

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET 14 July 2026**

#### **Best Start in Life Plan and Best Start Family Hubs Report of Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
  - a) Note the recommendation contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
  - b) Agree that, once Cabinet has responded, relevant officers will continue to provide each meeting of the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee with a brief written update on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendation for 12 months, or until it is completed (if earlier).

### **REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND**

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

3. The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered one report on the Best Start in Life Plan (the Plan) and one on the Best Start Family Hubs and Youth Hubs at its meeting on 26 June 2026.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services, Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director for Education, Sophie Black, Assistant Director for Early Help Assessment and Prevention, Jenny Stoker,

Operational Lead for Family Hubs, and Harriet Preedy, Targeted Youth Support Service Manager.

## **SUMMARY**

5. The Committee's discussion focused on the ambition and delivery of the Best Start in Life Plan, particularly the goal of improving school readiness and reducing inequalities in outcomes for children, especially those eligible for free school meals. Members broadly supported the decision to adopt more ambitious local targets than those set nationally, but emphasised that achieving these would require credible, evidence-based delivery. There was a strong emphasis on early intervention, with members highlighting the importance of acting well before school age, drawing on evidence from previous programmes such as Sure Start, and ensuring that practical measures, including speech and language support, parenting support and access to early years provision, were in place.
6. Discussion also centred on how the Plan would be delivered through Family Hubs and wider partnerships, with particular attention to access, sufficiency of provision and targeting of support. Members explored how services would reach rural communities and isolated families, the role of the voluntary and community sector, and the need for a universal offer alongside targeted interventions. There was a clear focus on integration across services, including health, education and early help, and on supporting a wide range of family circumstances, including children we care for and young parents. The Committee emphasised the importance of ongoing monitoring, learning and adequate resourcing to ensure that the Plan's ambitions translate into improved outcomes across the county.
7. Ultimately, at this stage, the Committee makes one recommendation relating to the entire project: that the Council must ensure that sufficient resource is provided so that its ambitions can be realised.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

8. The Committee's discussion made clear that the ambition of the Best Start in Life Plan, particularly the decision to set more stretching local targets for children (being nine percentage points higher than the Government's local target for Oxfordshire children eligible for free school meals and two percentage points higher than the Government's local target for all children), could not be achieved through existing practice alone. Members recognised that the scale of the inequality gap in early development outcomes will require additional focus, targeted interventions and sustained effort across multiple services. Without sufficient investment, the Committee is concerned that the Council risks adopting ambitious targets that would not be able to be delivered in practice. This could undermine confidence in the Plan and could limit its impact on the most disadvantaged children.

9. Delivery of the Plan will depend on a wide range of practical measures, including the expansion of Family Hubs and earlier identification of need, as well as improved support in areas such as speech and language development, parenting, nutrition and early years provision. These interventions require not only coordination but also adequate staffing, specialist expertise and accessible local services. The Committee is also keen to highlight the importance of reaching families earlier, including those not engaged with services, and those in rural or less-visible contexts. All of this could place additional demands on outreach, data-sharing and partnership working. Delivering this breadth of activity at pace will require resources aligned to the ambition of the programme.
10. The Committee recognises that the success of the Plan will rely on integrated working across health, education, early help and the voluntary sector, alongside continuous monitoring and adaptation of delivery. Maintaining a universal offer whilst also targeting those with greatest need will require a balance of core funding and flexible resource deployment.
11. As a concept, the Committee is strongly supportive of the Best Start in Life Plan and is keen that it delivers. The Committee is acutely aware of its importance. However, it is also very cognisant of the fact that Council budgets are strained. Recognising those strained budgets does not stop resource being necessary, though, and it calls on Cabinet to ensure that – in its budget settings and more widely – adequate and sufficient resource, both pecuniary and operational, is available for this Plan to be delivered both successfully and sustainably.

***Recommendation 1: That the Council should ensure that sufficient resources are available to deliver the Best Start in Life Plan's ambition and to support achievement of Oxfordshire's ambitions for children, including the more stretching local targets for children eligible for free school meals.***

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

12. The Committee expects to consider an update on the Best Start in Life Plan later in the municipal year.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

13. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.'

14. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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