to retain early years infrastructure. One interview revealed that a local authority's early years team included a manager, strategic lead, area SENCOs and six early years advisers, while the neighbouring local authority had only two staff overseeing the same functions. This has a knock-on impact, limiting the ability of local authorities to play the role as system leader and convener, build and maintain strong relationships and support the wider early years system.

¹³ Hoddinott, S., Dellar, A. (2025) Performance Tracker 2025: Local government; Institute for Government; [Performance Tracker 2025: Local government | Institute for Government](#)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Unison (2024) Cuts to children's centres hitting the most disadvantaged; [Cuts to children's centres hitting the most disadvantaged - UNISON National](#)

¹⁷ Centre for Young Lives (2025) A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support; [Fresh Start for Children and Family Support 07.04.pdf - Google Drive](#)

What can be achieved with strategic focus and sustained investment

The ‘A Better Start’ (ABS) programme – a £215 million initiative by the National Lottery Community Fund aimed at improving the life chances of babies and young children – offer a strong blueprint to show what can be achieved when there is a clear strategic direction in the early years, underpinned by strong local leadership and sustained investment. ABS sought to “build systems” by mobilising agencies, communities and families around a shared goal, remove siloed working and strengthen integrated support. In doing so, the model seeks to build a system - rather than simply deliver a programme - to drive improvement and establish infrastructure and ways of working designed to outlast its original funding cycle.

There are five decade-long ABS Partnerships in different areas across the country. In Blackpool, ABS launched in 2015, backed by £45 million over the decade. Strong, shared leadership was a defining feature from the outset. The Blackpool Better Start Executive Board was established to provide formal governance and collective accountability, ensuring early childhood remained a strategic priority even as wider pressures shifted. Membership included the Chief Executive of the Local Authority, Director of Public Health, Director of Resources of the Local Authority, the Chair of the Integrated Care Board and senior leaders from the Hospital Trust, the Police, Better Start and Local Elected Members.¹⁸ The board was also a key component of wider governance structures like the Health and Wellbeing Board.

The effect of ABS in Blackpool has reached beyond school readiness, however child development outcomes reflect the programmes impact. While more children in Blackpool are under the expected level of development compared to the national average, in the three years since 2021/22, there has been a 7.5% increase in the number of children reaching the expected level of development across all Early Learning Goals in Blackpool.¹⁹ This compares to a national average of 4.4%. The Lambeth Early Action Partnership – also funded by ABS – showed similar progress, with babies and children whose families engaged with relevant LEAP services 40% more likely to have reached expected levels of overall development at two and a half.²⁰

What is the challenge?

We know what works well. However, the local authorities we spoke to highlight several factors that undermine good practice and risk destabilising the strategic prioritisation and sustained focus on the early years that is required to deliver on the government’s school readiness target.

National policy overload and sequencing

Local authorities highlighted the challenge of the sheer volume of national policy initiatives arriving simultaneously, without adequate coordination between them, creating a challenge for

¹⁸ Blackpool Better Start (2025) Dashboard report Year 10, 2024/25; [LBR](#)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ LeapLambeth (n.d.) 2025 The story of LEAP; [LEAP - The Story of LEAP](#)

local areas in aligning policy aims, implementation and delivery. Local authorities are delivering or preparing to deliver on BSIL, including the school readiness targets and Best Start Family Hubs, SEND reforms in the Schools White Paper, the updated Healthy Child Programme, reforms to children’s social care and the Child Poverty Strategy. Yet, there is no overarching national framework that aligns them to support effective, joined-up and efficient delivery at a local level.

The lack of alignment – even down to simply when and who receives guidance from government – reflects siloed government working, and this incoherence risks playing out locally. National programmes continue to be accompanied by separate guidance, accountability and reporting requirements and funding arrangements, making it difficult for local systems to align efforts effectively.

As a result, we heard from several local authority teams which often feel as though there is an overreliance on local relationships between different parts of the system including local authority early years teams, public health, wider health partners, early years settings and schools – rather than the ability to rely on a well-structured system that facilitates that join-up by design. Throughout this report we identify examples of strong practice across local authorities to bring together the different actors in the early years system and the policies and programmes that govern them. However, without clear direction and alignment of national policy programmes from central government, local authorities will continue to face challenges in delivering on the government’s school readiness target and wider ambitions for children in the early years.

The focus of early years funding has shifted

While overall public spending in the early years has remained fairly stable since 2010/11, there has been a shift in the nature of that spend as funding for early education and childcare has doubled, while spending on local authority children’s services has fallen significantly – largely as a result of the reduction in Sure Start spending.^{21 22} Recent governments have moved away from funding for councils to deliver early years services and have instead directed the majority of early years funding towards expanding government-funded childcare for working parents.

For local authorities, this shift in recent years has limited their ability to be the leader and strategic convener of the early years system that is required for Best Start Local Plans and to deliver on the government’s school readiness target.

Best Start in Life: the challenge and the risk

While local authorities welcome the additional three-year funding attached to the BSIL strategy – including for new Best Start Family Hubs – several local authorities highlighted the inherent challenge of driving long-term systems change to improve outcomes for children across the full pregnancy to five continuum when funding is attached to specific programmes often targeting specific age ranges. Local authorities raised concerns about the transition at 2028 in terms of

²¹ Alma Economics (2025) Public Spending on the Early Years in England; NESTA; [Alma Economics - A feasibility study and preliminary framework for an alternative heritage sector statistics methodology](#)

the future of the support they are delivering under BSIL, and, without certainty of continuity of funding, how they will be able to support the children born in 2028 and beyond.

One local authority had spent several years developing a HLE pathway triggered by the 2-2½-year development review from age two which was then expanded to become universal due to early signs of impact. When the HLE offer as part of BSIL reverted to 3-4 years, despite the infrastructure in place to support early identification, the funding no longer supported acting on it until the child turned three. While this may be a unique case study, it highlights the challenges that come with programmatic funding aimed at specific age ranges in undermining good practice and supporting early identification.

National government must lead by example for local authorities with strong leadership and strategic prioritisation of the early years to drive improvements in early childhood outcomes. In doing so, they will create the conditions local authorities need to do the same.

A fragmented early years landscape

Delivering on government's ambition to increase the number of children reaching a GLD requires the whole system to work together. At a national level, this requires a clear strategic focus on the early years and effective cross-government collaboration that creates the conditions for local authorities to provide joined-up support. Local authorities must be empowered to pull on the levers at their disposal to drive improvement and work across the system. Part of the challenge in delivering strategic leadership in the early years – both nationally and locally – is the fragmented nature of the system.

The early years system is made up of several different actors – local authority children's services, Best Start Family Hubs, early education and childcare settings, health partners and the wider voluntary and community sector. Despite government directives to drive integration at a local level – set out in the BSIL strategy and Best Start Family Hubs guidance - the reality for local authorities is that competing priorities across actors in the system can reinforce siloed working and undermine local efforts to align the system behind a shared strategic goal.

While each actor in the wider early years system - local authority early years teams, public health and wider health services, and the childcare market and the early years sector – are all crucial to supporting children in the early years, the fragmented nature of system prevents the whole sector developing a strong collective voice to advocate to government for early years improvements.

The evidence from local authorities is clear: improving child development outcomes is not simply a matter of delivering the right programmes, but of building and sustaining the right conditions for the whole early years system to function effectively. Where strategic leadership, strong governance and adequate resourcing have been maintained, local areas have demonstrated that meaningful progress is achievable. However, without greater alignment and long-term commitment at a national level, local authorities will continue to operate in a system that challenges this and risks undermining the ambitions of the BSIL strategy.

Access to high-quality early education and childcare for all children

Just under two-thirds of children aged 0-4 are using formal childcare (64%), providing care for children at a critical point in their early development.²³ The BSIL strategy rightly recognises the importance of high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare in boosting child development. The most recent expansion of government funded childcare hours – which has the dual aim of supporting parents into work and improving child development outcomes - has doubled government spending on entitlements to over £9 billion, making up the majority of overall early years spending.²⁴

The childcare market is therefore a fundamental lever through which government can deliver on its school readiness target: delivering high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare to children and families.

The expansion alone will not deliver on this ambition. Government must now pull on the levers at its disposal to align the early education and childcare system with its ambitions to give every child the best start in life.

The childcare market today

Government now controls the prices of 80% of early education and childcare – up from 50% before the expansion – delivered by providers across the private sector, both for-profit and not-for-profit, and state-funded settings.²⁵

The balance of provision has been changing in recent years, with larger private provision now accounting for the majority of childcare, a shift that has been accelerated by the expansion.²⁶ While the most recent DfE data does not disaggregate data between private and voluntary group-based settings, data from 2019 to 2024 consistently showed a growing majority of children attend settings delivered in the private sector.²⁷

Likewise, there has been a rise in large chains as single or small group, for-profit, voluntary and community nurseries have merged, with 43% of private settings forming part of a chain.²⁸ Within the for-profit segment of the market, a distinct model of ownership has taken hold: large nursery chains have increasingly come to be owned and operated under private equity

²³ GOV UK (2025) Childcare and early years survey of parents; Department for Education; [Release home - Childcare and early years survey of parents - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

²⁴ GOV UK (2025) [Record £9.5 billion early years investment - GOV.UK](#)

²⁵ Drayton, E. et al (2023) Annual report on education spending in England: 2023; Institute for Fiscal Studies; [Annual report on education spending in England: 2023](#)

²⁶ Simon, A (2022) Opinion: Large for-profit nursery groups are becoming more common – with negative consequences; UCL; [Opinion: Large for-profit nursery groups are becoming more common – with negative consequences | UCL News - UCL – University College London](#)

²⁷ GOV UK (2024) Childcare and early years provider survey, 2024 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024>

²⁸ GOV UK (2025) Childcare and early years survey of parents; Department for Education; [Release home - Childcare and early years survey of parents - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

structures characterised by high levels of debt financing, complex corporate arrangements, a focus on short-term financial returns, and growth through acquisition and merger rather than organic expansion – raising questions about sustainability, transparency and quality.^{29 30}

Limited access to high-quality provision disproportionately impacts deprived communities

The decline in access to childcare due to the falling number of childcare providers across the country has not been evenly spread across the country. Some parts of the country experience persistently low access to childcare – known as ‘childcare deserts’, disproportionately impacting more deprived areas where parents have lower than average incomes.³¹ Of the local authorities in the bottom tertile of good levels of development (areas with the lowest percentage of children reaching a good level of development), 76% are considered childcare deserts (39).³²

The expansion in access to funded childcare in recent years has done very little to address these disparities. Analysis of Ofsted data shows that almost all of the growth in nursery places between 2018 and 2024 occurred in the least and less deprived areas of England, while the most deprived areas saw virtually no net increase in places over the six-year period.³³ This pattern is most pronounced among private-equity-backed providers, which concentrate the majority of their new openings in the least deprived areas and provide the fewest places and the fewest new openings in the most deprived areas.³⁴

Evidence shows that the quality of early education and childcare is lower among private, group-based settings which risks undermining efforts of the expansion to deliver high-quality care to children and boost their early outcomes. Private group-based providers of early education and childcare are more likely to offer lower quality provision for children with higher-staff turnover (16% compared to 6% in maintained nurseries), lower qualified staff (11% with a level 6 compared to 41% in school-based providers) and employer younger staff who may be less experienced (26% under 25s compared to 7% in maintained nurseries).³⁵

²⁹ Simon, A., Penn, H., Shah, A., Owen, C., Lloyd, E., Hollingworth, K. and Quy, K. (2022). Financialisation and private equity in early childhood care and education in England. *Journal of Social Policy*, 53(2), 512–529.

³⁰ Simon, A (2022) Opinion: Large for-profit nursery groups are becoming more common – with negative consequences; UCL; [Opinion: Large for-profit nursery groups are becoming more common – with negative consequences | UCL News - UCL – University College London](#)

³¹ GOV UK (2024); [Commentary: Changes in access to childcare in England - GOV.UK](#)

³² Centre for Young Lives (2025) Fresh Start for Children and Family Support; [690a3b500519c9e025875da5_REVISIED TWO CFYL Full Report 0411.pdf](#)

³³ Simon, A., Hollingworth, K. and Bokhari, T. (2025). *Nursery Closures and Openings in England since 2018: Does ownership type matter?* London: UCL / Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ GOV UK (2025) Childcare and early years survey of parents; Department for Education; [Release home - Childcare and early years survey of parents - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

Conditions for success: lessons from local authorities

Access to high-quality early education and childcare is key for improving children's early development outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and there is also strong evidence linking higher qualification levels of early years staff with high quality provision and children's outcomes.³⁶

Local authorities have responsibilities under law to secure early childhood services for the benefit of parents, prospective parents and young children, taking 'reasonable steps' to involve parents, early years providers and other relevant stakeholders in those arrangements.³⁷ They must consider the quantity and quality of services and work proactively to engage local parents to take up places. Councils must also provide information, advice and training for childcare providers in their area to support high-quality provision.

Our interviews with local authorities highlighted some examples of what works to strengthen the local early education and childcare offer for children: proactive engagement and strong relationships with settings, targeted support to boost quality and specialist support for settings, and system-wide workstreams to strengthen recruitment to the early years workforce.

Proactive engagement with settings to support quality improvement

Every local authority we interviewed highlighted the importance of strong relationships with their local early years providers as a key enabler in supporting quality improvement across settings. Robust partnerships created the relational infrastructure that supported continuous improvement, encouraged proactive outreach for support from providers, and empowered local authorities to take a more active role in assessing and supporting settings that might be at risk of underperforming.

Crucially, this enabled local authorities to identify settings facing difficulty early, before problems escalated, and without the need to wait for Ofsted to inspect or intervene. It also worked to support delivery of a consistent offer across all early years providers to ensure quality and support smooth transitions for children into education.

Creating a consistent, high-quality offer for children and families across early years settings

Our interviews identified several mechanisms supporting quality improvement – a requirement by law - that encouraged proactive and ongoing engagement with settings. Named, consistent relationships between local authority advisors and settings were cultivated over time, in place of what could otherwise become transactional interactions. Early years leaders' and wider professional networks and regular local authority bulletins for providers helped to keep local settings – of all provider types - informed and professionally aligned. This continuous, often low-cost infrastructure helped to maintain consistent quality expectations across the whole

³⁶ GOV UK (2015); [Study of early education and development \(SEED\) - GOV.UK](#)

³⁷ Local Government Association (2024) [Early education and childcare resource pack | Local Government Association](#)

sector. One local authority developed and published a framework for a consistent offer in early years settings that was supported by targeted training to deliver it. A consistent offer across settings also worked to improve structural coherence across the system, forging stronger links between early years, SEND teams, children’s social care and family hub infrastructure.

For more complex challenges in settings, several local authorities had adopted a ‘team around the setting’ approach which was deployed when a concern was raised. Multi-disciplinary teams included advisory teachers, early years SENCOs, curriculum consultants and specialist staff to address gaps in support. The ability of local authorities to deliver both universal and targeted, intensive quality improvement was often dependent on the resource and capacity in the team. Many local authorities went into settings to deliver training which mitigated some of the challenges around workforce capacity.

The majority of local authorities we interviewed were working to deliver support that was proactive, underpinned by ongoing engagement that support continuous self-evaluation and improvement of settings. This was to prevent settings facing concerns over quality altogether, while creating a culture that supported early identification of settings facing difficulty.

Targeted support to boost leadership quality and capacity in the early years sector

One Council attributed much of their success in boosting school readiness outcomes to a sustained programme of work with their early years settings. The workstream focused on strengthening local collaborative working with the early years sector and boosting leadership capacity and capability in local settings. The latter was seen as a key mechanism to act as an ‘engine’ for early years improvement.

Before new ways of working were introduced, lack of capacity meant often early years settings were unable to effectively prioritise professional development, undertake self-evaluation to deliver continuous improvement, and often managers felt overwhelmed and unable to take up key leadership responsibilities around performance management, comprehensive staff induction and focus on curriculum and pedagogy.

To support early years settings, the Council adopted a ‘management cycle’ approach constituting an interlocking set of management practices introduced and embedded across settings over many years with three core components: robust, evidence-based evaluation, focused improvement planning based on self-evaluation, and performance management to ensure individual’s professional development targets align with whole-setting priorities.

Training opportunities were targeted exclusively at senior leaders and managers rather than practitioners, underpinned by the rationale that practice should be disseminated from leadership level downwards and would ensure learning was effectively shared across settings. This top-down approach was seen to improve how manager led, evaluated and supported their staff – creating a multiplying effect across the settings. The approach also involved intensive, sustained training programmes rather than isolated half-days.

Interventions often ran over several months, with training days, tasks between sessions and opportunities for feedback and progress reports from settings. Training was delivered in 'cohorts' – where settings were grouped and attended training together – creating a learning community that supported sustained engagement and prevented drop out.

The local authority noted a marked improvement in reducing turbulence at manager level in settings, which previously saw repeated churn of leaders coming and going. The local authority similarly received feedback from reception teachers who reported an improvement in terms of development of the children entering their schools from these settings.

Likewise, of the local authorities we interviewed, those who reported more limited resource and capacity for quality support and improvement, the majority were targeting proactive support to settings identified as weaker. Targeting the support – including training and professional development opportunities – to specific settings, rather than as a universal offer, avoided stronger settings self-selecting into support and encouraged weaker settings to engage.

Local efforts to build a sustainable early years workforce

A significant number of the local authorities were facing workforce shortages and were actively undertaking work to offset the impact on quality of provision.

Several local authorities were working in partnership with local schools and colleges to promote the early years as a career destination, promoting pathways and incentives to attract young people into the profession. One local authority had a designated working group of a diverse range of providers, with staff from practitioner to owner, that collaborate to offer schools and colleges a fully rounded picture of what the sector has to offer. Another was in the process of developing a longer-term programme of work to engage parents and local community members as the prospective workforce. In doing so, they had an ambition to not only create a sustainable workforce, but one that was culturally responsive to the context and needs of local babies, children and families.

Local authorities did reflect however on the limits to these approaches in the context of broader structural challenges facing the early years workforce like low pay.

Supporting settings to identify and respond to additional need

In the context of rising need among babies and young children arriving at settings – increasingly younger and in higher numbers since the entitlement expansion – several local authorities identified the challenge of effectively meeting the needs of all children. This was either due to a lack of sufficient places, or concerns of an underqualified workforce ill-equipped to meet the needs of young children in their settings.

Several local authorities are working innovatively to overcome these challenges and ensure the needs of children are met – particularly those with SEND or from disadvantaged backgrounds who benefit most from high-quality early education but are also disproportionately impacted by a lack of access. Many providers have described responding proactively to rising complex needs through working with external professionals, investing in additional training, taking on

new staff and adjusting ratios, and adjusting the curriculum to be inclusive for all children.³⁸ Ofsted's new framework foregrounds inclusion, however delivering it in settings will require additional resource and support to ensure settings are set up to support every child.

Kent City Council: Transforming SEND Inclusion – From Extraction to Outreach

Kent City Council has in recent years undertaken work to transform their model for children with SEND or emerging developmental needs in the early years. The previous model involved 12 specialist nurseries run by special schools. When a child was identified as having vulnerabilities or additional needs, they were removed from their mainstream early years setting and placed in a special school nursery which was identified as disrupting their education and routine at the developmental stage when consistency and familiarity matter most.

The revised model applies a mainstream presumption: unless a child's needs are identified as too complex to be sufficiently met in a mainstream setting, they remain in their mainstream early years setting. The 12 specialist nurseries now operate as outreach providers sending specialist staff into mainstream settings to work with children who have additional needs. The outreach model is relatively new, but early evaluation has been identified as positive, both in terms of impact on the children supported and in terms of building capacity within the mainstream settings that receive outreach. Staff in mainstream settings are generalising the specialist strategies to other children, creating a multiplier effect that benefits the whole setting, not just the individual child.

Several local authorities were targeting their resource towards settings who had higher proportions of children in receipt of early years high-needs funding to deliver support and training to staff to help them meet the needs of the children. One local authority we interviewed was delivering targeted work to identify PVI settings with the highest concentration of children receiving Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) and working with those settings to adopt a targeted, early identification approach. This approach encouraged settings to identify children most at risk of not achieving a good level of development from the moment they enter the setting, and work with the local authority to deliver necessary support. In this approach, EYPP is used as an intervention trigger or proxy indicator for more intensive support, as well as a mechanism for additional funding.

However, uptake of EYPP is inconsistent across areas meaning this approach alone could miss settings with fewer resources to undertake the administrative burden of accessing EYPP.³⁹

Targeted support to promote equal access to early education and childcare

Several local authorities we interviewed were consciously working to increase support for children less likely to reach a good level of development.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Campbell, T. (2025) Who has been registered for free school meals and pupil premium in the National Pupil Database; Education Policy Institute; [FSM-report-March-2025_PDF.pdf](#)

While the number of working families using registered places is at a record high however, the number of poorer families or those unable to work has fallen to the lowest level on record.⁴⁰ The number of eligible two-year olds registered as ‘families receiving additional support’ – previously the disadvantage entitlement - is now at 65%, down 10% from the previous year.⁴¹ While this may in part be due to these families registering under the new working parent entitlement in some areas, falling take up of the disadvantaged offer may be contributing to the disadvantage gap in schools readiness.

Approaches from local authorities to mitigate this trend included promoting widely the universal three-to-four-year-old entitlement through a range of professional and community partners. Some local authorities had adopted more targeted and resource-intensive approaches to engaging families eligible for the entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds, including through adjusted funded rates to target specific groups. One local authority was working with PVI settings to safeguard places for younger children eligible for the disadvantaged entitlement and building equity requirements into the criteria for early years expansion and pivot the local market to deliver on the local authority’s ambition to boost access to early education and childcare.

Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs

Stronger Practice Hubs form a core part of the local early years system in supporting early years practitioners across the country, sharing evidence-informed best practice and offering professional outcomes to improve outcomes for young children.

An evaluation of the Stronger Practice Hub programme highlighted positive impact in improving settings’ practice and improving child development outcomes, with over 8,000 settings in network membership and just under half (43%) of those being in deprived settings.⁴² Where it works well, the hub model was identified as positive way to support the sector in its peer-led, responsive and inclusive approach and works to embed collaborative working across the early years sector across providers and local authorities.

However, the evaluation challenges that undermined the success of Hubs in some areas. For example, there were challenges around setting staff being able to access professional development opportunities due to capacity, workforce shortages or other logistical issues like timing or geographical challenges.⁴³ Support for children with SEND and children under two were also identified as two areas where settings wanted more support. Similarly, we heard through interviews with local authorities and Stronger Practice Hubs that there remained challenges in strong partnership and aligning programmes between the local authority and the Hubs and the extent to which this was taking place varied across areas.

⁴⁰ GOV UK (2025) Funded early education and childcare; Department for Education; [Release home - Funded early education and childcare - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² GOV UK (2025) Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs Evaluation; Department for Education; [Early years stronger practice hubs evaluation](#)

⁴³ Ibid.

The Government's Best Start in Life strategy committed to doubling the number of Stronger Practice Hubs to 36, extending the programme with additional funding for a further three years to March 2029. As the programme is extended over the coming years, ensuring it's success in supporting the early years sector will require join-up nationally and locally to maximise the role of Hubs.

What are the challenges?

Wider structural factors, however, challenge local authorities' ability to ensure a high-quality and consistent early years offer

The early years sector faces persistent structural challenges around workforce quality and sustainability, with persistently low pay, limited career progression, and staff shortages that undermine the ability of settings to deliver high-quality provision. These challenges are particularly acute for children with SEND, and children from deprived backgrounds who face more significant barriers to accessing high quality support as a result of childcare deserts and staff lacking the specialist skills and knowledge to meet additional needs.

Local authorities also face significant barriers in driving consistent quality improvement, navigating a fragmented childcare market increasingly shaped by large national chains, and navigating working alongside an inspection regime that can undermine their efforts to proactively engage settings.

Workforce challenges undermine high-quality early education and childcare

Without investing sufficiently in the early years workforce, there is a risk that the impact of the expansion of entitlements on child development could be undermined.

The proportion of staff with a level 4 or above (higher education) early years or teaching-related qualifications still only makes up around a quarter of the workforce, and a significant minority are qualified to level 2 (GCSE and below).⁴⁴ While school-based settings have seen some improvement, group-based providers have seen little change in terms of qualified staff.

Workforce shortages undermine local efforts to boost quality of provision

We heard from several local authorities which were facing staffing shortages and capacity issues. In many cases this limited settings' ability to engage with training and professional development opportunities provided by the council, while requirements around staff ratios in some cases meant managers and leaders were stepping into staff roles, leaving less time and capacity for them to undertake their wider responsibilities: properly inducting new staff, supporting wider workforce development, capacity building and wellbeing. It can also detract

⁴⁴ Flemons, L., Worth, J. (2026) Early Years Workforce in England Annual Report 2026; [early_years_workforce_in_england2026.pdf](#)

from their ability to take up a more strategic role at a system-wide level in terms of engaging with local partners and strengthening join up.

The government estimated that delivery of the fully expanded free childcare entitlement would require an additional 35,000 staff between by September 2025. While the workforce grew by nearly 20,000 between 2023 and 2024 and appeared on track, growth stalled in 2025, with only around 600 additional staff recorded. potential shortfall in staff numbers is not evenly distributed across the country, with the South West, West Midlands and North East.⁴⁵

An evaluation of the Government's financial incentives scheme to attract people to the early years profession found the scheme to unsuccessful in increasing the number of applications, and limited effectiveness in attracting suitable candidates with the right qualifications.⁴⁶ This reflects a more comprehensive approach to addressing the longer-standing structural and systemic issues facing the early years workforce.

Low pay and poor pay progression creates challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff

Low pay in the early years sector was one of the most consistent concerns in our local authority interviews. It created challenges in recruitment, retention of high-quality staff and risked undermining the quality of support for children. Several local authorities raised concerns about the young age of many newer early years practitioners. While working with schools and colleges to establish stronger pathways into the profession, capacity constraints among senior setting staff risked new staff not getting properly trained and inducted to deliver high quality care.

Local authorities were clear; without higher pay, workforce challenges would persist. Despite modest relative improvement in recent years, early years workers earn significantly less than the broader workforce and, crucially, less than workers in comparable roles. Across 2024/25, early years workers consistently earn around 30% less than workers in similar sectors and roles.⁴⁷ Even among the highest earners in the early years workforce – those likely to be the most qualified – early years workers earned just £4 above the minimum wage in 2023/24.⁴⁸

At the same time, limited opportunities for career progression impacts the ability of providers to retain staff resulting in high staff turnover rates and more qualified staff choosing to leave the profession for better paid jobs. Only 49% of early years workers agreed that there were opportunities for progression at their work, compared to 57% among similar workers.⁴⁹ This creates a challenge in recruiting adequately qualified staff to provide high-quality early education and care both in attracting qualified workers to the sector and retaining higher-

⁴⁵ Flemons, L., Worth, J. (2026) Early Years Workforce in England Annual Report 2026; [early_years_workforce_in_england2026.pdf](#).

⁴⁶ GOV UK (2025) Early years financial incentives evaluation; Department for Education; [EYFI final report October 2025](#)

⁴⁷ Flemons, L., Worth, J. (2025) Early Years Workforce in England; NFER; [The Early Years Workforce in England 2025 | NFER](#)

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

qualified staff. Several local authorities had seen more qualified staff leaving the profession to go and work in similar sectors with higher pay.

Insufficient access to early education and childcare for children with SEND

Early years practitioners and local authority early years teams have been reporting a growth in volume and complexity of need, a trend that was seen to have been emerging before the pandemic. The most significant change described by practitioners was the growth in the number of children with communication and interaction needs, and the complexity of those needs, with more children presenting with very limited or no language or social communication needs.⁵⁰

We heard from local authorities that access to specialist support and resources for providers to support children with SEND is often largely dependent on the wider local SEND system and, as a result, parents of children with SEND face a postcode lottery in access to appropriate care settings, both in availability and quality. Likewise, some local authorities told us that there often lacks early years representative in SEND partnerships. A 2026 Survey found that only 44% of local authorities in England reported having enough childcare for at least 75% of early years children with SEND in their area. Similarly, a number of providers reported reducing the hours that children who needed additional support could attend or having to turn away children because they could not meet their needs – with 4 in 10 local authorities having a concern about insufficient places for children with additional needs.⁵¹

Access to places is only one part of the challenge. Early years staff require sufficient knowledge and training to both identify and meet the needs of the children entering their settings. We heard from local authorities that even where opportunities for training for early years staff are available, workforce shortages, ratio requirements and a lack of capacity mean staff are unable to take up training offers. Without addressing the deeper structural challenges facing the sector – particularly those facing the sustainability and quality of the workforce – Government risks undermining recent efforts to drive inclusion like the new SEND training.

The government has recently made several commitments to strengthen inclusion in the early years, including the Early Years Inclusion Fund, funding for a new Experts at Hand service, a SEND practitioner in every Best Start Family Hub and new funding for SEND training for teachers to meet the new expectation that every teacher, including those in the early years, will receive SEND training. This package of support will sit alongside the Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF) and Disability Access Funding (DAF) which provides additional funding to meet the needs of children with SEND. However, evidence shows that there is significant variation in how local authorities manage SENIF funding around application processes, accountability and fund usage.⁵² A lack of clear national guidance for local authorities on the

⁵⁰ Bryant, B., Reed, J. (2025) “Rising needs in the early years”; Isos Partnership; [Rising needs in the early years](#)

⁵¹ Bryant, B., Reed, J. (2025) “Rising needs in the early years”; Isos Partnership; [Rising needs in the early years](#)

⁵² UK Parliament (2026) Solving the SEND Crisis; Education Select Committee; [Solving the SEND Crisis](#)

effective use of SENIF funding means there is significant variation across areas and inconsistent access to high-quality support for all children.

Barriers to local accountability and early years improvement

The nature of the local childcare market shapes efforts to drive up quality

In several areas, strong partnership working and cohesion between local authorities and providers was attributed to the determination and persistence of local authority teams. Continuous outreach and ongoing engagement were required to bring local providers 'on board' and encourage them to be proactive in engaging with the local authority support and improvement offer.

The nature of the local childcare market shaped some local authorities' ability to build and maintain these relationships. One local authority attributed its strong offer to the absence of large national chains in the area, instead hosting a 'diverse and locally rooted mixed economy' of maintained provision, PVI settings, childminders, school-based nurseries and maintained and academised schools. Prior to the rollout of school-based nurseries nationally, this local authority had piloted the model locally to deliver partnerships between PVI settings and primary schools to boost provision in schools with falling nursery rolls. The local authority identified their local context of mixed provision as enabling the cultivation a shared ethos of collective responsibility for all children in the area, regardless of the provider type.

Some local authorities raised concerns about the trend of small local providers either closed down or being merged with large chains, and the impact this had on quality, choice for parents, and building a strong local system network for supporting all settings and providing a consistent local offer. We heard from several local authorities that the presence of large chains in their area made it harder for these relationships to be cultivated. Settings in large chains often had their own internal policies and therefore were less likely to engage with the support and improvement offer provided by the local authority. It is worth noting however that there are also challenges for local authorities in engaging settings of other types including school-based and other independent settings.

The role of Ofsted in early years quality improvement: proactive engagement versus inspection-driven accountability

We heard from several local authorities that there can be a tension that plays out locally between their responsibility to support quality improvement, and the role of Ofsted as regulator in inspecting settings.

Local authorities that we spoke to raised concerns about the quality of Ofsted inspections and their ability to meaningfully assess the quality of provision and how settings are supporting child development. Many felt as though Ofsted did not consider or reflect the local authority's perspective or local insights when making judgements on settings.

In some cases, this created situations where a local setting will receive a positive inspection outcome from Ofsted, despite the local authority itself having concerns about the quality of the setting based on their local knowledge and insight. As a result, some settings may forego efforts

from the local authority to proactively engage to support quality improvement, because of that inspection outcome. This tension undermines local authority efforts to create a strong framework for proactive engagement and support for settings to boost quality before problems and difficulties escalate.



The early education and childcare system is fundamental to delivering on government's school readiness target and the wider ambitions of the BSIL strategy. Local authorities are demonstrating what is possible through proactive, relationship-driven approaches to quality improvement, but their efforts will remain constrained without national action to align the childcare market, invest in the workforce, and build an accountability system that supports continuous improvement rather than simply measuring it. As the government undertakes its Childcare Review, informed by a review of the market from the Competition and Markets Authority, it should seek to align the early education and childcare system with its wider ambitions, empowering local – and regional – governments to play their part in that too.

Integrated health services to join up support for children and families

It is well established across government, local services and the sector that integrated services are key to providing a strong, joined up offer of support.

For children and families, integrated services mean a single-front door approach where they'll receive the support they need regardless of where they go to ask for help, it means smooth transition across services without needing to repeat their history, and it means local services that can support early identification of need and strong referral pathways that ultimately boost outcomes for children. For local services, integration means joint working is by design – from strategic level down to delivery, it removes duplication and complexity, and it strengthens the offer of support for children and families.

Strong integrated services are a key part of the puzzle in joining up the wider early years system to deliver on school readiness targets. Delivered well, integrated services can support early identification of need - from pre-birth and birth - and strong pathways to support for early intervention. Local authorities recognise the benefits of integrated services, and each were working locally to strengthen that joined-up offer. However, structural and systemic barriers obstruct progress, and government action is required to create the conditions local authorities require to drive improvement and boost child development outcomes.

Conditions for success: lessons from local authorities

In some cases, stronger integration at a local level was attributed to specific local context rather than resulting from structural factors that enabled joined up working, for example, in smaller geographical areas where there were stronger links between services underpinned by close relationships. However, despite the barriers they were facing, almost every local area we interviewed was delivering innovative ways of working to maximise opportunities to integrate services.

Co-location of services in hubs was often seen to be the gold standard in integrated support for children and families, however the extent to which this was being delivered across local authorities varied. One local authority delivered all its health visitor provision in children's centres and family hubs, and almost half of its midwifery provision took place in hubs. This included baby groups delivered by midwives alongside family hub workers.

Integrated structures to support joined up delivery

Integrated governance and commissioning to align services

There was recognition, however, that co-location alone is not the silver bullet to integrated services. Without a structural framework to support integration locally, co-location risks being surface-level integration that fails to join up the wider system. Integrated governance structures and robust data-sharing arrangements are needed to deepen and strengthen integration.

At a strategic level, joint commissioning of services allowed local areas to maximise finite resources, avoid duplication and strengthen partnership working across partners by design, underpinned by clear data sharing agreements that encouraged effective, purposeful data sharing. These arrangements were key to establishing clear roles and responsibilities for partners working across the early years system and creating collective accountability. One local authority developed an integrated leadership model whereby the early years lead in the local authority was the professional lead for the health visiting contract, meeting regularly with the provider and lead health visitor to monitor performance. This creates formal contractual accountability and effective data sharing for health visiting within the education side of children's services and embedded joint working arrangements and collective responsibility.

Sharing live birth data was identified as a key enabler of early identification and intervention, however the extent to which it was happening across our interviews was varied. Where local authorities did have strong data sharing agreements in place, access to timely birth information helped services proactively outreach to families, particularly those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or less likely to engage with support independently. It also helped to strengthen collaboration between health services, local authorities and children's centres, and support the identification of hard-to-reach families before problems escalate.

Maximising specialist staff and upskilling the system

In the context of rising need and specialist workforce shortages such as speech and language therapists, several local authorities had developed or implemented innovative approaches to maximise specialist staff and upskill across the system. This had a multiplier effect across the system in supporting early identification and providing support for children who might not meet the threshold for specialist support but may be at risk from not meeting developmental milestones.

One local authority had implemented the Balance System programme for speech and language provision in response to it as a key area of unmet need, and to address challenges in access to speech and language therapists. The Balance System is a three-tiered programme where specialists provide training, supervision and oversight for provider staff, school staff and parents – building knowledge and good language development across the system. The second and third tier offer more targeted and specialist interventions to children with higher levels of need.

Wokingham Council: A Test and Learn approach to Speech and Language

Wokingham Council developed a speech and language telephone helpline for parents and settings, born out of informal conversations between the head of the speech and language service, the early years team, and the senior educational psychologist.

It was identified that children with speech and language concerns were waiting too long for a formal appointment, and in some cases were reaching school age before receiving any support, at which point they transferred to the school-age service and went back to the bottom of the waiting list.

To address that challenge, a telephone helpline was developed through which parents or settings could speak directly with a speech and language therapist for advice, reassurance, or guidance on next steps – introduced through a ‘test and learn’ approach. The impact was dramatic: waiting times fell from up to 18 months to a maximum of four weeks. The phone line enabled earlier triage, diverted cases that did not require formal therapy, and gave parents and settings the confidence to manage lower-level concerns without escalation.

The success of this programme was attributed to Wokingham's broader culture of agile, relationship-based innovation, partly a function of Wokingham's relatively small size, which reduces the number of layers between identifying a problem and trying a solution.

What are the challenges?

Persistent challenges in data-sharing

Every local authority identified the persistent challenge of effective data sharing as undermining local efforts to integrate support for families. They recognised the significant potential of effective data sharing in strengthening early identification, expanding reach of services through targeting families not accessing or typically underserved by support and supporting smooth transitions for families between services across the early years system. Strong data sharing arrangements are particularly crucial given the fragmented nature of the early years system across health, education, early years settings, children’s services, Best Start Family Hubs and wider community and voluntary partners (who often are more attuned to the specific local contexts and needs owing to them being more rooted in local communities).

Local authorities frequently cited the lack of clear guidance or a framework from government as a barrier to effective multi-agency data-sharing - something the government consistently highlights as best practice in national guidance. One local authority described this challenge as ‘being asked to run a marathon without being given the trainers to run it’. At a basic level, different IT systems across partners makes sharing data a logistical challenge. This is complicated further by a lack of clarity and confidence around GDPR rules, and often a lack of access to sufficient training on effective data use which can lead to overcautious constraints on sharing of data.

Part of the current challenge can also come from parental hesitancy to consent to information sharing across services. Local authorities recognised this concern often as a result of a lack of clear messaging on how and why data is shared, and the benefits effective data sharing can deliver in terms of the support available to families.

Strengthening early identification to support early childhood development

Public health plays a crucial role in the earliest years of a child's life, including pre-birth, and is a core element of a strong early years offer. There is strong evidence to show how critical the first 1,001 days from pregnancy to two – a period of rapid development – are in setting the foundations for a child's cognitive, emotional and physical development.

Conditions for success: lessons from local authorities

In some cases, stronger integration at a local level was attributed to specific local context rather than resulting from structural factors that enabled joined up working for example in smaller geographical areas where there were stronger links between services underpinned by close relationships. However, despite the barriers they were facing, almost every local area we interviewed was delivering innovative ways of working to maximise opportunities to integrate services.

The Healthy Child Programme

The Healthy Child Programme (HCP) is the national framework for improving the health and wellbeing of babies, children and young people from 0-19 (up to 25 for children with SEND) and is the only universal service that sees and supports families from pregnancy through to adolescence. In 2025/26, councils in England are expected to invest through the Public Health Grant, £941 million in children's public health services for children 0-5.⁵³ Local authorities commission the HCP programme with flexibility in how it's delivered – such as through NHS organisations, VCS, private and independent providers or 'in house' staff.

Under the HCP, the mandated early years offer (0-5) includes five universal health and development reviews for all eligible families from antenatal to 2-2½ years. The review at 2-2½ years currently uses the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, Third Edition (ASQ-3) to assess development across five domains: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving and personal social skills.⁵⁴

Integrating health visiting with the wider early years offer

At delivery level, co-location of services and integrated delivery was a key enabler in providing a strong support offer for babies and young children and their families. In the years since health visiting was brought into local government, councils have developed new ways of working: integrating health visiting with other early years services. The integrated two-year review brings together the 2-2½ health and development review with the Early Years Progress Check at age 2

⁵³ Local Government Association (2026) [Must knows for elected members: The Healthy Child programme](#) | [Local Government Association](#)

⁵⁴ GOV UK (2026) [Healthy child programme - GOV.UK](#); Department of Health and Social Care

to provide a more holistic assessment of childhood development, however the extent to which this is offered by local authorities is hugely varied.

Many areas have developed specialist posts for vulnerable groups, such as targeted, intensive health visiting support to families accessing drug or alcohol treatment. One local authority delivered all its health visitor provision in children's centres and family hubs, and almost half of its midwifery provision took place in hubs. This included baby groups delivered by midwives alongside family hub workers.

Whole-system training – including health visiting, education staff and family hub staff – was repeatedly cited as working to strengthen system-wide response and ensure consistency across local partners in understanding child development and identifying and meeting need.

Integrated Health Visiting Model, Camden Council

Camden Council described their approach to delivering health visiting that was fully integrated with the local authority's family hub services.

A centrepiece of the offer in Camden is the Best Start for Baby programme, functioning as an enhanced Healthy Child Programme, offering every family an appointment every three months in the first year of life, filling the gap between the mandatory 6-week and 12-month reviews that exist in the standard national programme. Best Start Healthy Babies funding enabled the Early Years and Family Hub Service to invest in Psychology expertise to design the programme, with a focus on strengthening perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationship practice and interventions (e.g. Video Interaction Guidance, Circle of Security), and developing referral pathways and an outcomes framework. A second priority is supporting early language by leading a strategic partnership, Camden Kids Talk which includes universal delivery of WellComm screening at the 12 month review, with plans for implantation at the 2 year review.

All health visiting and family hub staff have completed perinatal mental health training and Ready To Relate training. The Newborn Behavioural Observation tool is now a standard part of the new birth visit. Further training for the integrated early years workforce will include MORS (Mothers Object Relations Scales) and Watch Me Play! Camden also deploys psychologists as embedded members of health visiting teams within each family hub, enabling any family to access mental health support or relationship support at a universal, non-stigmatised level, with easy onward movement into the CAMHS Whole Family Team with Perinatal Specialism (North London Mental Health Trust), which is also fully integrated with the early years' service. CAMHS practitioners also provide reflective practice spaces and consultation for staff.

However, the extent to which integration was being delivered across local authorities varied among the local authorities we spoke to, often because of systemic and structural barriers around workforce capacity and barriers to effective data-sharing.

Maximising opportunities for early identification and intervention

Several other local authorities were working to maximise opportunities for early identification by strengthening and expanding interventions in the earlier years as key opportunities to engage families early, identify additional need and serve as meaningful intervention triggers.

For example, one local authority spent three years building a home-learning environment (HLE) pathway triggered by the 2-2½-year review, offering support from age two which was seen to be most impactful in supporting a child's development. The focus on three-to-four-year-olds in the current funding for HLE however caused disruption to this workstream, however early signs of the programmes positive impact mean the local authority is working to fill the gaps in funding to retain the pathways for younger children.

Boosting coverage of the 2-2½ Health and Development review

Some local authorities we interviewed had identified poor and inconsistent coverage of the review as a key barrier and were delivering workstreams to boost coverage and maximise its role as an early identification tool and intervention trigger for children with developmental differences or additional needs. One local authority had undertaken an audit of review uptake to identify which families were not receiving it: this revealed that non-attendance was concentrated among families with English as an additional language and those in unsafe or precarious housing conditions – precisely the families often most in need of intervention. This supported a more targeted approach – including in proactive engagement with families and communities - to ensure that families most likely to benefit from the review were able to access it.

One local authority described the aim of their approach to engaging underserved families was to reframe the messaging around the review. Rather than it being presented to parents as a review or a check – which might imply a tick box exercise or a process resulting in a pass or fail – they framed the 2-2½ year review as an ‘offer’ for families in promoting the types of support parents could expect as a result of participating.

What are the challenges?

The 2-2½ Year Review is not delivering on its full potential

Many local authorities identified several limitations of the 2-2½-year review which limit its effectiveness as an early identification tool and springboard to early intervention. While the two year reviews are a statutory requirement, there lacks a consistent statutory framework so the delivery and support attached can look different across local authorities.

The nature of the check itself does not align closely enough with the EYFS Profile measuring good level of development, which may explain the significant and consistent gap in development outcomes across the two measures: the proportion of children achieving a good level of development at two and a half is significantly higher than that at age five. This raises two questions: whether the 2-2½-year review is serving its purpose measuring child development, and what support is delivered – or not delivered – to children between the ages of two and a half and five to account for the gap.

Local authorities attributed this gap in part to the self-selective nature of the check, and the metrics and measurements of the check itself not being directly comparable to the EYFSP. The check is largely self-reported by parents rather than practitioner led, and risks being tick-box in nature and generating limited richness as a developmental assessment tool.

The review does however offer a key opportunity for services to engage with families, identify need and connect families with support at an early stage. Delivered well, the 2-2½-year review can identify the children not on track to reach a good level of development at age 5, and target support to them. Likewise, integrated two-year checks (combining the Early Years progress check with the 2-2½ year health and development review) strengthen the impact of the intervention in assessing child development more holistically and have been recommended by Government as best practice since 2015. However, persisting barriers prevent local authorities delivering integrated reviews to scale: workforce pressures, competing priorities across partners and barriers to effective data sharing between partners.

Health and Development Reviews: A postcode lottery

Statistics from the Office of Health Improvement and Disparities offer the most comprehensive picture of how many children are receiving a review at two to two-and-a-half years.⁵⁵

Universal Early Years Offer under the Healthy Child Programme (postnatal)	National Coverage in 2024/25	Range across local authorities, from lowest to highest (where a value can be calculated)
New birth visit, for children aged 1 to 2 weeks	85.2% ⁵⁶	9.7% – 99.1% ⁵⁷
6-to-8-week review, for children aged 6 to 8 weeks	85.1%	13.9% – 98.8%
12-month review, for children aged 9 to 15 months	88.4%	41.6% – 99.5%
2-to-2-and-a-half-year review, for children aged 24 to 30 months (including those with a completed ASQ-3)	80.8%	27% – 98.9%

Table 2: Health visitor service delivery metrics, 2024 to 2025, OHID (excluding antenatal health promoting review)

The data shows that – at a national level - the number of children receiving the check has been increasing steadily in recent years, with 80.8% of children receiving the review in 2024/25, up

⁵⁵ Caution should be used when interpreting these figures as it is a voluntary data collection and there is not full coverage. Any figures shown at a region or England level, or by deprivation, are based on an aggregate total of local authorities within those areas who supplied data items which complied with validation criteria for each indicator.

⁵⁶ rising to 98% when considering infants receiving a visit up to 30 days after birth

⁵⁷ Nearly all local authorities had coverage of over 90% when all new birth visits (before or after 14 days) are considered

from 74.1% in 2021/22.⁵⁸ However, as set out in table 2, the variation in coverage of each review is significant at local authority level, creating a postcode lottery of support for families.

Analysis by the Children’s Commissioner’s Office in 2020 revealed one in five children (20%) on average did not receive their 2-2½-year review (in 2018/19), identifying reasons for inconsistent uptake of the review were a result of several barriers including parental choice, transient population, and ‘hard to reach’ families.⁵⁹ The same analysis found that on average only 8% of 2-2½-year reviews per local authority were integrated with an early years progress check, and just over half of reporting local authorities (54%) could give the number of children referred or in receipt of additional support following the review.

Workforce capacity undermines effective engagement

The health visiting workforce - at the core of the Healthy Child Programme - has faced sustained workforce and financial pressures. Between 2015 and 2022, the health visiting workforce fell by nearly 40%, which school nursing nationally has seen a 33% reduction in the workforce since 2009.⁶⁰ ⁶¹ Nearly 80% of local authorities had experienced a decline in the health visiting share within their teams, which spending on mandated health visiting has fallen by nearly 20% in real terms.⁶² A recent survey by the Institute for Health Visiting found that in England, demand for health visiting support is currently far in excess of what services are commissioned and able to provide, with wide variation and a mixed picture of support for families.⁶³ Caseload pressure were also widespread, with around 74% of local authorities exceeding the recommended 250 children per practitioner and some exceeding 1,000 children.⁶⁴

There is an inherent structural tension obstructing efforts to deliver a standard integrated two-year check that again reflects misalignment between policy and programmes. Practitioners noted a concern that achieving service Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – such as delivering a higher proportion of the mandated checks – were prioritised over safe and effective delivery of care, alongside gaps in wider services in the community able to offer support for families, and pressures due to ongoing cuts to scope and delivery model for some health visiting services.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Office of Health Improvement and Disparities (n.d.) Fingertips / Public Health Profiles; Child and Maternal Health; [Child and Maternal Health - Data | Fingertips | Department of Health and Social Care](#)

⁵⁹ Children’s Commissioner (2020) Best Beginnings in the early years: Technical report two; [cco-best-beginnings-in-the-early-years-tech-report-2.pdf](#)

⁶⁰ Institute for Health Visiting (2024) Public Health Grant settlement – not enough to deliver the promised ‘best start in life; [Public health grant settlement – not enough to deliver the promised “best start in life” - IHV](#)

⁶¹ SAPHNA (2024) A School Nurse in every school: Sector leaders call for action; [School-Nurse-in-Every-School-PR-18.3.24-003-1.docx](#)

⁶² Conti, E. et al (2026) The State of Health Visiting in England: Workforce Composition, Caseloads and Service Delivery; University College London; [!Health_visiting_FOI_brief_March_2026_FINAL-.pdf](#)

⁶³ Institute for Health Visiting (2025) State of Health Visiting, UK Survey report; [State_of_Health_Visiting_Report_2024_FINAL_VERSION_22.01.25_compressed.pdf](#)

⁶⁴ Conti, E. et al (2026) The State of Health Visiting in England: Workforce Composition, Caseloads and Service Delivery; University College London; [!Health_visiting_FOI_brief_March_2026_FINAL-.pdf](#)

⁶⁵ Institute for Health Visiting (2025) State of Health Visiting, UK Survey report; [State_of_Health_Visiting_Report_2024_FINAL_VERSION_22.01.25_compressed.pdf](#)

These challenges were reflected in our interviews with local areas, resulting in stretched caseloads and reduced capacity for the relational, home-based element of health visiting that makes the profession uniquely placed to support early identification of need. In some cases, pressures meant that checks were carried out over the phone rather than in person. Unsurprisingly, workforce shortages had, in some local areas, led to a more limited strategic role of health visiting in supporting a system-wide approach, and a structural rigidity that limited their ability to flex and innovate to respond to local need.

Identifying need early requires a robust data infrastructure

Our interviews with local authorities were clear: efforts to identify need early are consistently undermined by weak data sharing arrangements as a result of a lack of clear government guidance or direction. More broadly, fragmented and siloed data infrastructures – between health and education, between health visitors and the wider early years workforce - present challenges not only around transitions between services, but prevent local authorities and relevant partners to develop a fully formed picture of where children are and what their unmet needs might be.

Without that fully established picture, local authorities face challenges in targeting support where it is needed most, identifying need early and responding with the right interventions. We heard from several local authorities that this can create a challenge in ensuring sufficient provision of childcare places equipped to support children with additional needs, such as children with SEND. Without knowing which children are coming up ‘through the system’, local authority teams are not well-placed to plan ahead and work with settings to prepare them.

Across the early years system, services and providers are collecting data across a range of different metrics, measurements and outcomes for babies and children. For child development, health visitors collect data through the mandated health and development reviews, while the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework requires early years practitioners to review children’s progress at the two-year check and again at age five via the EYFS Profile. While integrated reviews exist to join these together and create a more holistic assessment of child development, inconsistent delivery of the integrated review means this join up is not happening for every child. The prevalence of local authorities using different measures alongside ASQ-3 to measure and track child development locally reflects these challenges as they play out in practice.

The problem therefore is not one of insufficient data. Local services told us that they are often overwhelmed by the different reporting processes required from central government, and at a time where local services and early years workforces are overstretched, more data collection is not the answer. The problem is whether the data that is collected is serving the correct purpose and is useful for local areas to inform decision making and strengthen the offer of support in the early years.



The earliest years of a child's life are foundational and the window between birth and age two represents one of the most significant opportunities to identify need and intervene early, and

support children to reach a good level of development at by age five. The 2–2½ year review sits at the heart of this opportunity, offering a universal touchpoint to identify children not on track for a good level of development at age five and connect families with support before problems deepen. Yet this potential is being systematically undermined. Coverage remains inconsistent, while the review itself is constrained by its current implementation, and workforce issues and structural barriers undermine opportunities for integration.

The Centre for Young Lives will be publishing a framework for reforming the two-year review process towards the end of the Summer, setting out how it can be used effectively as an early identification tool for local authorities and intervention trigger. Succeeding in this will be key to supporting local authorities to meet their school readiness targets.

Reaching families and embedding support into communities

National policy in the early years has undergone a period of rapid development in recent years: the introduction of Family Hubs, to Best Start Family Hubs, the expansion of funded childcare, and beyond. And so, the challenge remains – for local authorities and government - how can we ensure that families are brought along with new developments, that trust is built between families and services and that support meets the needs of all families where they are. The impact and success of the Best Start in Life strategy to meet government’s target will in large part hinge on the ability of services to reach the children and families that need it, and would benefit from it, most. However, local authorities we interviewed consistently recognise that there remain families who won’t access the support available to them making them ‘hard to reach’ for services. Tackling this requires the building trust between services, families and communities.

Meeting the target will require not only bringing together each actor across the early years system – health, education, early education and childcare – it will need a fundamental shift in the way the system approaches support for children and families. The evidence is clear on the impact of a strong and stable home-learning environment on early child development, and reinforces a need to ensure that parents, carers and communities are equal partners in delivering on the target.

Conditions for success: lessons from local authorities

The Best Start in Life Strategy and recent guidance for Best Start Family Hubs both reinforce the need to meet the needs of families where they are, recognising that a core part of the challenge is building trust with families, and reaching services into communities to ensure all families – particularly those often underserved by services – have access to the support they need. Learning from the successes of Sure Start, Best Start Family Hubs makes a strong start at addressing this challenge, with Hubs targeted in areas of disadvantage, offering a ‘one stop shop’ for families to help them navigate the system, and build a system of network sites to encourage proactive outreach into communities. A key part of the BSIL strategy includes the new digital platform to deliver trusted guidance and advice to parents on child development.

Local areas have long recognised the importance of family and community engagement, and almost all we spoke to had developed approaches that reflect the unique local context in which their services operate.

Investing in the ‘connective tissue’ of the early years system

Visibility of services in the community was identified by several local authorities in our interviews as a key way to build trust with families and communities, encouraging and supporting families to access the support and services on offer for their young children. While every local authority had a digital presence, several local authorities had made the decision –

amid cuts to budgets – to retain in-person roles tasked with supporting parents to navigate the system, and ‘handhold’ them through transitions. These roles were identified as a key enabler of early identification.

Case Study: Supporting families to navigate the early years system

One local authority we interviewed made a strategic decision, despite budget pressures, to maintain an in-person Families Information Service (FIS) to provide personalised advice and support to families navigating the early years entitlement system. In this specific example, the FIS operates a structured outreach protocol with a particular focus on targeted families eligible for the disadvantaged two-year-old entitlement, every child on the DWP eligibility list receives up to five contacts: two phone calls, an email, a letter, and if there is still no response, a home visit. The model is explicitly designed to ensure that children identified as most at risk of not accessing early education, and therefore most at risk of not achieving a good level of development, are actively reached rather than left to self-refer.

Another local authority piloted a ‘health navigator’ model to support families to navigate transitions between health services and wider support. Navigators were based in family hubs and through specific agreements had access to GP records which enabled proactive outreach to families who had missed immunisations or otherwise key health interventions in the early years. The navigators were placed to personally ‘handhold’ families to wider services available to them and was found (anecdotally) to be highly effective in reaching families who otherwise may have missed crucial opportunities to access early support.

Our previous reports on Best Start Family Hubs highlighted the importance of embedding parent voice in service design and delivery.⁶⁶ Roles for parents, paid and volunteer, like Parent Champions or Parent Connectors work to build trust between parents and services and strengthen the reach of services to families who may face unique or specific barriers to accessing support.

Several local authorities were adapting their outreach to their specific local context – recognising communities from different cultural backgrounds, or areas of high disadvantage – which can shape how families interact with statutory services. One local authority had targeted its funding for outreach on culturally specific outreach workers, people from within communities, who were already embedded into communities and could therefore support building trust between families and services.

What are the challenges?

Several local areas were in a similar situation: each actor in the early years system – health partners, early years providers or Best Start Family Hubs – was working effectively to meet their responsibilities, yet the system as a whole was failing to work cohesively and deliver for

⁶⁶ Centre for Young Lives (2025) A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support; [690a3b500519c9e025875da5_REVISSED TWO CFYL Full Report 0411.pdf](#)

children and families. A significant part of this challenge was ensuring that the services and support available – Best Start Family Hubs, funded childcare, health visitor reviews – is reaching families, particularly those most in need of that critical early years support.

Engaging and building trust with parents

The fragmented nature of the early years system can create a confusing landscape for parents looking for support. This is compounded by weak data infrastructure that undermines early identification and disrupts smooth transitions between services. For families, this means having to repeat their story to each new professional which can act as a barrier to engagement, or at the sharp end, cause families to fall through the gaps between services.

Likewise, negative perceptions of statutory services – often disproportionately felt by vulnerable or marginalised communities – can undermine efforts to support families. These challenges have been compounded by cuts to local services in recent decades. The hollowing out of support networks for families like Sure Start Children’s Centres undermines any progress to embed support in communities and build trust with families so that they feel confident in knowing what support is available to them and where to go to find it.



Best Start Family Hubs are a welcome first step in acting as the one-stop shop for families seeking support, embedding into communities with a visible presence and delivering support with a focus on parenting and the home-learning environment. However, we know from the evidence that many overlapping factors shape a child’s home-learning environment: from poverty, physical environment, and exposure to adverse childhood experiences. As such, support for parents and the home-learning environment must become a collective responsibility for us as a society - not just for Hub staff and children’s services. Doing so will put early childhood and families at the centre of local communities, and local and national government.

Recommendations

What more can Government do to support local authorities boost school readiness and give every child the best start in life?

Supporting local areas to better integrate early years services

Our engagement with local authorities demonstrates what is possible with sustained investment, prioritisation and strategy to improve school readiness.

However, two messages from local areas were clear and consistent:

- First, improvements to early childhood development outcomes were often attributed not to specific interventions, but to ‘ways of working’ within the wider system that encouraged integration, strong joint-working and a clear strategic focus on supporting children in the early years and their families.
- Second, delivering on Government’s school readiness target will require government support to remove the structural and system-level barriers that continue to undermine local efforts to strengthen their local early years offer.

The school readiness targets place local authorities at the heart of government’s mission to deliver on its Plan for Change milestone to have 75% of children reaching a good level of development by 2028, however local efforts remain constrained by structural and systemic barriers that prevent local authorities acting as system leaders and convening the early years system in its entirety to support children and families. For local authorities to succeed in reaching their targets, this ambition must be met with the necessary infrastructure and oversight for local authorities to drive forward improvements and boost child outcomes.

Real integration with health services requires systemic and structural change

Clear direction is needed on the role of health in the early years

Local authorities were clear about the need for greater direction and support from central government to enable stronger integration of services at a local level. While there was evidence of best practice across the country, structural and system-level barriers continue to hinder local progress to deliver a joined-up offer of support for children and families.

The Best Start in Life Strategy and subsequent guidance for Best Start Family Hubs is explicit in integration being a core ambition. Now Government must match that ambition and give local areas the tools they need to deliver on it: clear guidance, a long-term workforce strategy that builds and maintains a highly qualified workforce, all underpinned robust data infrastructure to support early identification of need and strengthens pathways to targeted support.

The government is currently developing its 10-Year Workforce plan to deliver an NHS fit for the future and deliver on the three shifts in the NHS 10 Year Plan. Following years of disinvestment in the children’s workforce, we hope to see the new workforce plan place children at its heart with a key focus on supporting a public health approach to support in the early years. Likewise, upskilling the health workforce to deliver on the shift from analogue to digital will require upskilling the current and future workforce to deliver that change.

Drawing from the examples of best practice ways of working set out throughout this report, government should publish joint comprehensive guidance for local authorities and their local partners on programme alignment and multi-agency collaboration relating to national policies in the early years, including a national mandate and guidance to support effective data sharing. The guidance should clarify the roles and responsibilities of each partner across health, education, local authority teams, early years settings and wider voluntary and community organisations and set out how duplication can be avoided and how local areas can maximise resource and capacity including through joint-commissioning and pooled-budget arrangements.

Maximising the early development checks to identify need and trigger pathways to support

Across the board, local authorities flagged the 2-2½-year health and development review as a key universal intervention in the early years, with huge potential to support early identification and trigger pathways to support. However, it's potential as an early identification tool is currently undermined by inconsistent uptake and ineffective data sharing across health visiting, local authorities, Best Start Family Hubs and Early Education and Childcare settings to support intervention pathways.

A recent study drawing on longitudinal data from Connected Bradford highlights the potential value of using ASQ-3 results at age two to intervene early and support more children to become school ready at age 5.⁶⁷ The study found that children who achieved a good level of development on the ASQ-3 at age two were more than three times more likely to be school-ready at age five. The study also found that one in five children have fallen behind by age two, reinforcing the importance of the first 1,001 days in shaping child development.⁶⁸

Our upcoming report will set out a framework for how government can maximise the role of the 2-2½-year review to act as an effective early identification tool and meaningful intervention trigger for children and families and assess and address the barriers facing parents and carers in taking up the review. Delivered successfully, the review would act as a helpful milestone for local authorities to identify which children aren't on track to be school ready by five, and target interventions to support them to support efforts to meet the good level of development target.

Likewise, strengthening the review would serve to mitigate the risks outlined by local authorities that come with the target. Namely, that the target incentivises focusing efforts on older children who will turn five in 2028, at the expense of younger children who would benefit from intervention at the earliest point. Strengthening the review would ensure that timely and sufficient support is provided to the children who need it most, when they need it.

⁶⁷ Dickerson, J. et al; The association between the Ages and Stages Questionnaire assessment at age 2 and the Early Years Foundation Stage at 5: A longitudinal observational study using routine data; [The association between the Ages and Stages Questionnaire 3 assessment at age 2 and the Early Years Foundation Stage at age 5: A longitudinal observational study using routine data | medRxiv](#)

⁶⁸ Ibid.

The missing piece: a robust and connected data infrastructure to identify need and reach families

Public services in England have long been organised around institutional silos rather than around the lives of the children and families they serve. Each actor in the early years system – education, health, early education and childcare settings and wider children’s services- hold fragments of the same picture, but no single agency can see the whole child.

Support from central government to deliver better joined up data does not require reinventing the wheel. The Single Unique Identifier is already being piloted to improve information sharing across public services, and there is innovative work being undertaken in local areas to link data across health, education and wider public services to better serve their communities. The Connected Bradford database brings together data from health, education, social care and a wider set of local administrative systems including housing, benefits, crime and the National Child Measurement Programme.⁶⁹

However, what it does require is clear direction and guidance from government to support and encourage effective data sharing locally. The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should issue a joint mandate establishing a framework for data-sharing across all partners in the early years system across health (health visiting, Healthy Babies services, midwifery and maternity), Best Start Family Hubs, education, early education and childcare settings and wider children’s services. Supporting guidance should create clear instruction on which datasets should be shared across partners and empower partners to deliver new arrangements with confidence and consistency – including access to data-governance training for staff. Guidance should also include support for engaging and supporting parents and carers to understand the benefits of sharing data across services.

Better-connected data would allow government to shift from reactive crisis management to genuine prevention: identifying vulnerability earlier, coordinating support across services, and in the long term reduce the human and financial costs of delayed intervention. An upcoming report from Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives’ sets out an innovative new model for placing connected data at the heart of public service infrastructure to strengthen support for children and families and shift the dial towards prevention with wide ranging and long-lasting benefits.

Recommendations

The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should establish joint guidance for local authorities and partners on programme alignment and multi-agency collaboration relating to national policies in the early years, including a national mandate and guidance to support effective data sharing. The guidance should:

- **Clarify the roles and responsibilities of each partner across health, education, local authority teams, early years settings and wider voluntary and community**

⁶⁹ Sohal K, Mason D, Birkinshaw J *et al.* Connected Bradford: a Whole System Data Linkage Accelerator [version 2; peer review: 2 approved]. Wellcome Open Res 2022, 7:26 (<https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.17526.2>)

organisations, and set out how duplication can be avoided and how local areas can maximise resource and capacity including through joint-commissioning and pooled-budget arrangements.

- **Cover all relevant national policies and programmes, including Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies, delivery of the Healthy Child Programme and the Schools White Paper on SEND reform (as they relate to the early years), Families First, and neighbourhood health.**
- **Be supported by a mandate from central government on data sharing across services to support early identification of need and smooth transitions between services for children and their families.**

Review the 2-2½-year health and development review to ensure it can be used as a meaningful early identification tool and intervention trigger for targeted support for children falling behind their developmental milestones. The 2-2½ year review is not delivering on its potential as an early identification tool and intervention trigger. Working well, it could be a vital opportunity for local authorities to identify the children not on track to reach a good level of development at age 5 and target interventions to support them. The Centre for Young Lives will publish a framework for the 2-2½-year health check later this year.

Align the early education and childcare system to give every child the best start in life

In the context of a childcare market increasingly shaped by large, private-equity backed chains, and with the entitlement expansion meaning Government now controls the prices of around 80% of early education and childcare places, there is a real opportunity to pivot the system towards more desirable outcomes. The upcoming Childcare review offers the opportunity to do this.

While Government's focus on expanding access to early education and childcare is welcome – given the evidence of its impact on child development –, the current system risks entrenching disadvantage by failing to address the gap in access between disadvantaged children and those with working parents.

Reform eligibility criteria to prevent disadvantage entrenching

In this context, the Government's drive to expand access to high-quality early education and childcare for working families' further risks pushing out disadvantaged families and creating a two-tier system. The current entitlement system, which ties eligibility to parental employment status, risks excluding the most disadvantaged children. 48% of children in poverty are in families in which the youngest child is under the age of five, while only 10% of the poorest families in England with children under five are estimated to be eligible for the expanded funded hours.⁷⁰ Taking into account the earlier start (at nine months compared to two years) and the higher number of hours (30 instead of 15), a child with eligible working parents will receive three times as much government-funded early education than a disadvantaged child by the time they start school.⁷¹

Similarly, recent research also suggests that the new school-based nurseries – part of Government policy to deliver 3,000 new or expanded sites - are lagging behind on reaching disadvantaged children, citing limited appetite among schools to open new on-site nurseries alongside significant barriers linked to cost, space and staffing.⁷² This reflects the risk inherent in the policy of targeting expansion specifically on schools, while the reality is that the majority of provision, particularly for younger children, are delivered by PVI settings.

Taken together, and in the context of limited access to places disproportionately impacting more deprived areas, the current direction and childcare policy and provision risks widening the disadvantage gap with long term consequences for the future life chances of too many children.

⁷⁰ CPAG (2025) Child poverty statistics – new record high and further breakdowns; [Child poverty statistics – new record high and further breakdowns | CPAG](#)

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Montacue, R. et al (2026) Room to Grow; The Sutton Trust; [Room to Grow - The Sutton Trust](#)

We recognise the constrained fiscal context in which this Government is operating, and that the Department for Education currently spends almost £10 billion annually on funded childcare. However, as the Government undertakes its Childcare review it should review the extent to which the expansion is providing ‘value for money’ in terms of increasing access to high quality care, including how eligibility criteria is undermining Government’s ambition to give every child the best start in life by entrenching disadvantage.

As a first step, Government should review how the two-year entitlement for disadvantaged families is working to close the disadvantage gap and take steps to remove the individual-level, structural and systemic barriers families face in accessing that support.

Disadvantaged two-year-olds have historically been entitled to 15 free hours of early education per week, but eligibility has been eroded over time. Government should widen eligibility for this entitlement to allow more children to benefit from access to early education and childcare. Government should also consider expanding the 15 hour entitlement for disadvantaged children to cover all children, as with the 3-4-year old entitlement.

Government should also consider removing the barrier to access for parents in education and training - aligning the market with Government’s wider growth and skills agenda.

In the long term, the review should result in a phased, long-term plan for reforming eligibility requirements which will close the disadvantage gap in the early years, not widen it. More broadly, the review should ensure that Government’s early years funding envelope is being used most effectively to deliver the Best Start in Life strategy and meet the national target, including emerging evidence that the expansion may not be delivering on Government’s intention to support more parents into work.

Childcare Market Stewardship

Local authorities play a key role in shaping the local childcare market. However, the Best Start in Life strategy rightly recognises the rise of private-equity backed chains in shaping the market. This is playing out locally as local authorities face barriers to strong joined up working with their settings, undermining efforts to drive improvement and ensure high quality and equal access. A survey from 2024 revealed broad consensus that local authorities should continue to play a key role, while recognising that meeting the requirements for the expansion of entitlements will require more central resource and oversight – however there were mixed views on defining the future of their role in shaping the childcare market given the new market context.⁷³ This reflects what we heard from our interviews with authorities for this report.

The BSIL strategy ear marks a greater role for both national government, and Mayoral and Strategic Authorities in shaping the childcare market – allowing for greater oversight to deliver on national policy ambitions to boost early childhood development and respond to more local contexts and the needs of children and families. We welcome the recent announcement that the Secretary of State for Education has called on the Competition and Markets Authority to review how the childcare market is working as a whole and is set up to deliver on Government’s

⁷³ Reed, J. (2024) Childcare’s ‘middle tier’: Thinking on the future local authority role; Isos Partnership; [Childcare's "middle tier": Thinking on the future local authority role — Isos Partnership](#)

wider ambitions.⁷⁴ The first phase of the review is intended to inform the government's Childcare Review.

Leveraging Government investment to expand access to high-quality early education

With Government now controlling the prices of around 80% of funded childcare, there is a vital opportunity to leverage their investment – currently at over £9 billion per year – to shape the childcare market and deliver on Government's ambitions to give every child the best start in life. Government have the potential to play a greater role in shaping how money moves through the system, and where it ends up. In the context of the rise of private-equity backed chains, rightly recognised by Government in the BSIL strategy, a stronger role for Government in determining the impact of their investment is increasingly crucial. This is particularly true given the evidence on how the rise of these providers is already contributing to 'childcare deserts' and limited access to sufficient childcare places which are disproportionately impacting deprived communities and children with SEND.

As recognised in the Secretary of State's letter to the Competition and Markets Authority, there is significant potential for Government to better leverage their funding to drive workforce improvements through requiring or incentivising wage floors or pay progression, by attaching conditions to public funding such as minimum pay rates or mandatory wage grids. This is akin to the model in Ireland, where conditionality is used as a lever to pivot the market to deliver desired outcomes around workforce improvements.⁷⁵ In leveraging their investment in this way, with greater conditionality, Government can maximise the funding already in the system to deliver on ambitions not only across school readiness but address current gaps in provision around children from disadvantaged communities and children with SEND. Informed by the findings of the CMA review, we hope to see Government consider how best funding can be leveraged to deliver on their ambition to give every child the best start in life, and establish clear frameworks for the market to deliver high-quality provision and work in partnership with their local communities.

Government has the ability to set clear standards and expectations for the childcare market to deliver on their ambitions for early childhood outcomes. Leveraging Government investment for this purpose would also serve to raise the profile of the sector and reflect the vital role they play in early childhood.

Aligning regional agendas to deliver early years ambitions: a greater role for Mayoral and Strategic Authorities

As rapid developments in early years policy happen nationally, strategic authorities are already starting to think about what the future is for their role in shaping childcare provision at a regional level, aligning national ambitions for school readiness with regional agendas around poverty, economic growth and inclusion, and skills and workforce. As part of a child poverty strategy, North East Mayor Kim McGuinness launched the Mayor's Childcare Grant, providing

⁷⁴ GOV.UK (2026) Secretary of State letter to Competition and Markets Authority; [SoS letter to CEO of CMA](#)

⁷⁵ GOV.IE (2025) What is core funding; Department of Children, Disability and Equality; [What is Core Funding?](#)

support for parents aiming to bridge gaps in eligibility for parents that remain following government's entitlement expansion.⁷⁶ The Grant will support parents who are unemployed, in training, or wanting to increase their working hours to access funded childcare. As such, the ambitions and impact of the grant are two-fold: supporting parents to access training or employment – therefore alleviating the impacts of poverty – and supporting more children to access early education and childcare. A similar approach is being delivered by West of England Mayoral Combined Authority.⁷⁷

These examples highlight the growing appetite of strategic authorities to play a greater role in shaping the childcare market and align a wider range of ambitions, while responding to the specific needs and contexts of each region: including in establishing robust regional workforce data and establishing regional childcare sufficiency assessments. Learning from best practice, and in consultation with authorities, the government's Childcare review should set out a framework for strategic authorities to establish their role in shaping the regional childcare market in a way that allows them to respond to regional level contexts including workforce pressures and cold spots in provision.

Empower local authorities to support access to high-quality early education and childcare

Local authorities have a key role to play in shaping the local offer of early education and childcare locally in local workforce recruitment and professional development, supporting settings to meet rising need, joining up the local offer with the wider early years system, supporting parents to take up places and driving quality improvement across settings.⁷⁸ The BSIL strategy committed to working with local authorities to develop guidance on market shaping in the early years, and as Government undertakes its review of childcare, it should bring certainty and clarity to local authorities about what their role in supporting access to early education and childcare.

A new approach to early years inspections?

The recent reforms to Ofsted inspections in the early years were a welcome step to address some of the key concerns around the quality and impact of inspections. In recent years, Ofsted's remit has expanded far beyond regulation to become the primary arbiter of quality in registered early years provision, meaning it is in large part responsible for what constitutes high-quality early education and childcare. The new framework is intended to improve the inspection process, including through removing the one-word judgement, encouraging collaboration, and putting inclusion and the experiences of disadvantaged children at the foreground.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (2025) Mayor makes good on childcare grant manifesto commitment; [Mayor makes good on childcare grant manifesto commitment](#)

⁷⁷ West of England Mayoral Strategic Authority (2025) The West of England Child Poverty Action Plan; [The West of England Child Poverty Action Plan](#)

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ GOV.UK (2025) Education inspection framework: for use from November 2025; Ofsted; [Education inspection framework: for use from November 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

However, the framework stops short of more fundamental reform that could transform the current architecture of early years improvement. Government should consider the extent to which Ofsted is best placed to provide comprehensive inspections of early years settings around the key factors that shape children’s outcomes such as pedagogical quality or staff-child interactions. A more effective model might separate regulation from quality improvement, as is the case in Australia, allowing regulation to remain objective and evidence-based, while improvement remains proactive, collaborative and holistic in its assessment of the extent to which a setting is meeting the needs of children and boosting early child development.^{80 81}

The Childcare Review should consider the how local authorities and Ofsted can work together to boost quality early education and childcare. Alongside refining and clarifying Ofsted’s role, a new or strengthened national quality improvement framework should be developed and led locally, bringing together Local Authorities, Stronger Practice Hubs, and professional networks.⁸² These organisations are best placed to draw on local knowledge, build local relationships and create a network of support for early years settings that encourages proactive engagement, continuous self-evaluation and improvement and deliver a strong high-quality offer for early education and childcare for every child in their locality.

Recommendations:

The Government’s Childcare review should deliver reforms to ensure that the market is delivering on the Best Start in Life target, and the broader ambitions in the Best Start in Life strategy. The review should have a core focus on removing barriers in access to high-quality provision for disadvantaged children and children with SEND in particular.

In particular, the review should:

- **Establish greater requirements on early education and childcare providers in receipt of Government funding to drive up quality, address workforce challenges, and improve equal access to provision.**
- **Co-produce, in partnership with the sector and Mayoral and Strategic Authorities, a framework for regional and local childcare market stewardship that includes childcare sufficiency and workforce planning.**
- **Set out a long-term plan for opening up access to high-quality early education and childcare by reforming eligibility requirements to remove barriers to children from disadvantaged backgrounds – including children of parents not in work, or parents in education and training.**
- **Review the scope of Ofsted’s role as regulator in supporting and setting the standard of high quality early education and childcare. A new and expanded national framework for quality improvement should strengthen and clarify the role of local authorities and relevant local partners in quality improvement.**

⁸⁰ UK Parliament (2025) Written Evidence by Dr Sara Bonetti, Education Committee; committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/149635/pdf/

⁸¹ ACECQA (n.d.) [ACECQA](https://www.acecqa.com.au/)

⁸² Ibid.

- **Build on the commitments in the BSIL strategy to establish a long-term early years workforce plan to build a sustainable, high-quality workforce to deliver on the target. The plan should set out clear roles for national, regional and local governments in supporting and shaping the workforce.**

Secure the future of the early years

This Government has brought welcome focus, ambition and investment to the early years through their Best Start in Life strategy and school readiness target. But there is more to be done to support local authorities as this report sets out, and, as we approach 2028, the question becomes: what next?

Whether government meets their school readiness target or not, local early years services and the children and families that they serve will continue to exist beyond 2028 and will benefit from sustained focus and investment to continue driving better outcomes for children and families.

As the Best Start in Life Strategy is being implemented over the next two years, Government must turn their attention to what comes next: how can Government continue to deliver on the overarching principle of giving every child the best start in life, and how can they secure and protect the future of BSIL the whim of potential future governments and the reality of policy making shaped by the electoral cycle.

Key to this will be making the early years a priority for everyone. Not just the Department for Education, or Government and local services, but for wider society. To do this will require a fundamental rethink and strategic approach to investment in the early years, backed by evidence on the impact of early intervention, and clear and consistent messaging across Whitehall and beyond of the importance of getting it right in the early years.

‘Best Start in Life funding is catalytic, not comprehensive’

The message from local areas is clear: the Best Start in Life strategy and attached funding has been welcome in aligning local partners, giving impetus to a strategic focus on the early years, and setting a clear ambition for local areas to boost school readiness. In many cases, BSIL has acted as a vehicle for wider systems change to improve outcomes for children.

Equally however, local areas were clear that to shift the dial on early childhood outcomes and deliver real change requires sufficient, sustained investment that allows local areas to plan for the longer-term and provides greater flexibility to test and effectively implement what works locally to boost school readiness. Longer-term funding would allow local areas to embed systems improvement established under BSIL into ‘business as usual’ across their local systems, delivering a system that delivers for children and families and can stand the test of time. If BSIL successfully delivers on its purpose, it could generate wide-reaching savings across public services. To make this happen however requires government to take decisive action to protect investment now and for the long-term.

Likewise, local authorities were clear that funding that is flexible, rather than attached to specific programmes or age-ranges, would allow local authorities the flexibility to drive innovation and systems change locally, embedding ways of working that delivered well should withstand external pressures and changing contexts. Likewise, it would allow local authorities to take a more strategic approach to commissioning and service delivery that supports the whole child (0-5) and the family, instead of what can often become siloed working and duplication across services.

Secure existing early years infrastructure

If we want local authorities to act as system-leaders, conveners and co-ordinators of the networks of early years support for children and families in their area, they must be supported and empowered to deliver that function. The Best Start in Life strategy has given local authorities an opportunity to consolidate and strengthen local efforts to boost early child development and drive improvement at a system-level to strengthen the early years system. This progress however risks being undermined in the long-term if Government doesn't do what it can to protect it.

The Sure Start warning: Secure early years infrastructure

Best Start Family Hubs are a core tenet of early years support, and evaluation of Sure Start Children's Centres show the wide-reaching impact of integrated family support in communities on children's outcomes. Working well, Hubs can act as heart or anchor of the early years system, bringing together government policy and the often-disparate parts of the early years system, while offering that one stop shop in communities to put children and families at the heart of early years policy.

The statutory basis for Sure Start was created through the 2006 Childcare Act, establishing legal duties for local authorities to establish and run children's centres. In 2009, further legislation was passed to put children's centres under local authority control on a statutory footing. However over subsequent years, the introduction of new guidance that lessened requirements, and the removal of the ringfence for Sure Start funding, saw this legislation fail to protect children's centres and other early intervention support from severe cuts.

Unlike children's centres, Family Hubs have no legal basis which creates confusion and jeopardises the sustainability of the programme. The establishment of a new legislative basis for joined up family support, which incorporates remaining children's centres and Best Start Family Hubs, would create clarity and secure the sustainability of the programme.

Government should replace the existing legislation underpinning children's centres and replace it with fresh legislation that places all family support on consistent statutory footing under the Best Start Family Hub model, stronger than that for children's centres which will ensure security and longevity of the programme going forward. This is something that the Centre for Young Lives has long called for and would seek to embed early years support more firmly in the hearts and minds of communities.

A societal strategy for supporting children and families from pregnancy to five

Too often and for too long, national policymaking has been shaped by the electoral cycle and political short termism – limiting incentives to focus on long-term solutions to some of the key challenges facing our society.⁸³

⁸³ Davison, N., Metcalfe, S. (2025) Policy making blind spots: why some children are left behind from the start; Institute for Government; [policy-making-blind-spots.pdf](#)

Children are the future, and as such it should be the collective responsibility of wider society to ensure they are happy, healthy and set up to thrive. Not just in their childhood, but throughout their life. This requires wider thinking that places the early years at the heart of policy making, not just for the Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, but across Government. It requires a shift from a focus on ensuring children are school ready, to ensuring that schools, systems and communities are ready for children.

In delivering the Best Start in Life strategy, local areas identified challenges they face as a result of the often-fragmented early years landscape both in terms of national policy and local systems. Our recommendations throughout this report address these challenges by setting out how Government can support joined up working and meet its target.

Yet to genuinely shift the dial on early childhood and development outcomes requires more radical, long-term thinking about the way local systems can work to better to support children in the early years and their families. In this section we make the case for a ten-year, cross-government societal strategy for early childhood – underpinned by an ambitious vision for our youngest children and driven by true cross-government collaboration.

The Best Start for a Better Life: A societal strategy for the early years

Putting early childhood at the heart of policy making across government has the potential to deliver on Government’s wider missions to break down barriers to opportunity and boost economic growth now and in the future. Crucially however, it has the potential to transform the way we as a society support children and families. Early childhood isn’t just about raising the next generation, it’s about giving children a happy, healthy and supportive environment to grow up in – which in turn supports them to go on and thrive throughout their life.

The Best Start in Life strategy offers a strong foundation to drive long-term transformation in the early years. To capitalise on this moment, Government requires an ambitious vision: not just for the lives of children, parents, and the systems that supports them.

Government should develop a ten-year, cross-government societal strategy for early childhood, spanning from pregnancy to five, it should set an ambitious vision for how society should support early childhood. Crucially, parents, carers and communities should be identified as key partners in the strategy.

Through the strategy, DfE and DHSC should bring together government departments to each establish their role and responsibility in supporting early childhood. This should include:

- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government looking at the role of housing and communities including home environments such as Temporary Accommodation and local spaces such as opportunities to play.
- The Department for Transport looking at the role of local transport in shaping parental isolation and access to support and services for families, particularly in areas of high deprivation, childcare-deserts, or poorer connected areas such as coastal and regional areas.
- The Department for Work and Pensions looking at the relationship between the welfare system, parental employment and the role of employers in supporting early childhood

development supports early childhood: in particular in shaping the home-learning environment by delivering on the Child Poverty Strategy and supporting parents into employment.

- The Ministry of Justice looking at support for parents on probation and in prison.
- The Home Office increasing the availability of support and protection for children who are victims of domestic abuse in early childhood.
- The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology looking at impact of technology on young lives including tablet and smartphone use among toddlers

A common outcomes framework for babies, children and young people

Throughout our interviews, several local authorities were clear about limitations of the EYFS GLD measure in providing a holistic and comprehensive picture of child development. Broadening the outcomes used to measure 'success' in early childhood would mitigate this challenge and provide greater insight to inform local and national decision making.

The strategy should be underpinned by a common outcomes framework for babies, children and young people, setting clear and achievable target milestones over the ten-year period, and used to track progress.

Our previous report on integrated family support called on Government to build on the Common Outcomes Framework as the foundation for a cross-departmental national outcomes framework for babies, children and young people and their families.⁸⁴ The framework should build on the work already well-developed by the Common Outcomes for Children and Young People Collaborative and align strategically with the Local Outcomes Framework to establish a core set of centrally set outcomes, indicators, and metrics, reflecting national priorities for both central and local action. Critically, this should be set nationally but allow flexibility for local authorities and partners to define and monitor additional place-based outcomes and indicators that respond to community specific needs and contexts.

The next Spending Review offers a key opportunity to make the early years a priority

This must be reflected in Government spending that encourages rather than disincentivises integration locally and supports local areas to think more holistically and strategically about support in the early years. The 2025 Spending Review fell short in meaningful cross-departmental working, despite efforts from Government to deliver a mission driven SR guided by the Plan for Change milestones. Instead, it reinforced departmental boundaries, with no substantial joint budgets, cross-departmental 'spend-to-save' considerations and no mention of ministerial mission groups.⁸⁵

The 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review is a strong example of what can be achieved through real cross-departmental collaboration. It included a cross-departmental review – across thirteen departments - of provision for young children, in which the Government

⁸⁴ Centre for Young Lives (2025) A Fresh Start for Family Support; [690a3b500519c9e025875da5_REVISSED TWO CFYL Full Report 0411.pdf](#)

⁸⁵ Paxton, B. (2025) Spending review 2025: welcome improvements to the process but no total 'rewiring'; Institute for Government; [Spending review 2025: welcome improvements to the process but no total "rewiring" | Institute for Government](#)

‘improved support for children in the early stages of their lives’ by creating the Sure Start programme.⁸⁶

The next Spending Review is set for 2027/28, the target year for the school readiness milestone. The review offers a crucial opportunity for Government to assess the success of the Best Start in Life strategy in achieving their Plan for Change milestone and consider how wider cross-departmental collaboration and investment can drive forward improvement in the early years. It should include a specific thematic focus on the early years, with a cross-departmental review on Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life. The review should include the Department for Education, Health and Social Care, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Department for Work and Pensions, Home Office and the Ministry of Justice.

Like the Comprehensive Spending Review in 1998, each department should assess what more can be done to give every child the best start in life and result in a joint budget to deliver on Government’s ambitions to boost early childhood development.

A Test and Learn approach: A place-based approach to what works in the early years

To test this model, Government should fund pilots in a small number of local areas with a focus on areas which have the lowest levels of Good Level of Development by 2028. Funding for the pilots should support local partners – convened by local authorities – to develop a model of strategic governance and oversight for the 0-5 space, establishing clear roles and responsibilities for improving agreed and shared child outcomes for partners across health, education, children’s services, policing and criminal justice, employment and welfare and wider housing and planning services. Crucially, parents, families and communities must be partners in developing and delivering this model of support, through co-production with parent/carer and community voice to identify locally specific needs and what support is required to meet them.

To support delivery, the pilots should adopt the model of the place-based budget pilots announced in the Autumn Budget 2025 to pool public-service budgets to streamline efforts and avoid duplication and include piloting of a new model of connected data as per our recommendation.

Learning from Best Start in Life

Developing such an ambitious strategy won’t happen overnight and requires breadth and depth of thinking across Government, but the delivery and implementation of the Best Start in Life strategy offer a strong starting point and key opportunity to identify what works.

Government should establish a joint committee to oversee progress towards achieving the Best Start in Life to assess all of the levers at Government’s disposal to achieve better outcomes for young children and deliver on the target. The Committee should bring together relevant Secretaries of State and Ministers and be supported by a corresponding delivery board of senior officials. The work of the Committee should be used to improve support to local authorities to

⁸⁶ GOV UK (1998) Comprehensive Spending Review; [4011.pdf](#)

deliver on the target by 2028, and in the longer term inform the development of the ten-year societal strategy.

The rationale: A shift to prevention

Investing in early childhood would shift the dial towards prevention and create savings in the long-term, reducing the need for more costly interventions required when needs are identified much later. Such an approach closely aligns and would support the shift to prevention set out in the Government's 10 Year Plan for the NHS and the move towards neighbourhood health. With poverty one of the strongest predictors of early childhood outcomes, a ten-year societal strategy for the early years would align with the ambitions of the Government's Child Poverty Strategy around raising household incomes, increasing local support and mitigating the impacts of poverty.⁸⁷

As a general pattern in recent decades, local authorities have cut spending the most on the more 'upstream' or preventative services, instead prioritising the more acute ones. In children's services, local authorities spent 71.3% more on acute services in real terms in 2023/24 compared to 2009/10 (these being 'looked after children' and 'safeguarding children and young people').⁸⁸ In contrast, they cut spending on preventative services such as children's centres and services for young people by 78.6% in real terms between those years.⁸⁹ Similar patterns exist across the board: rising spend on children with complex SEND needs and more money being spent – directly and indirectly – on young people who end up not in education, employment and training.

Recognising the benefit of early years investment and intervention, not just as it relates to school readiness and the ambitions of the Department for Education, is key to ensuring that the early years is seen as a priority not just for government, but for society.

Recommendations

The Government should establish a joint committee to oversee progress towards achieving the BSIL target, to assess all of the levers at Government's disposal to achieve better outcomes for young children and deliver on the target. The Committee should bring together relevant Secretaries of State and Ministers and be supported by a corresponding delivery board of senior government officials.

The Department for Education should establish the long-term stability and security of Best Start Family Hubs by placing all children's centres and family hubs on a consistent statutory footing under the Best Start Family Hub model. This consistent statutory footing should include a duty on both local authorities and ICBs to commission these services, creating a stable financial future for Best Start Family Hubs.

Building on the Best Start in Life strategy, Government should develop a long-term, cross-government societal strategy from pregnancy to reception. This would drive cross-

⁸⁷ GOV UK (2025) Our Children, Our Future: Tackling Child Poverty; [Child Poverty Strategy - GOV.UK](#)

⁸⁸ Hoddinott, S., Dellar, A. (2025) [Performance Tracker 2025: Local government | Institute for Government](#)

⁸⁹ Ibid.

government collaboration beyond Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care and establish clear roles and responsibilities for a wide range of departments on supporting and improving early childhood.

This strategy should:

- **Be underpinned by cross-departmental collaboration on joint funding, including a thematic cross-departmental spending review on the Government’s mission to give every child the best start in life, with a view to establishing joint funding across government departments for the early years. The review should include the Department for Education, Health and Social Care, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Department for Work and Pensions, Home Office and the Ministry of Justice.**
- **Be supported by comprehensive guidance for local authorities and the full range of local partners to establish clear roles and responsibilities, support joined up working, and avoid duplication of working across services.**
- **Be underpinned by a mandatory, strengthened common outcomes framework for babies, children, young people and families – building on the work of the Common Outcomes for Children and Young People Collaborative.**
- **Involve a small number of ‘test and learn’ local system transformation pilots, focussed on the local areas on those with the lowest GLD rates. Funding for the pilots should support local partners, convened by local authorities, to develop a model of strategic governance and oversight for the 0-5 space, establishing clear roles and responsibilities for improving agreed and shared child outcomes for partners across health, education, children’s services, policing and criminal justice, employment and welfare and wider housing and planning services.**

Conclusion

What happens in the first five years of a child's life shapes their long-term health, learning and life chances in ways that no subsequent intervention can fully replicate. Every child who arrives at school without the foundations to learn is not simply behind their peers, they are carrying a disadvantage that will, without the right support, deepen over the course of their life.

The Government's school readiness target is a bold and meaningful commitment to tackle that. It is one we welcome, and one we believe with the right support from central government, can be achieved. The target has been set; now local authorities need the tools to deliver it.

They need long-term, flexible funding that allows them to plan and embed change. They need a workforce that is large enough, skilled enough and valued enough to deliver. They need direction and clarity to deliver integrated systems in which health visiting, early education, family support and children's services work together around the needs of the child rather than in parallel silos. And they need a data infrastructure that enables early identification of those children who are falling behind, and smooth pathways to the support that can make a difference.

The levers for change are there. Now Government must empower local authorities and create the conditions to deliver that change. This report has set out how we think that can be done, so that the Government can achieve it's targeted to have the highest number of children being school ready at age five by 2028.

Looking beyond 2028, our report sets a vision for the future of support in the early years that places our youngest and most vulnerable children at the very centre of policy making across Government – not just Education and Health.

Our youngest children must become society's responsibility. Reframing this to a collective responsibility would cross departmental boundaries and institutional siloes and deliver a much stronger, more joined up offer of support for children and families with long-term and wide-reaching outcomes for not just their individual life chances. Getting it right in the early years is the single most powerful investment this Government can make in the future of our children, our communities, and our society as a whole.

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