CABINET

Report subject	**Best Start in Life Local Plan**
Meeting date	4 March 2026
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	This report updates Cabinet on the development of BCP's Best Start in Life Local Plan, which delivers the Government's strategy for improving outcomes from pregnancy to age five and meets the requirement to publish a local plan by 31 March 2026. Key issues include achieving the Government-set Good Level of Development (GLD) targets (79.9% of children overall; 60.1% of children receiving Free School Meals) through whole system collaboration and establishing Best Start Family Hubs to provide integrated health, education and family support in areas of highest deprivation. Programme governance, project management, stakeholder engagement and a readiness survey are in place.
Recommendations	**It is RECOMMENDED that Cabinet:** (a) Note the continued development and publication of BCP Council's *Best Start in Life Local Plan* to meet the statutory requirement for all local authorities to publish a plan by **31 March 2026**. (b) Note the use of the *Best Start Family Hub delivery grant* and associated external funding streams to build workforce capacity, strengthen evidence-based interventions and enable consistent delivery of the expanded Best Start offer. (c) Note the establishment and phased implementation of *Best Start Family Hubs*, beginning with Boscombe as the first site and a second site in the west locality (d) Note the continued partnership governance arrangements, including oversight by the Early Help Partnership Board, to ensure coordinated delivery across Children's Services, Health, Early Years, Public Health and wider partners.
Reason for recommendations	**1. To meet statutory duties and national policy requirements.** All local authorities must publish a Best Start in Life Local Plan by **31 March 2026**, setting out their approach to improving outcomes from pregnancy to age five. The plan also supports multiple statutory responsibilities, including duties under the Childcare Act 2006, Children and Families Act 2014, and safeguarding

	frameworks. **2. To deliver improved child development outcomes and meet Government-set GLD targets.** The Government has set ambitious targets for GLD achievement, and BCP Council must demonstrate a whole-system approach to reaching them. The Local Plan sets out how Health, Early Years, Education and Family Support Services will contribute collectively. **3. To maximise use of available funding and ensure financial sustainability.** The Best Start Family Hub delivery grant and aligned funding streams (e.g., Public Health, Children's Services early intervention grant) provide a time-limited opportunity to build capacity, develop workforce skills, and embed a sustainable delivery model. **4. To ensure effective oversight, risk management and timely delivery.** Clear governance structures, including oversight by the Early Help Partnership Board, are essential to meet tight Government timelines, deliver transformation at scale and ensure risks are monitored and mitigated appropriately.
Portfolio Holder(s):	Councillor Richard Burton, Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Education and Skills
Corporate Director	Cathi Hadley, Corporate Director, Children's Services
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Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Information

Background

1.1 The Government published its "Best Start in Life" strategy in July 2025, which set out the UK Government's long-term vision to improve child development outcomes from pregnancy through age five, outlining a whole-system approach to:

- Better Support for Families
- More Accessible Early Education and Childcare
- Improving Quality in Early Years (including Reception)

1.2 As part of the Best Start in Life strategy, BCP Council has been set the following target by government to improve children's learning and development – by the end of the 2027/28 academic year, **at least 79.9%** children will be achieving a Good Level of

Development (GLD) and **at least 60.1%** of those eligible for Free School Meals will be achieving a GLD.

1.3 Every local authority must publish a local plan by **31 March 2026** – in this plan, each local authority must set out how they will work towards Government-set GLD target, fulfilling the Government Strategy to improve outcomes from pregnancy to age five through stronger family support, accessible early education and childcare, and improved early health intervention. Achievement of GLD is the responsibility of all services that support children and their families pre-birth to age 5, through collaborative working. Project managers have been appointed, key stakeholders engaged, and a readiness survey submitted to Government in January 2026. The plan follows a clear roadmap through early 2026, leading to publication by the statutory deadline and ongoing monitoring thereafter.

1.4 A key component is the development of Best Start Family Hubs, located mainly in areas of highest deprivation and providing integrated health, education, childcare and family support, including evidence based parenting programmes, perinatal mental health support, infant feeding support and early SEND help. These will expand on existing family hub provision already established within BCP. BCP Council has identified Boscombe as the first hub site, with a second west locality site to follow. The intention is for all six existing Family Hubs to adopt the Best Start Family Hub principles, with expansion phased over agreed timeframes and aligned to available resources, ensuring delivery remains both equitable and financially sustainable.

1.5 Implementation of the Best Start in life Local Plan will be overseen by the Early Help Partnership Board.

Options Appraisal

2.1 N/A

Summary of financial implications

a. Delivery of the Best Start in Life Local plan will be met through:

- Existing resources across Children's Services, Health Visiting, Family Hubs, Early Years, SEND, and partner agencies.
- Best Start Family Hub delivery grants
- Other external funding streams – such as the Wraparound programme and Public Health grant, Children's Social Care Prevention grant (former Supporting Families grant)– will support implementation where applicable

b. Best Start Family Hub delivery grant will be used to:

- Build on existing Family Hubs offer to deliver Best Start Family Hubs services
- Provide evidence-based parenting and home learning environment services
- Develop and implement Best Start local plans including workforce development plans
- Aligning Family Hub and Best Start branding and publicity

Summary of legal implications

4.1 The Council has clear legal duties in relation to early years and family support, including:

- The **Childcare Act 2006**, which places duties on the local authority to secure sufficient childcare, improve outcomes for young children, and establish and maintain a Family Information Service (FIS).

- The **Children and Families Act 2014**, which sets out duties relating to the identification, assessment and support of children with special educational needs and disabilities.
- The **Health and Social Care Act 2012**, which supports joint working to improve health and reduce inequalities.
- **Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018)**, which outlines statutory expectations for safeguarding partnerships.

BCP Council's Best Start Local Plan is being aligned with and supports the delivery of these statutory responsibilities.

4.2 BCP Council's Best Start Local Plan is being aligned with:

- Children and Young People Plan (2025–2030)
- SEND Improvement Plan
- Early Help Partnership Strategy
- Dorset Integrated Care Board's plan (2023-2028)
- Public Health Children and Young People's Programme
- Infant Feeding and Child Nutrition Strategy

This alignment work is ongoing and will continue through the next phase.

Summary of Human Resources implications

c. To deliver the Best Start Family Hubs, including delivery of targeted programmes, and increase in workforce capacity will be required to ensure the enhanced offer can be delivered consistently across localities, with a focus on 0-5. This additional capacity is anticipated and will be met through the Best Start Family Hubs grant, which is specifically designed to support the scaling up of early years and family support services.

5.1 No redundancies or restructures are anticipated. No changes are expected to payroll, pensions or personal data processes beyond standard operational requirements.

Summary of sustainability impact

6.1 Implementation of the Plan is expected to have a positive sustainability impact, primarily through:

d. Improved use of existing community assets such as Family Hubs, Early Years settings and library spaces, reducing the need for additional estate and supporting low carbon, place-based delivery.
   - Increasing digital access to information and support, including the online Family Hub, which reduces unnecessary travel for families and limits the environmental footprint of information-sharing.

e. Mobilising partnership to deliver and promote accessible local services, helping families receive help within their own communities and reducing reliance on longer distance travel for early help, childcare, or specialist support.
   - Supporting workforce efficiencies, including multi-agency joint working that reduces duplication, streamlines delivery and enables fewer separate visits or appointments.

6.2 No significant negative sustainability impacts have been identified at this stage.

Summary of Public Health implications

7.1 BCP Council's Best Start in Life Local Plan is designed to improve developmental, emotional and physical outcomes for children aged 0–5 and reduce health inequalities across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole.

7.2 The Local plan will deliver against Public Health prescribed and non-prescribed functions for example:

- Local authority role in health protection
- National Child Measurement programme
- Prescribed children's 0 to 5 services
- Obesity – adults and children
- Physical activity – adults and children
- Preventing and reducing harm from drug and alcohol misuse in adults
- Public mental health
- Nutrition initiatives
- Community safety, violence prevention and social exclusion

f. Dental Public Health

g. Implementation of the Plan is expected to have significant positive Public Health impact, including:

- Earlier identification of health needs, ensuring babies and young children receive timely support for speech, language, communication, emotional wellbeing, development and physical health.

h. Strengthened universal and targeted support through Health Visiting, Family Hubs and Early Years settings, improving access to parenting support, infant feeding guidance, oral health initiatives and home learning programmes.

i. Reducing health inequalities, particularly for families in priority localities, by improving access to integrated early help, SEND pathways and community-based services.

- Enhanced parental wellbeing, including improved access to mental health support, peer networks and community groups within Family Hubs.
- Promotion of healthy behaviours, such as active play, outdoor learning, nutrition guidance and safe home environments as part of the Family Hubs offer.

j. Increased reach of evidence-based public health programmes, delivered consistently across partners and early years services.

7.3 No negative public health impacts are anticipated.

Summary of equality implications

k. BCP Council's Best Start in Life Local Plan places a strong emphasis on reducing inequalities in early childhood outcomes, particularly for families in our most disadvantaged communities. Ensuring equitable access to services, support and opportunities is a core principle of the Plan, and equality considerations will continue to be embedded throughout all subsequent stages of design, decision making and delivery – starting with one site in an area that already has provisions we can build on, extended to another in second locality, with a view to scaling to all six sites to ensure the offer is consistently accessible, inclusive and responsive to the needs of every community across BCP.

8.1 Implementation of BCP Council's Best Start Local Plan is expected to have significant impact on reducing inequalities including:

- Targeting enhanced early years, health and family support into communities with the highest levels of deprivation, improving access where need is greatest.
- Strengthening early identification and consistent pathways so children with emerging needs receive help earlier, narrowing developmental gaps.
- Expanding access to integrated Family Hub services and evidence-based parenting and home learning programmes, improving outcomes for families who face the greatest barriers.

Summary of risk assessment

9.1 DfE have set very specific expectations and timelines for implementation of Best Start in Life – the need for a supportive decision from Cabinet is both time sensitive and critical for the success in delivery of this plan and programme (the Local Plan has to be published online by 31st March 2026).

9.2 Several strategic risks may arise through the future implementation of the Best Start in Life Local Plan. These include:

- Workforce capacity pressures across early years, Family Hubs and partner agencies, which may impact delivery of the expanded Best Start offer.
  Mitigation: Capacity building supported through the Best Start Family Hubs grant, strengthened workforce development programmes, and ongoing monitoring of sufficiency.
- Data sharing and information governance risks linked to more integrated pathways and multi-agency working.
  Mitigation: Adherence to existing information governance frameworks and assurance through partnership governance boards.
- Financial sustainability risks if future funding streams are reduced.
  Mitigation: Use of current Best Start Family Hubs grant to build foundation capacity, alongside ongoing review of commissioning approaches to maximise efficiency and partnership contributions.

9.3 None of these risks prevent the continued development or future implementation of the Local Plan. They will be monitored through the Best Start governance structure, with escalation routes in place as required.

Background papers

Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies: guidance for local authorities

Giving every child the best start in life

Access to SEND support through Best Start Family Hubs

Early years funding rates for 2026-2027

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Best Start in Life Overview

Appendix 2 – Best Start in Life Funding Allocation