

# **EDUCATION & YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**– 26 June 2026**

## **Best Start in Life Plan**

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

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. **The Education & Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
  - (a) Note and provide any comments on the Best Start in Life plan and the agreed monitoring arrangements, approved by Cabinet on 19 May 2026.

#### **Executive Summary**

2. Overall Oxfordshire is characterised by high-quality childcare provision, low levels of deprivation and positive child development outcomes. 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.
3. The Oxfordshire Best Start in Life Plan sets out a shared ambition that every child in Oxfordshire has the best possible start in life, and that families receive the right support, at the right time, in the right place. The Plan focuses on the period from pregnancy to school entry, when timely, coordinated support can make the greatest difference.
4. The Plan aligns national policy, local priorities and partner delivery into a single, outcome-focused approach. It strengthens joint working across health, early years, education, early help and the voluntary and community sector, with a clear focus on prevention and reducing inequalities.
5. The Best Start in Life Plan was approved at Health and Wellbeing Board on 29 April 2026 and Cabinet on 19 May 2026.

#### **Ambitions of the Best Start in Life Plan**

6. 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 (GLD) 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.
7. 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 (FSM) eligible children 50.8% (Oxfordshire 2025 Outcome 43% (7% below national))
8. As part of achieving this vision, all Local Authorities have been required to develop a Best Start in Life plan, which sets out how we will achieve our Good Level of Development target. The plan for Oxfordshire has been developed based on our existing Early Years Strategy and Early Help and Prevention Strategy.
9. 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. Therefore, our approach has also included setting out 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;
- (a) All eligible children 79.8% (2% above Local Target)
  - (b) All free school meal eligible children 59.8% (9% above Local Target)

## **Overview on the Best Start in Life Plan**

10. Oxfordshire already benefits from a range of services to support the Best Start in Life offer, including libraries (offering a range of services), Family Help service, 0–19 Public Health Nursing Service, Family Information Service, and the early years SEND service. Across Oxfordshire there are also a wealth of Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector (VCFS) organisations delivering a range of services to families within the local communities.
11. The Best Start in Life Plan is designed to sustain and enhance this provision, building on established strengths to ensure families continue to receive timely, coordinated assistance. The plan aims to deliver even more comprehensive support, tailored to families' needs and accessible in their local communities.
12. The Best Start in Life plan sets out a clear vision that every child has the best start in life, and parents, parents-to-be, babies and young children have what they need to thrive.

13. Through achieving this vision, it will mean that all babies, children and families are: safe, learning, happy, healthy and engaged.
14. The plan sets out four key priorities to achieving this vision:
  - (a) **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.
  - (b) **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.
  - (c) **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.
  - (d) **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.

## **What This Means for babies, for Children and Families**

15. 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.
16. For Parents and carers, they will 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.
17. We want families to experience support that feels welcoming, practical and joined up, with professionals working alongside them and building on their strengths.

## **Delivery and Governance**

18. 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.

19. 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
20. 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.
21. 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.
22. 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
23. By June 19<sup>th</sup> the Council must submit a SEND Reform Plan to the Department for Education developed across Local Area partners. Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life Plan as a national policy is therefore referenced and included within the Oxfordshire SEND Reform Plan.

## **Corporate Policies and Priorities**

24. 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." As part of the plan, priority areas were identified, including providing help and support across the system at the earliest opportunity.
25. 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.

26. 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.
27. 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.
28. For all of the above the Best Start in Life Plan very much aligns to these strategies and programmes, and will be key delivering the strategic ambitions of providing earlier help and prevention and addressing inequalities.

## **Financial Implications**

29. The Plan is expected to be funded by a combination of existing budget allocations which includes the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and Best Start Family Hubs grant allocations from the Department for Education.

Comments checked by:

Jane Billington, Strategic Finance Business Partner

## **Legal Implications**

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

Comments checked by:

Craig Cochrane, Principal Lawyer, Child Care Legal Team

## **Staff Implications**

31. The delivery of this plan will be achieved using existing resources. A strong emphasis will be placed on collaborative working across all relevant departments and partners, enabling us to join up and maximise our resources efficiently and effectively. This approach supports the Council's commitment to making the best use of available assets while maintaining high standards of service provision.

Comments checked by:

Amy Warner, Strategic People Partner HR and Culture Change Team

## **Equality & Inclusion Implications**

32. As part of the development of the detailed implementation plan for the Best Start in Life Plan, an Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken, and will be overseen and owned by the Steering Group.

## **Sustainability Implications**

33. As part of the development of the detailed implementation plan for the Best Start in Life Plan, a Climate Impact Assessment will be undertaken, and will be overseen and owned by the Steering Group.

## **Risk Management**

34. The Best Start in Life Steering Group will be responsible for the identification, mitigation and monitoring of risks and issues to the delivery of Best Start in Life Plan. Where risks are required to be escalated, this will be to the Children's Trust Board.

Lisa Lyons  
Director of Children's Services

Annex: Best Start in Life Plan

Contact Officer: Annette Perrington, Deputy Director of Education and Inclusion

May 2026