



Executive summary

Starting Well

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

June 2026

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, appearing to read 'H. Chowdry', written in a cursive style.

Haroon Chowdry

Chief Executive, Centre for Young Lives

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 concerningly, 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.

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