



Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life Plan



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

Foreword

**Councillor Sean Gaul,
Lead Member for Children's Services**

“ We know that the early development of babies and children under 5 is crucial for long-term health and wellbeing, being ready for school and learning, and in shaping and unlocking children's potential, raising their aspirations as future citizens; so, they can be anything they want to be and this is why giving every child the best start in life is a priority for Oxfordshire.

We are ambitious for all our children but know that not every child is achieving their outcomes which will support their future lives.

Last year 7 out of 10 children reached their Good Level of Development but for children eligible for free school meals this was 4 out of 10, this is not good enough, we must close this gap and reduce this inequality, whilst improving outcomes

for all children, which is why we have set ourselves even more challenging targets than the Department of Education set Oxfordshire.

By 2028 we want 8 out of 10 children to achieve their Good Level of Development and be ready for school, and for those who are eligible for free school meals we will work tirelessly to close the gap so 6 out of 10 children are successful and thriving.

We know this is a challenging ambition, and we won't stop there, but it's a step in the right direction and we are committed and focussed to reducing this inequality and improving outcomes through this Best Start in Life Plan.”

**Lisa Lyons,
Director Children's Services**

“ Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life Plan sets out our shared commitment to ensuring all children, whatever their background or circumstances, are supported to thrive from the beginning.

It reflects our determination to strengthen families and give every child the strong foundations they need to grow and learn.

I am proud that children are at the heart of everything we do and of the ambitions shown across partners in developing our offer, together we are creating the conditions for children to grow up safe, happy, healthy, learning and engaged.

**Ansaf Azhar,
Director of Public Health and Communities**

“ Every child deserves the very best start in life. The experiences children have from pregnancy through their early years shape their health, wellbeing, learning and life chances far into the future.

When we get things right early on, we give children – and our communities – the strongest foundations to thrive.

Oxfordshire is a place where many children do well, but we know this is not the story for everyone. Some families face additional challenges, and too often these can affect children's development before they even start school. This Best Start in Life Plan sets out how we will work together to change that – by focusing on prevention, early help and making sure support is easy to find and access, when it is needed most.

This plan brings together partners across health, education, family support, early years settings and the voluntary, community and faith sector, alongside families themselves. By listening, learning and acting together, we can reduce inequalities and improve outcomes so that all babies and young children in Oxfordshire have the best possible start in life.

Every child's best start, together

Every baby and young child deserves the very best start in life. The experiences children have before they start school shape their health, learning and wellbeing for the rest of their lives. What happens in pregnancy and the early years has a lasting impact on children's physical health, emotional wellbeing, learning and relationships.

In Oxfordshire, many children do well. However, we know this is not the case for everyone. Some families face barriers linked to poverty, poor health, trauma, isolation or wider pressures, which can make it harder to access support or to give children the start they want for them.

This Best Start in Life Plan sets out, in clear and accessible language, what we want to achieve for babies, young children and families in Oxfordshire, and how services and partners will work together to make this happen. It focuses on the period from pregnancy through to starting school, when timely support can make the greatest difference.

Our ambition is straightforward: every child in Oxfordshire has the best possible start in life so every child can grow up safe, happy, healthy, learning and engaged and every family gets the support they need, at the right time, in the right place.

Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life vision

The vision and intended outcomes mean that children in Oxfordshire are happy and loved, safe and protected, healthy in body and mind, curious and learning, and ready for school and for life.

Parents and carers feel confident and supported, listened to and respected, and able to ask for help early without fear of judgement or stigma and every family gets the support they need, at the right time, in the right place.

We want families to experience support that feels welcoming, practical and joined up, with professionals working alongside them and building on their strengths.

★ **Every child has the best start in life, and parents, parents-to-be, babies and young children have what they need to thrive.** ★

Through achieving this vision, it will mean that all babies, children and families are:

Safe

Learning

Happy

Healthy

Engaged

Why the early years matter

The first years of life, starting in pregnancy, are a period of rapid brain development. Babies and young children learn through relationships, play, communication and everyday experiences. Warm, responsive relationships with parents and carers help children feel safe and secure and support the development of language, emotional regulation and social skills.

When families experience challenges such as poverty, poor mental health, domestic abuse or trauma, these can affect children very early on. Without support, difficulties can become more complex over time. Acting early – and working with the whole family – gives children the best chance to thrive and reduces the need for more intensive intervention later.

Working together around families

Best Start in Life is not a single service or programme. It is a shared way of working across Oxfordshire, with services and partners working together around families.

This means listening to families, valuing lived experience, sharing information appropriately, and working collaboratively across health, education, early years, Family Help, libraries, the voluntary and community sector and wider partners.

Our shared ways of working include:

- **Putting families and children at the centre**
- **Acting early and preventing problems from escalating**
- **Working with the whole family and wider support networks**
- **Building strong, trusting relationships**
- **Using evidence and learning to improve practice**
- **Focusing effort where inequalities and need are greatest**

Oxfordshire is proud to have partnered with Marmot and is a Marmot County, this means we are committed to addressing and reducing inequalities for all residents of Oxfordshire



Current outcomes

As part of the development of the Best Start in Life Plan, analysis of a range of data was completed, including research undertaken by the Institute of Health Equity through our Marmot County status. Overall Oxfordshire is characterised by high-quality childcare provision, low levels of deprivation and positive child development outcomes, however not all children are achieving strong outcomes, and not all families are able to access the support they need, when they need it.

Families have told us that it can be hard to find out what support is available, where it is available and whether they are able to take up the current offers of support and services and partners should work more closely together.

We understand that each child and family is unique and may have different needs and require different support at different times and are committed to ensuring that support is available locally and when families need it.

Most children in Oxfordshire have positive outcomes in healthy beginnings, with lower rates of parental smoking at delivery, higher breastfeeding rates, and a reduced incidence of low birth weight compared to regional and national averages. However, nearly 21% of children by age five have visible dental decay and 8.3% prevalence of obesity at age 4-5 years, which can impact children's health as they grow.

Most babies and children in Oxfordshire live in stable and safe families, however we know that some families have additional challenges and needs which can impact upon babies and children's outcomes. We will support families who need additional support where they may be experiencing domestic abuse, struggling with mental health, or needing support with parenting.

Seven out of ten children in Oxfordshire are achieving their expected Good Level of Development outcomes, which is higher than the national average. For children who are eligible for free school meals this is just four out of ten and there has been a 10% decline in the number of 2-year-olds accessing early years settings where families are in receipt of additional support. 97% of eligible working parents with two-year-olds have accessed childcare and 95% of eligible parents of 3 and 4-year-olds are accessing childcare.

The majority of Early Years Providers are judged good or better by Ofsted in Oxfordshire (96%), which is higher than National giving confidence that practice and provision is good in most of our early years education settings.



0-4 population at a glance

37,800

children aged
0-4 years-old

8.3%

Reception
prevalence of
obesity at age 4-5

87.5%

of Oxfordshire
children were
achieving a
Good Level of
Development at
age 2 to 2 and a
half years

70%

of children achieved
a Good Level of
Development in 2025

43%

of children eligible for free school meals
achieved a Good Level of Development

**Greatest
population
increases in
the south and
northeast of
the county**

Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life priorities

Healthy beginnings

We will focus awareness raising of the importance of pregnancy and early childhood across all organisations in Oxfordshire and ensure additional support for families where this is needed.

Strong foundations

We will focus on working with partners to deliver coordinated support through Family Hubs and the wider Family Hub Network, including a range of parenting programmes, and resources to support home learning, supporting families to stay safe and nurturing positive early relationships and supporting babies and children to learn.

High-quality early years learning

We will focus on ensuring that all children can fully participate, achieve, and feel supported in the environments where they grow and develop. To support children to thrive and learn, we will invest in a strong and well-trained workforce and champion inclusive practice across the early years system.

Strengthen our Best Start in Life offer

We will focus on working together across services and with families through our Family Hub Network and Family Hubs to continue to develop a wider Best Start in Life offer which is available when families need support local to where they live. We will share our data and use this to identify what families need and where they need it.

Our Best Start in Life offer in Oxfordshire

Families in Oxfordshire can access a wide range of support, from universal services available to everyone, through to more targeted and intensive help for families who need additional support. We open our first Family Hub in Blackbird Leys in April and four further Family Hubs are planned.

Our focus is on making this offer easy to understand, easy to access and well joined up. Families should not have to navigate multiple systems or repeat their story. Instead, support should feel coordinated, relationship-based and shaped around what matters most to them.

This offer brings together health services, early years education and childcare, Family Hubs, Family Help, libraries, community spaces, and voluntary and community organisations working together around families.

The vision for Family Hubs in Oxfordshire is a network of provision across Oxfordshire for children and families through a Family Hub Network with partners, including the voluntary, community and faith sector to provide a range of services and a primary hub in each locality including continued delivery of existing support and developing new co-delivered support, developing outreach and 'pop up' sites in existing community locations so that all families can access support in their local neighbourhood.

The 0–19 Public Health Nursing Service

Oxfordshire’s integrated 0–19 Public Health Nursing Service brings together health visiting, school health nursing and the Family Nurse Partnership into a single pathway with one point of access. Eleven locality teams operate across the county, providing coordinated support as children grow.

Families are offered the Healthy Child Programme contacts from pregnancy through to age five. These include antenatal support, new birth visits, reviews at 6–8 weeks, 1 year and 2–2½ years, and a new universal 4 year review to support health, development and school readiness.

Health visiting teams also provide targeted and specialist support where vulnerabilities are identified and run group-based support such as infant feeding groups, baby drop-ins and ‘Marvellous Me’ sessions to promote confidence, emotional wellbeing and early relationships.

The Family Nurse Partnership provides intensive, evidence-based support for eligible young parents from early pregnancy until their child’s second birthday. This is complemented by an integrated young parent pathway, with family nurses offering specialist leadership and support for families with more complex or multiple needs.

The service works closely with Home Start, a national charity providing volunteer-led, nonjudgemental peer support for families with children under five. This partnership strengthens early help and prevention by offering practical and emotional support alongside statutory health services.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to increasing the uptake of health visitor checks for all families and supporting families to know and use the services available in our Family Hubs and through the Family Hub Network.

Family Help through our Family Hub Network and Family Hubs

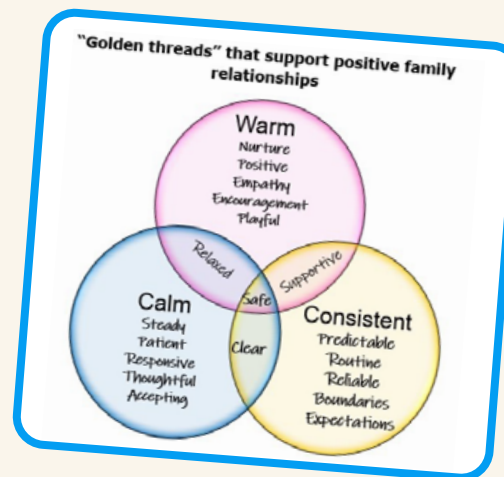
Family Help is a key part of Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life approach, providing whole family, strengths-based support when children or parents are experiencing difficulties.

Family Help works alongside families where children may be affected by issues such as poverty, parental mental health needs, trauma, domestic abuse or other pressures.



Family Help practitioners work in a relational, trauma-informed and restorative way. Support is consent-based and focuses on building on family strengths, improving day-to-day family life.

Support may include purposeful home visiting, direct work with children, coordination of plans through a lead professional role, and helping families connect with local community support. Family Help teams also deliver group-based parenting programmes that support parents to build confidence, skills and positive relationships and can



signpost parents for additional support through partnerships with voluntary support groups such as Home Start.

These include evidence-based programmes focused on nurturing parenting, understanding children's development and behaviour, strengthening parent-child relationships, supporting parents of teenagers, and helping parents affected by conflict or trauma.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to increasing our offer of family support by working more closely with voluntary agencies local to where families live, offering additional parenting support programmes and offering a range of home learning resources to support families build on their strengths and support each child to achieve a Good Level of Development.

Libraries and early learning

Oxfordshire's network of 45 libraries is a core part of the Best Start in Life offer. Libraries are welcoming, inclusive community spaces that support families from birth onwards and play an important role in early language, literacy and social connection.

Through local libraries, families can access early years programme development and the expansion of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in key locations, helping children develop a love of books and reading from an early age. Book Start book packs for babies, weekly rhyme time and story time sessions that support language development, Stay and Play activities in targeted areas, and milestone events such as World Book Day, Baby Week and the Summer Reading Challenge.

Libraries also host a wide range of creative and cultural activities for children and families, including Lego clubs, chess clubs, coding clubs, author events and creative workshops.



These activities support learning, confidence, social skills and community connection, libraries support literacy, learning and wellbeing, with benefits that can last throughout a child's life.

As part of the Best Start in Life Plan, we are committed to expanding access to books and early reading events with partners through access to libraries and through the Family Hubs and Family Hubs Network to all babies and children.



Voluntary, community and faith sector groups

Oxfordshire works in partnership with voluntary, community, and faith groups who offer a range of different services and support to families. This includes information and advice, guiding people to appropriate resources, running stay-and-play sessions, and offering more specialised support like one-on-one help

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to strengthening our working with the VCFS sector to develop and enhance the offer to babies, children and families.

Family Information Service (website)

The Family Information Service website offers comprehensive resources and support for children, young people, and families residing in Oxfordshire. This freely accessible platform provides detailed information regarding local services available within the community.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to improving our digital information offer for families and partners to deliver Family Hubs information directly to families in an accessible format.

Parks and open spaces

Oxfordshire parks and play areas offer a mix of quiet areas and high energy spaces for babies and children with their families to enjoy being outside together in nature and for meeting spaces with friends, with some being fully inclusive and with sensory specific equipment. Open spaces and play areas support babies and children with their physical development and health, with social skills, cognitive development and learning through creative imaginative play. For families they provide opportunities for bonding and having fun and are good for everyone's mental well-being.

As part of the Best Start in Life Plan, we are committed to ensuring more parks and play areas are accessible for children and families, whatever their needs.

Leisure centres

Children thrive when they can be active, whether involved in specific sports or in joining in with their families and care givers. Being active supports physical health and also promotes language, social and emotional development. There are a range of leisure centres delivered by district council partners, which provide access to families to engage in a range of different play and recreational activities.

As well as leisure centres, Active Oxfordshire delivers YouMove, free and low-cost activities for eligible children and their families, including those on benefits related free school meals or Universal Credit, refugee children, and children supported by early help services in Oxfordshire, enabling babies and children to stay active and have fun along the way.

As part of the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to working with the leisure centres as part of our Family Hubs Network to support babies and children, with their families to access and enjoy leisure facilities.

Oxfordshire County Music Service

We recognise the importance of music in the holistic development of babies and children in supporting their development of speech, language and communication, emotional, social and physical skills and in supporting strong attachments with parents and care givers, which contribute to children achieving a Good Level of Development. Music is fun and Oxfordshire County Music Service has an early years music strategy and offers whole-class music lessons for early years as part of the wider curriculum support offer to schools and delivers one-off, bespoke music workshops in schools. Children and families have benefitted from community music projects in schools and settings.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to expanding music into all Family Hubs and through the Family Hub Network and extend the current offer to settings and schools to ensure every child has an opportunity to take part in sessions so music can support improved outcomes.

Access to childcare

From September 2025, working families who meet the eligibility criteria have been able to access up to 30 funded hours per week for children from nine months. 97% of eligible working parents of two year olds have accessed this offer and just over 95% of eligible parents of three and four year olds are accessing childcare.

However there remain some geographic areas within the county who have limited childcare options. The Family Information Service supports families with finding appropriate childcare and accessing the eligible childcare entitlements.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to securing childcare for all children and families and improving access for those children whose families are receiving additional support or through our Family Hub Networks.



Early Years SEND service

The Early Years SEND is a countywide Special Educational Needs and Disability advisory support service for children with special educational needs under 5 years. The service works with children under 5 years, either known to or waiting to be seen by a community paediatrician, who need additional support with their development and learning. Specialist teachers offer individual support and advice to parents, carers and family, and work with the child's setting on to support the child's individual needs and unique circumstances.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to ensuring access to specialist support is available to all families and settings to ensure children's needs are identified early and to support settings and families to work together to support those needs.

Quality Early Years Education

96% of Early Years Providers are judged good or better by Ofsted compared to 91% nationally, giving confidence that practice and provision is good in most of our early years education settings (Ofsted statistics: 1 September 2024 to 31 March 2025).

The early years quality team provide support and guidance to all early years providers (childminders, preschools, day nurseries, nursery schools and all other schools) through quality improvement visits which support leadership, teaching and access to high quality training and resources. Additional targeted support is offered where identified following Ofsted and to settings with low Good Level of Development outcomes.

Through the Best Start in Life Plan we are committed to working to increase all Early Years Providers are meeting expected standards and that Good Level of Development outcomes in line with our ambitious local revised target.

Delivering on our vision

The following section outlines how the system will be coordinated to deliver on the Best Start in Life Plan.

Voice of families

In the Best Start in Life Plan, we will make sure the voices of babies, children and families are at the heart of how we design, deliver and improve our work. We will build their perspectives into our governance structures, create regular and accessible ways for families to share their experiences, and ensure their feedback directly shapes decisions.

Using a mix of approaches, including working with the voluntary, community and faith sectors, we will hear from a wide range of families and communities. Most importantly, we will act on what they tell us, so that services feel relevant, responsive and built around their needs, driving continuous improvement across the whole early years system.

Governance

The Best Start in Life Plan will report to the **Children's Trust Board**, which will hold overall responsibility for monitoring the performance and impact of the plan. Updates will be provided quarterly.

To support this, a **Best Start in Life Plan Steering Group** will be responsible for prioritising the plan, tracking progress, and addressing any risks or issues. The steering group will also ensure oversight of the combined budget and make recommendations on funding allocation to the appropriate boards.

Delivery of the Best Start in Life Plan will take place through the **Oxfordshire Education Partnership, Early Years Board, and Early Help and Prevention Board**, with progress and outcomes ultimately reported back to the steering group and Children's Trust Board and to the **Health and Wellbeing Board**.

Shared commissioning of services

We ensure a clear core offer in all Family Hubs and to provide local targeted Best Start in Life offer for family support and for those children who are identified as not achieving their Good Level of Development. We will jointly commission with partners where additional services are identified by need.

Our key measure of success will be the Good Level of Development

A Good Level of Development (GLD) is the Statutory Assessment at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) when children are in Reception classes¹.

Impact measures by 2028

% of children with a Good Level of Development at 5-years-old

Local revised Target 79.8%
DfE local target - 77.8%

% difference between the proportion of children eligible or not eligible for Free School Meals achieving a Good Level of Development

Local Revised target 59.8%
DfE target – 50.8%

¹ Children are assessed against the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) which are part of the Early Years Curriculum and support teachers to make a holistic, best fit judgement about a child's development and their readiness for year 1.

High level Best Start in Life Plan, March 2026 to March 2027

For all babies, children and families to have:

■ **Healthy beginnings:**

1. Work with partners to ensure that we have a clear offer to identify and support parental wellbeing, as well as parent-infant relationships
2. Work with partners to increase up the uptake of the health visitor checks, for 2-2.5 years and Oxfordshire's 4-year-old check
3. Improve our offer of information of support for dads and male carers
4. Ensure young parents can access the support they need

■ **Strong foundations:**

5. Open five primary Family Hubs across Oxfordshire
6. Develop and publish a clear offer for each Family Hub locality

7. Offer proven, high-quality parenting and home learning programmes that help children and families learn and develop well

8. Ensure that we have an effective system in place, in line with national guidance, to keep families safe

■ **Access to high-quality early years learning:**

9. Increase Free School Meal entitlement take-up, by developing auto-enrolment
10. Increase uptake of 15-hour childcare entitlement for families receiving additional or universal support
11. Increase childcare sufficiency for 9 months to 23 months and for under 3 places in identified areas of need
12. Support those schools with low Good Level of Development scores or where additional need is identified
13. To continue enhancing inclusivity within Early Years Settings for all children, building upon the existing work and progress already underway

■ **To strengthen our Best Start in Life offer:**

14. Strengthen partnerships and networks across health, education, social care and the voluntary, community and faith sector
15. Develop of a Best Start in Life workforce training offer
16. Develop our digital information offer
17. Use our data to better inform our understanding on Good Level of Development
18. Use our Oxfordshire Marmot County status to engage wider partners including research partners and local businesses to raise the awareness of the importance of the Best Start in Life