

## **Divisions Affected - All**

# **EDUCATION & YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 27 February 2026**

## **Early Years**

### **Report by Director of Children's Services**

## **RECOMMENDATION**

1. **The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to**

This report is to share information regarding Early Years Provision, including the introduction of Best Start in Life plan, the agreed governance around it, the sufficiency arrangements and an update on Good Level of Development (GLD)

## **Executive Summary**

2. The report is as requested by the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

## **Best Start Plan**

3. In July 2025, government published the Giving every child the best start in life strategy. This is the government's strategy for improving child development and meeting the ambition that 75% of 5-year-olds in England have a good level of development by 2028. The strategy has three core priorities:
  - (a) Improving family services, providing high quality support to parents and children from pregnancy to age 5.
  - (b) More accessible early education and childcare.
  - (c) Improving quality in early years including reception.
4. To meet the National ambition of 75% of 5-year-olds to achieve a good level of development, each local authority has been given a local target. For Oxfordshire these are:
  - (a) All eligible children 77.8%. Oxfordshire 2025 outcome 70% (2% above National)
  - (b) All free school meal eligible children 50.8%. Oxfordshire 2025 Outcome 43% (7% below national)

The gap between children achieving GLD with FSM on 2025 data is therefore 27%, which is just above 1 in 4 children not achieving their GLD if in receipt of FSM. Whilst we recognise the challenges of the national targets, we do not feel this is ambitious enough or that 1 in 4 children are not achieving GLD who are eligible for FSM is acceptable.

Our approach then is to set revised local targets (RLT) to bring us in line with National performance and above the set local targets in 2026. Our revised local targets are therefore;

- (c) All eligible children 79.8% (2% above Local Target)
- (d) All free school meal eligible children 59.8%. (9% above Local Target)

5. We are now, as are all Local Authorities, required to develop a local Best Start Plan. This plan should set out how we will achieve the local target for Good Level of Development and must be published by 31st March 2026.
6. These Best Start Plans should include the following:
  - (a) Setting a bold vision for improving child development and health outcomes with local delivery partners across all sectors.
  - (b) The plans should cover the early years system (health, family services, education, childcare providers, Stronger Practice Hubs, schools) and the wider community.
  - (c) Identify the local needs of babies, children and families, and set out plans to address gaps in provision.
  - (d) There should be a clear focus on improving access to early education and improving the quality of that provision across your local area, including reception year in schools.
  - (e) The plans should demonstrate how the action taken will improve child development, particularly for children most likely to need additional support, such as those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or with existing or emerging developmental needs.
  - (f) Describe how delivery will be carried out in partnership, tracked and tailored to continually drive progress.
  - (g) Scaling innovative practice. We encourage using test and learn approaches to continually drive quicker and more impactful actions to meet local Best Start in Life targets.
7. As part of the implementation of the Giving every child the Best Start in Life Strategy, all Local Authorities are required to provide updates on progress. In January a Readiness Survey was completed, which asked questions around the following areas:
  - (a) Plans with the development of Family Hubs and the address of the first Family Hub.
  - (b) The implementation of the Parenting and Home Learning Environment Programmes within Family Hubs.
  - (c) Best Start Family Hubs Branding.

- (d) Healthy Babies services to be delivered through Family Hubs. Please note, Oxfordshire County Council will not be receiving Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) funding for Healthy Babies services.
  - (e) Plans for increasing uptake of 15-hour entitlements of funding for childcare (Families Receiving Additional Support and Universal).
  - (f) Use of Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and how the amount retained is spent.
  - (g) School based nurseries.
  - (h) Monitoring of Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) and activity to increase uptake.
  - (i) Support and training provided to schools to complete the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP).
8. The ambition for the Oxfordshire Best Start Plan is that it delivers on our Department for Education requirements but also reflects that of our local priorities and needs.

## **Governance of Best Start Plan**

9. Within Oxfordshire we already have in place the Early Help and Prevention Board and the Early Years Board. The Early Years Strategy (2025–2028) is the county's strategic plan for ensuring that all babies and young children have the best start in life, from pre- birth to school entry. The Early Help and Prevention Strategy (2024–2028) is the county's overarching plan for ensuring children, young people, adolescents, and families receive the right support at the right time, as early as possible, to prevent issues from escalating.
10. The Best Start in Life Plan, which is currently in development, will be delivered jointly through the Early Years Board and Early Help and Prevention Board. The chairs of these boards will form a Best Start in Life Steering Group. This Steering Group will ensure that the plan is progressing as required, risks and issues are identified and managed jointly and that opportunities are shared and maximised.
11. The Children's Trust Board will have oversight on implementation, monitoring of progress and improved outcomes across the best start in life plan, including the good level of development target.

## **Sufficiency**

12. The childcare market in Oxfordshire is diverse, with nearly 800 providers offering funded places. These include childminders, private, voluntary, and independent settings, as well as maintained and academy schools. Many of these providers also offer additional paid hours alongside funded early years entitlement places. Our annual Childcare Sufficiency Assessment details the extensive efforts we undertake to evaluate the availability and cost of childcare in Oxfordshire, which then informs our strategies to address key areas of concern. The latest childcare sufficiency assessment is in draft and will be available shortly.

13. In the Spring Budget 2023, the government announced an expansion of early years funded entitlements. Starting from September 2025, working families meeting the income criteria, with children aged 9 months and older, are eligible for up to 30 funded hours of early education and childcare per week over 38 weeks a year. To support this increased eligibility, we are committed to sustaining early education and childcare provision and where there is clear evidence of need, we develop new and extended quality provision within the sector. The current entitlements available to families are:
- 30 hours entitlement for qualifying children of working parents aged from 9 months until the child turns 2 years old.
  - 30 hours entitlement for qualifying children of working parents aged 2.
  - 15 hours entitlement for families with 2-year-olds receiving additional forms of support (formerly known as the 2-year-old disadvantaged entitlement).
  - Universal 15 hours entitlement for all 3 and 4-year-olds and the additional 15 hours entitlement for qualifying children of working parents aged 3 and 4.

### **Early Years Government Funded Entitlements Take-up Rates Summer 2025:**

- 9-23 month working parent entitlement: 75% (new entitlement).
  - 2-year-old additional support entitlement: 59% (down from 71% in 2024).
  - 2-year-old working family entitlement: 97% (up from 82% in 2024).
  - 3 & 4-year-old universal entitlement: 96% (up from 88% in 2024).
  - 3 & 4-year-old extended entitlement: 95% (up from 70% in 2024).
14. Across Oxfordshire there has been a decline in the take up of 2 Year Old Funding for Families in Receipt of Additional Support. This mirrors the national picture, where take up has fallen from 75% to 65% and the South- East region where take up has fallen from 74% to 63%. Encouraging take up is a key priority aligning with the Best Start in Life Strategy.
15. We work to identify providers that require additional support and training to ensure children with SEND needs are met and they can access suitable childcare

### **Place availability**

16. Targeted engagement with providers has focused on reshaping provision to better reflect parental demand resulting in the reduction of 3 and 4-year-old places to create additional capacity for the 9-23 month and 2 year olds. An overall surplus remains meaning we have sufficient places overall, but not consistently in the right age groups or geographical areas

17. The below grouped Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) are priority areas for creating additional 9-23 month and 2 year old places to meet demand:
  - Thame and surrounds
  - Witney and surrounds
  - Didcot and surrounds
18. Individual MSOAs that also require additional under 3 places are:
  - Deddington, Steeple Aston and Heyfords
  - Woodstock
19. The Government awarded £1,286,300 of new capital funding to help expand provision for their new childcare offer. The funds have been added to the existing early year capital programme to create a fund of £2.8M. We are currently working with providers to deliver projects to fill sufficiency gaps in the target areas.
20. School Based Nursery (SBN) schemes provide early years settings on school sites, running independently or as part of a school. Phase 1 was managed by central government, with five bids in Oxfordshire approved, adding around 90 new places. Phase 2 began in September 2025, inviting primary schools and maintained nursery schools to apply for up to £150,000 to create or expand nursery facilities, further boosting early years capacity. Five primary schools have been supported to submit applications to phase 2 and are currently awaiting a Department for Education (DfE) decision. Details for phase 3 were released on 4<sup>th</sup> February. Local Authorities (LAs) are encouraged to submit multi-year funding proposals to establish new and expanded school-based nurseries from 2027 to 2030.
21. Since the rollout of the wraparound programme in September 2024. Oxfordshire has supported 35 schools / private providers with grants to create or expand their wraparound offer, creating an additional 1013 places so far. We continue our work to extend / create provision to meet the governments wraparound criteria.

## **Sufficiency implementation strategies**

22. To address the shortage of early years and childcare places, we continue to implement a range of strategies including delivering the capital programme, converting surplus places for older children into provision for younger age groups, encouraging schools to lower their age ranges, and extending provider opening hours. Additional measures involve promoting recruitment and retention through government campaigns and apprenticeships, securing developer funding via S106, and supporting new government initiatives such as school-based nurseries, wraparound programme and free breakfast clubs.

## A Good Level of Development (GLD)

23. **GLD** is the Statutory Assessment at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) when children are in Reception classes. Children are assessed against the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) which are part of the Early Years Curriculum. The ELGs should support teachers to make a holistic, best fit judgement about a child's development at the end of the EYFS, and their readiness for year 1.
24. There are 17 ELGs and Children should achieve an expected level in each of them.
25. In 2025, The Government announced a Plan for Change linking to the publication of Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life which set out the ambitious target of 75% of all 5-year-olds to each at GLD by 2028. In addition to this, all LAs were given individual targets:
26. *'The statutory target for your Oxfordshire will be considered "achieved" if the following two conditions are met:*  
  
*The proportion of children in Oxfordshire County Council achieving a Good Level of Development at the end of the 2027/28 academic year is at least 77.8%; and Disadvantaged children have benefitted at least equally from this improvement; that is, that 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 50.8%.'*
27. Currently the picture is positive for most children in Oxfordshire:
  - 70% of children achieved the GLD in 2025, this was 2% above national.
  - 69% of children achieved 'expected' in all ELGs, 2% higher than national.
  - Oxfordshire children achieved higher than national in all Early Learning Goals including Early Language and Communication and Literacy.
  - Children with EHCPs and on SEND Support achieve better than nationally.
28. However, for children in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) the picture is very different with the percentage of pupils eligible for FSM in Oxfordshire who are achieving a Good Level of Development is 43%, 7% below national, and 27% below overall GLD. We are ambitious for our children and have set revised local targets.
29. It should be noted that in 2025 11% of children in Oxfordshire were eligible for FSM whilst nationally this figure was 17%. Rural deprivation in Oxfordshire is not marked by widespread poverty but by inequitable access to services, hidden socioeconomic pockets, and infrastructural gaps. Across Oxfordshire, approximately one in six children live in low-income families
30. Actions in place to address the GLD targets:

- The EY Board has developed an Early Years Strategy.
- Working with Colleagues to develop a Best Start in Life Plan which references the GLD.
- Data analysis completed to highlight areas of concern and all schools with low GLD are targeted for visits by an EY Advisory teacher and invited to training (visits made to date: over 200 visits to EY providers including schools, impacting upon over 5000 children).
- New training - Making a Difference in Reception training is in progress (80 schools attending to date).
- Briefings/comms with Heads & Governors and practitioners. focused upon the GLD and targets and engaging School Leaders to join with the EY programmes of support on offer.
- New writing training being delivered this term to 50 schools.
- Continuing work on engagement with WellComm (early identification and intervention for speech and language) tool and resource purchased for Nursery classes/EY providers (trained over 600 providers).
- New Phonological awareness training and resource continues to be delivered and over 800 practitioners have attended the training.
- Raising awareness of the updated requirements for assessing writing in the Writing framework – challenging misconceptions and myths, at all briefings and in communications.
- Working with Multi Academy Trust EY Leads to ensure we are consistent in our messages, expectations and understanding of the GLD with Reception teachers.
- Working with DfE RISE Team led by Marc Rowlands to target schools in Vale and City with low FSM GLD in the spring term (20 schools).
- Offering Peer to Peer Sessions facilitated by the LA for reception teachers to discuss and moderate their judgements.
- Training for new Reception teachers and Headteachers focusing upon assessment in the EYFS especially the EYFS Profile.
- Piloting Targeted Programs such as Tots Talking (36 providers involved), Talk Boost (12) from Speech and Language UK, in areas with low GLD and high FSM.
- 50 Things to do before you are 5 App for parents available to support learning in the home environment with an emphasis on early language and communication (over 4000 downloads).

## Early Years SEND

31. Oxfordshire's early years SEND support offer to nursery classes, childminders and PVI settings across Oxfordshire has been substantially expanded over the last three years and is having a demonstrable impact in driving sustained improvements in identification, provision, inclusion, and partnership working, contributing to better outcomes and experiences for young children with SEND and their families.
32. The **Early Years SEND Inclusion audit** support schools and settings to evaluate the effectiveness of their Early Years SEND provision, improving early identification and intervention support. 257 settings (61% of early years

group and school-based providers) registered for the Early Years SEND Inclusion Audit by August 2025. New childminder inclusion audit launched October 2025.

33. **Individual and targeted SEND support** for settings aims to improve whole setting EY SEND provision. 33% increase in settings achieving “securely in place” on EY SEND inclusion audit following targeted SEND support, enhancing inclusive provision. 56 settings are currently receiving a block of targeted setting SEND support.
34. **Early Years SEND information** regularly disseminated in EY newsletters, Schools News and SEND bulletin. The Early Years section of the **SEND Framework** launched September 2025, provides detailed information about how to follow the graduated response including information about EY SEND funding, improving practitioner access to up-to-date guidance and improving the quality of ordinarily available SEND provision.
35. Key tools such as the **Early Years SEND Indicators Tool** and the Early Years Identification and Implementation Flowchart have been introduced, enabling settings to systematically review and enhance their practices.
36. **New materials to support smooth transitions** to primary school are being launched Spring 2026 to ensure effective support for all learners as they start school to continue progress from their early years setting.
37. **SENDCO Helpdesk** – early years responses. Providers report positive impact from in- person advice and problem- solving support -114 early years request were received and responded to September 2024 to August 2025. Parents benefit from clearer communication, timely advice and improved practitioner confidence.
38. **Early Years SENDCO networks** 161 SENDCOs and EY practitioners attended EY SENDCO networks (85 settings) during 24- 25 strengthening early intervention pathways and reducing delays between identification and support.
39. **Early Years SEND Training** [Early Years SEND Advisory Team | Oxfordshire | Education Services](#) 44% average increase in practitioner confidence and knowledge following training. Over 800 early years practitioners accessed Early Years SEND team led training. Bespoke training is also provided to settings by the EY SEND and SENSS Sensory and Physical Disability teams around individual children’s needs (see below).

## **Support for Individual children with SEND 0-5 years**

40. The Early Years SEND team and SENSS (Special Educational Needs Support Services) provide support to families of young children with SEND and to the schools and settings they attend. The aim of this support is to enable parents, carers, and early years practitioners to better understand children’s needs so

that they can effectively promote their learning and development and offer more inclusive and accessible learning environments.

41. In the last academic year 2024/2025 the Early Years SEND team actively supported 1,456 children with special educational needs related to communication, emotional regulation, cognitive delay, or social interaction differences including autism. In addition, the SENSS Physical Disability team worked with 91 children in the early years (year group -1 and below), the SENSS Vision Impairment team worked with 44 children, the SENSS Deaf and Hearing Support team worked with 144 children, and the SENSS Multi-Sensory Impairment (deaf-blind) team worked with 7 children.
42. Currently the Early Years SEND team and SENSS team are supporting a total of 860 children between the ages of 0 and 5 years (635 known to the EY SEND team and 225 known to SENSS). Of these children, 21% have an EHCP (123 from EY SEND caseloads and 58 for SENSS).

## **Corporate Policies and Priorities**

43. The Children and Young People's Plan set out a vision of "Every child and young person will have the best possible start in life, the county will be a great place to grow up in, and children and young people will have opportunities to become everything they want to be. These life chances will be reflected equally across our rural and urban communities."
44. In Autumn 2024 the Early Help and Prevention Strategy was approved by the Children's Trust Board. The Early Help and Prevention Strategy in Oxfordshire is a comprehensive, multi-agency framework designed to ensure children, young people, and families receive timely and effective support before needs escalate.
45. As well as an Early Help and Prevention Board, an Early Years Strategy was approved by the Children's Trust Board in April 2024. The Early Years Strategy sets out how we will work together across the Early Years system to give all babies and children the start in life they deserve.
46. The Council has partnered with the UCL Institute of Health Equity to become a Marmot Place. This means the Council has committed to tackling health inequalities and improving health fairness in Oxfordshire by working with local partners across the system. These include local authorities, communities, public services, businesses, and voluntary and community sector organisations. The initial areas of focus for the Marmot Programme are to: give every child the best start in life, creating a fair employment and good work for all and ensuring a healthy standard of living for all.
47. Work is also underway to develop and implement Family Hubs across Oxfordshire, in line with the Department for Education requirements in the Giving every child the best start in life strategy (July 2025). Family Hubs are defined as a place-based way of joining up locally the planning and delivery of

family services. They bring services together to improve access in local communities, improve the connections between families, professionals, services, and providers, and put relationships at the heart of family support. Family Hubs offer support to families from conception to those with children of all ages (0-19 or up to 25 for those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), with a Start for Life offer at their core.

48. As well as Family Hubs, the Council is also delivering on the Families First Partnership (FFP) programme. The aim of this programme is to transform the whole system of help, support and protection, to ensure that every family can access the right help and support when they need it, with a strong emphasis on early intervention to prevent crisis. Family Hubs will be a key part of delivering the Families First Programme, whether through helping to identifying families that may need more intensive multi-agency support, or providing to some families an ongoing, local support network.

### **Financial Implications**

49. There are no general fund implications arising from this report. Early years expenditure is funded by Dedicated Schools Grant Early Years block predominantly, with some SEND Early Years costs funded by the High Needs Block, and the wrap around provision funded by a DfE Wraparound Grant.

Jane Billington, Strategic Finance Business Partner,  
[Jane.Billington@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Jane.Billington@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

### **Legal Implications**

50. There are no significant legal implications arising from this report.

Craig Cochrane, Principal Lawyer, Child Care Team,  
[Craig.Cochrane@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Craig.Cochrane@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

### **Staff Implications**

51. No implications.

Leah Jones, Interim Strategic People Partner,  
[Leah.Jones@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Leah.Jones@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

### **Equality & Inclusion Implications**

52. The implementation of Best Start in Life will be subject to Equality Impact Assessment.

Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services

Annex:  
Nil

Background papers:  
Nil

Contact Officer:

Kim Wilson

Assistant Director – Schools and Settings (Standards, Effectiveness & Performance)  
Children, Education and Families

[Kim.Wilson@Oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Kim.Wilson@Oxfordshire.gov.uk)

Mobile: 07729230086

Jaswinder Didiaily

Assistant Director – Schools and Settings (Sufficiency)  
Children, Education and Families

[jaswinder.didiaily@Oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:jaswinder.didiaily@Oxfordshire.gov.uk)

Mobile: 07860695719

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