



Department
for Education

Early education partnerships

Partnership guide

June 2026

Contents

Glossary of terms	3
Ministerial foreword	4
Introduction	5
Overview	6
Summary	6
Objectives and benefits	7
Policy design	7
Priority areas	8
Priority area 1: Continuity of learning	8
Priority area 2: Professional development and shared practice	9
Priority area 3: Family engagement	9
Priority area 4: Information and resource sharing	10
Delivery phases	10
Year 1	10
Year 2	10
Year 3	11
Forming a partnership	12
Establishing partnership members.....	12
Partnership roles and responsibilities	12
Partnership members.....	12
Partnership grant administrator.....	13
Local authorities and multi-academy trusts (MATs)	13
Best Start Family Hubs	13
Delivery partners	14
How to apply	15

Glossary of terms

Term	Definition
Early years providers	An early years provider who is required to comply with the early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory frameworks , including childminders, and group and school-based early years providers.
School readiness	<p>Refers to a child being socially, emotionally and developmentally ready to participate in and access learning in reception within a school environment. Encompasses their overall development and therefore starts much earlier than school transition or pre-school age.</p> <p>The starting reception checklist outlines the skills that schools expect children to be able to do before their first day of school, although if a child has SEND or additional needs, they may need additional support or these skills may not yet be achievable.</p>
Transition	Refers to a child's transition into the school that they will be attending in reception, starting from offer day (when their school place is confirmed) through to when they are attending reception full time, as well as transitions into, within and between early years settings.

Ministerial foreword

A child's earliest years lay the foundations for lifelong learning, growth, and wellbeing. These formative experiences shape children's development and prepare them for the important transition into school.

The evidence is clear: high quality early education has long-lasting benefits, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. By investing in early years, we have an opportunity to reduce inequality and ensure that every child and family can access the high-quality early education and childcare they need to thrive.

Early years educators and teachers play a vital role in supporting children's development. By working in close partnership, early years providers and schools can support children to have a seamless journey from their earliest learning experiences through to formal education, creating a brighter future for all. Strong, reciprocal relationships pave the way for creating consistent approaches to learning, care, and wellbeing, enabling children to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Together, we will create a more coherent and connected early years landscape. One where early years educators collaborate, families feel prepared and understood, and children experience smoother transitions and more consistent provision from birth to school age. This is not only about preparing children for school, it is about giving them the best start in life. By working in partnership to share expertise, information and best practice, schools and early years providers can better support children and their families in these crucial early years.

Olivia Bailey, Minister for Early Education and Equalities

Introduction

We have invested significantly in improving the quality of early years provision through our continuous professional development offer, early years stronger practice hubs and wider Best Start in Life (BSiL) initiatives. Through our reception offer, including regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE) advisers and newly forming reception networks, we are encouraging schools to embed early years best practice in reception. We are also increasing the availability of early years provision through the expansion of funded childcare entitlements and implementation of the school-based nurseries (SBN) programme.

This funding opportunity complements this investment by:

- supporting children's smooth transition from early years settings to reception, including by offering families advice to help prepare children for school, alongside support offered by Best Start Family Hubs
- strengthening relationship between early years providers and feeder schools to improve children's learning journeys, strengthening continuity and collaboration between settings, and supporting early years educators and teachers to share best practice. This will help children - especially those with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) and from disadvantaged backgrounds - experience high quality transitions into reception and be ready to start school and ensure schools are prepared to meet each child's needs
- encouraging joint professional development, observation, and curriculum alignment across the early years system, building on and working alongside early years stronger practice hubs which provide professional development opportunities and share evidence informed practice

This initiative will provide localised support to children and families, particularly disadvantaged children and children with SEND. It also responds to evidence that early childhood experiences are critical for long-term outcomes and aligns with the government's commitment for 75% of five-year-olds in England to achieve a good level of development (GLD) by 2028.

Overview

Summary

The [Best Start in Life strategy](#) emphasises the importance of improving quality in early years settings and enhancing alignment between early education provision and schools to drive better developmental outcomes and support social and emotional development and school readiness. In this strategy, we committed to:

“...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.”

Partnerships will bring early years providers, including private, voluntary and independent (PVI) nurseries, childminders, maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries, together with state-funded primary schools to share their knowledge and expertise, improve transitions, and support reception readiness until 2029. Partnerships will focus on inclusion and support for children with SEND, additional needs, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The initiative will run for 3 years, with the aim of building a strong evidence base for effective early years transitions and reception readiness practice. To support this, we are keen to see partnerships test innovative approaches to improving outcomes for children.

The first year of funding will provide an opportunity for partnerships to form, identify their local need, and begin to plan the activities they will carry out. In subsequent years, partnerships would be expected to move into delivery of tailored activities, responding to identified local need. Over time, partnerships should focus on strengthening impact and embedding effective practice so it can be sustained and continue to benefit children beyond the lifetime of the initiative. Partnerships are encouraged to take a multiagency approach to delivering activities, including with education and early years services run by councils, local health and social care services such as health visitors, speech and language therapists and children's

social care agencies. Best Start Family Hubs should also have a central role in these partnerships. This will allow everyone involved in a child's early years to share insights on their development, strategies that work, identify emerging needs earlier and ensuring timely intervention. Collaboration with wider initiatives, [early years stronger practice hubs](#) and [reception networks](#) also helps create a seamless support pathway for families, reducing duplication and strengthening continuity across services. This integrated approach ensures that partnerships not only support early education, but contribute to a broader, joined up system focused on children's development, wellbeing and readiness for reception.

Objectives and benefits

The primary objectives of partnerships are to:

- strengthen transitions from early years settings to school
- improve reception readiness
- build the evidence base for effective early years transitions and reception readiness practice and embed this across the sector

The expected benefits are:

- improving relationships between early years providers and schools
- improving outcomes for children, including those with SEND and from disadvantaged backgrounds
- increasing the number of children reported as being ready for reception (in partnership areas)
- ensuring more teaching time is spent delivering the reception curriculum

Policy design

To ensure that the initiative meets the needs of children, families and the early years sector, the department has developed the policy in partnership with a range of early years educators and key sector stakeholders. Through a co-design project with the department's Education Policy Innovation Centre (EPIC), we tested the objectives and the types of activities that partnerships might deliver, enabling us to put the views of nursery staff and managers, childminders, school leaders, teachers, and other sector representatives at the centre of policy design. The key findings from this engagement are:

- there is overall support for strengthening relationships across early years providers and schools, with a focus on improving transitions and reception readiness

- it is important to recognise and value the role of all parties within partnerships, as teachers and other early years educators can both benefit by collaborating, sharing expertise, and learning from each other
- the focus should not just be about strengthening relationships between early years providers and schools; relationships with families are integral, and partnerships provide the opportunity to harness the strong relationships that early years providers have already built with families, often over many years
- partnerships should be inclusive and provide support for children with SEND, additional needs, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- there should be flexibility for partnerships to design and deliver activities according to local needs and priorities, with a framework that can be used to shape their activity
- good practice is already in place across the country for partnerships to build on, however, there are often barriers such as time and resource constraints

Priority areas

The co-design project and wider sector engagement allowed us to test the types of activities that partnerships would deliver to overcome barriers to social and emotional development, school readiness and effective transitions. These activities have been categorised into 4 priority areas to inform partnership choices around what activities they want to deliver to meet local need.

Good practice and collaboration is already happening across the sector, and partnerships are encouraged to build on this by engaging with their early years stronger practice hubs, Best Start Family Hubs, and other local networks to understand what provision and support is currently available before designing something new.

Priority area 1: Continuity of learning

This priority area encourages partnerships to deliver activities which align approaches, frameworks, pedagogy and curriculum between early years settings and schools, to ensure consistency of learning approaches and a shared understanding of school readiness, regardless of the setting.

Continuity between home and all the settings that make up children's individual learning journey are key to effective transitions¹ and effective partnership working is critical for successful transition, ensuring children are ready for reception.

¹ [Birthto5matters](#)

Partnerships should design activities that strengthen alignment and continuity across settings, ensuring children experience a coherent, supportive, and well sequenced early learning journey that prepares them confidently for reception. This could include more formal curriculum but also child-centred, play-based approaches and approaches that build strong early communication skills.

Priority area 2: Professional development and shared practice

This priority area encourages staff across early years settings and schools to learn from each other, build confidence in meeting a diverse range of children's needs, and create greater consistency for children as they move between settings. Evidence suggests that professional development enhances staff ability to foster emotional wellbeing and learning, which are key for children being able to adapt to new routines.

Partnerships may choose to deliver activities that enable staff to deepen their understanding of child development, strengthen inclusive practice, provide impactful SEND support or improve approaches to communication and language or social-emotional development. Partnerships may want to arrange opportunities for staff to spend time in each other's settings to understand different pedagogical approaches and strengthen transition pathways. Partnerships should first engage with their local early years stronger practice hub before arranging CPD as the hub may already offer relevant funded support. Similarly, partnerships are encouraged to engage with reception networks, as well as local councils on their EYFS training offer.

Priority area 3: Family engagement

This priority area encourages partnerships to design activities that build strong, consistent relationships with families, reduce confusion by connecting families to the right support, and reinforce a shared understanding of how home, early years settings, and schools can work together to ensure children are ready to learn when they start school.

The Best Start in Life strategy places a strong emphasis on helping families access clear, joined-up guidance and early support, recognising that many parents find the current system confusing or disconnected. While it is positive that more parents are aware of 'school readiness', rising from 72% in 2024 to 76% in 2025, fewer parents now expect their children to achieve skills such as independence, communication, and emotional regulation before school². Partnerships therefore have a key role in ensuring parents feel informed, confident, and engaged in their children's

² [School Readiness Survey 2026 - Kindred²](#)

development from the earliest stages. They also provide the opportunity to harness the strong relationships that early years providers have already built with families, often over many years.

Partnerships should engage their local Best Start Family Hub early in the development of engagement activities, to ensure joined-up support and advice for families. Best Start Family Hubs will be able to share best practice approaches to engaging hard to reach and more vulnerable families, and to support transitions for children with additional needs via SEND practitioners who will be available to provide direct support to children and families in every hub.

Priority area 4: Information and resource sharing

This priority area focuses on developing shared resources and systems to enable better data and information sharing, early identification of needs, and reducing the burden on individual schools and settings. Effective data and information sharing is particularly important for children with SEND, who may need additional and tailored support to settle into reception. Sharing early insights about children's development helps ensure children and families to have the right support in place when transitioning from early years settings into reception.

Delivery phases

Year 1

The first year (2026-27) will be a development phase, focused on each partnership building strong reciprocal relationships between early years settings. A partnership development grant will be issued to successful applicants in order to establish their partnership between September 2026 and March 2027. Details of how to use this funding and expected outputs can be found in the development phase [year 1 guidance](#).

Partnerships will then need to apply for continued funding for years 2 and 3.

Year 2

In the following year (2027-28), partnerships would be expected to move into delivery, implementing planned activities aligned to identified local priorities. Partnerships should monitor the impact of these interventions and adapt as they progress to focus on what is most effective to achieve their aims. Detailed guidance will be issued for this phase later in 2026.

Year 3

In the subsequent year (2028-29), successful partnerships would be expected to continue delivery, building on previous learning and refining their approaches. The focus at this stage should be on embedding effective practice so that it can be sustained beyond the delivery period. Updated guidance for this phase will be issued in 2027.

Forming a partnership

Establishing partnership members

Early years settings (including childminders) and schools are encouraged to engage with their local networks and establish a group of individuals and organisations who wish to form a partnership. Individuals and organisations can be a member of multiple partnerships.

Partnership roles and responsibilities

Partnership members

All members of the partnership will share leadership of the work and are expected to work collaboratively to shape the partnership's aims, priorities and planned activities, ensuring that every partner is able to contribute and influence the direction of the work. To ensure collective leadership, decisions should be taken collectively and transparently, with all partners sharing responsibility for acting in the best interests of children and families. Members should actively promote equality and inclusion throughout the partnership's activities, ensuring that approaches reflect the diverse needs of local communities.

All partnership members hold collective responsibility and accountability for delivering agreed actions and for participating in ongoing review, reflection and learning to drive continuous improvement. To support this, members should work together to establish governance arrangements that are clear, proportionate and effective, and that enable meaningful joint decision making and shared accountability. Members may want to capture this in a memorandum of understanding (MoU) (see [guide to writing a memorandum of understanding](#) for further information and a template). All partnership members are also collectively responsible for agreeing who will act as the partnership grant administrator (PGA) – see details below.

Partnership members will remain responsible for meeting the relevant [early years foundation stage \(EYFS\) statutory framework](#) requirements in relation to the children in their care, including the requirements in relation to safety on outings. It will be up to each partnership and individual organisation to make sure they comply with the relevant provisions of the EYFS framework and all other relevant requirements (such as requirements of their registration) at all times.

Partnership grant administrator

Each partnership must have a nominated partnership grant administrator who will be responsible for completing eligibility checks, submitting an application form, and acting as the main point of contact between members, the Department for Education (DfE), any delivery partners contracted to DfE, and any other relevant networks. The partnership grant administrator may also want to inform relevant local authorities and multi-academy trusts of the intention to form a partnership,

The partnership grant administrator will also be responsible for distributing funding to all members of a partnership. For administrative reasons, the partnership grant administrator must be a primary school since they provide the most straight forward route for the department to distribute funding. However, this does not mean that the primary school is leading or determining the direction or focus of the partnership; these decisions should be agreed by all members equally. If there is more than one primary school in a partnership, all members should agree which primary school will act as their nominated partnership grant administrator.

If the partnership grant administrator has an overall Ofsted effectiveness rating below 'good', one or more key judgements rated below 'good' or any evaluation areas below 'expected standard', they will need to confirm that they can deliver partnership activities alongside activities to support their improvement journey.

If the partnership grant administrator is under consideration for or already undertaking any other DfE funded or non-funded Best Start in Life activity (for example, a stronger practice hub or reception network), they will need to provide details and confirm that they have capacity to deliver partnership activity alongside this existing commitment.

Local authorities and multi-academy trusts (MATs)

Local authorities may want to have oversight of all partnerships in their area (linked to their Best Start Local Plan), looking across the area to consider need, identify opportunities for collaboration, engaging agencies (for example, health) and ensuring inclusivity (for example, connecting with childminders). MATs may also have a similar role depending on the local context. We will provide details of successful partnerships, including contact details for the partnership grant administrator in each partnership, with local authorities and MATs.

Best Start Family Hubs

Partnerships should make sure they engage with their local Best Start Family Hubs as they will be able to share best practice approaches to engaging hard to reach and

more vulnerable families, and to support transitions for children with additional needs via SEND practitioners who will be available to provide direct support to children and families in every hub.

Delivery partners

DfE may onboard delivery partners to support delivery oversight, implementation and / or evaluation activities. Partnerships will be expected to work closely and cooperatively with these organisations. This may include:

- providing timely information, data, and documentation
- contributing to evaluation activities
- developing or refining project plans
- adopting recommended best practices
- acting on advice or guidance offered to strengthen delivery

Partnerships should ensure they have appropriate capacity and systems in place to engage effectively with delivery partners throughout the funding period.

How to apply

The partnership grant administrator must complete the [application form](#) on behalf of the proposed partnership.

To apply for this funding opportunity, the partnership grant administrator must check that the partnership meets the eligibility criteria and agrees to the minimum requirements set out in the development phase [year 1 guidance](#) and confirm this in the application form.

For further information on how to complete the application form and to see the questions, please read the development phase [year 1 guidance](#).

The deadline for submitting applications for the year 1 development phase is 17th July 2026.

We will be holding webinars during the application period as an opportunity to find out more information. Please register for one of the following dates:

- [Tuesday 16 June, 3:30 to 4:30pm](#)
- [Thursday 18 June, 12:30 to 1:30pm](#)
- [Tuesday 23 June, 6:30 to 7:30pm](#)

During the development phase, partnerships will have to apply for funding for years 2 and 3. Guidance on how to do this will be published later this year.



Department
for Education

© Crown copyright 2026

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0, except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3.

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

About this publication:

enquiries www.gov.uk/contact-dfe

download www.gov.uk/government/publications

Follow us on X: [@educationgovuk](https://twitter.com/educationgovuk)

Connect with us on Facebook: facebook.com/educationgovuk