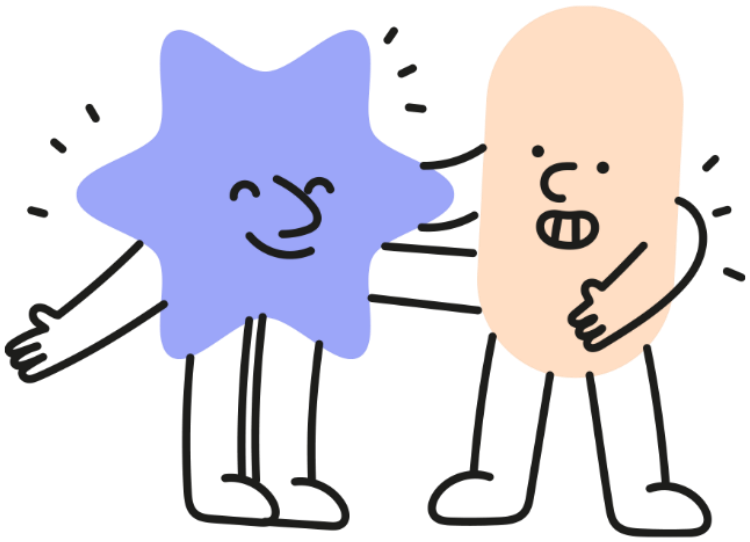
Bolton Family Hubs

BEST START IN LIFE

Best Start in Life Local Plan 2026-2029

October 2026 version 2



Bolton Together

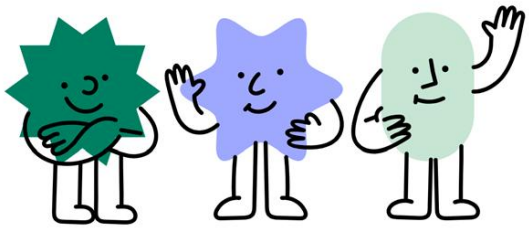
NHS Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust

bolton cvs

Bolton Council

NHS Bolton NHS Foundation Trust

Introduction



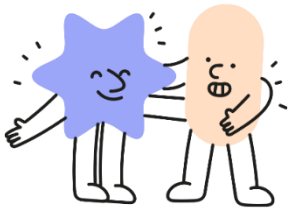
In July 2025, the Department for Education published the **Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life Strategy.** The strategy outlines the government's vision for early years support from pregnancy to age 5 and its plan for delivering on the Plan for change target of 75% of children in England achieving a Good Level of Development at the end of reception by 2028.

Best Start in Life Local Plans should be developed to identify local needs, gaps, and opportunities, bringing together activity already underway across different programmes.

This plan outlines our priorities under core services and system enablers. The outcome of delivery against these priorities will support on improving our Good Level of Development.

This plan has been updated in October 2026 to strengthen our priorities. The changes are as a result of further analysis of our data, readiness for change assessments carried out across the partnership, and the development of operational plans and an outcomes framework.

Vision and Target



Our vision for 2030 is:

By working together, we will empower families to provide the nurturing care children need to thrive from their earliest years.

We will enhance the availability, quality and impact of universal information, advice and support, ensuring families can access the right help at the right time, both in-person and online. Through strong relationships, positive early experiences and high-quality support, we will help every child to develop, learn and be ready for school. This supports Bolton's vision that every child is Safe, Healthy, Achieve and Belong.

Our targets:

Our statutory target to improve the Good Level of Development in Bolton by 2028 is:

72.8% of children and

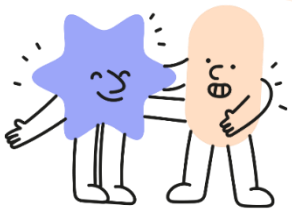
61.8% of children accessing Free School Meals

Our Bolton target to improve the take up of 15 hours funded early education 'Early Learning for twos' (most vulnerable children) is:

77.3% - Minimum expectation

86.1% - Stretching goal.

What our data says



23,460
Children in Bolton aged 0-5 population

75,599
Children in Bolton aged 0-17

24.4%
Percentage of who are children

Percentage of children from ethnic diverse communities (Census 2021)

Bolton	England
42.3%	26.6%

There were **73 spoken languages** recorded across Reception classes in Bolton (Reception profile 2025)

Percentage of population in low-income families

Bolton	England
37.5%	23.1%

(Children in low-income families local area 2024)

There are **54,000** disabled people aged under 25 living in Bolton

Bolton is in the top 5 in England for 5-year-olds with experience of visually obvious dental decay

Bolton	England
42.8%	23.7%

Secondary Uses Service (SUS)

Breastfeeding prevalence at 6 to 8 weeks
45.3%
Bolton (2023-24)

Percentage of children who were at or above the expected level at their development check (2 to 2 and a half years)
82.0% **Quarter 4 2025-26**
(Child development outcomes Gov.uk)

Average vaccine update percentage per age group
12 months - 91.1%
24 months - 89.8%
5 years - 90.6%

Pupils achieving a Good Level of Development at Early Years Foundation Stage

64.2% Bolton (2024-25) **68.2% England (2024-25)**

The GLD has remained stable over the last 4 years

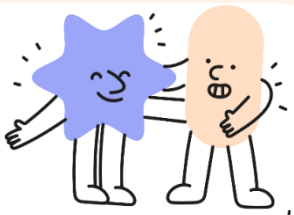
24% of children with SEN Support and 1.2% of those with an EHCP achieved the Good Level of Development (2024-25)

70.2% of girls and 58.4% of boys achieved Good Level of Development (2024-25)

Provisional data for 2025-26 has shown a 3% increase in achievement of GLD

Local analysis of 2025-26 identifies a difference of 24% between the ward in Bolton with the highest proportion achieving GLD and the ward in Bolton with the lowest

What our data says



Better support for families



There are **8 Best Start Family Hubs** across Bolton, attended over the last year by

10,389 Parent/ carers

6,487 Children

6,837 events and sessions delivered in the last year

Accessible Early Education and Childcare



70% Early learning 2-year-olds take up

95% universal 3- and 4-year-old take up

318 children supported through Early years Inclusion fund

High Quality Early Years and Reception



259 funded early years providers in Bolton

98.5% of all providers are judged Good or better

* Data as at publication of v1 plan, April 2026

We have located our 8 Best Start Family Hubs in the most deprived communities across 6 neighbourhoods and 3 districts, and there is a multi-agency and integrated approach across the networks and community settings.

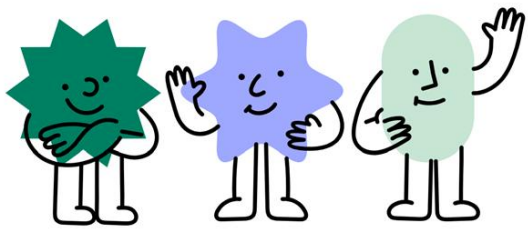
We are using local data and insights to further identify our priority children and families and inform key areas of focus across our priorities.

Our analysis of Good Level of Development (GLD) outcomes data tells us that our priority focus to improve the GLD should be children who are eligible for free school meals and boys.

We know where there is lower take up of Early Learning for 2 year olds (EL2) from eligible families. To improve take up, we need to reduce barriers including awareness of entitlement, availability of places, affordability and understanding the benefits of early education.

An outcomes framework has been developed which will provide assurance and oversight across the plan, governed by the Best Start in Life Operational Board.

Further to this, a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) will be developed with a focus on Healthy Babies.



Readiness for change

Since publishing our version 1 plan in April 2026, we have worked with Nesta to undertake a readiness for change assessment with leaders and partners across Bolton's Best Start in Life system. This assessment has helped us to understand the strong foundations which we can build on to achieve our priorities.

Integration and early identification

Integration of services for early identification of need

Foundations for intelligence

Essential data is gathered across a range of services to understand activity and engagement

Community reach

Partnership working with voluntary, community and faith sector, schools and settings as a familiar route for families

Prevention in practice

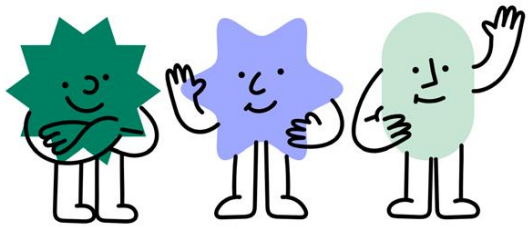
Evidence based interventions and champion roles across the workforce

The assessment also highlighted where we need to accelerate pace to remove barriers and deliver our ambitions.

We need to improve **data sharing arrangements** and make more **effective use of our existing data** so that we can further identify underserved families and make targeted improvements across our services.

We also need to make sure **communication** across the partnership is clear and consistent, so everyone **understands the Best Start in Life offer** in Bolton and can confidently support families to access the right help at the right time.

Test and Learn



Outreach: Strengthening our outreach is essential so that all children and their families can access the Best Start in Life offer in Bolton, especially those who are at highest risk of not reaching the GLD. Aligned under the new Outreach Strategy, we are working at pace to deliver new approaches to reach families, including:

Community Connectors

In partnership with Bolton CVS, a team of part-time staff will be recruited from across Bolton, with a focus on our priority areas and underserved demographics. They will be based in the community, building relationships with families and delivering peer support – from information sharing about the Best Start Family Hub (BSFH) offer, to accompanying a nervous parent to their first session. We are excited to be working closely with Better Start Blackpool on this initiative, learning from their 10-year Community Connector programme.

Faith Sector Engagement

We are commissioning the Gather Movement to provide a faith sector engagement and development service which connects BSFHs and faith-based organisations. Volunteers from faith communities will be trained to promote the BSFH offer and the key messages which we know are crucial to improving our GLD outcomes. By building on the mapping of faith-based provision across Bolton, we will reduce inequality in access and ensure families receive clear, consistent messages in their trusted community spaces.

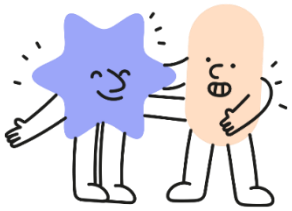
Accessible support: Talking Walk-ins

We need to reduce barriers so that families can access effective and proportionate support when they need it. Talking Walk-ins are new play-based drop-in sessions where families who are concerned about their child's speech, language or communication can speak to a professional from the Speech and Language Therapy service or Family Hub. As part of The Balanced System framework, we are using a test and learn approach to ensure this new intervention is impactful, giving parents and carers access to timely support without the need for an appointment or referral.

Other test and learn approaches:

- Family Hub Membership and Digital Offer
- Workforce champions for Perinatal Mental Health (PNMH) / Parent Infant Relationship (PIR) and father inclusivity

Core Services



In developing our Best Start in Life plan, we have considered the services that we provide to families both within the Best Start Family Hubs and within our communities. Against each of these services, a review has been carried out to determine what is already being delivered, what are the key priority areas and how outcomes will be monitored.

Parenting

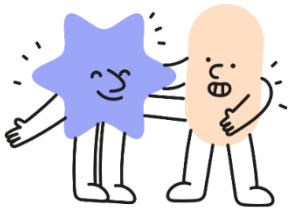
We will work alongside families from pregnancy through the early years to strengthen parenting capacity, improve home learning experiences, nurture positive parent-child relationships and ensure equitable and early access to support through Bolton Best Start Family Hubs. We will continue to enhance and expand our established Evidence Based Intervention offer, including Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL), the Home Learning Environment programme, and Togetherness Parenting.

Key deliverables:

1. Empower parents as their child's first educator through home learning support.
2. Provide evidence-based parenting support that builds confidence, resilience and wellbeing.
3. Target outreach and engagement to disadvantaged families, SEND, fathers and under-served communities.
4. Develop a 0-19 (25+) parenting strategy with a clear pathway and delivery plan that links to a Bolton Parenting Offer.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- More families engage with and complete evidence-based interventions and the digital Togetherness pathway.
- Families show improved outcomes following participation in evidence-based interventions, as demonstrated through pre- and post- intervention measures.
- Families report increased confidence and positive experiences through feedback and engagement activities.



Home learning environment

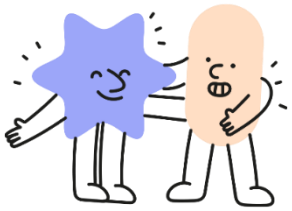
We will strengthen the Home Learning Environment by empowering parents and carers as their child's first educators. Through evidence-based interventions, the Balanced System framework, targeted outreach, and digital support, we will promote communication and language development, shared reading, play, early mathematics, social and emotional development, and school readiness, with a particular focus on families at greatest risk of poorer outcomes.

Key deliverables

1. Further enhance home learning support approaches and key messages to promote Communication and Language, Early Literacy and Early maths. Develop a Home Learning Environment delivery plan to reflect the needs and wants of priority families.
2. Deliver accessible home learning support which supports play and exploration and reduces inequalities.
3. Promote Children's Social, Emotional and School Readiness Development.
4. Increase parent confidence and relationships, to strengthen parent-child interactions.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- Data from across services, including public health, Start Well and NHS, shows increased participation in evidence-based interventions and a greater proportion of children meeting age related development expectations.
- Parents report increased confidence and capability through pre- and post-intervention feedback and questionnaires.
- More children receive their 18-month development check and meet age related expectations after a rescreen in WellComm and/or ASQ-SE.
- The positive impact of REAL on children’s development and parent-child interactions is evidenced through case studies and individual child progress tracking.
- Parent feedback, case studies and data evidences the impact The Balanced System framework. Test and learn approaches are embedded and demonstrate accessible timely support, increased parent confidence and more children meeting age related expectations.



Healthy Babies – Infant feeding

Every family should have access to timely, integrated and evidence-based infant feeding support from pregnancy to the early years, delivered through strong partnerships across the Best Start Family Hub network. By strengthening early support, addressing barriers to access and promoting breastfeeding-friendly environments across Bolton, we will improve infant feeding outcomes and narrow inequalities.

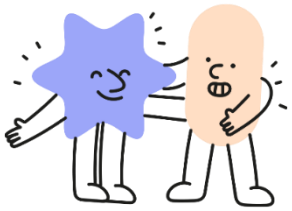
Key deliverables:

1. Provide high quality, integrated infant feeding services, aligned to national guidance and evidence-based information.
2. Implement a Data Protection Information Arrangement (DPIA) with NHS midwifery and 0-19 service to strengthen antenatal and early postnatal infant feeding support.
3. Expand access to infant feeding support through BSFH, community support and a breastfeeding-friendly culture in Bolton.
4. Reduce inequalities in infant feeding outcomes.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) Stage 2 accreditation is achieved, maintained and progressed beyond Stage 2.
- Information sharing arrangements with the NHS are in place, enabling Best Start Family Hubs to contact and support families directly.
- Families from all cultural and community backgrounds feel supported to make informed infant feeding choices.
- More families access infant feeding support services across the partnership, ensuring they receive timely advice and guidance when needed.

Healthy Babies – Perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationships



We will promote and strengthen perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationships across Bolton by improving early identification of need, expanding access to support and reducing inequalities for priority families through culturally responsive service design and delivery. Information and support will be available for parents from the antenatal period throughout the early years, recognising the critical 1,001 days for attachment and bonding.

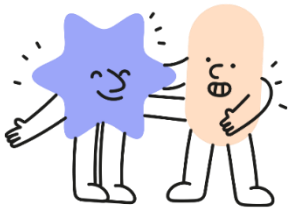
Key deliverables:

1. Improve early identification and access to timely support for families with perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationship needs.
2. Increase reach and reduce inequalities in perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationships for priority families.
3. Strengthen Bolton's perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationship offer and pathway across the wider BSFH network through integration and partnership.
4. Promote consistent messaging and improve awareness and community understanding around perinatal mental health (PNMH) and parent-infant relationship (PIR) from pregnancy onwards

How we will know we have made a difference:

- More families access and engage with perinatal mental health services, with increased reach across the local population.
- A greater number of priority families receive the support they need to improve perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationship outcomes.
- Staff demonstrate increased confidence and knowledge in perinatal mental health, evidenced through improvements in pre- and post-audit results.
- PNMH and PIR champions report increased workforce understanding, awareness and confidence in identifying and responding to perinatal mental health needs.
- Case studies, feedback and qualitative evidence demonstrate improved parental wellbeing, stronger parent-infant relationships and positive outcomes for families.

Children with additional needs and their families



We want Best Start Family Hubs to be the front door for supporting early identification of need in Bolton. Children with additional needs and their families will receive relationship-based, whole-family support that builds on strengths and provides the right help at the right time. We will ensure alignment across Best Start in Life and SEND reforms, building on existing early identification processes and strengthening integrated family support.

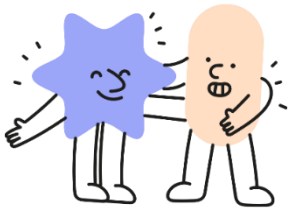
Key deliverables:

1. Ensure Best Start Family Hubs and network sites are trusted, inclusive places where families are heard and can access help early.
2. Co-produce a joined-up system that identifies needs early and provides timely, coordinated accessible support for children with SEND and their families.
3. Build on relationship-based, strengths-focused practice to improve early identification of additional and emerging needs.
4. Improve access to SEND information, advice and support through clear offers and coordinated services where and when families need them.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- Families report that they can easily access high-quality SEND advice, information and support, and feel confident that their needs are understood and addressed.
- More children with SEND access their early years entitlement, ensuring they benefit from inclusive learning and development opportunities.
- Children supported through Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF) and High Needs Bases achieve improved developmental, educational and wellbeing outcomes.
- Improved outcomes are demonstrated through the Special Approach to REAL evidence-based intervention, showing positive progress in children's communication, language and learning.
- A higher proportion of children achieve positive outcomes following their 18-month development check, with needs identified and supported at an earlier stage.
- Section 23 notifications are effectively tracked and monitored, resulting in timely identification, assessment and support for children with SEND and their families.

Access to early childhood education and care



We will improve access to high-quality early education and childcare, and support families to access their entitlements, ensuring that children develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to be ready for school. We will raise our ambition alongside the early education and school age childcare sector to ensure a diverse range of high quality, inclusive places that meet the needs of children and families.

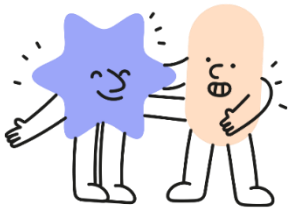
Key deliverables:

1. Reduce inequalities by increasing access to funded childcare in communities with lower outcomes.
2. Increase take-up of Early Learning for 2 year olds, using data-led targeting to achieve the BSIL trajectory of 74.3% take-up by 2028 and 86.1% by 2029.
3. Improve childcare sufficiency and market intelligence to strengthen the early years workforce and provider sustainability.
4. Make best use of national programmes to maintain and develop our early education childcare offer.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- More families access their childcare entitlements each year, including the Early Learning for 2 year olds offer.
- Childcare sufficiency data demonstrates that there are enough high-quality childcare places available to meet the needs of local families.
- Ofsted inspection outcomes continue to show high standards of quality across early years and childcare provision.
- Increased access to high-quality childcare supports children's learning, development and school readiness.

High-quality early years education



We will work in partnership with providers to ensure excellent standards of high-quality early years education and care across Bolton. Through inclusive practice, early identification of need, strong family support and effective transitions into Reception, we will increase the number of children achieving a Good Level of Development.

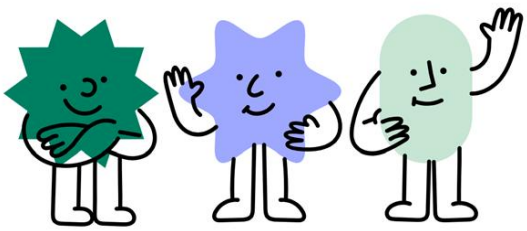
Key deliverables:

1. Build on the existing work of the early education improvement group focusing on transition, including enhanced transition for children with additional needs.
2. Have consistency to ensure speech, language and communication is everybody's business, building children's communication, vocabulary and early literacy and maths from birth.
3. Use data to target support where need is greatest, helping schools and providers improve outcomes for children at risk of missing GLD and reducing inequalities in our most disadvantaged communities
4. Ensure the quality, safeguarding and accountability of early education and childcare provision.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- The proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development in priority wards increases year on year.
- The gap in Good Level of Development outcomes reduces for children on free school meals.
- More children are supported to reach age-related expectations and are well prepared for school.

System Enablers



To deliver against our Best Start in Life plan we have considered the key system enablers that underpin delivery of our priorities.

Collaborative working and outreach across Healthy Babies and the Best Start Network

We will deliver a seamless, integrated Healthy Babies and Best Start in Life offer through collaborative working across services and partners. This will include innovative test and learn approaches to outreach, integration and inclusion, driven by a clear understanding of need.

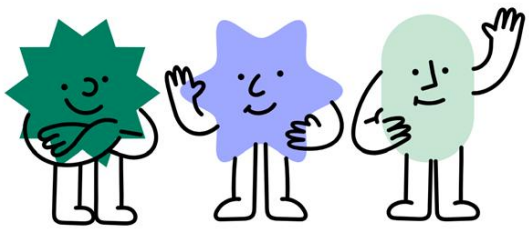
Key deliverables:

1. Develop an Outreach Strategy which includes ambitious test and learn approaches and stronger community networks to reach priority families, including outreach in neighbourhoods that do not have Best Start Family Hubs.
2. Create a visible, accessible and joined-up front door for Healthy Babies and Best Start in Life services, helping families navigate and access the right support at the right time, both in person and digitally.
3. Strengthen integrated delivery through shared practice, relationships and co-location where appropriate, while maximising the use of trusted community venues to improve access for families.
4. Embed father-inclusive practice across the Best Start partnership, ensuring fathers, co-parents and male carers are recognised, welcomed and supported as equal partners in their child's development.
5. Publish and regularly refresh a Best Start in Life JSNA to identify need, address inequalities, target resources and inform partnership action.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- More families, including fathers, male carers and co-parents, access and actively engage with Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies services.
- Increased numbers of successful Community Connector referrals and warm hand-offs ensure families receive the right support at the right time.
- More families engage with and benefit from the digital offer, improving access to information, advice and support.
- Families report that services are easy to access, responsive to their needs and provide a positive experience.
- Inequalities in service uptake reduce across priority communities, ensuring that families from all backgrounds can access the support they need.

Workforce capacity and capabilities



We will strengthen the knowledge, capacity and capability of our workforce so they can more confidently support and signpost families at the right time and in the right place.

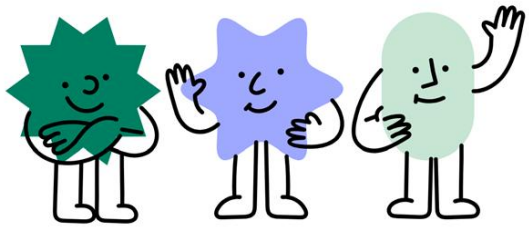
Key deliverables:

1. Build on existing workforce continuous professional development offer to ensure all priorities are met and to support the effective delivery of evidence-based interventions for all children.
2. Assess emerging workforce needs and continue to develop CPD approaches.
3. Continue partnership working to improve the recruitment and retention of the Best Start in Life workforce and provider sustainability.
4. Embed Make Every Contact Count across the workforce, focussed on Best Start in Life priorities.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- Quality assurance processes demonstrate that evidence-based interventions are delivered consistently and in line with the intended model and standards.
- Workforce knowledge, skills and confidence improve over time, evidenced through pre- and post-training surveys, audits and evaluation activity.
- Childcare sufficiency data demonstrates a sustainable childcare market that continues to meet the needs of local families.
- Families provide positive feedback about the knowledge, skills and support provided by the workforce.
- Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) Stage 2 accreditation is achieved, maintained and progressed beyond Stage 2, demonstrating a continued commitment to high-quality infant feeding support.

Family voice



We will ensure family voice is at the heart of all of our plans and reflected in our delivery.

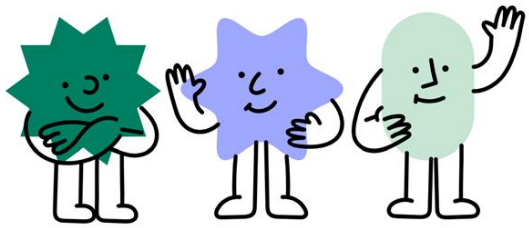
Key deliverables:

1. Build on existing approaches to develop a framework to enable all families to have a voice and influence plans.
2. Develop innovative ways to strengthen our current parent panels.
3. Establish regular feedback sessions with the voluntary and community sector organisations to share knowledge about family needs and priorities.
4. Develop processes to collate feedback across multi-agency partners to capture the authentic voice and opinion of priority families and establish close the loop systems.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- More parents and carers are actively involved in shaping services, with increased membership and representation on the Parent Carer Panel.
- Feedback from co-design activities is clearly reflected in the development and delivery of services and support offers.
- More parents and carers are aware of, access and benefit from the support services available to them.
- Engagement with priority and underrepresented families increases, ensuring that a wider range of voices and experiences influence service design and improvement.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning



We will establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework that aligns with the Children and Young People's Partnership Board and national reporting requirements.

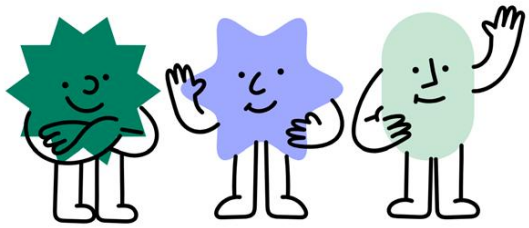
Key deliverables:

1. Achieve the statutory target to increase Good Level of Development to 72.8%.
2. Publish single Best Start in Life outcomes framework, nested under the partnership framework, with named owners and reporting arrangements — drawing on the emerging Greater Manchester common outcomes framework.
3. Robust monitoring of commissioned services, with provider data expectations clearly written into contracts.
4. Ensuring effective monitoring arrangements for childcare sufficiency take up and quality of provision.
5. Evaluating the impact and reviewing evidence-based interventions across the Best Start Family Hubs to inform delivery.
6. Enhancing data quality and partnership sharing of information by giving an explicit data-sharing mandate covering DPIAs and provider expectations.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- The proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development increases year on year, supporting progress towards the 2028 statutory target.
- A clear outcomes framework is agreed and endorsed by the Children and Young People's Partnership Board, providing a shared approach to measuring impact.
- Partners can demonstrate how activity is contributing to improved outcomes for children and families through regular performance reporting and evaluation.
- Data and evidence show sustained improvement in school readiness and early childhood outcomes across Bolton.

Accountability, governance and funding



We will strengthen and innovate our governance and accountability arrangements to ensure the high-quality delivery of the Best Start in Life local plan, in coordination with wider system changes including Families First and SEND reforms. This includes a continued focus on multi-agency ownership, strong coordination, and shared responsibility for improvement with delivery groups leading on each priority strand and a Best Start in Life Operational Board providing oversight. We will maximise the impact of our funding and resources by ensuring value for money and targeting investment towards priority communities to drive positive and sustainable change.

Key deliverables:

1. Establishing the coordination of the Best Start in Life plan across the governance structure to align with Families First and SEND reforms, NHS Neighbourhood plan and Live Well strategy.
2. Continue to deliver budget robust monitoring and reporting of the funding across the Best Start in Life plan to ensure fidelity of spend, alignment to priorities and continued impact.
3. Exploring the potential of pooled funding and joint commissioning, facilitated by our governance and partnership boards.

How we will know we have made a difference:

- A cross-programme risk log is in place, providing a shared overview of priorities, risks and dependencies across Best Start in Life, Families First and SEND reforms.
- Highlight reports provide timely and meaningful evidence that supports effective partnership decision-making and oversight.
- Governance arrangements demonstrate strong multi-agency engagement, with partners actively contributing to discussions, planning and delivery.
- Parent and carer voices are embedded within governance structures and inform decision-making, service design and continuous improvement.
- Robust financial monitoring and reporting provide assurance that resources are being used effectively to deliver agreed outcomes and priorities.
- Partnership governance supports improved coordination, accountability and delivery of positive outcomes for children and families.

Bolton Family Hubs

BEST START IN LIFE

Thank you for reading