



Department
for Education

Early education partnerships

Year 1 (2026 to 2027) guidance

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Summary

Early education partnerships will strengthen continuity and collaboration across early years settings. In doing this the objectives are to improve transitions between settings, enhance school readiness and identify and embed good practice across the sector.

Year 1 of the partnerships funding (September 2026 to March 2027) will be a development phase, focused on each partnership building strong reciprocal relationships between early years providers and schools and applying for year 2 funding (financial year 2027 to 2028).

A partnership development grant will be issued to successful applicants to establish their partnership between September 2026 and March 2027. Details of how to use this funding and expected outputs can be found in this guidance.

Expiry date

This guidance is relevant to year 1 of the early education partnerships which will be implemented from September 2026 to March 2027. New guidance will be issued later this year ahead of year 2 and in 2027 ahead of year 3.

Who this publication is for

This guidance is for all those who are interested in forming early education partnerships. This includes state-funded primary schools, group-based providers, childminders, maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries. Please see eligibility criteria.

Other key publications

The [Best Start in Life strategy](#) explains the overarching mission and plan for change that this programme forms a part of.

The early education partnerships [partnership guide](#) contains broader details on the aims, objectives and priority areas for the partnerships.

Further information

If you have any other questions, please [contact us](#).

Please note that we are unable to provide any advice related to how to improve individual applications due to their competitive nature.

To allow sufficient time for the team to respond to your queries, we recommend that you submit your enquiry at least 5 working days before the application deadline. Whilst we

will endeavour to respond to all enquiries, we cannot guarantee a response before the application deadline.

Please do not submit multiple requests for the same issue. Queries submitted through other routes are not guaranteed a response.

Aims and objectives

Early education partnerships will bring early years providers, including 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. Partnerships will focus on inclusion and support for children with SEND, additional needs, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Funding will be available for 3 years and the initiative will help to build the evidence base for effective early years transitions and reception readiness practice. The first year of funding provides an opportunity for partnerships to form, identify their local need, and begin to plan the activities they will carry out. The second year of funding will see successful partnerships mobilise and begin to deliver tailored activities. In the third year, partnerships will continue to deliver activities and begin to embed good practice approaches that will benefit children beyond the funding period.

Partnerships should take a multi-agency 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. 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, including Best Start Family Hubs, [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.

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

Eligibility criteria and minimum requirements

Eligibility criteria

To apply for year 1 funding, the proposed partnership must meet the following eligibility criteria:

- all partner organisations must either be (a) a registered early years provider or (b) a school-based early years provider¹ in England
- all partnerships must contain a minimum of one primary school with a reception cohort **and** a minimum of one other type of early years provider (for example, a group-based provider, a school-based nursery, a maintained nursery school, a childminder). A partnership cannot solely be between a primary school and their own school-based nursery or any other which is managed by the school due to conflict of interest requirements
- the partnership grant administrator² must be a state-funded primary school³. There is no limit to the number of partnerships a state-funded primary school may belong to but they can only be the partnership grant administrator for one partnership
- 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 Department for Education funded or non-funded BSiL activity (for example, a stronger practice hub or reception network), they will need to confirm in their application that they have capacity to deliver partnership activity alongside this existing commitment

Further information and evidence may be requested prior to award of funding subject to the department's discretion.

¹ "School-based early years provider" means all schools and independent educational institutions in England who provide early years provision in respect of which they are exempt from registration by section 34(2) of the Childcare Act 2006. Section 34(2) of the 2006 Act exempts certain schools and independent educational institutions from the requirement, in section 34(1) in (1A) of the 2006 Act, to register with Ofsted in the early years register, or with an early years CMA, where the early years provision is made by the school or institution for children aged 2 and over as part of that school or institution's activities.

² The partnership grant administrator must be a school and is responsible for the grant funding. The partnership grant administrator is also responsible for completing the eligibility checks, submitting the application form and acting as a main point of contact between partner organisations, DfE and other relevant stakeholders or networks.

³ DfE will check the financial health of partnership grant administrators and will contact them in case of any further queries or clarification.

Minimum requirements

Proposed partnerships must also agree to:

- deliver activities which align with other BSiL initiatives (such as early years stronger practice hubs or reception networks) and the wider early years system; partnerships must ensure that these activities do not duplicate or displace other government funded activity
- deliver activities that meet the needs of all children and families in their local area, particularly those with SEND, additional needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds
- have the right systems and governance arrangements in place to support effective partnership working
- meet the Department for Education's (DfE) reporting requirements on delivery, spend and assurance
- commit to working with delivery partner/s to support implementation and evaluation activity
- develop a partnership model that could be sustainable beyond the funding period

Year 1 funding

Funding is available for up to 100 partnerships in year 1.

Grants for year 1 will be issued to successful applicants to use from September 2026 to March 2027. The amount that each partnership receives in year 1 will vary according to how many members (early years providers and schools) are in the proposed partnership:

- partnerships with 2 to 4 partner organisations will receive up to £12,500
- partnerships with 5 to 9 partner organisations will receive up to £25,000
- partnerships with 10 to 14 partner organisations will receive up to £37,500
- partnerships with 15 or more partner organisations will receive up to £50,000

Funding objectives

In year 1, partnerships will need to meet the following objectives:

Partnership establishment, mobilisation and governance

By March 2027:

- the partnership will be fully established and mobilised, with all partner organisations demonstrating commitment to the partnership's aims and objectives
- clear governance and accountability arrangements will be in place, including documented roles, agreed decision-making processes, and mechanisms for shared accountability across the partnership

Demonstrated engagement with the programme

By March 2027:

- at least 2 partner organisations from each partnership will attend a minimum of one DfE or delivery partner-led support webinar or best practice forum and will cascade learning to their wider partnership within 2 weeks of attendance

Development of costed funding proposal

By January 2027:

- the partnership will develop and submit a fully costed funding proposal for year 2 and year 3, demonstrating financial planning, alignment to at least one of the following priority areas, and anticipated outcomes

Priority areas

To inform partnership choices around what they want to deliver, we have set out 4 priority areas for the types of activities partnerships could 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 transitions⁴ and effective partnership working is critical for successful transition, ensuring children are ready for reception. 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

⁴ [Birthto5matters](#)

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 school⁵. Partnerships therefore have a key role in ensuring parents feel informed, confident, and engaged in their children's 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.

How to use year 1 funding

In year 1, partnerships should work together to:

- build constructive relationships between partner organisations

⁵ [School Readiness Survey 2026 - Kindred²](#)

- engage relevant local stakeholders such as local authorities, multi-academy trusts, [stronger practice hubs](#), Best Start Family Hubs, [reception networks](#) and local health and social care services to ensure coordination, strategic alignment and avoid duplication of interventions
- identify the specific local needs that the partnership will address – focusing on:
 - supporting children’s smooth transition from early years settings to reception, including engaging with families to help prepare children for school
 - strengthening relationships between early years providers and feeder schools to improve children’s learning journeys, especially those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and from disadvantaged backgrounds
 - strengthening continuity and collaboration between settings and supporting early years educators and teachers to share best practice encouraging joint professional development, observation and sharing of curriculum and pedagogy across the early years system
- plan the activities that the partnership will undertake from April 2027 to March 2028 (subject to successful application for year 2) to address those needs; these must align with at least one of the priority areas outlined in the [partnership guide](#) and the plan should include how wider stakeholders will be engaged through the partnership
- submit a costed proposal for year 2 partnership funding by the deadline
- establish partnership governance arrangements that are clear, proportionate and effective, and that enable meaningful joint decision making and shared accountability for the partnership; 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)

At least 2 partner organisations of each partnership must attend one or more support webinars offered by DfE or a contracted delivery partner to learn from best practice across the sector and access advice and information about developing partnerships.

At least one of the 2 attending organisations from each partnership should not be a primary school. Those attending should also ensure that key learning and information from these sessions is cascaded across their partnership.

Partnerships that are awarded year 1 funding should submit an application for year 2 and year 3 (April 2027 to March 2029) by January 2027. Guidance for year 2 of the initiative, including information about how to submit these proposals, will be issued later this year.

Grant funding is provided for revenue expenditure only and must be used to support the delivery of partnership activities as outlined in this guidance and in line with the year 1 funding objectives. Eligible revenue expenditure includes, but is not limited to, staffing and backfill costs directly related to partnership activity, professional development, venue hire, travel and subsistence, consumable materials, and externally commissioned support

or training. All funding is subject to the terms and conditions set out in the department's [grant funding agreement](#).

This grant cannot be used to fund capital expenditure, including the purchase of equipment, furniture, IT hardware, or any other asset with a useful economic life beyond the funding period. Expenditure on items unrelated to the partnership's agreed activities and any activity that duplicates existing government-funded provision will also not be considered eligible.

[Contact us](#) in advance if you are uncertain whether a specific cost is eligible, rather than incurring expenditure that may later be queried or disallowed.

Applications are now closed

Applications closed on 17 July. We are no longer accepting applications.

If you have submitted an application, you will be notified of the outcome in the new academic year.

How DfE will assess your application

Applications will be assessed through a structured 3-stage sifting process to ensure a fair, transparent and consistent approach.

Eligibility check

Firstly, DfE will check that your partnership meets the eligibility criteria and agrees to the minimum requirements (see eligibility criteria and minimum requirements).

Prioritisation

Partnership applications will then be prioritised according to their level of disadvantage based on the following data from all prospective partners:

- free school meals (for schools) or early years pupil premium (for early years providers)
- Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) (for all partners)⁶

This data will be used as a proxy indicator for numbers of children with SEND.⁷

Assessment

Assessment will start by reviewing the applications prioritised using the above data and will continue until all funding is utilised. This may mean that applications that are not prioritised may not be progressed to assessment.

Applications prioritised will then be assessed on a pass/fail basis (see criteria in annex A) in relation to:

- how the partnership will address local challenges
- strategic fit with other local initiatives
- approach to partnership-building

A minimum of 2 evaluators will assess each application individually and assign a pass or fail mark. You must pass all 3 areas for your application to be considered for award. If funding remains available, the department may, at its discretion, consider applications that pass 2 out of the 3 criteria.

⁶ DfE will rely on the latest published data available at the time the applications are assessed.

⁷ To ensure we have a broad range of delivery contexts, the department may at its discretion adjust the number of partnerships if there are particular areas of the country or sizes of partnership that are significantly under-represented.

Where evaluators' assessment marks are different, a moderation meeting will be held with the intention of both evaluators agreeing on the outcome (pass or fail) for each of the areas. The discussion will be chaired by an independent moderator who has authority to decide the final outcome should neither evaluator agree.

In the event that we need to take a decision between partnerships that are both/all prioritised using the above data and pass the assessment, we will use the number of children reached through the partnerships as a tie break criterion.

Please see the application form questions below for further information, including pass criteria.

Key dates and deadlines

* Some dates remain indicative and subject to change;

- deadline for submission of year 1 applications – 17 July 2026
- year 1 funding agreements issued* – September 2026
- year 1 (development phase) implementation* – October 2026 to March 2027
- support webinars / best practice and evidence forums* – October 2026 to March 2027

Application form questions

You will not be able to save and return to your application online, so you should ensure you have all necessary information and prepare your responses before completing the application form online.

Questions 1 and 2

Provide the following details of the key contact for your application:

- name
- email address

Guidance

This is for administrative purposes only and in case we have any queries about your application. The contact name may be changed at a later date if needed. The key contact should be from the primary school that will manage the partnership grant, if successful (the partnership grant administrator).

Question 3

Confirm that you have agreement from all proposed partner organisations to submit your application.

Eligibility criteria

Questions 4 and 5

Confirm the following eligibility criteria:

- all partner organisations are either a registered early years provider or school-based early years provider in England
- your partnership contains a minimum of one primary school with a reception cohort **and** a minimum of one other type of early years provider (for example, group-based provider, school-based nursery, maintained nursery school or childminder)

Partnership grant administrator

Questions 6 to 10

Tell us about the school that will administer the partnership development grant if your application is successful – this will be the partnership grant administrator. Please provide the following information:

- school name
- unique reference number (URN)
- address and postcode
- phone number
- email address

Guidance

The partnership grant administrator must be a school and will be responsible for the grant funding. The partnership grant administrator is responsible for completing the eligibility checks, submitting this application form and acting as a main point of contact between partner organisations, DfE and other relevant stakeholders or networks.

DfE will check the financial health of partnership grant administrators and will contact them in case of any further queries or clarification.

Questions 11 and 12

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

Questions 13 to 15

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), you will be asked to:

- provide more information about this
- confirm that the partnership grant administrator has capacity to deliver partnership activity alongside existing commitments

Partnership details

Question 16

Tell us about the early years providers and schools that will be in your partnership. For each, you will need to provide the following information:

- provider or school name
- for providers: establishment URN and Ofsted early years URN (the Ofsted early years URN is formed of 6 or 7 numbers and starts with EY) or for schools: URN
- provider or school email address

Guidance

You will be asked to enter this information into a text box – please use the following format:

[provider or school name], [establishment URN], [Ofsted EY URN], [email address]

After you submit information for one partner organisation, you will have the option to add more.

Question 17

Tell us what region you are in: North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands, West Midlands, London, South East, South West or East of England.

If more than one region applies, please use the location of the partnership grant administrator school.

Question 18

Tell us how many children you expect your partnership will reach.

To calculate this, add together:

- the total number of children attending each early years provider (not including schools)
- the total number of children in school reception classes

Tell us about your partnership and local area

These questions need longer, written responses. They will be scored on a pass or fail basis using the criteria listed for each question below.

Question 19

Describe the challenges and issues that you are currently facing in relation to transitions into reception and school readiness and how your partnership will address them. Please also explain how this relates particularly to children with SEND and disadvantage needs.

Your answer should be **no more than 300 words** – any additional words will be redacted and not considered.

Pass criteria for question 19

Answers must:

- provide an overview of the challenges and issues the proposed partners are facing in relation to transitions and school readiness
- consider the partnership as a whole and your local area; not focusing only on partnership grant administrator school
- provide rationale for how this particularly impacts children with SEND or disadvantage needs
- provide initial thinking on actions you will take to address these challenges through working in partnership

Question 20

Describe any other early years, SEND or disadvantage initiatives and programmes in your local area and how you will coordinate with them to maximise resources and avoid duplication.

Your answer should be **no more than 300 words** – any additional words will be redacted and not considered.

Pass criteria for question 20

Answers must:

- list specific initiatives or programmes operating in the local area that relate to early years, such as (but not limited to):
 - early years stronger practice hubs
 - Best Start Family Hubs
 - reception networks
 - other local early years, SEND or disadvantage-focused initiatives
- briefly describe how the partnership will coordinate with the initiatives identified, including at least one of the following:
 - mechanisms for sharing information or resources
 - avoidance of duplicated provision
 - how partnership working will help maximise existing local capacity

Or, if relevant initiatives do not exist or are not applicable, your answer must:

- explicitly state this and provide a rationale (for example, geographical coverage or absence of relevant programmes)
- briefly describe how the partnership will ensure resource alignment and avoid duplication within the existing local early years system, even without formal programmes

Question 21

Describe how you will build the partnership in the year 1 development phase (from September 2026 to March 2027).

Your answer should be **no more than 500 words** – any additional words will be redacted and not considered.

Pass criteria for question 21

Answers must outline a clear plan for developing the partnership from September 2026 to March 2027. This must include:

- building relationships between providers
- engaging other relevant local stakeholders
- gathering relevant information about local needs
- establishing appropriate governance arrangements for the partnership to support collective decision making amongst all partner organisations

Declaration and terms and conditions

Questions 22 to 27

On behalf of the partnership, you will need to confirm that the partnership agrees to the minimum requirements. Your partnership must agree to:

- deliver activities which align with other BSiL initiatives (such as early years stronger practice hubs or reception networks) and the wider early years system; partnerships must ensure that these activities do not duplicate or displace other government funded activity
- deliver activities that meet the needs of all children and families in their local area, particularly those with SEND, additional needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds
- have the right systems and governance arrangements in place to support effective partnership working
- meet the Department for Education's reporting requirements on delivery, spend and assurance
- commit to working with delivery partner/s to support implementation and evaluation activity
- develop a partnership model that could be sustainable beyond the funding period

Questions 27 and 28

In addition to the minimum requirements, you must confirm that the partnership will:

- comply with national and local safeguarding policies, statutory requirements and relevant early years and school standards
- comply with data protection legislation, including the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)



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