



Department
for Education

Giving every child the best start in life



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Government of the United Kingdom
Department for Education

Giving every child the Best Start in Life

Presented to Parliament by Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education by Command of His Majesty

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Foreword from the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP



"What a wise parent would wish for their children, so the state must wish for all its children."

R.H. Tawney

The foundations of the stronger society this government wants to build must be laid down from the very start of children's lives. Today, the Government sets out its plan to grasp that reality and deliver the best start in life for every child.

The opportunities to learn, grow and thrive that this government wants for every one of our children must be there right from the beginning. That means our conception of education has to begin – and does begin – long before the first day at primary school. It means helping families to support their children to succeed through the love, curiosity and experiences they share every day, and it means high-quality learning and play in the crucial, formative early years.

We know that ensuring the best start in life transforms life chances for individuals – but it does more than that. It helps us to build stronger communities, a fairer society and a more prosperous economy. If we are to deliver on that sacred promise - that we will give our children better opportunities than we have had ourselves - we need a step change in the focus and priority that our society gives to children's critical early years.

Today, far too many children are not getting the best start in life which they deserve and need, and which this government is determined they must have. Over 4.5 million are growing up with their lives scarred by poverty. One in four families with babies and children under five struggle to get trusted advice and guidance to support their parenting. Despite the hard work of providers of all types and our committed and dedicated early years workforce, many parents can't access high-quality local early education and childcare that is right for their child. It's either unaffordable or out of reach. Too many children start school behind where they need to be, even though by September around 80% of pre-school childcare hours in England will be state-funded.

This lack of support contributes to too many children not being ready to start school, with the impact felt in two and a half hours of lost teacher time every day. Once at school, gaps persist and widen, as two-fifths of the disadvantage gap among children at age 16 is already there by age five. The scourge of inequality which so scars our society opens up early in all our lives. The ways in which that unfairness cascades down the generations takes root even before we have first entered a classroom.

I will not stand by and watch while the system drifts on and opportunities to lift the life chances of our children are missed. Working with the sector, I will modernise our early years system and put it to work in the service of children and parents. That means help for families where and when they need it. It means flexible, accessible, high-quality early education and childcare. And it means bringing that all together into one cohesive Best Start offer.

The strategy we publish today expresses that vision and explains how we can and will make it a reality. We have already taken our first steps – we will rollout 30 hours funded childcare for working parents saving eligible families who use their full entitlement a massive £7,500 a year on average, we are delivering the biggest uplift in the early years pupil premium on record, and new free breakfast clubs and school-based nurseries are opening across the country. But the time has come to go further and faster.

I believe that our best days lie ahead of us – for our country and our children alike – and there is no more important work to do than this.

We're ambitious for early years reform because we're ambitious for the children of this country. Giving them the best start in life is a huge responsibility. But the opportunity to improve the lives of children and families is also an immense privilege. Working hand in hand with our brilliant early years workforce, I know that we can deliver the best start in life for all our children.

Executive Summary

The foundations of success are laid in early childhood. Ensuring every child has the best start in life - the chance to achieve and to thrive - are the foundation stones of the Government's Opportunity Mission. To ensure that a child's background does not determine their future success, so that all children develop well, learning to communicate, build relationships, manage their emotions, play and learn. Not just in school, but throughout their lives. That is why our Plan for Change sets a target for a record proportion of children to be school-ready by 2028.

Just as government sets the framework in which our businesses and public services operate, so too does government set a framework for families. Fixing that starts in the early years with the parenting advice and healthcare support that enables families to thrive from the start. It begins with accessible, available early education and childcare which boosts children's life chances and parents' work choices. We must make supporting families an integral part of our communities, bringing together education, health, community support, charities and business partners to deliver this shared mission.

Rebuilding the infrastructure around families will take time. For too many, their opportunities are limited by their background. Babies start life ready to grow and learn, but of course development does not happen on its own. It depends on rich, responsive interactions and nurturing support. But right from the start, some children are getting left far behind while others power ahead. Too many children are missing key developmental milestones, in their learning, health, and development, meaning they are not ready to learn when they start school.

Today, the tendency to be left behind is a particular problem for some of our children. Too often we hear from families who struggle to access childcare for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Children from White working-class communities are the most likely to miss crucial early learning goals at the end of reception. We know that poverty and discrimination directly affect the development and health of children. The work of the Government's Child Poverty Taskforce to stop and then reverse the increase in child poverty since 2010, will be integral to building children's life chances.

Home and family are what matters above all for children, and families are a child's first and most important teachers. Giving every child the best start in life means supporting families to provide the nurturing care that children need to thrive.

All parents want the best for their children. But for many, especially those facing poverty, poor housing, mental health challenges, or family stress, it can be very much harder. Parents are responsible for their children, but government should be right behind them, reducing everyday pressures, helping parents understand what healthy child development

looks like, and how talking, playing, reading, responding and being physically active, can make a powerful difference.

But for too long government decisions have made that harder, not easier. Funding for integrated, holistic early parenting and family support has been radically reduced since 2010. Many children's centres remain, thanks to the great age of expansion some twenty years ago, but the service offer is much diminished. Early education and childcare is unaffordable for many families and, in some cases, not available at all and we have seen ever decreasing numbers of childminders in recent years.

The range of early education and childcare offers is complex for parents to navigate, with different schemes that are confusing and difficult to access. England's amazing unsung heroes, our early years educators, feel overstretched and undervalued. The attention of leaders, nationally and locally, has for too long been elsewhere – and services that support families with babies and young children are not joined up enough.

Turning this around will be our central priority. That begins with a new Best Start Family Service: bringing together the services families need both in communities and through a new digital platform to give parents easy access to a network of advice, support and guidance to help their children thrive. This will be backed by local Best Start Plans, co-produced by local authorities together with their communities and in response to local needs.

At the heart of this is trust, which this government is determined to rebuild with the people we serve. The early years are a huge opportunity to build relationships with families and parents who may previously have had difficult experiences with statutory services. We must engage with parents and families ensuring their experiences and outcomes are at the heart of our reforms. We must listen to and work closely with professionals who work with families, babies and young children. We want to see health, children's and family services, nurseries, childminders, schools, charities, and businesses connecting and collaborating to deliver this shared mission. And we must learn lessons from what has come before, to thoughtfully design and deliver comprehensive reform to the early education and childcare system.

This publication sets out our first steps in a decade of renewal, building on the commitments made in the Plan for Change and laying the foundations for further reform. The Department of Education will spend close to £1.5 billion over the next three years on improving family services and early years education to begin the hard work needed.

The reforms set out in this strategy go hand in hand with the move to a Neighbourhood Health Service set out in the Government's 10 Year Health Plan, and the three radical shifts - hospital to community, analogue to digital and sickness to prevention.

Supporting families with young children to thrive will also be integral to the Child Poverty Strategy due to be published late this year, and families will benefit from the already

announced expansion of free school meals for those in receipt of universal credit. We have also launched a review of the parental leave and pay system to ensure parents have the resources and time away from work that are crucial for their wellbeing and their children's early development.

With the immediate steps set out here – to expand and strengthen family services, make early education and childcare more accessible and affordable, and improve the quality of early education and childcare – we will make real change happen for families and children across the country. These are the first steps to delivering a decade of national renewal and putting the early years back at the heart of how we deliver stronger outcomes for our children, our families and our society.

We will begin the job of building back crucial family services, providing high-quality support to parents, babies and children from pregnancy to age five. This includes:

- **A new Best Start Family Service:** We will accelerate the process of rebuilding critical family services through renewed drive and fresh investment. We will take the best of the Sure Start, Family Hubs and Start for Life approaches to create **Best Start Family Hubs**, with a new evidenced-informed core offer for parents, a clear local mission around children's early development in support of the Plan for Change milestone, and a digital parenting offer. This will be supported by a new national **Best Start digital service**, linked to 'My Children' on the NHS app, bringing together the trusted advice and guidance all parents need in one place, and linking families to their local services.
- **We will fund Best Start Family Hubs in every local authority:** These services will reach the children and families who will benefit most – those from low-income families and with additional vulnerabilities. Best Start Family Hubs will be open to all and based in disadvantaged communities where they are needed most. Best Start Family Hubs will include professionals working across all local teams, including health and education, and will work with nurseries, childminders, schools, health services, libraries and local voluntary and community groups. One of the strengths of the Sure Start programme was that it was designed with local communities who have a clear understanding of their needs. We will apply this learning to the design of Best Start services, including the families that they serve.
- **Strengthening health services:** We will improve maternity care, strengthen health visiting services, increase access to vaccinations, and take steps to reduce tooth decay in children.
- **Accountability and innovation:** The Plan for Change puts early childhood outcomes at the heart of national government priorities, bringing the spotlight for both policy and delivery to the life chances of our youngest children. We will harness that momentum to galvanise local leaders and partners. We will agree with each local authority a clear target, working with health and voluntary and community sector organisations, to improve child development locally. We will work with local

leaders and partners to experiment, fix problems, and ensure that we reach the families who most need help, through our Test Learn and Grow programme. And we will look for opportunities to partner with social investors, to bring additional funding and access to capital to the sector, working with partners in the *Impact Economy* – which includes philanthropic investors, charities, social enterprises, and purpose-driven businesses - to bring new insight and solutions to longstanding challenges.

We will make it easier and more affordable for children to access early education and care. This includes:

- **Delivering 30 hours government funded childcare to save families an average of £7,500 a year:** From the term after their child turns nine months, eligible working parents will get 30 hours of funded childcare a week, saving families who use their full entitlement an average of £7,500 per year. Thanks to the hard work of early years providers and local authorities, over half a million children are already benefitting from the expansion of 15 funded hours for children aged nine months to two years old, and many parents have increased their working hours, boosting family income and lifting more children out of poverty.
- **Creating more early education and childcare places where they are most needed:** We are building and expanding nurseries in schools, with up to 6,000 places opening from September 2025 onward and almost £370 million in new funding to support further expansion.
- **More funding to promote inclusion:** In April 2025, we raised the Early Years Pupil Premium to its highest level ever to support better outcomes for children from low-income families attending early education and childcare. We will also increase access for children with SEND by investing in the help available to them to support inclusion and early intervention to prevent the escalation of needs.
- **Stable and sufficient funding:** Reliable funding is the basis for a healthy provider market. Government spending on funded hours is expected to reach over £9 billion next year and will increase by £1.6 billion in total by 2028/29 so providers can deliver high-quality care and education and meet growing demand from parents. We will consult on changes to how early years funding is allocated and distributed to ensure funding is matched to need and promotes workforce stability and quality provision.
- **Shaping local markets:** We will ensure the market is well supported and there is effective oversight at local or regional level to deliver the high-quality early education and childcare families need. We will explore giving local authorities and Mayoral Strategic Authorities new powers to make sure there are enough places locally and parents have a good range of early education and childcare options including childminders.

- **Strengthening accountability:** We will also provide Ofsted with funding to increase the frequency and improve the quality of their inspections so that parents can make better informed decisions about where to send their children. We will work with Ofsted and providers to develop an effective approach to group inspection.

To deliver our long-term ambition of comprehensive reform, we will work across government to design and deliver a simpler system to make it easier for families to access early education and childcare. We will look at the early education and childcare support provided by different parts of government to identify ways to make it simpler for providers and parents, improve access, and increase the overall impact of government spending on children and families.

We will improve the quality of education that children receive in early years settings, childminders and reception classes. Children's outcomes improve when high-quality interactions with adults help them to learn new words and new skills, and extend their understanding of the world. To do this, we are investing in training and qualifications to raise the skill levels of the workforce, and increasing understanding of high-quality practice, providing more access to proven, evidence-based early years programmes. This includes:

- **Raising the status of early years educators:** We want more people to view early years as a rewarding career. We will work with the sector to co-design and introduce a new professional register to put early years workers on a more professional footing and create clear paths for career progression, to drive up standards and professionalism among the workforce.
- **More highly qualified staff where they are needed most:** We believe every early years setting should have at least one early years teacher, because more high qualified staff leads to better outcomes for children. We will increase the number of qualified early years teachers and educators by offering more high-quality training routes based on what we know works best: a 'golden thread' of evidence-informed practice. We will offer financial incentives to attract and keep early years teachers in nurseries serving the most disadvantaged communities so every child, no matter where they live, can benefit from high-quality early education.
- **Creating centres of expertise:** We will double the number of Stronger Practice Hubs, securing their future for a further three years, and fund partnerships between nurseries and schools to share evidenced-based practice and strengthen links across settings, helping more children have a smooth transition into reception.
- **Helping early years staff to ensure every child can thrive:** There is strong evidence that effective early intervention lowers barriers to learning and reduces the prevalence of identified SEND. We will make inclusive practice standard practice in the early years by embedding an inclusive approach in our workforce education,

training and leadership opportunities and funding evidence-based programmes that are proven to improve children's development.

- **Giving every reception child the right start:** Reception year is a national priority for Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams and we will drive improvements in the quality of teaching in reception, including increasing access to proven early language programmes, ensuring that children get a fairer start to school.

To support the Government in relentlessly driving forward this agenda we will appoint a **Best Start in Life Champion**. The new Champion will bring early years expertise into the heart of government and will work with us through the Opportunity Mission to drive forward this change.

These steps are just the beginning. We will continue working with parents, educators, healthcare professionals and local services, councils and unions to go further over a decade of renewal, rebuilding the importance of early childhood, giving families time to build strong relationships together and ensuring that children are set up to continue their learning journey and thrive, in school and beyond.

Introduction

Our mission: giving every child the best start in life

The **Government's Plan for Change** puts children at the heart of its priorities with the aim of a record proportion of children starting school ready to learn by 2028. Every child should have the opportunity to grow, play, learn and thrive. However, for too many children, their opportunities are limited by their background. **That is why this government has set a mission: to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child.**

The early years of a child's life are when their brain develops the fastest. During the first year alone, more than a million new brain connections form every second.¹ What happens during this time – at home, in early education and in the community – has long lasting impacts, setting the foundations for growth, learning, and emotional and physical development. That is why giving every child the best start in life is central to the Government's Opportunity Mission.

Helping families in the early years can make a huge difference, recognising the crucial role parents play as their children's first educators. Parents need information and advice about child development to help their children to thrive. This includes access to pregnancy and early child health services, parenting support and baby classes, and good quality early education and childcare. Improving education and health go hand in hand – healthier children are better able to learn and children who achieve well in education go on to live healthier lives.²

The evidence is clear that access to these services has huge benefits to the children and parents directly affected as well as the economy and wider society. Evaluation of previous investment in family services shows that it improved educational outcomes and health.³ The benefit of attending high-quality early education and childcare for at least two years is equivalent to gaining a higher grade in around seven GCSEs.⁴ Improving access to early education and childcare also enables parents, particularly women, to work, which improves family income and boosts the economy.⁵ While all children benefit from improved access to family services and early years education, the educational and other benefits for children from low-income families are particularly high.^{6, 7}

¹ Centre on the Developing Child (n.d.). *Brain Architecture*. Available at: www.developingchild.harvard.edu/key-concept/brain-architecture/

² Healey, K. (2004). *Linking Children's Health and Education: Progress and Challenges in London*. The King's Fund.

³ Carneiro, P et al. (2025). *The Short- and Medium-Term Effects of Sure Start on Children's Outcomes*. Institute for Fiscal Studies.

⁴ This is the benefit for children who attend high-quality early years education, for at least two years from the age of three, compared to not attending at all.

Sylva, K. et al. (2014). *Students' Educational and Developmental Outcomes at Age 16*. Department for Education.

⁵ Brewer, M. et al. (2020). *Free childcare and parents' labour supply: is more better?*. Institute for Fiscal Studies.

⁶ Melhuish, E., & Gardner, J. (2021). *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact study on early education use and child outcomes up to age 7 years*. Department for Education.

⁷ Carneiro, P et al. (2025). *The Short- and Medium-Term Effects of Sure Start on Children's Outcomes*. Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Despite these benefits, many families today struggle to access the help they need. Between 2010 and 2022, around one in three Sure Start Children's Centres in England closed or reduced their services, and overall spending on family services dropped by around three quarters.⁸ Early education and childcare is less available in some parts of the country, and many low-income families don't take up the help they're entitled to.⁹ Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) often face additional challenges in accessing support.

This contributes to too many children not being ready to start primary school, with staff in schools saying that almost half are unable to sit still, one in three can't respond to simple instructions, and one in four are not yet fully toilet trained.¹⁰ The impact of this is felt by all children in the classroom, with around two and a half hours of teacher time lost daily, affecting the education of the whole class.¹¹

Children from low-income families are more likely to be missing basic developmental milestones. By age five, these children on average are almost five months behind their peers in development.¹² Once children fall behind their peers it becomes increasingly difficult for them to catch up. This developmental gap continues to grow, and by the time they take their GCSEs at age 16, they are on average 19 months behind.¹³ This means these young people are less likely to leave school with essential qualifications and skills, will have fewer employment opportunities and around 10 years lower life expectancy.¹⁴

That is why the **Plan for Change** sets an ambition that all children get the **best start in life**, no matter who they are or where they come from. We want to break the link between a child's background and their future success and raise the healthiest generation ever. This means delivering accessible, integrated maternity and family support services from pregnancy to age five, and high-quality early education and childcare to set every child up for success.

We will measure progress through the number of children starting school ready to learn. By 2028, we want a record proportion - 75% - of children to reach a good level of development by the end of reception. That's up from around 68% today, meaning 40,000 to 45,000 more children each year will be better prepared for school and life.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Department for Education (2024). *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, 2023/24*. Available at: www.explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents/2023

¹⁰ Kindred squared school readiness survey (2025). *School Readiness Survey*. Available at: www.kindredsquared.org.uk/school-readiness-survey/

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Education Policy Institute (2024). *Annual report 2024: Disadvantage*. Available at: www.epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-disadvantage-2/

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Marmot, M. et al. (2020). [Health equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 years on](#). Institute of Health Equity.

12 development goals for children

Children's development is assessed at the end of reception year by their teacher through the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile assessment. To meet a 'Good Level of Development' children must meet 12 development goals.

Personal, social and emotional development



1. Self-regulation

- understand feelings and begin to regulate behaviour
- focus, respond and follow instructions
- work towards simple goals with patience

2. Managing self

- show confidence and independence
- understand and follow rules
- manage personal needs, like hygiene and dressing

3. Building relationships

- form positive attachments
- play cooperatively and take turns
- show sensitivity to the needs of others

Communication and language



4. Listening, attention and understanding

- listen attentively, responding with comments or questions
- take part in conversations with teachers and peers

5. Speaking

- participate in discussions using new vocabulary
- explain thinking and express ideas and feelings using full sentences

Physical development



6. Gross motor skills

- move confidently and safely
- show strength, balance and coordination in a range of physical activities

7. Fine motor skills

- hold a pencil effectively in preparation for fluent writing
- use other tools such as scissors and cutlery
- begin to show accuracy when drawing

Literacy



8. Comprehension

- understand and retell stories using own words and new vocabulary
- anticipate events and use new vocabulary in discussions

9. Word reading

- say sounds for letters and digraphs
- read simple words and sentences aloud, including sound blending

10. Writing

- write recognisable letters and spell words
- write simple phrases and sentences

Mathematics



11. Number

- understand numbers up to 10
- recognise quantities up to 5 without counting
- automatically recall number bonds up to 5 and some to 10

12. Numerical patterns

- count beyond 20
- compare quantities up to 10
- explore number patterns up to 10 such as odds, evens and doubles

15

¹⁵ Department for Education (2024), *EYFS Statutory Framework*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/670fa42a30536cb92748328f/EYFS_statutory_framework_for_group_and_school_-_based_providers.pdf



Chapter 1

Better support for families

1. Better Support for families

Summary

We know that previous investment in strengthening and joining up family services has had a significant positive impact on child outcomes, yet one in four families with children under five cannot access local family services, rising to one in three in low-income families. Awareness is low, access is uneven, and there are significant gaps in provision, particularly for low-income families and children with special educational needs and disabilities.

We will deliver a new Best Start Family Service to bring together parenting, healthcare and education support services to ensure all babies, children and families have access to the early intervention and support they need. Through local commissioning, we will ensure that Neighbourhood Health Services work in partnership with family hubs, schools, nurseries, childminders and colleges, ensuring support for young children's health and development is available and accessible in communities. The Department for Education will provide over half a billion pounds of investment in the Best Start Family Service over the 2026-29 spending review period.

Case for change

The Sure Start programme was launched in 1998. The programme evolved over the following decade and consistently provided significant investment in holistic, integrated early childhood services – public health, pregnancy and maternity care, parenting and family support – aiming to promote child development and reduce inequalities. Sure Start Children's Centres were a 'one stop shop' – a place where families knew they could go for help, and which would facilitate joint working between professionals in a community.

We now know without doubt that Sure Start worked. It reduced hospitalisations and improved GCSE outcomes, with the strongest impacts in disadvantaged areas.¹⁶ It improved early identification and reduced the number of children with persistent special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) over the long-term, boosted physical and mental health, and strengthened family environments.¹⁷

But today, many families can't access this kind of help. Between 2010 and 2022, around one third of children's centres closed or cut back, and funding for family services fell by about 75%.¹⁸

¹⁶ Carneiro, P et al. (2025). [The Short- and Medium-Term Effects of Sure Start on Children's Outcomes](#). Institute for Fiscal Studies.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

At the same time, health services have faced new pressures, with fewer health visitors, lower vaccination rates, and growing inequalities in tooth decay, which is the most common reason for hospital admissions in children aged between five and nine years old.¹⁹

Despite these challenges, many local authorities have begun the task of building back these services, some with funding from central government. Some local authorities have used children's centre buildings to create Family Hubs, open to families with children of all ages. We will continue to prioritise the early years and ensure targeting of services for young families whilst also ensuring that families with older children can access the help that they need.

Local leaders and professionals are doing great work with communities and families every day. But central government funding has been limited and inconsistent. A 2024 survey found that one in four families with children under five cannot access local children's centres or Family Hubs, rising to one in three low-income families.²⁰

It will take time to rebuild, but families need, want and deserve better. The evidence is clear that these services improve outcomes for children, prevent needs from escalating and more than return on the investment. Education and health go hand in hand: healthier children learn better, and children who succeed in school live healthier lives.²¹ We must take immediate action to support families, especially those that experience poverty, if we are to put families at the heart of a decade of national renewal, ensuring a record proportion of children starting school ready to learn.

Case study – Impact of Family Hubs

Lauren is 22 years old and a first-time mum to an 18-month-old. She uses four different family hubs in Peterborough and attends two perinatal mental health groups, which she came across by chance while attending an informal play session at one of the hubs. Lauren has formed strong friendships with other mums through these groups. *"I turned up for a Babbling Babies and said, what's in that room? They said it's a Mind group – come in if you want....I do not have any friends from before. All my friends are from the groups. It's made a real difference."*

Lauren reflected on the importance of these free services for her own mental health and son's development. She also uses paid services run by private providers but limits this to once a week. *"Each one is around £7 and it adds up, especially with the bus fare there and back. It ends up being £40-50 a month – that's [equal to] a food shop."*

¹⁹ NHS England (2024). *Hospital Admitted Patient Care Activity, 2023-24*. Available at: www.digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/hospital-admitted-patient-care-activity/2023-24

²⁰ UNICEF UK / NSPCC (2024). [Opening Doors: Access to Early Childhood Services for Families Impacted by Poverty in the UK](#).

²¹ Healey, K. (2004). [Linking Children's Health and Education: Progress and Challenges in London](#). The King's Fund.

The actions we are taking

We want all families to have easy access to high-quality family support when they need it. Becoming a parent is a huge moment, full of excitement about the future. But all parents, at different times, need a helping hand – whether it's reassurance during moments of uncertainty, guidance through transitions such as weaning or potty training, support if relationships hit a rough patch or simply connection in the midst of everyday pressures. Without that, it can feel isolating and overwhelming. These services do not just offer a help, they offer hope and connection. We will begin to rebuild crucial family services, providing high-quality support to parents and children, from pregnancy to age five and beyond, under a new 'Best Start' umbrella.

A new Best Start Family Service

We will deliver the high-quality family support that can transform children's lives and life chances.

- **We will create a new Best Start Family Hubs Programme:** Best Start Family Hubs will draw on what we know works from Sure Start and similar programmes. At these hubs, families can get professional help or simply meet other parents and make friends. They will offer fun programmes such as Stay and Play which will be open to all, health services, and advice on a range of issues from parenting tips to managing children's emotional needs. Parents will be able to join courses to boost their confidence and help their children with language and emotional development. And through these hubs, families will be connected to other local services such as healthcare, relationship advice, jobs and housing.
- **All local authorities will receive funding to support families in their areas:** We estimate this expansion could reach half a million children across the country. Local authorities not currently in receipt of central government funding for Family Hubs will receive a grant this financial year to ready new services for parents so they are up and running quickly when the new Best Start funding commences from April 2026.
- **Best Start Family Hubs will be key to our vision of joined up services in the community:** Families should have a place they can go to get help, without getting lost in a complicated landscape of overlapping services. Best Start Family Hubs will bring together professionals from health and education, and will work with nurseries, childminders, schools, health services, libraries and local voluntary and community groups. For example, a parent might attend a midwifery appointment, receive advice on breastfeeding from a health visitor, go to a parenting class to learn about child development, get help to manage conflict, or advice from a local charity for housing issues, all in one place. Stay and Play services can help overcome barriers to taking up childcare entitlements for those who have most to benefit. And as we roll out the reforms of the 10 Year Health Plan, Neighbourhood Health Services will build on the work of, and coordinate with, Best Start Family

Hubs and Start for Life services, to realise the vision for integrated services that help move healthcare from hospitals to the community and from sickness to prevention.

- **Best Start Family Hubs will be open to all but based in areas where families need them most:** Trusting relationships between families, services, peers and communities are precious and critical. Yet, too often, families can be put off from seeking support. Seventy percent of parents with children aged nought to five say that they feel judged by others; and many report lower self-esteem, increased self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, and sadness or unhappiness.²² Best Start Family Hubs will be welcoming spaces where every family feels valued and confident to ask for help, open to all, and relationship-centred. They will be located in areas of disadvantage, because we know from the evidence that while joined up family services benefit all children, the benefits for children from low-income families are even greater. No family should be turned away from a Best Start Family Hub having taken the step of seeking support, but we will prioritise the early years and ensure targeting of services for young families.

Case study - Support for Families with Young Children in Lincolnshire

In Lincolnshire, families with young children can take part in a funded, free to access programme called '**Making it Real**', designed to help parents support their child's learning at home. Aimed at children aged three to four, the programme runs for six weeks and involves both parents and children. It focuses on fun, easy-to-do activities that use everyday items found around the house. These activities are designed to encourage talking, playing, and learning together, helping children get ready for school. The sessions also include a couple of special literacy events to spark a love of books and stories.

The programme is delivered by friendly staff from Family Hubs and children's centres, and sessions can take place in a variety of local venues such as nurseries, libraries, churches, and other community spaces—especially in rural areas. Families can be invited to join by nursery staff or health workers, or they can choose to sign up themselves.

Alongside 'Making it Real', Lincolnshire also offers other support for families, including a second free programme 'PEEP' and a speech and language pilot. These are delivered by trained Early Years teachers and supported by the Early Years Alliance. Many local nurseries and early years settings have now been trained to run these programmes on their own, making them more widely available.

To make sure everything runs smoothly, Lincolnshire has a team of Early Years Improvement Advisers who work across the county. They help train staff, support local settings, and ensure families receive the best possible experience.

²² Royal Foundation / Ipsos MORI (2020). [State of the Nation: Understanding Public Attitudes to the Early Years](#)

- **Parents will see a clearer, more consistent, evidence-based offering that will help them with their child's development:** Over the past decade and more, funding cuts and lack of national and local focus have led to inconsistency and drift. This will change. There will be a core offer for families, to create a clear local parent pathway from conception through to the early years. We will fund more evidence-based parenting and home learning offers to achieve the 75% good level of development milestone, and bridge the critical gap before children enter school. We will set clearer rules to ensure that funding is used on high-quality parenting programmes.
- **There will be help for families of children with additional needs:** Each Best Start Family Hub will have a children and family services professional specifically trained in working to support parents of children with additional needs. This will help identify children with SEND who may need extra help early on, making links with local early years settings and health services. They will assist parents in navigating what can be a complex landscape of services, including making links with local early years settings and health services, so that families can get the right support as soon as possible.
- **Parents will be involved in decisions about how their local Best Start Family Hubs are delivered, and there will be greater outreach to make sure no one misses out:** Services work best when they are informed by the needs of local communities, and we learned much from Sure Start about the power of parental engagement. We will fund outreach work so that Family Hubs can connect with families who do not typically engage with family services, building on what we are already learning from our Test, Learn and Grow pilots (see below). This could include fathers, young parents, and ethnic minority communities. Outreach will help parents understand what is available and how to access wider offers such as funded childcare hours. And all Best Start Family Hubs will work with a parent panel to help ensure the service works effectively for local families.
- **We will back our investment in local services with a new national Best Start digital service:** We will launch a new Best Start in Life campaign in autumn which will guide parents, from pregnancy through their child's journey to starting school and beyond. It will be followed by a new Best Start digital parenting hub, which in time will link to 'My Children' in the NHS App, a 21st century alternative to the 'red book', announced in the 10 Year Health Plan. We will bring together the trusted advice and guidance parents need in one place, and link families to their local Best Start Family Hub. We will look to streamline checking eligibility for funded childcare hours by allowing parents to do this directly. We will also look at how new technology, such as artificial intelligence, could be used safely to help parents find and access the information they need.

Healthier children: strengthening health services in early childhood

The healthcare that families receive before, during and after pregnancy can have lifelong implications. As set out in our 10 Year Health Plan we will reinvent the NHS through three radical shifts - hospital to community, analogue to digital and sickness to prevention. Our move to a neighbourhood health service will improve support for families, so every child has the healthiest possible start in life.

- **Better maternity and newborn care:** To strengthen services, the Government has announced plans for a national, independent investigation to understand the systemic issues behind why so many women, babies and families experience unacceptable care. This builds on work that is already underway such as the national rollout of a programme to reduce brain injury in childbirth, and setting new national standards to tackle maternal mortality, focused on the main causes of maternal death and harm.
- **Strengthened health visiting services:** Health visitors play a vital role providing advice and support and are often the first to spot if a baby or young child needs extra help. We will strengthen health visiting services, by reducing variation in the reach and quality of development and health reviews to ensure all families have access to high-quality, personalised support. We will also test new ways of delivering these services to better meet families' needs.
- **Making it easier to get vaccinated:** Vaccinations are one of the most effective ways of protecting children from serious illnesses. We are updating the vaccination schedule so children are protected from illnesses such as measles, mumps and rubella sooner. We will also make it easier for children to get vaccinated – through their GP, and for some families during health visitor appointments.
- **Supporting healthy eating:** To support the poorest families and tackle child poverty, we are giving direct support to families most at risk of food poverty, helping them buy nutritious food for their children. We will restore the value of the Healthy Start scheme from 2026 to 2027. Pregnant women and children aged one or older but under four will each receive £4.65 per week (up from £4.25). Children under one year old will receive £9.30 every week (up from £8.50). In addition, from September 2026, all school-aged children who attend state-funded schools, as well as children²³ in state-funded school nurseries, whose household is in receipt of Universal Credit, will be eligible for free school meals. Over half a million children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds will benefit from a free nutritious meal as a result, lifting 100,000 children in England out of poverty.
- **Tackling tooth decay:** To help reduce childhood tooth decay we are introducing supervised toothbrushing to reach up to 600,000 three- to five-year-olds in the most deprived areas in England in collaboration with Colgate-Palmolive who are providing over 23 million toothbrushes and toothpastes over the next five years.

²³ Those which attend both before and after lunch.

- **Making it easier to book appointments:** We will deliver on our 10 Year Health Plan commitment to provide a digital alternative to the 'red book', by giving parents access to support, guidance and their child's health records, via the NHS App. It will provide advice and support throughout childhood, on weaning, maintaining healthy habits, or where to find support for concerns about mental health.

Leading local change: making services work better for families

There are many great examples of local health, education and family services working well together. But too often this is not the case, and families still face gaps, especially where they have more complex needs. Parents have to deal with lots of different organisations that do not always share information or work as a team to meet the needs of families.

Mission-centred government means working differently to solve these problems. National government needs to play its part, joining up centrally, setting a clear direction, and then working in partnership with the frontline to innovate and find solutions to longstanding problems. The Opportunity Mission and the Best Start in Life milestone set a clear ambition around which partners can organise and work together, as they must, if we are to achieve better outcomes for children in the short and long term.

- **Consistent, outcomes-based accountability for central and local government:** Child development outcomes are once more a priority for national and local leaders and decision makers. The new draft Local Government Outcomes Framework published for consultation by the Government makes the proportion of children achieving a good level of development at the end of reception a priority metric for local government; we will follow this up with specific statutory targets for each local area, using the powers set out in Part 1 of the Childcare Act 2006, which also places duties on other partners to work together with the local authority.
- **Better coordination between services:** The national target for improving child development cannot be achieved by government alone. The challenges across local areas, and the scale and type of action needed will be different. Local authorities have a key role to play as leaders of local systems. They will be tasked with developing ambitious Best Start local plans to achieve the 2028 milestone and improve child development in their area, working in partnership with Government. We will provide additional funding through the Best Start Family Services programme to enable local authorities to create mission-oriented plans to identify local needs and gaps in provision, and join up across systems and sectors. We will also explore whether a more detailed outcomes framework, under the Best Start in Life umbrella, drawing on the lessons of Every Child Matters, would improve join up of services locally.
- **Innovation:** Test, Learn and Grow approaches are central to the Government's mission to rewire the state. Projects to improve the uptake of family services in Manchester and Sheffield have already shown the value of this approach. The Manchester pilot indicates that making speech and language screening more

accessible to parents – by providing it in alternative community spaces such as food banks or libraries – can help to increase uptake, while the Sheffield project used demonstrations and WhatsApp voice note testimonials to boost sign-ups to an early literacy programme. The Best Start in Life will continue to be a priority for our Test, Learn and Grow agenda. Starting this autumn, Government will launch 'accelerators' aimed at testing new ways to ensure the services offered at Best Start Family Hubs are accessible and effective – designing around parents and their needs. Innovation is not just limited to the state – we will explore opportunities to partner with the *Impact Economy*, which includes philanthropy, impact investors, charities, social enterprises, and purpose-driven business – to bring the power of these approaches to longstanding challenges on data, funding and integration.

Case study –System participation and innovation

To achieve the Best Start in Life's objective of 75% of children reaching a good level of development by 2028, multiple systems – including health, public health, family support, early childhood education and care, and schools – will have to work together at pace. In January 2025, the Education Policy Innovation Centre and Behavioural Insights Unit in the Department for Education partnered to explore how applying a participatory approach could help identify challenges and opportunities for innovation across these systems to drive progress towards the mission. A participatory approach means widening who government engages with when designing interventions; empowering delivery partners and families to share best practice, align on a shared vision and shape policy and delivery ideas.

The team has developed relationships with four local authority areas where significant shifts will be needed to achieve the mission: Blackpool, Lancashire, Peterborough and Gravesham in Kent. So far researchers have engaged with over 90 local authority officials, frontline practitioners and voluntary sector organisations and immersed themselves in the lived experience of five families at different stages on the Best Start in Life journey.

Insights from this research will be shared at two regional events this summer bringing together actors from across the system, including central government officials to identify the priority system-level challenges and opportunities. The next phases of work will focus on addressing these challenges and opportunities by supporting local authorities to develop local strategic delivery plans, developing a system-wide programme guide and testing and learning about specific policy interventions, including scaling up leading practice from local areas involved in the project.

- **Workforce and leadership:** The development and evolution of Sure Start made clear the importance of leadership and the skills required to work effectively with families and to manage and lead these services well. However, the challenges faced by local professionals and leaders continue to evolve. We will conduct a family services leadership and workforce study to establish a clear basis for long-term reform.
- **Smarter use of data:** We know better sharing of information is key to providing children and families with the right services at the right time. That is why we have established a programme of work seeking to address deep-seated and well-known problems with how information about families and children is shared within and across organisations, including families having to tell their stories multiple times to different professionals. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will support professionals working with a child to share information by creating a duty for organisations to share information relevant for safeguarding and promotion of welfare purposes. Alongside this we are piloting a single unique identifier which will allow data to be shared more effectively and accurately by linking records together, so no child falls through the cracks. Together this will ensure organisations will be able to join up data about children and families with greater accuracy and confidence. This will make it quicker and easier for the right information to be shared amongst professionals who are supporting families and children, including in Best Start Family Hubs, so that data can play its full part in providing the right services to the right people at the right time.
- **Keeping children safe:** Best Start Family Hubs will work closely with other local children's services to safeguard children and help families facing complex problems, in particular those who are supported by a dedicated family help lead practitioner (who may be a social worker). They will be integral to the reforms of the *Families First Partnership* programme²⁴ by improving the join up of vital services in an area and making it easier for children and families to access a range of help at the right time, irrespective of their needs. The Families First Partnership is a national programme which will transform how support is delivered to children and families, focusing on early intervention, multi-agency collaboration, and empowering families to make decisions about their own care. The Government will continue to invest £523 million each year in the Families First Partnership programme. This will rise by at least another £300 million across the next two years.

²⁴ Department for Education (2025), *Families First Partnership programme guide*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/families-first-partnership-programme



Chapter 2

More accessible early education and childcare

2. More accessible early education and childcare

Summary

High-quality early education and childcare boosts child development and makes it easier for parents to work. We are delivering more support to working families than ever before with the rollout of 30 hours government-funded childcare from September 2025. This is expected to save eligible families using their full entitlement an average of £7,500 a year, transforming the costs of having children for families.

However, there are still significant challenges within the childcare and early years system with families missing out on help and many still finding it hard to get early education and childcare where and when they need it.

The current system is made up of several different schemes and has developed gradually over time, with add-ons and expansions made by subsequent governments in an ad hoc fashion. This can make it confusing for both parents and early years providers to understand and apply for the help available. We will continue improving the system so that all children, regardless of background, can benefit from high-quality early education and childcare, and parents are supported to work.

Case for change

High-quality early education and childcare boosts children's life chances and enables parents to work. Children who attend high-quality early education and childcare between ages two and four on average perform better at every stage of school, with children from low-income families benefitting the most.^{25, 26, 27} In fact, the benefit of spending at least two years in early education and childcare is equivalent to gaining a higher grade in around seven GCSEs.²⁸ Helping parents to work is also vital to reduce child poverty and the impacts on children who are experiencing poverty now.

In 1998, the Labour government first introduced funded hours for early education and childcare for four-year-old children in England, with the aim of boosting child development and ensuring more children were ready for school. This has increased over time, but the purpose has alternated between a focus on child development and parental employment leaving a patchwork offer for families across England.

²⁵ Department for Education (2025). *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED)*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/study-of-early-education-and-development-seed

²⁶ Sammons, P. et al. (2015). [Pre-school and early home learning effects on A-level outcomes](#). Department for Education.

²⁷ Sylva, K. et al. (2014). [Students' Educational and Developmental Outcomes at Age 16](#). Department for Education.

²⁸ Ibid.

Early Education and Childcare Support

Universal offer

- Universal funded early education and childcare for 15 hours per week for 38 weeks a year for all 3- and 4-year-olds.



Support for low-income families

- 15 hours of funded early education and childcare per week for 38 weeks a year is available for eligible 2-year-olds in low-income households. This is also available for looked-after or previously looked-after children, children with an Education, Health and Care Plan, and/or children receiving Disability Living Allowance.
- Low-income working families in receipt of Universal Credit can be reimbursed up to 85% of their childcare costs each month for children aged under 17.



Support for working parents

- From September 2025, eligible working parents can get up to 30 hours of funded childcare for 38 weeks a year from the term after their child turns 9 months until they start school. To qualify for working parent support, each parent must earn at least equivalent to 16 hours per week at National Minimum Wage, but not more than £100,000 adjusted net income per year.
- Additionally, with the Tax-Free Childcare scheme, for every £8 a parent deposits into their account, the government adds £2 to help with the cost of childcare for working parents that are not in receipt of Universal Credit. Parents can get up to a maximum of £2,000 per year per child aged under 12, or £4,000 for disabled children aged under 17.



Support for student parents

- If they meet the eligibility criteria, students can apply for the Childcare Grant and Parental Learning Allowance.

Support for working parents increased last year and eligible parents will receive 30 funded hours for 38 weeks per year from this September, with children able to access funded hours from an earlier age. But many families still struggle to access the early education and childcare they need. Here are some of the challenges:

- **Additional costs:** Despite government funding, parents can often face additional costs if they need to buy more hours to suit their working pattern and for things such as meals or activities. Additional, unexpected charges such as fees to register for a waiting list also create barriers for families.
- **A complicated system:** Early education and childcare support comes from different parts of government, which can be confusing for both parents and providers. To qualify for the working parent entitlement, each parent must earn above a minimum amount (equivalent to 16 hours per week at minimum wage), but not more than £100,000 per year. Parents who do not earn enough to qualify for the working parent entitlement must wait until their children are either two or three years old before they are eligible for 15 funded hours.²⁹

“Some of our families are falling through the entitlement gap. One parent was £10 short of the working parent offer. She was distraught. She does night work, comes home, takes her daughters to school then drops the little one here. Her employer added one hour on her regular pay cheque to push her over the threshold. She got the funding but the process caused a lot of stress.”

Pre-school Manager – Kent

- **Inclusion of children with SEND:** Parents of children with SEND can struggle to find a suitable place for their child.³⁰ The number of children under five with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) has also reached a record high.³¹
- **Availability of places:** Early education and childcare availability depends on where you live, meaning parents can't always find a place in a location or pattern of hours that suits them. Four in ten parents with children under five say there are not enough places locally.³² More affluent areas tend to have more and better-quality early education and

²⁹ Some families who do not qualify for the working parent entitlements will qualify for 15 hours at 2 years old. Further detail at: www.childcarechoices.gov.uk

³⁰ Department for Education, *Pulse Surveys of Childcare and Early Years Providers 2024*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/673f60262ff787d4e01b0a34/Pulse_Survey_of_Childcare_and_Early_Years_Providers_April_2024.pdf

³¹ Department for Education (2025). *Education, Health and Care Plans*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-health-and-care-plans/2025>

³² Department for Education (2024). *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024>

childcare.^{33, 34} Meanwhile, the number of childminders has halved since 2012, making it harder for families to find flexible care.³⁵

- **Less choice of provider:** The childcare market is fragmented, making it hard for small businesses to manage and adapt to the introduction of new government schemes. Over time we have seen a decrease in voluntary providers, a steady reduction in childminders, and an increase in private equity investment.^{36, 37, 38}

The actions we are taking

We want all children, regardless of background, to have access to high-quality early education and childcare. This allows parents to work and supports children's development as they grow, getting them ready for school and beyond.

Helping families with the cost of early education and childcare

We know that the cost of early education and childcare is one of the biggest challenges families face. Some parents find it difficult to access the help they are entitled to, and others find the system confusing. We are taking steps to make early education and childcare more affordable and easier to access, especially for working families and those on lower incomes, so that more children can benefit from early education.

- **Increasing government-funded hours for working parents to save families an average of £7,500 a year:** We are delivering on the expansion of funded childcare hours available to working parents. From September 2025, eligible families will be able to access up to 30 hours of funded childcare a week the term after their child turns nine months until they start school – saving families that use their full entitlement an average of £7,500 a year. This change is already making a difference: the average cost to parents of a 25 hour nursery place for children under three has halved between 2024 and 2025.³⁹ Almost 500,000 children have benefited already from the rollout of 15 funded hours last year.⁴⁰ Already, one in seven parents using funded hours have increased their working hours since April 2024 and we expect this to increase further following 30 hours rollout.⁴¹

³³ Office for National Statistics (2024). *Childcare Accessibility by Neighbourhood*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/childcareaccessibilitybyneighbourhood/2024-06-04>

³⁴ Nesta (2024). *Where You Live Shouldn't Stop You Accessing the Very Best Childcare – But in Some Places It Does*. Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/data-visualisation-and-interactive/where-you-live-shouldnt-stop-you-accessing-the-very-best-childcare-but-in-some-places-it-does/>

³⁵ Ofsted (2025). *Early years and childcare statistics*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/early-years-and-childcare-statistics

³⁶ Department for Education (2024). *Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024>

³⁷ Ofsted (2025). *Early years and childcare statistics*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/early-years-and-childcare-statistics

³⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023). *We Should Be Suspicious of the Growth of Private Financing in Childcare*. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/care/we-should-be-suspicious-of-the-growth-of-private-financing-in-childcare>

³⁹ Coram Family and Childcare (2025). *Childcare Survey 2025*. Available at: www.coram.org.uk/resource/childcare-survey-2025/⁴⁰ Department for Education (2025). *Expansion to early childcare entitlements: eligibility codes issued and validated*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/expansion-to-early-childcare-entitlements-eligibility-codes-issued-and-validated/2025-may>

⁴⁰ Department for Education (2025). *Expansion to early childcare entitlements: eligibility codes issued and validated*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/expansion-to-early-childcare-entitlements-eligibility-codes-issued-and-validated/2025-may>

⁴¹ Department for Education (2025). *Expansion to Early Childcare Entitlements: Childcare Experiences Survey*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/expansion-to-early-childcare-entitlements-childcare-experiences-survey/2024-25-autumn-term/data-guidance>

“The Government’s childcare support has been vital for our family. Without it, I wouldn’t have been able to return to work after maternity leave; the cost of childcare would have been too high. Thanks to the funded hours I’ve been able to go back to work, regain some financial independence, and enjoy adult interaction again, whilst knowing my daughter is thriving in a safe, caring and stimulating environment. I’ve told so many other parents about the support because it really does make a huge difference – not just financially, but emotionally and socially for parent and child.”

Sophie, mother to a one-year-old, Nottingham

- **Improving support for low-income families:** We will work with local authorities to increase take-up of the 15 hours of the early education and childcare offer for two, three and four year-olds, ensuring low-income families, children with SEND and children in care receive the early education they are entitled to. We will engage directly with local authorities where take-up is lowest, supporting families through Best Start Family Hubs to take up their funded hours, addressing local variation in performance and tracking data through the new Local Government Outcomes Framework. As part of the Child Poverty strategy, we will also work with the Department of Work and Pensions to make it easier for parents to use Universal Credit Childcare and the funded hours together, helping them to access work.
- **Improving early education and childcare support:** We think we can do even better. We will look across the early education and childcare support provided by different parts of government to identify ways to make it simpler for providers and parents, improve access and increase the overall impact of government spending on children and families. We will look at how to improve outcomes for children from low-income families and at the requirements on households to access different childcare entitlements. We will also look at how we distribute funding to providers, to ensure we have a diverse range of provision, reduce administrative burdens and ensure providers are able to offer a high-quality service at competitive prices. This work will also take account of the outcomes of the Government’s review of the parental leave and pay system.

Increasing the availability of places

We know that many parents struggle to find early education and childcare nearby. Four in ten parents with children under five say there are not enough places in their area.⁴² We are taking action to increase the number of places available, especially for families on low incomes and children with SEND.

⁴² Department for Education (2024). *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024>

- **More nurseries in schools:** We are delivering on our commitment to create tens of thousands of places in new or expanded school-based nurseries backed by almost £370 million. School-based nurseries are more likely to operate in areas of disadvantage and have a higher proportion of children with SEND.⁴³ The first round of funding is already on track to create up to 6,000 places from September 2025 onward. Around one in ten (9%) are partnerships with private, voluntary and independent (PVI) providers, and around half of the projects plan to offer childcare outside of term time. This is a first step to making more places available and accessible so parents can take-up the funded hours to which they are entitled, with a further funding round launching this autumn. In addition, we are also funding partnerships between early education and childcare providers and local schools to encourage closer working and help children transition smoothly into primary school.

Through the School-Based Nurseries Programme, Bloemfontein Primary School in County Durham has received a £150,000 grant to expand its nursery by September 2025 to address a local shortfall in early years places. The project includes converting a classroom into a baby room for 12 children under two and increasing nursery capacity for two- to four-year-olds from 29 to 60.

“This funding will enable us to transform unused school space into an engaging and vibrant environment, offering year-round childcare for children from birth to five.”

Alex Armstrong, Headteacher at Bloemfontein Primary School

- **Fairer funding:** It is often harder to find early education and childcare places in low-income areas. To help fix this, in April we raised funding for Early Years Pupil Premium by 45% to a record level, to a maximum of £570 per child. This gives additional funding to providers to invest in evidence-informed approaches to supporting children from low-income families. To go further, and to make sure that the early years funding system is hardwired to benefit those children and parts of the country that have higher levels of additional need, we will review early years funding, including national funding formulae, and consult the sector on changes by Summer 2026.

⁴³ Department for Education (2024). Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024>

- **More funding to promote inclusion:** We know the early years sector champions inclusive practice but too often we hear that the early years funding system creates a barrier to delivering provision for children with SEND. We will increase the funding available to providers to support children with SEND and make improvements to the way funding is allocated as part of wider reforms to the SEND system. For 2026/27, this additional funding will be for local authorities to distribute to settings alongside their existing Special Educational Needs Inclusion Funding (SENIF). This will help fund extra resources for providers to invest in inclusion and early intervention and prevent the escalation of needs at a time when additional support can have the biggest impact in a child's development. We will also work with local authorities to improve consistency, speed of distribution and reduce bureaucracy, to ensure help reaches children who need it quickly. More detail on the Government's approach to SEND reform will be set out in a Schools White Paper this autumn.

Case study - Childminders working in partnership with schools

Recent changes now allow childminders to work more flexibly, including solely or only from non-domestic premises. Childminder agencies like Tiney have been building partnerships between childminders and schools to create flexible, high-quality and affordable early education on school sites for the benefit of local communities and school staff, providing career opportunities for people who are interested in becoming childminders, including parents of children at the school.

Childminder agencies register and quality assure childminders. In the model they are exploring, schools provide the space and childminders bring their own resources, manage daily operations and are responsible for meeting Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and safeguarding requirements. Childminder agencies are regulated by Ofsted and can supply schools with registered childminders and handle quality assurance, training, professional development and regulatory support.

Brett Wigdortz, CEO of Tiney says:

"From conversations with our community and internal surveys, we know that childminders would like to explore the possibility of operating from non-domestic premises, but many face real challenges in finding available or affordable spaces. This new partnership model helps to overcome those challenges for existing childminders and opens the door to brilliant educators who might otherwise be shut out of the profession, like renters who often can't get permission to operate from home.

Childminders, who are educators in their own right, can slot into unused school spaces, with all their regulation and operational requirements taken care of by an Ofsted-registered agency. This model is a win for everyone involved: it makes it easier for parents – including the vital teaching workforce – to access flexible, convenient wraparound care often on the same site as their older children, while helping schools make better use of their space and support their communities."

- **Supporting childminders:** Childminders play an important role in the childcare system, offering flexible, personalised care that many families value. They also tend to look after younger children so are a key part of the provider landscape as we expand funded childcare hours for younger children.⁴⁴ We have already made it easier for childminders to work from different places such as schools and other community centres. Now, we will work with local authorities and others to ensure that, where they want to, childminders and other early years providers are paid monthly for the funded hours they provide, making their income more stable. We will also keep working with Jobcentre Plus to encourage more people to become childminders.

A stronger early education and childcare system

We are making big investments in early education and childcare. Government spending on funded hours will reach £9 billion next year and will continue to rise over the Parliament, so providers can deliver high-quality care and education for young children. From September 2025, the Government will be funding around 80% of early education and childcare hours in England.⁴⁵ As more funding becomes available and the sector grows, we want to make sure this funding is used well, so families have access to high-quality, reliable early education and childcare.

We value all types of early education and childcare providers who are working hard to deliver more places for working parents. Early years and childcare providers have always been varied and diverse. This is a strength when it works to ensure families get a choice of high-quality, flexible childcare options which meet their needs, but it can mean many settings and childminders miss out on the benefits to efficiency and quality which can come from working together in groups, as growth has been concentrated in larger chains.

- **Supporting high-quality providers to grow:** We know many providers operating single sites are rightly proud of the businesses they run and the standards of education and care they provide for children. We respect this, and that is why we will work together with the early years sector to explore how more providers, including voluntary and independent settings, could access the benefits of operating in local groups and spread their expertise while maintaining their identity. Considering the range of group models which already operate in the early years sector both in the UK and internationally, and working with providers, and local and Mayoral Strategic Authorities, we will test models to support the expansion of high-quality groupings. We will also explore opportunities for providers to pool back-office functions and overheads where this is right for their business, so nursery managers can spend more of their time working with children rather than worrying about administrative tasks.
- **Maintaining sector stability:** While chains and groups of settings can bring greater efficiency and spread high-quality practice, in recent years we have seen a rise in

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024). *What You Need to Know About the New Childcare Entitlements*. Available at: www.ifs.org.uk/articles/what-you-need-know-about-new-childcare-entitlements

large providers backed by private equity.⁴⁶ These providers are less likely to operate in deprived areas,⁴⁷ and we have seen from other sectors, such as adult and children's social care, that over time this can result in price rises and disruption to services. We want to ensure the early education and childcare market continues to be financially sustainable, able to create more places where they are needed and focused on the needs of children. We will continue monitoring the financial sustainability of the market and may take further steps to increase transparency of the largest providers if appropriate, which could include measures similar to those being taken in adult or children's social care.

- **Opportunity through the Impact Economy:** At the same time, we have seen a decline in the number of not-for-profit providers, especially in the most deprived areas. In order to increase places in deprived areas and as part of this Government's commitment to public sector reform, we want to work with these providers – including charities and social enterprises – and alongside philanthropy and social investors to explore new ways for them to access the funding they need to expand, and to encourage new entrants into the market, for example through social investment funds.

Alongside a strong market, we want to drive higher standards through a strengthened improvement and accountability system. Just as the Department for Education has a key role in monitoring the financial stability of the market, Ofsted has a key role in regulating quality. We will work closely with Ofsted as they make changes to inspections that will help providers to improve quality and give parents greater confidence in the quality of early years settings and more up-to-date information to support their choices. This will complement the role of local authorities in driving outcomes for babies and children, in line with the draft local government outcomes framework, and taking responsibility for place planning, supported by new guidance on market shaping.

- **Inspection frequency:** From next April, we will fund Ofsted to inspect all new early years providers within 18 months of opening and move towards inspecting all providers at least once every four years, compared to the current six-year cycle. This means standards will be reviewed more regularly and parents will have more up-to-date information to help them choose the right setting for their child.
- **A focus on high-quality inspections:** Ofsted will receive additional investment to further raise the quality and consistency of inspection through strengthening quality assurance and focused inspector training. We will also work with Ofsted to introduce reporting on larger nursery chains so issues that span a group of providers can be addressed. For parents this means inspection reports will be more accurate and consistent.

⁴⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023). We Should Be Suspicious of the Growth of Private Financing in Childcare. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/care/we-should-be-suspicious-of-the-growth-of-private-financing-in-childcare>

⁴⁷ Simon, A., Hollingworth, K. and Bokhari, T. (2025). [Nursery Closures and Openings in England Since 2018: Does Ownership Type Matter?](#) UCL: University of London.

- **Ofsted report cards:** This comes alongside reforms to Ofsted's inspection outcomes for early years childcare settings in the form of easily accessible report cards which clearly highlight strengths and areas for improvement. Ofsted has consulted on the introduction and information presented on report cards and will respond to that consultation in September.
- **Tailored support after inspections:** When a setting or childminder needs to improve, a Stronger Practice Hub will arrange one-to-one coaching or expert guidance from an experienced early years professional to quickly and effectively address the issues identified. This could include, for example, working with the setting leader to draw up an action plan, helping leaders to evaluate the quality of their setting, or providing advice and guidance to enable the setting to deliver quality practice.
- **Strengthening local oversight:** Local authorities are responsible for making sure there are enough places locally available for parents, and they play a key role in managing their early years and childcare sector. We have already removed restrictions on local authorities opening and running their own early years provision. Now we will work with local authorities and the sector to develop guidance on market shaping in early years – similar to that which exists for adult social care provision. This will set out the role and expectations of local authorities, bring together examples of best practice and encourage local authorities to actively shape their local childcare markets. We will also explore whether local authorities and Mayoral Strategic Authorities would benefit from additional powers to make sure there are enough places and parents have a good range of early education and childcare options including childminders.



Chapter 3

Improving quality in early years including reception

3. Improving quality in early years including reception

Summary

High-quality early education and care sets children up for success when they arrive at school and beyond. We will ensure high-quality care and education is what every parent can expect. To do this, we are backing the people who care for and teach our youngest children. We want a clear ‘golden thread’ of high-quality evidence to underpin the training, support and development for people working in the early years. This will mean passionate people can grow their skills and careers, and help every child to achieve and thrive.

We will work hand in hand with early years providers and schools to make sure they have the tools, training and support they need to meet every child’s needs. We are backing this plan with **£400 million over the next three years**, on top of existing funding, to improve quality in early years settings and reception classes and drive better outcomes for children.

Case for change

We know that high-quality early education and childcare makes a big difference to a child’s life. The evidence is clear that when children attend great nurseries or childminders, they go on to achieve better outcomes in school and in later life.⁴⁸ And the better trained the staff in those settings are, the more children benefit.⁴⁹ But becoming a highly skilled early years educator is not easy, and too many talented people are leaving the profession. Disadvantaged communities have less access to high-quality early years settings and fewer highly trained staff.^{50, 51, 52}

Support for quality is inconsistent. We have made progress in some areas, with organisations like the Education Endowment Foundation significantly improving our understanding and evidence base for determining best practice.

⁴⁸ Melhuish, E., & Gardner, J. (2021). [Study of Early Education and Development \(SEED\): Impact study on early education use and child outcomes up to age 7 years](#). Department for Education.

⁴⁹ OECD (2012). [Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators](#). OECD Publishing.

⁵⁰ Nesta (2024). [Where You Live Shouldn’t Stop You Accessing the Very Best Childcare – But in Some Places It Does](#). Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/data-visualisation-and-interactive/where-you-live-shouldnt-stop-you-accessing-the-very-best-childcare-but-in-some-places-it-does/>

⁵¹ Department for Education (2025). [Childcare Providers and Inspections as at 31 March 2025](#). Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-march-2025>

⁵² Nesta (n. d.). [The Missing Graduates in England’s Nurseries](#). Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/data-visualisation-and-interactive/the-missing-graduates-in-englands-nurseries/>

However, the help available can vary by local area and services do not always work together as well as they could. The links between nurseries, childminders, family services and schools can be inconsistent, and it can be hard for settings to find and access high-quality, evidence-based guidance and professional development. To raise the quality of early education and childcare, we must tackle some key challenges:

- **Long standing recruitment and retention issues:** Early years providers need to be able to hire and keep great people. As we expand access to funded childcare, we need even more skilled, passionate early educators to join and stay in the sector.⁵³
- **More opportunities for career progression:** Having a trained early years teacher leading practice in a setting leads to better inspection results and better long-term outcomes for children.⁵⁴ But there are not enough early years teachers working in the sector. Post-16 qualifications at level 3 are being reformed so they are better quality and deliver improved outcomes. We want there to be a clear pathway and training routes for early years educators to progress their careers and achieve higher level qualifications.
- **Some children need extra help to achieve and thrive:** Only 51.5% of children who qualify for free school meals reach a good level of development at age five, compared to 72% of children not eligible for free school meals. And only 19.7% of children with any special educational needs (SEN) reach this benchmark, compared to 75.6% of children without SEN.⁵⁵ We need effective, timely help for these children, and those who are behind in certain areas of learning, so that all children can thrive.
- **Improvement support for settings is patchy:** While there has been progress, early years settings and schools need clear, joined-up systems that make it easy to access the help they need, when they need it.

We are committed to fixing these issues so that every child, in every part of the country, can get the best possible start.

The actions we are taking

Great early years education starts with great people. Across the country, there are already many brilliant educators and nurseries doing amazing work to give children the best start in life, offering rich learning opportunities through high-quality interactions and play. We want to build on that, working with the sector to create a stable, highly skilled early years workforce.

⁵³ Melhuish, E. et al. (2015). [A Review of Research on the Effects of Early Childhood Education and Care \(ECEC\) on Child Development](#).

⁵⁴ Mathers, S. and Smees, R. (2014). *Quality and Inequality*, 2014. Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf

⁵⁵ Department for Education (2024), *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results: Academic Year 2023/24*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2023-24>

We know that outcomes for children depend on maximising the impact of every adult-child interaction. That is driven by the quality of the workforce, which is why we are investing in training and qualifications, raising skill levels and creating opportunities for career progression. It is also driven by the quality of practice, so we are widening access to evidence-based programmes that are proven to make a difference in early years settings and reception year.

More highly skilled early years teachers, educators and leaders

Children and babies thrive when they are cared for by confident, well-trained educators who feel valued. We want parents to know that their children are in safe, capable hands, and we want educators to feel proud of their work. That means attracting, training, and keeping great staff – and making sure they are valued and supported throughout their careers.

We also know that having staff with higher qualifications working with children has a positive impact on children's outcomes, and that impact is even more significant for children from low-income backgrounds, or those with additional vulnerabilities. To offer the best education and care possible, we want all early years educators to have access to high-quality training at each stage of their career, built on a 'golden thread' of evidence-informed early years teaching practice, and a simpler qualification offer.

More early years teachers, where they are needed

Evidence shows that nurseries with early years teachers leading the development of programmes and the curriculum leads to better outcomes for children.⁵⁶ We will work with the sector to increase the number of early years teachers, with the long-term aim of an early years teacher in every nursery setting. The impact of an early years teacher goes further than just establishing more meaningful interactions with children directly. They can share their skills, expertise and the latest research and evidence with other practitioners in their setting, leading curriculum planning and improving daily practice for all staff.

We know there are fewer early years teachers and access to high-quality provision is worse in disadvantaged communities, so that is where we will focus first.^{57, 58} To recruit more early years teachers in areas they are needed most we will:

- **Create more training places:** We are significantly increasing the number of funded training places on Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT) courses over 3 years, aiming to more than double the number of places by 2028. We are also rolling out a new degree apprenticeship route to enable more people to become early years teachers, with financial support for employers to help deliver this.

⁵⁶ Mathers, S. and Smees, R. (2014). *Quality and Inequality*, 2014. Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf

⁵⁷ Nesta (n. d.). *The Missing Graduates in England's Nurseries*. Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/data-visualisation-and-interactive/the-missing-graduates-in-englands-nurseries/>

⁵⁸ Nesta (2024). *Where You Live Shouldn't Stop You Accessing the Very Best Childcare – But in Some Places It Does*. Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/data-visualisation-and-interactive/where-you-live-shouldnt-stop-you-accessing-the-very-best-childcare-but-in-some-places-it-does/>

- **Champion early years teachers:** We want the important role of early years teachers to be properly recognised with high-quality training routes, based on a ‘golden thread’ of evidence-informed early years teaching practice. We will therefore consult with the sector on the training routes, course content and professional status for early years teachers, including on the settings they can teach in, to move towards greater parity with other teachers.
- **Focus support in areas that need it most:** We will offer financial incentives to attract and keep early years teachers in nurseries serving the most disadvantaged communities so every child, no matter where they live, can benefit from high-quality early education.

“I think it has helped me feel pride in being an early years teacher...I can call myself a teacher and that makes a big difference.”

– EYITT trainee

“The course helped me to gain confidence in what I was doing already, but back it up with research and up to date thinking and reflect on my own practice and make improvements.”

– EYITT trainee

“Guiding other practitioners to be leaderful is a powerful way to achieving better outcomes for our children and families. I encourage others to continue their studies, and I continue to enjoy observing the transformation in my setting. It’s a great feeling!”

- Manager of a setting who completed EYITT

Supporting and growing a skilled early years workforce

A strong early years workforce is the foundation of high-quality care and education. But too often, early years staff feel overworked, overlooked and undervalued.⁵⁹ Men are especially underrepresented in the workforce.⁶⁰ We want early years to be a career people are proud to start and rewarding to pursue. We will work with the sector to understand and address specific barriers to recruitment and retention and take action to create more opportunities to enter the profession, gain relevant qualifications and build fulfilling careers. We are also improving working conditions and investing in leadership to ensure staff feel valued and supported throughout their career journey.

⁵⁹ Social Mobility Commission (2020), *The Early Years Workforce: Underpaid, Overworked and Undervalued*. Available at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stability-of-the-early-years-workforce-in-england/the-stability-of-the-early-years-workforce-in-england

⁶⁰ Department for Education (2024). *Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024>

- **Attracting talented people:** We are helping more people discover rewarding early years careers through the 'Do Something Big' campaign, and a dedicated website that highlights the qualifications that are available, and local job opportunities. To go further, we will pilot a new service to guide applicants and expand our online qualifications checker so all early years workers can easily see if their qualifications are relevant. We will work with Mayoral Strategic Authorities on ensuring there are clear pathways into the early years workforce in their area. We will also build on existing pilots to offer financial incentives to help attract and retain the best educators.
- **Improving conditions and career pathways:** To raise the status of the profession we will work in partnership with the sector to co-design and introduce a new professional register designed to raise the value of the profession, promote continuing professional development and give early educators the recognition they deserve. We will work closely with the sector to establish an evidence-informed career framework to support career progression at all levels, linked to a simpler qualification offer. We are continuing to invest in funding rates to enable providers to recruit and retain great staff, and through the Employment Rights Bill, the Government is delivering the biggest upgrade in employment rights in a generation. We are also exploring how steps to increase flexible working and reduce workloads in schools could be applied in early years settings.
- **Supporting more early years staff to boost their qualifications:** We want more people to achieve a Level 3 qualification, the key standard for early years educators. To do this we will introduce a faster assessment only route for experienced staff to achieve Level 3 recognition, similar to those in other education professions. We will continue to simplify the number of early years qualifications on offer, so it is clear which are relevant to work in the sector. We are also transforming apprenticeships into a new growth and skills offer, with shorter, more flexible training options. Recent reforms to the English and maths requirements will allow many thousands more apprentices to qualify each year. We will continue to ensure apprentices have a high-quality experience and increase the number of completions.
- **More development and leadership opportunities:** We are raising skill levels across the workforce by funding high-quality training programmes for both educators and leaders. This includes continuing and extending free online child development training, available to all staff, to spread the latest evidence-based practice. We are enhancing the National Professional Qualification (NPQ) for Headship with more early years content, developing a new training course for reception class teachers, creating a new professional development offer for setting leaders, and funding more places on the NPQ in Early Years Leadership.

Embedding high-quality inclusive practice to enable every child to thrive

The number of high-quality interactions an adult has with babies and young children – whether in a nursery, childminding settings, or reception class – has a huge impact on how children learn and grow.⁶¹ That is why we are investing in high-quality evidence-informed professional development from the baby room through to reception year. We know that expertise is particularly important for children identified with emerging additional needs.

Extra support for the children who need it most

Every child deserves the chance to thrive, but we know some children need a bit of extra help to get there, and some children need more intensive help from specialists. We will invest in proven programmes and new ideas to support children's development, especially in the areas where it is needed most.

- **Making inclusive practice standard practice:** Early years educators play an important role in identifying developmental delays early so children receive timely support. However, a lack of SEND-specific knowledge and barriers to accessing wider services can make it difficult for children and families to get much needed help. We will work with early years educators, including Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), to embed inclusive practice across all early years teaching and qualifications, so that inclusive practice becomes standard practice. Through stronger links to the Best Start Family Service and better data sharing across education and healthcare services, we will make it easier for settings to provide holistic support for families, particularly those with additional needs.

“The staff seem very experienced in working with children with a whole range of disabilities, which has proven to be a very useful resource for me as a first-time parent trying to navigate this new world”

– Parent whose child attends a setting that has completed SENCO training

- **Boosting early maths and language skills:** Around two-thirds of children who do not achieve a good level of development at age five struggle with maths skills. Children's language skills at age five are the biggest predictor of later attainment.⁶²
⁶³ We are funding more early years settings to take part in the Maths Champions programme which has been proven to boost early numeracy.⁶⁴ We will introduce early maths leads and early language leads in local areas to give on-the-job training

⁶¹ Peisner-Feinberg, E. et al (1999). *The Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go To School*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

⁶² Department for Education (2024), *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results: Academic Year 2023/24*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2023-24>

⁶³ Reilly, S. & McKean, C. (2023). *Creating the Conditions for Robust Early Language Development for All -Part 1: Evidence-Informed Child Language Surveillance in the Early Years*. International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, Vol. 58. , 2023, pp. 2222–2241.

⁶⁴ Robinson-Smith, L. et al. (2024), *Independent Evaluation of Maths Champions in Nursery to Develop Children's Early Numeracy: A Two-Armed Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial*. Education Endowment Foundation

to early years educators, helping them build confidence in teaching maths and improving children's vital language skills.

- **More funding for children from low-income families:** In April 2025, we raised funding for the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) to a maximum of £570 – the biggest rise ever. We want to make sure this funding has the biggest impact possible. From next year, we will provide additional funding to extend EYPP in areas most in need, and test different approaches to using this funding to understand how best to maximise its impact - ensuring that children most at risk of falling behind receive high-quality evidence-informed support. We will also work with the Education Endowment Foundation to evaluate the impact of this additional funding.
- **Testing new approaches:** We will also invest in developing and testing new programmes in critical areas of teaching and learning such as early maths, communication and language, and personal, social and emotional development – building on work we have begun with the Education Endowment Foundation. This will help build the evidence base on what works best, expand the number of high-quality evidence-informed programmes, and bring those ideas into more settings and schools in the future.

Building stronger partnerships to help every setting improve

To ensure every child benefits from high-quality early education we are building a more connected and collaborative early years system. One that helps nurseries, childminders and schools draw on evidence-informed practice to deliver high-quality, inclusive education, and build stronger links with Best Start Family Hubs and other local services, so every child is ready to succeed when they start school. This creates space for different types of setting to make connections and learn from one another – making the most of the rich and varied expertise held by Maintained Nursery Schools, childminders, private and voluntary providers, primary schools and others.

- **Expanding Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs:** We are doubling the number of Stronger Practice Hubs from 18 to 36, enabling even more early years settings and childminders to access free, evidence-based resources and training to help improve their practice. Nearly 10,000 settings are already part of these networks.
- **New school-nursery partnerships:** We are also funding new partnerships between schools and local nurseries to strengthen transitions into school – so children feel confident, prepared and supported when they start school, and schools are ready to meet each child's needs. We know that in many places nurseries and schools already work well together but we want to go further to strengthen relationships and encourage a more joined-up approach. These partnerships will allow staff in schools and nurseries to spend time learning from each other and sharing knowledge, expertise and best practice, strengthening local early years systems. They will also help parents and children build relationships with schools

and other local services, help teachers spot issues early, and ensure parents know how to effectively support their child's development at home, so that they feel at home in the classroom when they start school.

"The stronger practice hub has been instrumental in improving our practice and the outcomes for the children in our setting. The network events have been both informative and inspiring and a great way of meeting other professionals and providing opportunities to liaise and learn from one another. We highly recommend accessing the stronger practice hub to upskill practitioners, improve practice by using evidence and most importantly, improve outcomes for the children."

- Early years educator in a school-based nursery

Giving every reception child the right start

Starting school is a big step, and we want every child in reception to feel supported, confident and ready to learn. Reception is a vital foundation year that sets children up for success throughout primary school and beyond, and must be given the attention and importance it deserves. That is why we are making sure schools have access to the right tools and tailored improvement, including helping every parent to play their part, and be confident in their child's progress.

- **Support for every school:** We have made the reception year a national priority for our Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams. This means all schools will receive support to improve reception teaching, with some schools being eligible for enhanced or more intensive offers:
 - **Universal reception offer** – all schools will be given access to better data and analysis on Early Years Foundation Stage Profile assessment at the end of reception and invited to participate in face-to-face and online training.
 - **Enhanced reception offer** – some schools will receive additional early years engagement from specialists in language, literacy and maths through English and Maths Hubs. English Hubs will deliver new literacy-focused audits to schools, to supplement those already focused on language and reading. Maths Hubs will put more schools through their Mastering Number training and deliver consolidated teacher training on Number and Spatial Reasoning.
 - **Intensive reception offer** – some schools will receive more intensive assistance from English and Maths Hubs, including dedicated time with a literacy expert and engagement from Maths Hubs to increase participation in other training.

Case study: Reception RISE offer

More schools will receive support from an English or Maths Hub, or both. These programmes offer whole school training to improve language, literacy and maths.

Mastering Number

The Mastering Number programme – part of our Maths Hub offer – supports teachers and school leaders in teaching early maths. It has reached schools such as Holy Trinity C of E Primary School in Bury, Lancashire, where 94% of children have English as an additional language (EAL) and many speak English as their third language. In the Mastering Number sessions, reception children gain a deep understanding of numbers to 10 and key skills like subitising, supporting new arrivals to the school or those with additional needs to be taught alongside the whole class.

Feedback from another school: *"I can really see the value of this programme and the impact it has on the pupils' understanding of key concepts. The stem sentences have helped develop the children's mathematical language, alongside their understanding. I have utilised this in my main maths lessons which has been hugely beneficial. My knowledge has certainly improved, alongside the children's!"*

Wandle English Hub

The Wandle English Hub worked with a primary school where a reception child had struggled to orally blend when reading. Through the Hub's dedicated training and support, the school gained a deeper understanding of the importance of a consistent, phonics-first approach. Staff learned how to deliver targeted, high-frequency catch-up sessions. After five months of consistent teaching and unwavering positivity, the child learned to read. He was celebrated in assembly and continues to make strong progress.

Feedback from another school: *"The support from the English Hub has been truly transformational for our whole school including our EYFS team. Their expert guidance in phonics, particularly through coaching and mentoring Reception and Nursery staff, has boosted confidence and consistency across the board. From developing TA-led story time sessions to implementing inclusive strategies like connected phonation, their input has strengthened our provision for all learners, including those with SEND. Their continued support and monitoring helped us achieve high-quality, consistent, phonics teaching, and as a result, 86% of our pupils met the ELG for word reading this year. We are incredibly grateful for their partnership."*

- **Extending early language support:** We will continue to ensure every reception class benefits from fully funded access to proven programmes such as the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI), which has been shown to help children build strong speech and language skills.⁶⁵ Reception staff will also be able to access specialist early language leads.
- **Clearer, more consistent assessment:** We will provide new guidance to help reception teachers carry out the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile assessment with confidence and consistency. This will make the process more reliable and give parents a clearer picture of how their child is developing.
- **Supporting school leaders to focus on early years:** We are giving schools access to better data and analysis on the assessment of children's development and learning at the end of the reception year. This includes giving schools better data and analysis so they have a clearer understanding of where they need to improve in comparison to others. This is in addition to face-to-face and online training. Alongside this, we will make it easier for schools to find the tools to improve through our new reception resources.

Case study: Gillas Lane Primary Academy

Gillas Lane Primary Academy is located within the top 10% of most deprived areas in England. 73% of their children are eligible for Free School Meals.

An EYFS Teaching Assistant and NELI Lead at Gillas Lane shares why NELI is an essential part of their EYFS provision.

“Many children start school with significant language and literacy gaps. The NELI programme’s structured approach appealed to us. After seeing strong progress in the first year, we continued the programme and results have improved year after year.

Many start off shy and quiet, but their confidence grows through the individual sessions. NELI is well structured and easy to deliver. Over time, children improve their language, imagination, and ability to express ideas – skills they also carry into their play. While we work with speech therapists, NELI helps more children get the support they need to access the full curriculum.

At Gillas Lane, NELI has greatly improved our children’s speech, language and confidence. We highly recommend NELI based on the excellent results we’ve seen.”

⁶⁵ Smith, A. et al. (2023). [Impact Evaluation of Nuffield Early Language Intervention \(NELI\) Wave Two](#). Education Endowment Foundation

Conclusion

The transformative changes outlined in this strategy mark the beginning of a decade of national renewal - one that places our children, families, and communities at its heart.

We will deliver the new Best Start Family Service, make it easier and more affordable for families to access early education and care, and improve the quality of education, backed by significant new investment. We will work across government with families and providers towards our longer-term ambition to simplify and improve our early years system for all.

We cannot do this alone. Professionals who work in early years – in settings, schools, family services, health care, the charity sector, and beyond – guide the youngest members of our society with passion, expertise and commitment. You, and above all, the children and families we serve, are at the heart of our mission and we commit to working with you as we deliver our Plan for Change ambition: to give every child the best start in life.

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