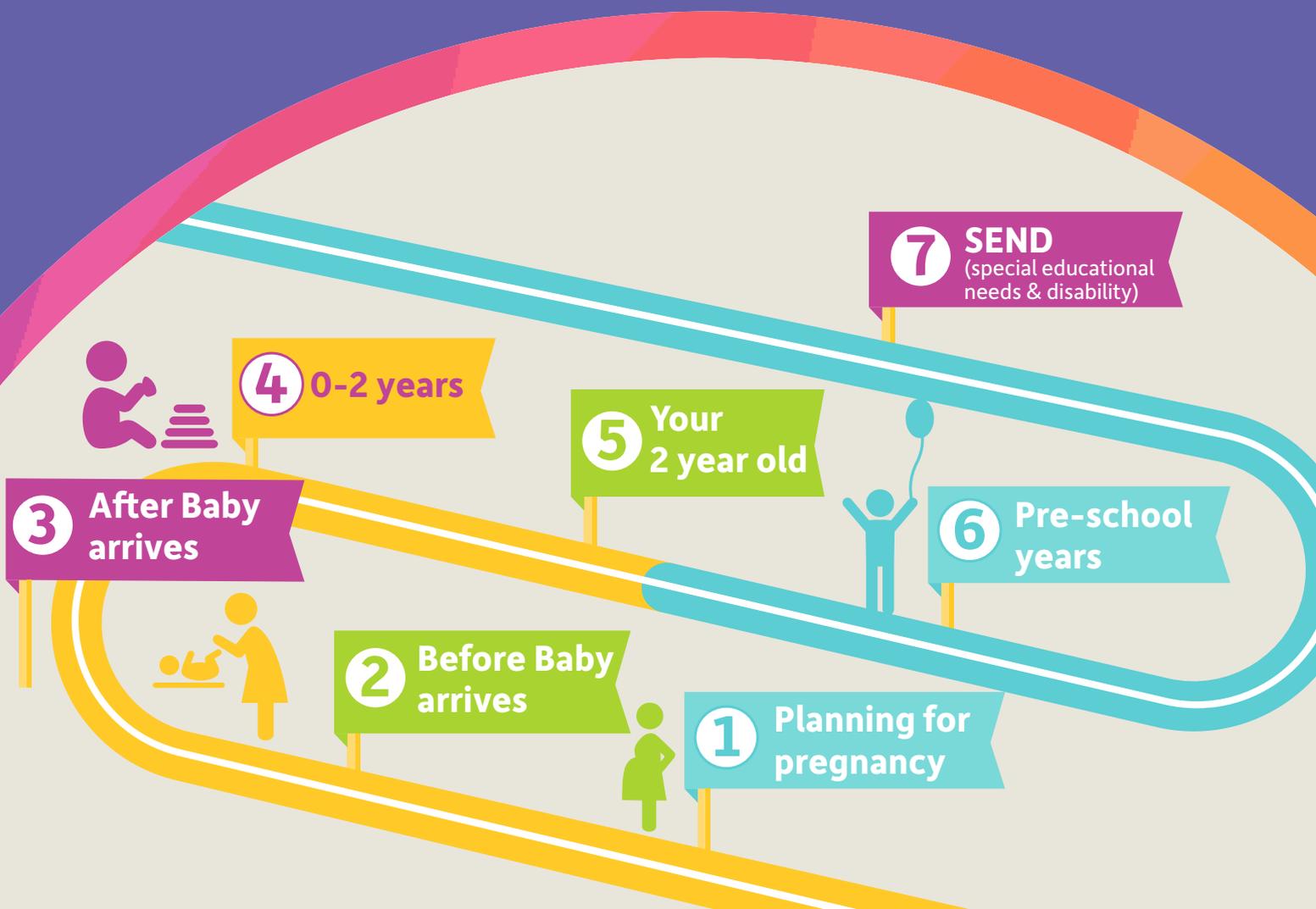


Leicestershire Best Start in Life Local Plan

2026-2029



Foreword

We are delighted to share this updated strategy, which reaffirms our shared commitment to ensuring that every child in Leicestershire has the **very best start in life**. This document reflects the strength of our partnerships across the county and demonstrates how we continue to evolve our approach in line with the latest national and local priorities.

Our refreshed strategy builds on six years of collaborative work under the Children and Families Partnership Plan, the Health and Wellbeing board, where we focused on the 1,001 Critical Days and school readiness, recognising the profound impact early experiences have on a child's long-term outcomes. The importance of these early foundations continues to be strongly reinforced through national policy, including government expectations for all local authorities to develop comprehensive Best Start in Life plans by 2026.

Locally, we remain deeply committed to embedding the Government's vision for the 1,001 Critical Days, ensuring that every parent and carer understands their vital role in supporting their child's early brain development within this unique window of opportunity. Recent updates to Leicestershire's Best Start for Life strategic commitments further strengthen our focus on high quality early years support, improved pathways for identifying developmental needs, and evidence-based approaches such as Evidenced based parenting programmes and strengthened preschool services.

We firmly believe that every child deserves the strongest start to their education journey. Achieving this relies on all partners—families, early years providers, health services, and schools—working together to ensure children enter school healthy, confident, and ready to thrive.

At the heart of communities across Leicestershire, our Best Start Family Hubs are now well established, offering accessible, joined up support for families, children, and young people. Guided by the national Family Hubs and Start for Life framework, we continue to enhance access, integration, and service quality for families from pregnancy through the early years.

Looking ahead, we remain committed to delivering a confident, collaborative, and outcomes focused Best Start in Life offer. This includes ensuring high quality, evidence-based services; improving access and information sharing across partners; strengthening pathways for emotional and physical wellbeing; and ensuring families are supported through consistent, compassionate, and responsive provision.

Together, we will continue to work towards a future where every child in Leicestershire grows up with the foundations they need to flourish.



Sharon Cooke
Interim Director
Children and Family Services



Tim Browne
Interim Director
Education, Inclusion and Additional Needs

Executive Summary

This plan sets out Leicestershire County Council's Best Start Family Hub Local Plan, describing how the Children and Families Department, working with partners across health, education, the voluntary and community sector, and the Families First Partnership, will deliver joined-up, place-based support for children, young people, and families across the county.

The local plan aligns with the UK Government's Best Start for Life and Family Hubs Programme and supports families from conception to age 19, and up to age 25 for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It reflects Leicestershire's commitment to early intervention, prevention, and reducing inequalities across both rural and urban communities, while also strengthening collaborative working in line with ongoing SEND reforms. These reforms ensure more integrated pathways, earlier identification of need, and improved co-ordination across services—further enhancing the connectivity between Family Hubs, SEND provision, and the Families First Partnership to deliver better outcomes for all families.

Mission

Children in Leicestershire should grow up safe, supported, and able to reach their full potential within thriving communities. We are committed to ensuring that any child requiring support can access coordinated, high-quality information and services that lead to positive and equitable outcomes.

Best Start in Life – Leicestershire Strategic Position

Leicestershire's Best Start in Life mission reinforces our commitment to ensuring that every child grows up healthy, safe, and ready to learn. The earliest years—from pregnancy to age five—are recognised as critical in shaping lifelong wellbeing and achievement.

Our ambition aligns with national priorities to reduce inequalities and strengthen the support available to families. This includes improving access to high quality early education, health services, and family support, with a particular focus on families facing additional barriers to positive early development.

Through strong collaboration across education, health, early help, and the voluntary and community sector, Leicestershire is contributing to the national goal of achieving a 75% Good Level of Development (GLD) at age five by 2028. Delivering this ambition requires coordinated, place-based action to ensure families receive timely and effective support and that children thrive in their earliest years.

Our approach is grounded in partnership, prevention, and community resilience, ensuring that children in Leicestershire benefit from the best possible start and a strong foundation for future success.

Local Context

Leicestershire is a predominantly rural county with diverse market towns and villages, alongside areas of higher population density close to Leicester City. This geography presents both opportunities and challenges in ensuring equitable access to services, particularly for families living in rural and semi-rural areas.

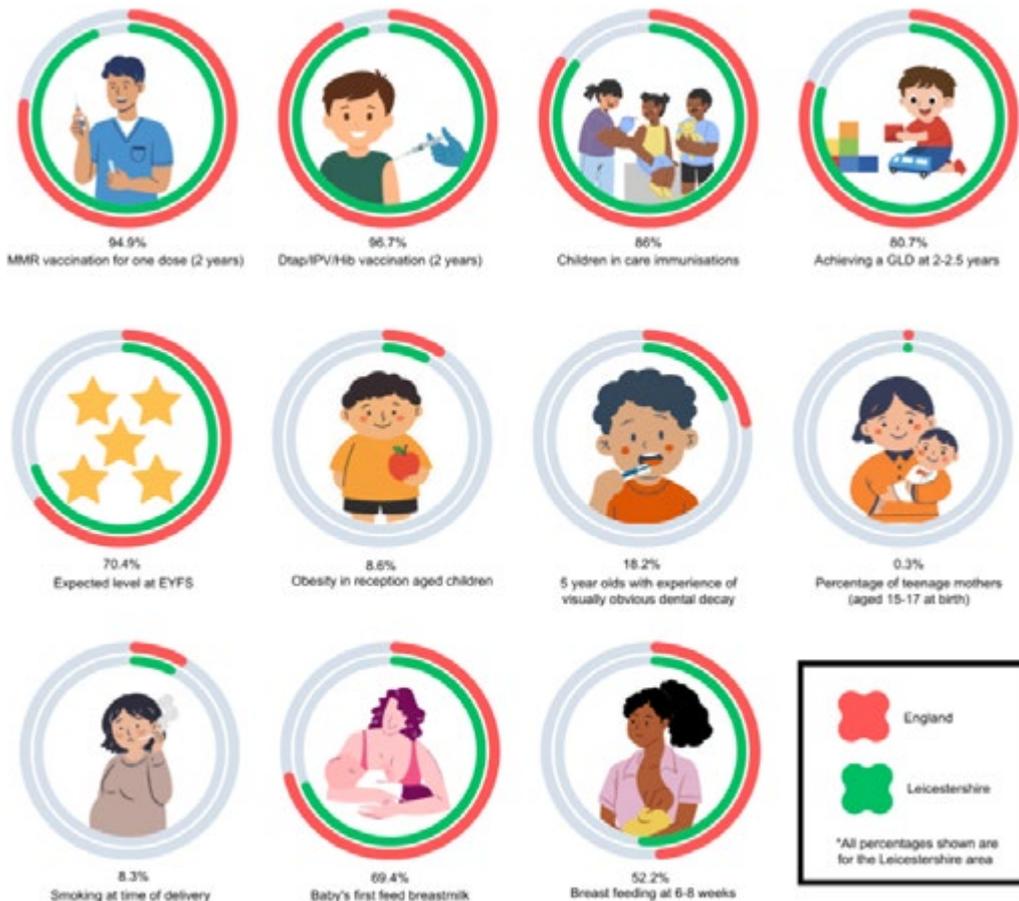
Our population is diverse, and children's early years outcomes can vary significantly between different ethnic groups. Evidence shows that ethnicity can influence access to maternity services, early development outcomes, and engagement with early years support. Differences may arise due to a range of factors, including cultural barriers, language needs, experiences of discrimination, and variation in service accessibility.

The Best Start Family Hub approach builds on Leicestershire's existing family hubs, community venues, and digital services, ensuring families can access support close to home or virtually where appropriate.

Key local considerations include:

- Support improved health and education outcomes for babies, children and families
- To bring about system transformation to fundamentally reform and improve the way that 0-5 family and health services are delivered
- Support families in areas of higher deprivation – (super output areas)
- Ensure access to suitable advice and guidance around SEND children and young people
- Improve access to services for families in rural communities

What we have achieved so far



2025 UK The Government's Best Start in Life Strategy is an initiative focused on improving child development from pregnancy to age five and beyond. It recognises that the foundations of success are laid in early childhood, and that a child's background should not determine their future success. When children can develop well, communicate effectively, build relationships, manage their emotions, play and learn, they are provided with the best chance to thrive not only in school but throughout their lives. This Local Plan sets out how we will work in partnership across Leicestershire to deliver this ambition for our children and young people.

There is a strong evidence base to show that experiences in the first 1,001 days from conception to age two is a period of rapid growth and what happens during this time could affect the rest of the child's future outcomes. Positive experience and good quality parent-infant relationships during this time support secure attachments which contribute to good physical and mental health, speech and language development, emotional self-regulation, resilience, and wider social and economic advantages throughout the life course. Every child deserves the best possible start in life, and support to fulfil their potential. This is also reflected in Leicestershire's Start for Life offer.

Preparing our children for school is an important transition in their lives, to allow them to have a positive start to their formal educational journey. We want the pre-school children of Leicestershire to be equipped with the skills they need so that all children develop well, learn to communicate, build relationships, manage their emotions, develop their fine and gross motor skills through play, so that they are ready to learn and flourish as they enter their foundation year at school. School readiness is measured by the percentage of children receiving a Good Level of Development by the end of the Foundation Stage



Success of the national Best Start in Life Strategy will be measured by improvements in the percentage of children achieving a Good Level of Development at Reception. School readiness is assessed at the end of the academic year in which a child turns 5, when teachers compare a child’s development against 17 early learning goals (Table 1). A child is considered to have reached a Good Level of Development if they have achieved the expected level for the early learning goals in the “Prime Areas of Learning” and two of the “Specific Areas of Learning” (Literacy and Mathematics).

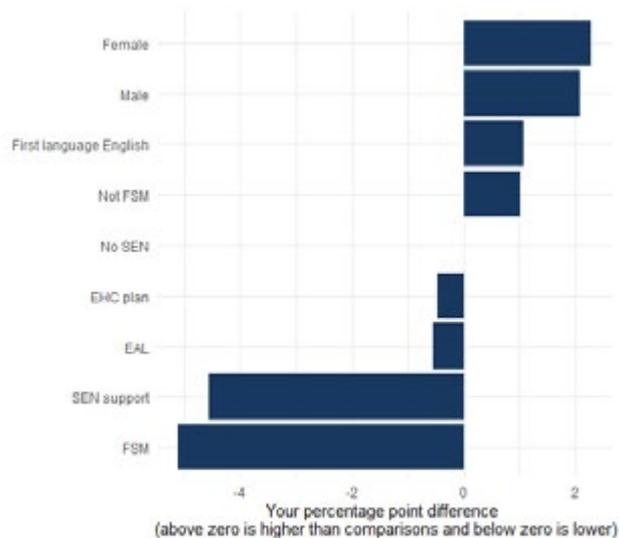
Early Learning Goals

| | | |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Good Level of Development | Prime Areas of Learning | |
| | Communication and Language | Listening, attention and understanding |
| | | Speaking |
| | Physical Development | Gross motor skills |
| | | Fine motor skills |
| | Personal, social and emotional development | Self-regulation |
| | | Managing self |
| | | Building relationships |
| | Specific Areas of Learning | |
| | Literacy | Comprehension |
| | | Reading |
| | | Writing |
| | Mathematics | Numbers |
| | | Numerical patterns |
| | Understanding the world | Past and present |
| | | People, culture and communities |
| | | The natural world |
| Expressive arts and design | Creating with materials | |
| | Being imaginative and expressive | |

A child’s ability to achieve Good Levels of Development are influenced by a wide range of factors, with the families, communities, and environments we are born into and grow up in, playing a crucial role in shaping our health and wellbeing throughout life. This influence is especially profound during the first 1001 critical days—from conception to age two—when rapid neurological development occurs, laying the foundation for a child’s life chances and outcomes

The percentage of children achieving a Good Level of Development at the end of reception in Leicestershire is significantly higher than that of England as a whole (70.4% vs 68.3%). Furthermore, this figure is on the back of a positive trend, with increases seen each year since 2021/22

| Academic year | Actual percentage GLD |
|---------------|-----------------------|
| 2021/22 | 67.6% |
| 2022/23 | 69.1% |
| 2023/24 | 69.6% |
| 2024/25 | 70.4% |



When we break this down to the individual early learning goals that comprise the development assessment (Table 1) we see that children in Leicestershire achieve better than the national average in each compared with national averages for the 2024 to 2025 academic year. Speaking, comprehension, listening, attention and understanding score particularly well.

We know, however, that these positive headline figures don't represent the experiences of all our families and that there exist inequalities amongst our population. For example, our data shows that children in Leicestershire who have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), English as an additional language (EAL), who are in receipt of Special Educational Need (SEN) support, or Free school meals (FSM) do less well compared with national averages. Whereas 51.3% of children who receive free school meals in England achieve a good level of development by reception, in Leicestershire this figure is only 46.1%.

| | Leicestershire | National |
|--------------------|----------------|----------|
| EHC plan | 3.5% | 4.0% |
| EAL | 64.2% | 64.7% |
| SEN support | 21.8% | 26.4% |
| FSM | 46.1% | 51.3% |

We will use a cycle of data which includes (but is not an exhaustive list) of school readiness, take-up of childcare entitlements, Ages and Stages Questionnaire at 2-2.5 years old and fingertip data to inform the different needs of families with babies and young children across the 0-5 age range.

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

The local authority has ambitious targets to achieve by 2028.



GLD is currently at 70.4%
(above national average)
Free school meals is currently at 46.1%
(below national average)



The expected target for the proportion of children in Leicestershire achieving a good level of development at the end of 21/28 academic year is 78.6%



The expectation is that disadvantaged children have benefitted *at least equally* from this improvement; the expected target for the proportion of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and achieving a Good Level of Development at the end of the 2027/28 academic year is at least 53.3%, this equates to another 56 children achieving a GLD





Vision and Aims

To ensure every parent and child in Leicestershire who needs support has access to co-ordinated, high-quality information enabling them to thrive and succeed with positive outcomes, regardless of where they live.

We will actively identify and reduce inequalities by ensuring that our services are culturally competent, inclusive, and accessible to all families. This includes recognising the impact that ethnicity can have on early years outcomes and embedding this understanding into how we design, commission, and evaluate services. Our commitment to equity ensures that support is proportionate, responsive, and aligned with the needs of our diverse communities.

We will achieve this by:

- Delivering accessible, integrated family support across Leicestershire
- Strengthening early help and prevention
- Reducing inequalities and improve outcomes for vulnerable families
- Improving service navigation through clear access points
- Embedding family voice and co-production in service design
- Improving access to funded places/ improve GLD at the end of reception
- Ensuring more accessible early education and childcare
- Improving quality in early years settings

The above aims will be supported by the following workstreams:

Maternal and early years health services

Our commitment as a partnership

- We will promote Healthy Start and healthy nutrition practices and work with parents, carers and providers to promote good oral hygiene
- We will increase take-up of childhood vaccines, through community-led campaigns
- Offer support to pregnant people with any concerns relating to smoking, alcohol consumption and/or wider physical and or mental health challenges
- Increase uptake of key health visiting contacts, with a focus on priority families and communities that face barriers such as limited access to maternity services, lower early years education participation, higher levels of poverty or housing instability, and restricted digital access to support or parenting resources
- We will invest in evidence-based breastfeeding support across Leicestershire, empowering parents to begin and sustain breastfeeding for as long as they choose.
- We will provide services that support perinatal mental health, aiming to achieve the best possible outcomes during the first 1001 critical days of a child's life.
- We will look to increase our engagement and awareness of impact on fathers' mental health and parenting confidence
- We will lead efforts to ensure parents receive the support they need during the transition to parenthood, strengthening their relationships and overall family wellbeing.
- To ensure parents have knowledge and understanding regarding child development and the importance of thriving by age 5

What does success look like?

- Increase in the number of families engaging with Family Hubs (footfall, registrations, repeat visits).
- Universal services and groups are offered to all parents and carers and signposting or further referrals are made for those parents and carers that need specialist support or further intervention
- Greater uptake of healthy nutrition workshops and support programmes.
- Increase in childhood vaccine uptake across all communities.
- Reduction in vaccine inequalities between different localities or demographic groups.
- Increased number of pregnant people accessing stop smoking or alcohol reduction support.
- Improvement in completion rates of mandated health-visiting reviews among priority families.
- Higher breastfeeding prevalence at 6–8 weeks.
- Improvement in pre and postintervention wellbeing scores.
- Reduction in the percentage of children with tooth decay at age 5.
- Evidence of improved referral pathways and reduced duplication between services.
- Positive feedback from professionals on joint working
- Increased engagement with fathers and broader awareness of impact on their mental health and parenting confidence
- We will champion support that helps couples navigate the transition to parenthood and protect healthy relationships by using evidenced based interventions exploring parental conflict and resolution skills

Early Childhood Education and Care - access and quality

Our commitment as a partnership

- Working with group and school-based providers, childminders, Stronger Practice Hubs, and other partners in Leicestershire to agree and deliver actions that will improve access to early education and drive improvements to the quality early years provision
- We will promote the benefits of funded high-quality childcare and early education to increase the uptake of their free early education entitlement
- We will ensure disadvantaged children access their funded entitlements in high quality provision
- We will ensure sufficient childcare places in each district and for each age group by supporting new and existing childcare to open, including School Based Nurseries
- Monitor the take up of funded childcare and report against different cohorts to ensure children are school ready
- We will ensure that all children not accessing Funded Early Education Entitlement (FEEE) are offered tailored groups to support their transitions to nursery and school settings breaking down barriers to parental confidence and awareness of the need for early education.

What does success look like?

- Increased number of eligible 2-year-olds and 3/4-year-olds taking up a funded place (monitored termly).
- Increased uptake rates for targeted cohorts (economically disadvantaged, SEND, EAL).
- Increased number of providers engaging in training, continuing professional development, or quality improvement programmes through local authority or stronger practice hubs
- Sufficient number of childcare places available by district and age group vs. sufficiency thresholds.



SEND support

Our commitment as a partnership

- Specialist SEND practitioners will provide support to every Best Start Family Hub across the locality.
- We will establish clear and consistent referral pathways for children identified early, ensuring all partners understand how to access health, education, and wellbeing support.
- We will strengthen support for transitions between early years settings and schools so that children experience continuity and stability.
- We will deliver a universal and targeted training programme for the early years workforce, in partnership with the Stronger Practice Hub and the Local Authority, to build capability across the sector. Staff will receive training appropriate to their role to support families and guide them through transitions into adulthood.
- We will work collaboratively with health professionals and specialist services to ensure families benefit from an integrated and coordinated support system.

What does success look like?

- Families experience timely access to specialist SEND support within every Best Start Family Hub, resulting in earlier identification of needs, improved family confidence, and more consistent outcomes across all localities.
- Partners follow a shared, streamlined referral pathway that ensures children identified early receive coordinated health, education, and wellbeing support without delay—reducing duplication and ensuring children access the right help at the right time.
- Children move confidently and smoothly between early years settings and school, supported by consistent information-sharing and partnership working. Families feel informed and reassured, and settings report fewer transition-related challenges.
- The early years workforce demonstrates increased confidence, knowledge, and capability, with staff appropriately skilled for their roles. Families receive more consistent, high-quality support, and transitions into adulthood are better understood and planned for.
- Families experience seamless, joined-up support from education, health, and specialist services. Communication between professionals is strong, duplication is reduced, and families feel supported by a single, coherent system.



Home learning environment and parenting interventions

Our commitment as a partnership

- We will establish a clear, coherent, and accessible local parenting offer that supports families from conception through the early years, ensuring this pathway is widely understood across all services and community touchpoints.
- We will deliver high-quality, evidence-based parenting and home learning programmes that enhance outcomes for children and families.
- We will develop a shared understanding of the skills, capabilities, and resources within the wider partnership so that parenting support is a collective endeavour, not the responsibility of a single service.
- We will invest in workforce development and training to ensure practitioners are equipped with relational, evidence informed, and strengths-based practice.
- We will promote consistent use of approved curricula and delivery models across all providers to ensure continuity, quality, and effectiveness.
- We will embed supervision, peer learning, and quality assurance processes to maintain high standards of delivery across the partnership.
- We will ensure all programmes reflect cultural competence and meet the needs of Leicestershire's diverse communities.
- We will work collaboratively with community, charity, and faith-based partners to extend our reach and strengthen support for families across the county.
- To take responsibility as a partnership to promote the importance of and awareness of what a good home learning environment is.

What does success look like?

- Improved coordination and reduced duplication between partners, with clear referral pathways into parenting and home learning support.
- Increased enrolment and completion rates for parenting and home learning programmes, with positive parent reported confidence and wellbeing outcomes.
- Practitioners will engage with the whole family to ensure cohesive understanding of a good home learning environment, therefore impacting on the whole family.
- Evidence that families - particularly priority, underserved, and vulnerable groups - are accessing the local parenting offer consistently across all localities. Evidence that families - particularly priority, underserved, and vulnerable groups - are accessing the local parenting offer consistently across all localities. Underserved communities refer to families who face barriers to accessing services due to factors such as rural isolation, limited digital access, socioeconomic disadvantage, language or cultural barriers, or reduced availability of local early years provision.
- Improved developmental outcomes for children participating in home learning and parenting programmes, demonstrated through ASQ data, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) progress, and practitioner observed improvements.
- Increased uptake of early learning and funded childcare entitlements among families supported through the parenting offer and home learning pathway.
- Positive parent and practitioner feedback on the coherence, accessibility, and effectiveness of the local parenting offer and programme pathway.
- Workforce confidence and competence strengthened, demonstrated through participation in training, high quality delivery, and consistent use of approved curricula and evidence-based approaches.

- Strong engagement from voluntary, community, and faith sector partners, ensuring families receive support that reflects their cultural, linguistic, and community context.
- Demonstrable impact of home learning interventions (such as Making it REAL and PEEP), shown through parent feedback, children’s individual progress, and practitioner assessments.

Transition to preschool and into school and their reception year

Our commitment as a partnership

- Continue improving resources and tools for practitioners to support the process of transition and the child’s transition arrangements.
- Expand professional collaboration and training to strengthen information sharing processes between settings, schools and parents to ensure foundation stage classrooms meet the needs of the child
- Enhance transition planning for children with SEND
- Increase parental engagement and support
- With regional improvement teams, help bolster underperforming schools (identified through the View Your Education Data platform).

What does success look like?

- Positive feedback from children, parents (particularly from priority families), settings and schools
- Children who may be at risk of exclusion maintain their school placement due to the successful transition and planning prior to the child starting school
- Reduction in cases where key information is missing at transition.
- Parents of children with SEND coproduce a personalised transition plan and multiagency meetings are held in advance of children starting their new placement
- Families access the local authority’s transition materials or digital resources.



How will we achieve this?

Leicestershire will continue to deliver a network of Family Hubs, utilising existing provision such as existing Family Hubs and community venues, supported by a countywide virtual Family Hub offer.

Hubs will be aligned to locality-based working, ensuring strong links with schools, GP practices, and community organisations.

Through Family Hubs, families in Leicestershire will be able to access:

- Midwifery, health visiting, and early years support
- Parenting and relationship support
- Emotional wellbeing and mental health services
- SEND information, advice, and support
- Early help and social care pathways
- Employment, skills, and financial wellbeing advice
- Voluntary, community, faith-based organisations and local charities

Leicestershire will strengthen partnership working by maximising the use of its 21 Family Hubs to provide accessible universal and targeted support. Each hub will offer specialist SEND guidance, improved outreach for those families who require specialist support, and integrated health and family support services. A multiagency approach will ensure smooth transitions for children and enhance emotional wellbeing. Evidence based parenting and home learning programmes will be expanded, supported by family feedback. The strategy prioritises increased uptake of early education, particularly for children who may require additional support, and continues to build on digital service delivery.



Workforce capacity and capabilities

Leicestershire County Council is committed to developing a skilled, resilient early years and family support workforce capable of delivering high-quality, integrated services from pregnancy to age five. This includes strengthening recruitment and retention across universal and targeted Best Start services and ensuring that every early years setting has access to at least one highly qualified early years teacher to support quality improvement.

A coordinated programme of professional development will be delivered to build a shared understanding of Best Start priorities. This will enhance practitioner capability in trauma informed practice, infant mental health, inclusive approaches, and leadership development. Workforce integration will be supported through shared learning opportunities, clear definition of roles and responsibilities, and the continued embedding of a strength based, family centred approach.

To further strengthen practice, the Council will work with school leaders to ensure they can effectively interpret and use Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) data, providing targeted support for those with less early years expertise.

What does success look like?

Match Funding and commissioning would help bring together the strengths of the whole community public services, charities, local groups, and businesses. The fund would match money from philanthropy with part of the BSIL/BSFH funding. This would allow local authorities and an independent organisation to work together. Alongside this, direct commissioning will enable us to work alongside key partners on specific workstreams while also helping us to resource gaps where these can't be met by our Local Authority teams.

- **Create a shared local plan** focused on the BSIL goals, helping more children arrive at school ready to learn and achieving a Good Level of Development.
- **Use the skills and resources of all partners** — councils, community groups, and private organisations — so that efforts support each other rather than work in isolation.
- **Agree on shared ways of measuring progress**, so everyone understands what is working and where improvements are needed.
- **Improve communication across the whole area**, making sure families are part of the conversation and feel informed and involved.
- **Build on BSIL investment** to create new partnerships, services, and support for parents and children that could not be delivered by the local authority alone

Family Involvement

The Best Start in Life Partnership is committed to strengthening the role of families and communities in shaping services and improving outcomes. The partnership will work collaboratively to identify where family voice is essential and establish a straightforward, consistent approach for gathering targeted, needed feedback, with findings shared across the system.

The partnership will expand existing parent panels, prioritising engagement with under-represented communities, to ensure that parent perspectives inform decision making. All Family Hubs will implement clear “**you said, we did**” feedback loops to demonstrate how parent input influences service development.

Regular feedback sessions will be held with voluntary, community and faith-based sector organisations, ensuring a shared understanding of family needs and emerging priorities. In addition, the partnership will continue to support meaningful contributions from those communities to support local maternity and early years objectives.



Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Robust monitoring, evaluation and learning will ensure meaningful improvements for children and families and allow the programme to adapt in response to evidence and lived experience.

To ensure transparency and drive improvement, key indicators within our outcome's framework will be disaggregated by ethnicity. This allows us to track progress, understand which groups may not be benefiting equally from our interventions, and ensure that actions taken as part of the Best Start in Life programme effectively narrow gaps in outcomes across all communities.

Best Start Family Hubs and Early Years services will measure impact using:

- Participation and completion rates for parenting programmes, including the outcomes achieved for children and families
- Parent reported confidence and wellbeing measures
- Child development indicators at key stages
- Take up of funded childcare
- Quality of early years childcare provision
- Qualitative feedback from families and practitioners
- National and local health data to assess improvements for children aged 0–5

This evidence will drive continuous improvement and inform ongoing reporting alongside other Family Hub outcomes.

Governance

Leicestershire Children and Families Partnership

The purpose of the Children and Families Partnership is to champion effective partnership working on shared outcomes and priorities that make a real difference to the lives of children and young people. By working together, the Partnership can also maximise resources and expertise, be more co-ordinated in the services provided and avoid duplication of effort.

This work will also contribute to the “Best Start for Life” commitments of the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy, through close working with the Children and Young People Place Based Group (an operational delivery group of Leicestershire’s Health and Wellbeing Board).

