

# **Best Start:** A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support

Part 2 Report



**November 2025**

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Alongside this report, the Centre for Young Lives has published a supplementary report exploring case studies and typologies of family support provision across the country.

### **About the Centre for Young Lives**

The Centre for Young Lives, founded by Baroness Anne Longfield CBE in February 2024, is an independent think tank and delivery unit working to improve the lives of children, young people, and families across the UK — with a particular focus on those facing the greatest challenges. Our team combines decades of experience in Westminster, Whitehall and beyond with a relentless commitment and drive to breaking down the barriers that hold back some children, and to ensuring that every child and young person can thrive. We use high quality research and evidence to advocate and campaign for innovative solutions and new models that improve the lives of children, young people and their families.

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## Foreword by Baroness Anne Longfield, Executive Chair of the Centre for Young Lives

Childhood is a precious, fleeting, and sometimes challenging time for many families. In recent years, life has become more of a struggle for some, with many families still navigating the impact of the Covid pandemic and the rising cost of living following over a decade of austerity.

Families have crucial windows in which a child's future can either be opened up or closed down – from the precious early years to the crossroads from education to employment. The right support at the right time can be transformational, enabling families to build resilience and unlock potential, with wide-reaching benefits that span across a lifetime.

Yet in the wake of the sizeable reduction of Sure Start Children's Centres and the support they can offer, many children and families are living without access to the essential support they need to build strong foundations and to thrive. Parents also tell us that where help is available, too often it can be inconsistent, fragmented and difficult to navigate.

A quarter of a century on from the first Sure Start programme opening its doors, it is time for a fresh start.

The government's Best Start in Life Strategy, published this summer, set out a major commitment to do just that, taking "the best of the Sure Start, Family Hubs and Start for Life approaches", to establish a new network of Best Start Family Hubs.

The Centre for Young Lives is committed to supporting this ambition, and we know that its delivery cannot come soon enough for many families.

Since early 2025, we have undertaken research to strengthen understanding of the current provision of family support in local communities across the country – and the potential of this support to deliver the Government's ambitions, from its Opportunity Mission to its Health and Growth Missions.

Our first report in this series, published in April 2025, found that joined up family support receives less than a quarter of the funding it did at the peak of Sure Start, and that half of local authorities were having to cut their budgets in the last financial year. We were clear that urgent and substantial investment was needed to restore what was lost – and so we welcome the substantial step towards our recommendations following the Spending Review and the extra funds committed to families in the Best Start in Life Strategy published last July.

This second report, drawing on insights from experts and system leaders directly delivering support to children and families, sets out what is needed from government to ensure that Best Start Family Hubs are effectively delivered, alongside communities, to meet the needs of children and families who need them most.

The direction of travel is encouraging, but the success of Best Start Family Hubs will hinge on their effective impact and quality of implementation, as well as a continued increase in numbers. Our six principles draw on the learning from more than a quarter of a century of joined up family support, from Sure Start Children's Centres to Best Start Family Hubs. Together, they set out a clear framework for high quality family support that places support at the centre of supportive communities, where families can access trusted and impactful help that helps them to navigate life's challenges.

Our vision is for a 'single front door' any family can walk through; a clear brand that wins community trust; services that reach out to families to make access easier; services which are high-quality and responsive to need; a consistent offer with dedicated support for children of all ages; and most importantly, an emphasis on hearing the voices of children and families.

To achieve this, we need a fresh start in policy and practice – and that means new legislation which replaces the children's centre provisions and establishes a stronger legal basis for Best Start Family Hubs. It also means a new and clear brand across all local authorities, which makes Best Start Family Hubs a household name like Sure Start was previously.

We know that many families can be wary of public services and sometimes have poor experiences in accessing help or feel they have no agency, caught up in processes that seem to take over their lives. Best Start Family Hubs must be different. They must get alongside families, learning from the successes of Sure Start to deliver an impactful and valued network of support that works together with families.

What is clear is that time is of the essence for families coping with early parenthood, child poverty, rising youth unhappiness, unmet special educational needs, and school absence. Every moment is precious. We need a fresh start for family support.

# Executive Summary

The evidence is clear – when delivered well, integrated, place-based family support is transformative for the lives of children and their families. Yet, a quarter century after the launch of Sure Start, children and families often lack the support they need to thrive.

But the tide is changing. Recent policy decisions have been encouraging, placing children's life chances back at the forefront of Government priorities. The Government's *Best Start in Life Strategy* marks a pivotal opportunity to learn from the best of Sure Start and Family Hubs, and rebuilding a trusted, integrated system of family support. Much is at stake for children and families, and to deliver real change, ambitions must be clear, and sights set high on what can be achieved through Best Start Family Hubs.

Between 2024 and 2025, the Centre for Young Lives undertook research to provide key insights into the nature of family support provision today. Drawing on and learning from the best practice of the last 25 years, this report sets out what it will take to deliver family support and how it can bring about long-term systems change for family support and better outcomes for children and families.

## **What is the scale of children's centre and family hubs provision?**

In part one of this research<sup>1</sup>, published in April 2025, we set out the scale of the existing stock of family support and made the case for sufficient and sustainable funding to expand the offer of support for families. We revealed how in 2023/24, local authorities were spending less than a quarter on children's centres and family hubs compared to spending at the peak of Sure Start. That funding was precarious and at high risk, with just under half of local authorities reporting they were facing budget cuts for this financial year. The reduction in funding was responsible for both a reduction in the number of centres and the depth of provision offered by each. There are now an estimated total of 2,100 hubs and centres across England – from the 3,500 Sure Start children's centres at Sure Start's peak – and an average spend of £275,000 per hub – just over half of the average spend per hub under Sure Start in 2010.

While a recent announcement of £500m for Best Start Family Hubs from the Department for Education is welcome, this report reaffirms the need for sufficient, long-term funding to catalyse the transformation of family support through the delivery of new Hubs.

Funding from Government for Best Start Family Hubs should prioritise targeting those children and families with the highest need, and those who do not currently have access to the early years support that they need. This is essential to ensuring that Best Start

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support: Part 1 – Building from the Foundations; <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dswrrwvYKx5wYVHYCJliD3e6vw7FQAMMC/view>

Family Hubs are delivering the biggest impact and contributing to the Government's milestone of 75% of children reaching a good level of development, or being 'school ready' at age five, by 2028. Targeting funding in this way will help to ensure that reaching the Government's milestone does not create a situation where those children who are close to achieving the milestone make up the 75%, while those much further away from reaching a good level of development are left to fall even further behind their peers by not receiving the support they need, when they need it.

In this report, a cross-analysis of the number of children not yet reaching a good level of development in a local authority, and so-called 'childcare deserts' - where there are more than three children for every early years place in an area - highlights the need for Government to target support to the areas which need the most support. Of the local authorities in the bottom tertile of good levels of development (areas with the lowest percentage of children reaching a good level of development), 76% are considered childcare deserts (39). This compares to 53% in the middle tertile (27), and 22% in the top tertile, areas with the highest percentage of children reaching a good level of development (11). We are asking Government to target support, through the rollout of Best Start Family Hubs, to the areas most in need to ensure they have the biggest impact.

### **What can Best Start Family Hubs learn from the best of Sure Start and Family Hubs?**

In the context of the Best Start in Life strategy, this report sets out how Government investment can be delivered most effectively to support children and families through new Best Start Family Hubs to establish a new and ambitious vision for joined up family support.

Building on our findings from the past year, this report establishes six principles that we have identified, in partnership with local authorities and experts, as necessary in underpinning Best Start Family Hubs and the wider system of family support to ensure they deliver well for children and families.

We set out six principles identified to establish a clear vision for what children and families want and need from family support, and our recommendations to Government and local authorities to get there.

### **Principle 1: A single front door approach to support backed up by an Integrated Local System**

Where children and families seeking help can access the support or information they need, regardless of where they go to ask for support.

### **Principle 2: Family support where the voices of children and families are heard**

Best Start Family Hubs that work alongside and are shaped by families, providing support when and how it is needed, and embedding co-production into service design and delivery from the very start.

### **Principle 3: Family support that is embedded into communities**

Family support that is visible, consistent, and long-term. Bringing together all family support, including remaining children's centres under a new Best Start Family Hubs brand which is for the long term and is known and trusted by families and communities.

### **Principle 4: Family support that is easy to reach**

Ensuring easy access to support near to home so that children and families are getting the help they need, where and when they need it.

### **Principle 5: High-quality Family support in every community**

A system of family support that delivers high-quality, evidence-based support for every child and family that needs it, no matter where they live.

### **Principle 6: Family support for children of all ages and their families**

Support is available throughout childhood - from the first week to adolescence - so that trusted relationships are built and maintained as children grow up.

## **Recommendations for Government**

### **Principle 1: A single front door approach to support, backed up by an Integrated Local System**

- The Department for Education should establish and lead a cross-departmental plan for Best Start Family Hubs, co-signed by key departmental partners including Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This plan should be a running agenda item at the Opportunity Mission Board and supported by a cross-departmental team of senior officials and encourage the join up on national policies such as the Youth Strategy, Education White Paper on SEND reform, Neighbourhood Health under the 10 Year Plan, and Young Futures Hubs.
  - This should include a Family Hubs working group of senior civil servants from relevant Government departments.
  - The Test, Learn and Grow Programme should explore scalable and effective examples of best practice of a wide range of support for children and families to be delivered with and through Best Start Family Hubs.

- The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should publish one single and comprehensive, cross-departmental guidance document for Best Start Family Hubs, co-signed by key departmental partners including Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Guidance should:
  - Facilitate stronger data-sharing arrangements between Family Hubs and relevant statutory agencies and partners, through data-sharing pilots to understand what works well in ensuring smooth data-sharing, supported by the establishment of the Single Unique Identifier.
  - Facilitate strong join up between Family Hubs and local childcare providers. This should include co-location of Family Hubs and the government's new school-based nurseries, and guidance clarifying the role of Family Hubs in improving quality and establishing links with the childcare providers through training and guidance.
  - Set out guidance for delivering the Best Start offer for older children, teenagers and their families, including linking to new Young Futures Hubs.
  - Clarify the role of integrated mental health support for teenagers through Family Hubs and Young Futures Hubs.
- The Department for Education should launch a workforce leadership programme for Family Hubs and wider children's support staff, equipping local practice leaders with the tools and professional development to deliver strong leadership, systems change and innovation locally. The Department for Education should expand the role of the National Centre for Family Hubs to support local authorities in delivering Best Start Family Hubs, through delivering a unified national training programme for Family Hub staff, and the sharing of best practice both locally and nationally through Communities of Practice.

## **Principle 2: A Family support system where the voices of children and families are heard**

- Learning from the benefits of co-production under Sure Start, guidance from Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should support local authorities to embed co-production into Best Start Family Hubs to ensure that the voices of children and families are heard, issuing guidance to local authorities on effective ways to embed co-production into service design. This should be supported by the sharing of best practice and practice guides from the National Centre for Family Hubs.

## **Principle 3: Family support that is embedded into communities**

- The Department for Education should develop a new and meaningful nationwide Best Start Family Hubs brand to replace Family Hubs and Sure Start branding with coordinated public awareness campaigns, to remove confusion and ensure families know what support is available to them, and where to access it.
- The Department for Education should consult on plans to establish a statutory basis for Best Start that brings all existing family support under one Best Start legislative framework, to remove confusion, set clear and consistent expectations on local authorities and ensure a clear and consistent pathway for families across the country. The legislation should ensure:
  - A legal definition of a Best Start Family Hub, which replaces previous Sure Start legislation and establishes clarity about the remit of hubs and centres.
  - Clear principles are set for Best Start Family Hubs and wider Family Support.
  - A duty is placed on local partners, including local authorities, health providers, and schools, to work together to support families through hubs.
  - The financial sustainability of Best Start Family Hubs is protected, through a duty to provide or commission support.
  - A duty is placed on local partners to report on key metrics relating to the provision of Best Start Family Hubs.

#### **Principle 4: Family support that is easy to reach**

- Guidance from Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should establish routine collection of need and gap analysis data and reach data for services delivered by and through Best Start Family Hubs. This would enable local authorities to better understand impact, target underserved communities and strengthen proactive outreach.
- The Department for Education should support the national rollout of community-facing 'navigator' roles to strengthen proactive outreach to families and connections across services. This should include co-producing a national role specification and training network for navigators with local authorities, families and the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.

#### **Principle 5: High-quality family support services in every community**

- The Department for Education should design and deliver a centrally mandated 'core offer' of service 0 – 19 to be delivered through Best Start Family Hubs.
- The Opportunity Mission board should establish a 'common outcomes framework for Opportunity', a cross-departmental common outcomes framework for babies,

children and young people, with clear accountability across Government departments. Local authorities should develop area-specific outcomes frameworks in line with this, strengthening partnerships with local partners to deliver on key priorities.

- The Department for Education should support the delivery of evidence-based services with a focus on high quality implementation through a national database of evidence-based programmes to support local authorities, and support from regional authorities and the National Centre for Family Hubs to provide additional support.
- The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should provide guidance to local authorities and support where necessary to strengthen standardised data collection and effective monitoring of take-up, engagement and outcomes of service delivery to identify how many, and which families are accessing support, and the impact services are having.
- Government should match the need for family support and commit to long-term, ambitious, sustainable funding to build a national infrastructure of Best Start Family Hubs, including shoring up existing family support provision.
  - The Department of Health and Social Care should match the initial investment of £500m into Best Start Family Hubs through Start for Life, to boost investment to a total of at least £1bn over the next three years.
  - The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should scale up investment into joined up family support over the next decade to strengthen provision and embed Best Start Family Hubs into communities for the long-term. Part 1 of our research sets out a costed model that recommends an iterative approach to scale up funding to reach £2.2bn and 2m more children by the ninth year.
  - The Department for Education should consider innovative means to raise investment for Family Hubs. This should include establishing National Social Outcomes Partnerships pilots - government-backed agreements that fund services based on achieving measurable social outcomes rather than activities or inputs - for Best Start Family Hubs to unlock additional investments. The Better Futures fund could also support these developments.
- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education should provide a dedicated funding pot for provision for older children and teenagers as part of Best Start Family Hubs.

## **Principle 6: Family support that delivers a consistent offer for children of all ages and their families**

- The Department for Education should support the delivery of an ambitious offer of support for children across the full 0-19 age range through setting clear standards and expectations in guidance for Best Start Family Hubs.
- The National Centre for Family Hubs should promote best practice in supporting children of all ages and their families through Hubs by providing resources and guides for tailoring your space and offer of activities and services to children of different ages based on examples of best practice.

## **Recommendations for local authorities**

- New Best Start Local Plans should set out how the delivery of integrated local systems will be designed and delivered through Hubs. This should include:
  - Establishing formal arrangements to embed multi-agency decision making from the earliest possible stage of service design and delivery.
  - Developing area-specific common outcomes frameworks that reflect the needs and priorities of their communities and through that work to strengthen partnerships with other key stakeholders. Responsibility and accountability for these outcomes should sit with the Children and Young People's Board.
  - Identifying and clearly defining where responsibility and accountability for Family Hubs sits within the wider system.
  - Exploring effective ways to ensure multi-agency working is occurring.
  - Establishing a clearly defined, formal and strategic role for the VCSE sector in service design and delivery.
- New Best Start Local Plans should explore means of embedding parent and community voice into service design and delivery and include the voices of children and young people from the earliest stage. This can be delivered through strengthening the role of Parent Carer Panels and Advisory Board, and Parent Champions to feed in at a strategic level. Family Hubs should encourage parent-led services through peer support, volunteering and training opportunities to parents and carers.
- Best Start Local Plans should establish a delivery plan for proactive outreach of services into communities. This should draw on existing community assets such as schools, community spaces and community networks, and factor in the role of the VCSE sector in reaching underserved communities.

## Background

This report builds on research published by the Centre for Young Lives in April 2025, *A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support: Building from the Foundations*.<sup>2</sup>

Part One examined the budget and spend on children's centres and family hubs delivered by local authorities and set out a costed model for scaling up investment over the next decade. Drawing on new Freedom of Information (Fol) data collected by the Centre for Young Lives on local authority spending on children's centres and family hubs, our report revealed the extent to which funding for family support has been decimated over the last fifteen years, and that what funding remains is precarious. Through Fol returns from 80% of England's 152 Upper Tier local authorities, we found:

- **The landscape of children's centres has been left decimated and threadbare after more than a decade of cuts.** In 2023/24, spending on children's centres and Family Hubs by local authorities was **less than a quarter** of annual spend on children's centres in 2009/10.
- **The number of centres has fallen, and their volume and depth of services and support has also decreased.** In 2023/24 there were estimated total of 2,100 hubs and centres across England, at an average spend of £275,000 per hub, just over half of the average spend per hub under Sure Start.
- **The funding that does exist is precarious and at high risk.** 49% of local authorities reported cuts to their budgets for children's centres and Family Hubs between 2023/24 and 2024/25. One local authority cut its budget by 81%, which is likely to leave many children and families with nowhere to turn for support.

Ahead of the Spending Review, we recommended that the government should invest to secure and scale up investment for place-based, joined up children and family support. Our recommendations called for a phased and iterative approach to scaling up funding to children and family support, building over time to reach 2 million children in the ninth year at the completion of two parliamentary terms.

- Phase 1, costing £1.2bn over the three years of the Spending Review period (2026/27, 2027/28, 2028/29), would sure up existing local authority budgets and scale up investment first to reach 200,000 and then 500,000 children in the final year of the Spending Review period.
- Phase 2 involves scaling up investment further over the following five years to reach 2 million children, with £2.26bn being spent a year on family support by the ninth year.

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<sup>2</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) *A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support: Part 1 – Building from the Foundations*; <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dswrwwYKx5wYVHYCJliD3e6vw7FQAMMC/view>

# Chapter 1: The case for joined up family support

The need for a fresh network of family support has never been greater. Needs have increased as public services have been squeezed. Too many children in England are growing up in poverty, there are record levels of poor mental health, high numbers of children are arriving at primary school without having reached expected levels of development and leaving education without basic qualifications, and many young people are at risk of exploitation or serious violence. The Covid pandemic has rocket-boosted many of these long-term trends.

The benefits of place-based children and family support are now well evidenced, with landmark studies by the Institute for Fiscal Studies making their educational, health and wider social benefits clear.<sup>3</sup> They have shown how the right support at the right time can be transformational for families, helping them to navigate modern challenges of high mobility and low social connection, low school readiness, high school absence, deepening inequality, and rising Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and poor mental health.

## Getting it right in the early years

While challenges can present themselves to families at any point in their lives, getting it right in the first few years of a child's life, where key developmental stages occur, is essential to addressing some of the key barriers that can hold back children. As such, the focus on children reaching a good level of development in the Government's Plan for Change, and the Best Start strategy is welcome.

Several studies have shown 'school readiness' to be linked to wider outcomes across health and education. Over half of children who were deemed not 'school ready' performed below expected in their Key Stage 1 ready assessment, compared to only 6% of children performing below expected who were deemed school ready.<sup>4</sup> Children deemed not school ready were also found to be nearly 2.5 times more likely to be persistently absent from school, increasing to over three times when considering persistent absence over several academic years, and children who were not school ready are around three times as likely to be NEET (Not in Education, Employment or

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<sup>3</sup> Carneiro, P., Cattani, S. (2025) The short- and medium-term effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes; Institute for Fiscal Studies; <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/IFS%20Report.%20The%20short-%20and%20medium-term%20effects%20of%20Sure%20Start%20on%20children%E2%80%99s%20outcomes.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Centre for Young Lives, Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership (2024) An evidence-based approach to supporting children in the pre-school years; [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/65b6b3c3bd2e7d160db2dbc0/66fec552d5159812bc01ff6d\\_Pre-School%20Report%20Digital.pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/65b6b3c3bd2e7d160db2dbc0/66fec552d5159812bc01ff6d_Pre-School%20Report%20Digital.pdf)

Training) at 16-17 years old.<sup>5</sup> Support around early language, parenting, feeding and nutrition, and other needs in the early years will be crucial to turning these trends around.

### **The impact of integrated family support**

The evidence shows that children living near Sure Start Children's Centres experienced significantly better educational outcomes. Access during the first five years of life was associated with an average improvement of 0.8 GCSE grades, with effects up to six times greater for children eligible for Free School Meals.<sup>6</sup> Health outcomes also improved markedly. The presence of one additional Sure Start Centre per 1,000 children was found to prevent over 13,000 hospital visits annually among 11–15-year-olds.<sup>7</sup> These reductions were most pronounced in disadvantaged areas, and cost savings offsetting approximately 31% of the programme's delivery costs.<sup>8</sup> Notably, the programme reduced hospitalisations among older children at nearly twice the rate it increased them among infants, highlighting its preventative value.

Sure Start also contributed to earlier identification and support for children with SEND. Access to a nearby Centre reduced the proportion of children recorded as having SEND at ages 11–16 by 3%, and decreased the likelihood of requiring an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) by 9% (equivalent to over 1,000 fewer EHCPs annually).<sup>9</sup> These improvements generated further cost savings, offsetting around 8% of programme costs. Social outcomes were similarly positive. Living within 2.5km of a Sure Start Centre reduced the likelihood of a criminal conviction by age 16 by 13%, and custodial sentences fell by 20%.<sup>10</sup>

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Sure Start represents a highly effective investment. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that for every £1 of net spending, the programme may generate up to £11 in long-term benefits for attending children, driven by improvements in education, health, and social outcomes.<sup>11</sup> These findings reinforce the value of joined up early years provision in supporting children's development and reducing inequalities.

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<sup>5</sup> Warburton, M et al. (2024) Risk of not being in employment, education or training (NEET) in late adolescence is signalled by school readiness measures at 4-5 years; BMC Public Health, vol. 24. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18851-w>

<sup>6</sup> Carneiro, P., Cattán, S. (2025) The short- and medium-term effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes; Institute for Fiscal Studies; <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/IFS%20Report.%20The%20short-%20and%20medium-term%20effects%20of%20Sure%20Start%20on%20children%E2%80%99s%20outcomes.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

More broadly, with 31% of all children living in the UK living in poverty in 2023/24 – a rise on the previous year, integrated, place-based family support can serve to mitigate the impacts of poverty for children and families. Living in poverty can bring additional challenges and stresses to parenting. Parenting support delivered through hubs and centres, and access to activities like stay and play, and parent-infant relationships support can provide parents with the additional tools to build strong relationships with their children and build confidence in their parenting abilities. Services offering financial support and help in accessing training and employment for parents – often delivered through family hubs – can support parents into employment, working to lift parents out of poverty and break the cycle of disadvantage which can sometimes trap families living in poverty.

The benefits of integrated, place-based family support are well-evidenced in delivering better outcomes for babies, children and young people. So too is the importance of intervening early to prevent problems escalating for children and their families. The Government's Best Start in Life strategy signals a return to government policy that places children and families at the centre, invests in the early years, and recognises the role of integrated family support in removing barriers to opportunity and improving the lives of children and families.

## Chapter 2: Targeted Support will deliver the biggest impact

We welcome the government's milestone to have 75% of children reaching a good level of development by age 5 by 2028.

There are a range of local factors that can have an impact on early childhood development including the availability of high-quality early education and childcare, wider support for families in the early years and the extent of deprivation.

This chapter explores how rates of children reaching a good level of development link with these factors, including comparing local authority rates of good level of development with family hubs provision, areas with 'childcare deserts' – defined as areas where there are three or more children per childcare placement in an area – and, with deprivation levels.<sup>12</sup> We find that local authority areas where parents currently lack sufficient access to childcare, where there are fewer family hubs, and where there are higher rates of deprivation are the areas which have the furthest to come in achieving the good level of development milestone. We demonstrate a need for the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to target

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<sup>12</sup> New Economics Foundation (2024) Childcare deserts: The reality of access to early years education, <https://neweconomics.org/2024/05/childcare-deserts-the-reality-of-access-to-early-years-education> [Accessed: 01.09.25]

funding and support to meet the highest levels of need and have the biggest impact for children and families.

### **Disadvantage baked in from the early years**

The evidence is well established: disadvantage holds children back, with inequality often baked in from their earliest years. Without the right support, children facing disadvantages are more likely to fall behind their peers as they grow up.

Inequalities in the home, educational, emotional and material environments can explain over 20% of overall inequalities in cognitive development and 45% of inequalities in socio-emotional development by age three.<sup>13</sup> In 2023/24, around 1 in 3 children (32%) did not reach a good level of development by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. This rises to almost half (48%) for children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).<sup>14</sup> The percentage of children with a good level of development is lowest for those who live in the 10% most deprived areas (measured using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index). The difference between children eligible and not eligible for free school meals has increased since the previous year, with a difference of 20.5 percentage points. By age 11, 59% of the attainment gap between those disadvantaged and those not classed as disadvantage was due to the gap at age 7.<sup>15</sup> Good levels of development also vary geographically: Inner London has the highest percentage of children with a good level of development at 70.2% whereas the North West has the lowest at 64.4%.<sup>16</sup>

Yet evidence shows that children and families in areas of high deprivation will often not have the support services needed to overcome these additional challenges. Analysis by the New Economics Foundation found a clear and stark correlation between deprivation and access to early years education.<sup>17</sup> The distribution of access reflects the funding model design by government, whereby the full offer of 'free hours' is only available to families where all parents work for at least 16 hours per week – a condition that fewer households will be meeting in more deprived areas of the country.<sup>18</sup>

Analysis from Nesta found that approximately 100,000 children aged 0-4 living in relative poverty in England do not currently live within walking, driving or commuting

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<sup>13</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies (2022) 'Early childhood and inequalities', IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities, <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Early-childhood-inequalities-IFS-Deaton-Review-2.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Department for Education (2024) Early years foundation stage profile results, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2023-24>

<sup>15</sup> Education Policy Institute (2025) Breaking down the gap: The role of school absence and pupil characteristics, <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Breaking-down-the-gap.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Department for Education (2024) Early years foundation stage profile results, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2023-24>

<sup>17</sup> New Economics Foundation (2024) Childcare deserts: the reality of access to early years education; [Childcare deserts: the reality of access to early years education | New Economics Foundation](#)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

distance of a Family Hub.<sup>19 20</sup> Their analysis also highlights that while local authority average deprivation scores have been used by government to allocate hub funding, these scores may risk missing 'hidden pockets' of deprivation within affluent communities, which can be among the most deprived areas nationally. The government must adopt a strategic approach in their rollout of Best Start Family Hubs, achieved by considering a combination of data on access, inequality in early years outcomes, and deprivation at a neighbourhood level.

### **A good level of development**

Good level of development is a widely used benchmark that shows whether children are reaching key development milestones which prepare them for starting primary school. In 2024, Ofsted found that the pandemic is still having an impact on children's behaviour and social skills, with children starting Reception with delayed communication and language and emotional difficulties.<sup>21</sup> A school readiness survey from 2024 found that one in four children starting Reception were not toilet trained in 2024.<sup>22</sup> Half of school staff said that the school readiness problem is worse than in September 2022, with some children still arriving at Reception wearing nappies and sitting in buggies, with poor communication skills.

A child needs to have 12 specific early learning goals across five areas to achieve a good level of development.<sup>23</sup> Since 2022/23, the percentage of children reaching none or one early learning goal at the expected level has increased, as did the percentage of children reaching all 17 early learning goals at the expected level. This means that there is a greater divergence between children with higher and lower levels of development, indicating that some children are continuing to fall further and further behind their peers.

For children that aren't reaching a good level of development, there can be long-lasting and detrimental impacts for their future learning and life chances. Children deemed not

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<sup>19</sup> Nesta's analysis is based on access to an overall total of 900 family hubs, including those in local authorities that did not receive central government funding.

<sup>20</sup> Nesta (2025) Data can strengthen family hub rollout as new analysis reveals 100,000 children living in relative poverty in England have no access to vital services; A fairer Start; [Data can strengthen family hub rollout as new analysis reveals 100,000 children living in relative poverty in England have no access to vital services | Nesta](#)

<sup>21</sup> Ofsted (2024) Strong foundations in the first years of school, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strong-foundations-in-the-first-years-of-school/strong-foundations-in-the-first-years-of-school>

<sup>22</sup> Kindred Squared (2024) School Readiness Survey, <https://kindredsquared.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Kindred-Squared-School-Readiness-Report-Infographic-February-2024.pdf>

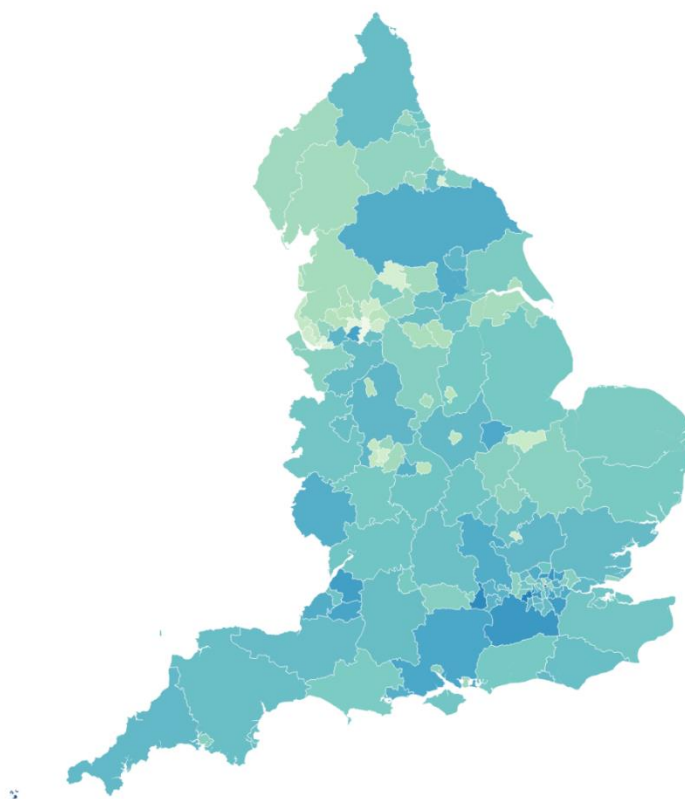
<sup>23</sup> Department for Education (2024) Early years foundation stage profile results, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2023-24>

school ready are nearly 2.5 times as likely to be persistently absent from school (missing at least 10% of lessons) and three times as likely to be NEET.<sup>24</sup>

### Percentage of children with good level of development per local authority, 2023/24

Percentage of children with good level of development in 2023/24

59.6 84.2



Source: Department for Education (2024) Early years foundation stage profile results • Map data: © ONS Geography • Created with Datawrapper

*Map 1: Percentage of children with a good level of development by local authority*

Map 1 shows the percentage of children reaching a good level of development across England by local authority.<sup>25</sup> As this map shows, higher percentages of children with a good level of development are concentrated around the mid-South East area, in local authorities such as Hampshire, and some London boroughs. The three local authorities with the highest percentage of children with a good level of development are Richmond

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<sup>24</sup> Centre for Young Lives, Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North (2024) An evidence-based approach to supporting children in the preschool years, [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/65b6b3c3bd2e7d160db2dbc0/66fec552d5159812bc01ff6d\\_Pre-School%20Report%20Digital.pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/65b6b3c3bd2e7d160db2dbc0/66fec552d5159812bc01ff6d_Pre-School%20Report%20Digital.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> These were created by inputting the most recent data at the time of writing from the Department for Education for maps 1 and 3, and data from New Economics Foundation for map 2.

Upon Thames (77.1%), Wokingham (75.5%) and Waltham Forest (74.2%); and the lowest three are Halton (61.2%), Salford (60.7%) and Manchester (59.6%).<sup>26</sup> Areas with low percentages of children with a good level of development are more prevalent in the North.

### **Childcare deserts**

High quality early education and childcare can boost a child's life chances, particularly for children from financially disadvantaged families.<sup>27</sup> However, support for parents is lacking and varies significantly across the country. Childcare deserts are defined as an area where there are three or more children aged 0-5 for every childcare place, indicating that the number of childcare placements available is far below the number of children.<sup>28</sup> A report from the New Economics Foundation found that 44% of children aged 0-5 (1.5 million) are living in these deserts.<sup>29</sup> There is a correlation between deprivation and childcare deserts, with the most deprived local authorities also being the most likely to be a childcare desert.<sup>30</sup>

Average access to childcare – defined by the number of registered childcare placements available and reachable for each child in an area – has declined since 2020, with the change greater in some places than others. London has seen an increase in childcare accessibility since 2020, whereas the North East, East Midlands, and Yorkshire and The Humber have seen the largest proportional decrease in childcare access. Childcare deserts are more likely to be in rural areas and coastal areas. Childcare oases – areas with higher access to childcare – tend to be urban areas, particularly in the South East and London.<sup>31</sup>

To address the gaps in provision, the Government has committed to deliver up to 6,000 school-based nursery places by funding 300 schools. The majority of phase one school-

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<sup>26</sup> Excluding Isles of Scilly and City of London.

<sup>27</sup> Department for Education (2025) Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Report on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes at Key Stage 2, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68669aa2e134dfbc2e9e6d74/SEED\\_impact\\_report\\_on\\_early\\_education\\_use\\_and\\_child\\_outcomes\\_at\\_KS2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68669aa2e134dfbc2e9e6d74/SEED_impact_report_on_early_education_use_and_child_outcomes_at_KS2.pdf)

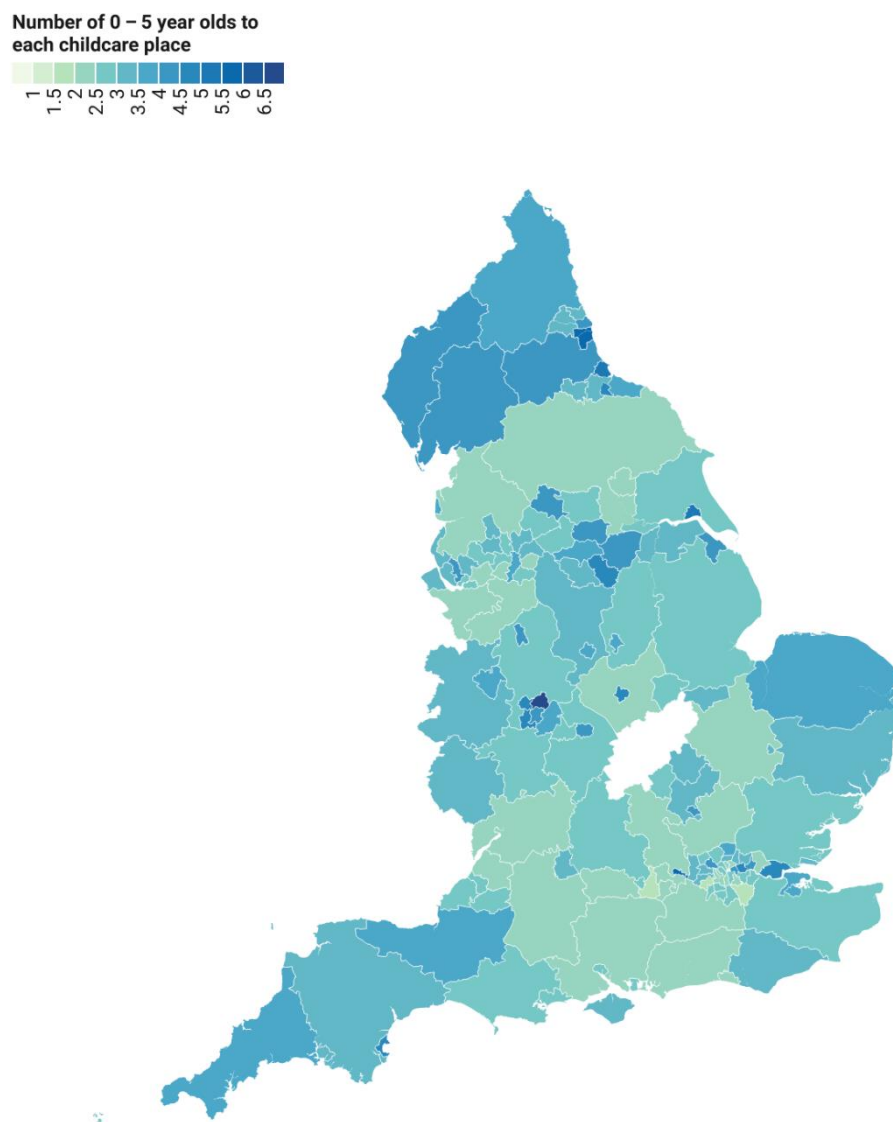
<sup>28</sup> New Economics Foundation (2024) Childcare deserts: The reality of access to early years education, <https://neweconomics.org/2024/05/childcare-deserts-the-reality-of-access-to-early-years-education> [Accessed: 01.09.25]

<sup>29</sup> New Economics Foundation (2023) A Fair Start for All: A universal basic services approach to early childhood education and care; <https://neweconomics.org/2023/11/a-fair-start-for-all>

<sup>30</sup> New Economics Foundation (2024) Childcare deserts: The reality of access to early years education, <https://neweconomics.org/2024/05/childcare-deserts-the-reality-of-access-to-early-years-education> [Accessed: 01.09.25]

<sup>31</sup> Ofsted (2024) Commentary: Changes in access to childcare in England, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-access-to-childcare-in-england/commentary-changes-in-access-to-childcare-in-england>

based nurseries are in the North or Midlands, with around one in ten in the North East. Government has said that Phase two will continue to build capacity in areas of need.<sup>32</sup>



\* North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire Local authorities are excluded from the list, because they were not included in New Economics Foundation analysis. \*\* Figures are rounded for clear representation of childcare deserts (areas where there are three or more children for each childcare place).

Source: New Economics Foundation (2024) Childcare deserts: the reality of access to early years education • Map data: © ONS Geography • Created with Datawrapper

Map 2: Number of children aged 0-5 per childcare placement by local authority

<sup>32</sup> Gov.UK (2025) School-based nurseries: Everything you need to know  
<https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/04/nurseries-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/>  
 [Accessed: 01.09.25]

In Map 2, areas of a darker blue have a higher number of children per childcare placement, and lighter colours indicate relatively fewer children per childcare placement. As the scale indicates, colours darker than a medium blue are childcare deserts (three or more children per childcare placement). Childcare deserts are particularly prevalent in the North of England, the South West, and in some parts of the East of England, with particularly high concentration in Norfolk (3.64 children per childcare placement).

### **Comparing childcare deserts with a good level of development**

Analysis<sup>33</sup> from Centre for Young Lives found that, of the local authorities in the bottom tertile of good level of development (areas with the lowest percentage of children reaching a good level of development), 76% are considered childcare deserts (39 of 51). This compares to 53% in the middle tertile (27 of 51), and 22% in the top tertile, areas with the highest percentage of children reaching a good level of development (11 of 51).<sup>34</sup> As with levels of deprivation, there will exist within each of these local authority areas neighbourhood level disparities in children reaching a good level of development.

To achieve their ambition to have 75% of children reaching a good level of development by age five, government must be targeting support to the most disadvantaged areas where there is often more limited access to childcare and lower rates of children reaching a good level of development. We welcome initial steps including Best Start Family Hubs targeted to areas of high need, new funded nurseries, and efforts to attract and retain early years teachers in settings serving the most disadvantaged communities to ensure that children and families with the most need are able to access support when and where they need it.

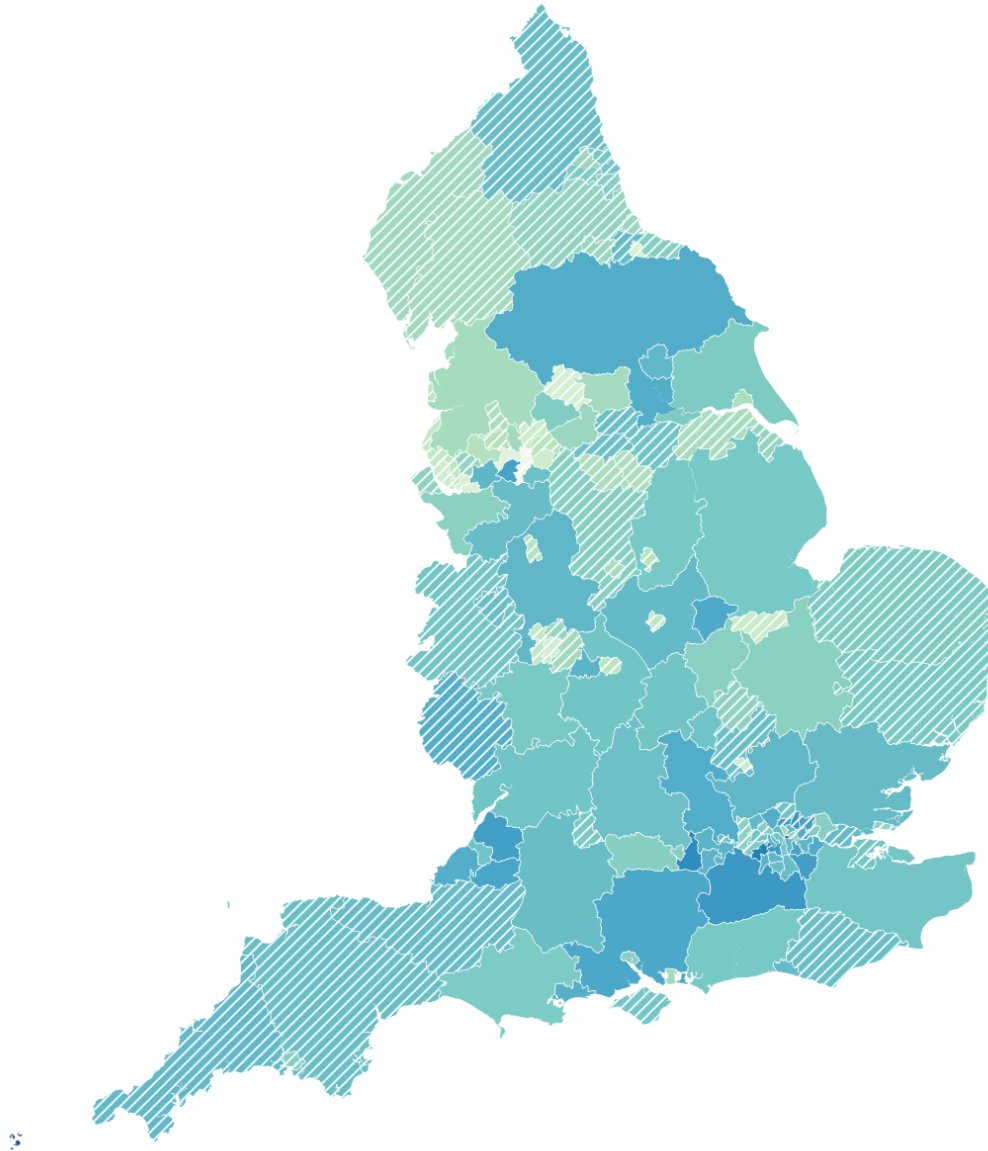
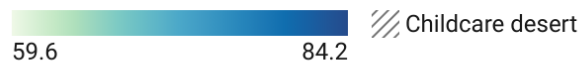
Map 3 below shows both number of children reaching a good level of development and childcare deserts, defined as three or more children per childcare placement.

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<sup>33</sup> In Annex A of this paper, the table ranks Upper tier local authorities from those with the lowest percentage of children reaching a good level of development by age 5, to the local authority with the highest percentage of children reaching good level of development. The table also shows the number of children per childcare place in the area with the corresponding ranking, using data collected by the New Economics Foundation.

<sup>34</sup> Analysis conducted by the Centre for Young Lives based on the table in Annex A.

### Percentage of children with a good level of development



Source: Source: Department for Education (2024) Early years foundation stage profile results, and New Economics Foundation (2024) Childcare deserts: the reality of access to early years education • Map data: © ONS Geography • Created with Datawrapper

*Map 3: Percentage of children with a good level of development and areas that have 3 or more children per childcare place, by local authority*

## Chapter 3: Best Start: Principles for a Fresh Start for Family Support

Best Start Family Hubs offer a vital opportunity to transform the system of support available to children and families. To make the most of this initial £500m investment and ensure Best Start Family Hubs deliver on the Government's ambitions for breaking down the barriers to opportunity, the Government must strike a suitable balance of direction and oversight while enabling local authorities to tailor delivery of support based on the assets and needs of their communities. To achieve this, Best Start Family Hubs should be led by a set of core principles which govern their delivery, setting a clear ambition and drive innovation locally.

The Centre for Young Lives has worked with experts and system leaders to identify six overarching principles that reflect the wants and needs of children and families and are necessary to deliver high quality, easily accessible, outcomes-focused and joined up family support that is responsive in meeting the needs of babies, children, young people and families.

For each, we define the principle and what it means for families, consider how close existing provision is to adhering to the principle and the challenges that remain, before making recommendations for national and local policy to establish the principle in practice.

### 1. A single-front door approach to support and an integrated local system

A 'single front door' approach to family support means that every child and family seeking help can access the support or information they need, regardless of where they go to ask for help.

At its centre is an integrated system of support where statutory and community partners lean together to create a wider network of support through multi-agency arrangements. This enables earlier identification of need, provides timely support and creates smooth transitions and clear referral pathways for children and families. Where effective, this can prevent children and families falling through the gaps of what have too often been siloed and fragmented statutory services. Family Hubs, which offer a range of provision across the 0-19 age range with services often operating across a variety of places and through different means, can play a central role in connecting families to wider services and supporting joined up working.

To deliver a 'single front door' approach and an integrated local system of support, multi-agency responsibility for services must be made explicit, including through:

- Frontline delivery: facilitated by clear referral pathways, strong data sharing arrangements, shared training across agencies, regular multi-agency meetings to manage day-to-day operational challenges, and communities of practice to drive improvements.
- Strategic decision-making: facilitated by embedded system infrastructure to bring together senior leaders across local agencies, shared visions and outcomes for family support through joint strategies and delivery plans, and strong leadership to deliver strategic, multi-agency working and system-wide collaboration.
- A highly skilled and professional workforce: instilling system-wide knowledge and multi-agency working across the workforce can deliver transformative, long-term systems change.
- Central government join up: clear direction and guidance from central government to all local agencies and partners delivering support for babies, children, young people and families. Facilitated by join up of national policy to embed family hubs into the wider network of support.

### *How close is existing provision to delivering a single front door?*

Local authorities recognise the benefit of integrated local systems in providing a holistic response and preventing families telling their story more than once to access the support they need. However, through our engagement with local authorities, it is clear that challenges remain in preventing and overcoming siloed service delivery. Siloed working can result in duplication across services, uncertainty for families and gaps in support. While the Family Hubs and Start for Life programmes have brought significant improvements through joint funding and guidance from DHSC and DfE, the extent to which Family Hubs are integrated with local partners across health, education, childcare and other support services for families remains varied across local areas.

### **Data sharing**

Challenges in data-sharing arrangements between Family Hubs and wider partners, health in particular, remain a key challenge for integrating systems. Where data sharing is working well, either through data-sharing agreements between partners or alignment of electronic system across services, it has enabled early identification of need, wider reach of services, a clearer understanding of the journey of the family through services to ensure smooth transition. While many areas have arrangements in place to share information, this is inconsistent across local authorities. Support and clear guidance from central government should enable local areas to implement these arrangements and give local leaders the confidence to effectively share information across services to deliver effective integration.

## **Capacity challenges**

Capacity issues often linked to funding, particularly for health and education partners, was identified as another barrier. Concerns were raised by local authorities about the impact of the planned changes to Integrated Care Boards and NHS England on the capacity of health partners to play a role in whole-system approach to family support both at delivery and strategic level. In the context of these changes, it is even more important that the Government are clear in their direction about the role of health in new Best Start Family Hubs. Likewise, schools are increasingly being asked to deliver more support outside of education in school settings, without the funding to support them.

## **Guidance from central government**

Support and clear direction from the Government would better facilitate stronger integration. While there is joint guidance from DfE and DHSC through Family Hubs and Start for Life, some local authorities reported that separate guidance across partners can create confusion and act as a barrier to effective joint working. The recent Families First Partnership programme seeks to reform local authorities' approach to implementing family help, multi-agency and child protection through new guidance to safeguarding partners (and other relevant agencies including education and childcare settings).<sup>35</sup> While the guidance references the role of family hubs as a gateway to targeted support, there remains a lack of clarity in defining the role of Best Start Family Hubs.

A singular, comprehensive guidance document governing Best Start Family Hubs would ensure clarity and alignment across partners working through and alongside hubs.

## *Joint working to deliver a 'single front door' for families*

### **Integrated service delivery**

At service-delivery level, a single front door means that when families access services, their needs will be identified, and they will be able to access the right help through the hub team – rather than being passed between different services. Best Start Family Hubs acting as a one-stop-shop for support is key to connecting families to wider support.

While co-locating key services within the hub can be effective, it is not always a 'silver bullet' for joint working. Integrating local systems can be further supported by:

- Embedding joint working and co-production at every level from strategic decision making through joint strategies and delivery plans, regular cross-sector meetings between key stakeholders at senior leadership level, managerial level and frontline practitioner level

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<sup>35</sup> HM Government (2025) Families First Partnership Programme;  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/families-first-partnership-programme>

- Effective data sharing arrangements between key local agencies and wider partners to support early identification of need, strong referral pathways and prevent families telling their story more than once to receive the right help.
- Strategic partnerships and integrated local systems should include local partners delivering services for children and families across Family Hubs, schools, health services, childcare providers, employment support and financial advice, youth justice, children's services, and specialist support such as that for families facing domestic abuse. It should also include a clearly defined role for the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector delivering support for babies, children, young people and families.

Clear direction from central government on the role that health, education and wider partners should play in delivering family support is crucial. Here we set out key examples of where strong partnership working is being delivered effectively across local authorities.

### **Integration with health services**

The joint-delivery of the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme was a welcome step to strengthen delivery of an integrated offer of support for children and families through the health services delivered through Start for Life.

The new neighbourhood health model set out in the NHS 10 Year Plan offers a further opportunity to further integrate health services with family support, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Two local authorities we spoke to for this report were already delivering Family Hubs through a 'neighbourhood approach' which will offer a strong local infrastructure to join up with new Neighbourhood Health Centres. Many others were already working with health partners to integrate family support with the new neighbourhood health model as it's rolled out across local areas.

**Case study A**, a council in the East of England offers a unique example of a strong integrated health and family support offer. Joint commissioning by public health, local authority children's services and the local ICB funds the delivery of a fully integrated range of early help and 0-19 services including a Family Hub model by a private provider organisation, in partnership with a national charity. It adopts a 'proportionate universal model', so that universal services are available to all families, and families who are in need of additional support are identified and offered it.

Strong integration has been driven by an outcomes-focused approach to their joint commissioning of services, with Family Hubs sitting at the centre of a wider network of support for families. The local authority highlighted the importance of the strong and trusted relationship between the local authority as the commissioner and the service provider. The local authority adopted a 'loose-tight' guidance approach by setting clear

expectations for providers through commissioning agreements based on key area-specific priorities and outcomes, while allowing the provider to identify and test the most effective way to meet outcomes and have an impact.

The commissioned provider collates information against 17 groups or 'categories of vulnerability' to provide strategic direction in the delivery of family support to target help towards children and families most in need. Integration is further supported by the join up of electronic systems across partners. This has enabled intentional data-sharing between hubs and health partners to monitor key information such as health inequalities and population health data. This allows for better identification of need and targeting of support to deliver an early intervention and prevention approach for children and families in need of support through early identification of need. System-wide knowledge across delivery partners and frontline professionals allowed for effective signposting, referral pathways and smooth transition of families across different services.

**Case study B**, a local authority in the North East is in the process of delivering an on-site GP service one morning a week for families already accessing services in the Hub, funded by their Integrated Care Board. Health partners and local authority teams attributed strong integration to the joint planning and funding in partnership with the ICB, and reorganisation of local authority buildings to maximise their use for delivering services. Health partners stressed the challenges of delivering high-quality, consistent and long-term services with short-term funding and the high cost of health services.

This level of integration was supported by strong working relationships at a strategic level, for example hub service leads were present at regular strategic meetings of the ICB. Family support services are governed by two aligned strategic boards – one covering early years, 0-5 and the Start for Life elements of the offer, the other responsible for Family Hubs, Family Help and wraparound support. Both boards are strategically aligned and feed into the local Children and Young People's Board and the Health and Care Partnership board, elevating the status of children and families across local partners.

At service delivery level, what underpinned strong integration in this case was a universal culture of collaboration and an understanding that health and family support operated as one team in delivering support through Hubs. Co-location of services was possible due to the smaller geographical size of the area, yet challenges remained around information sharing across partners, which was identified as central to better integration between health and family hubs.

**Health spot** is an integrated offer of services for young people, including a GP clinic, which started in Tower Hamlets and operates out of Spotlight youth centre. The model is now being replicated across other boroughs in North East London. Spotlight and its youth workers offer a welcoming safe space for 11-19 year olds and up to 25 years for those with SEND or with care-experience. The model helps to ensure health services are not “hard to reach” for young people and are designed with their rights and their needs in mind.

The GP service is a fully kitted doctor’s surgery where young people can have their health needs met with the support of youth workers. The surgery offers regular accessible appointments alongside sexual health and substance misuse support offers, mental health and emotional wellbeing support, social prescribing, speech and language service and health workshops. The GP regularly refers young people to activities within the youth centre, such as boxing activities, music, mentoring, employability and training and other social prescribing opportunities.

100 per cent of young people who use the GP Health Spot service would recommend it to their friends. A review of 800 consultations with the Health Spot GP reveal that the model is reaching a representative profile of young people in the local area in terms of ethnicity. More than two thirds of consultations were with young people presenting with mental health and emotional wellbeing difficulties, and more than 50 per cent had no current support for these needs. 65% of consults were with young people who had been or were currently open to children’s social care and 19% of consults were with NEET young people - indicating that the accessibility of the model ensures those most vulnerable are able to access.<sup>36</sup>

## **Partnerships with schools**

Schools are a crucial partner for Best Start Family Hubs, sitting at the heart of communities as a focal point for children up to at least sixteen years old and their families. School staff are often experts in the key challenges facing children and their families. In recent years, school staff have increasingly been tasked with delivering more support for children and families outside of the curriculum. Partnerships with the additional support provided by Best Start Family Hubs can be mutually beneficial to both partners and provide a more joined up, holistic offer of support.

We hope to see the upcoming Education White paper, due to be published this Autumn, deliver long overdue reforms to tackle long waiting times for assessments, EHCPs and sky-high transport costs. There is a place for Best Start Family Hubs to play a role in

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<sup>36</sup> Impact data from Health Spot shared with Centre for Young Lives

reducing the pressure on the SEND system and to provide much-needed wraparound support for children with SEND and their families. Under Sure Start, access to a nearby centre at an early age increased the likelihood of children being recorded as having SEND at age 5, but reduced the proportion of children recorded as having a SEND at ages 11 and 16 by 3%.<sup>37</sup> Sure Start Children's Centres delivered a needs-led and responsive approach that identified need early to give children and families the help they needed before challenges could escalate. By age 16, the probability of having an Education, Health and Care Plan decreased by 9% for children who had access to a centre.<sup>38</sup>

**Old Kent Road Family Zone, Southwark**, delivered by Surrey Square Primary School in Southwark is an example of the potential for family support when delivered meaningfully through schools. The Executive Head Teacher of Surrey Square Primary School, where the Zone operates, describes the ethos of the school as working alongside communities rather than “doing to” them, with the Family Zone placing decision-making in the hands of local people. The Family Zone is a hub running at weekends, when the school is not open. It serves a community where 85% of children attending the Zone are in the highest deprivation band on the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). The Zone receives grants from a philanthropic funder, amounting to over £500,000 to deliver the project for five years. Additional grants from other funders contribute to the delivery of specific programmes or activities - all of which are co-created with the local community. Partnerships with local organisations are also key to providing services that local people need and want.

The funding pays for a range of roles - largely offering employment to local people, including a part-time strategic lead position, a Family Zone coordinator, operational costs for the Zone and a range of different services delivered through the model. This includes a monthly ‘marketplace’ which offers a range of services including free food, toys, free physical and mental health checks in partnership with the NHS, and a selection of creative workshops. The Zone also hosts a weekly youth club for older primary school children and the ThinkSpace project designed by parents for parents to offer much needed space to connect, think and focus on personal development.

There is also a family support worker embedded into the school staff at Surrey Square, working alongside senior leadership and pastoral staff to identify where children and families might need support and help to access wider services to receive help.

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<sup>37</sup> Carneiro, P., Cattan, S., Ridpath, N, (2024) The short- and medium- term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes; [https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/SS\\_NPD\\_Report.pdf](https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/SS_NPD_Report.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

**Case study D** is a local authority delivering family support through a Trust model in the North East. Working closely with the local authority, the Trust delivers a 'team around the school' approach, linked to a longer-term aim of delivering support to families into communities through a hub and spoke approach. As their model of support has developed, particular emphasis has been placed on partnerships with local schools, driven by a local ambition to tackle low attendance rates and provide early help in schools to identify children at risk of dropping out of the education system. Family Hub staff are present in local schools and community spaces on a regular basis, working to identify at risk children and families.

The Trust and local authority are currently working to deliver an Early Help offer in every local school, with a focus on intervening early through primary schools, as part of the team around the school approach. As part of this, specific focus is placed on outcomes in education. Improving attendance has been identified as a key priority in recognition of the protective environment that schools provide. Partnerships have evolved where family support staff provide advice and support to mainstream school staff to engage with families, signposting them to the support services and connecting them with Family Hubs. The Family Hubs have also recently started to include attendance advisors as a regular service being delivered through the Hubs to strengthen the link with schools. The Trust also co-funds youth work in partnership with schools, with schools identifying children at risk of exclusion or with behavioural challenges for engagement in youth work.

**Oasis Community Hubs** work in close partnership with Oasis schools to build strong, safe, and resilient communities. Their holistic approach brings together schools, local partners, and residents to co-design and deliver a wide range of services and activities that support families and young people, enabling families to seek help early and youth workers to engage effectively with vulnerable young people.

Across locations such as Oldham, Enfield (Hadley), and Waterloo, Oasis Hubs offer tailored programmes that reflect local needs. Activities include youth clubs, mentoring, NEET interventions, and support for vulnerable families, alongside holiday programmes, financial inclusion initiatives, and community kitchens. In Oldham, the hub's trusted youth workers help keep young people safe, while families feel confident reaching out for support. In Enfield, Oasis Hub Hadley provides food parcels, one-to-one mentoring, and parenting support, and is seen as a vital resource by families who may be distrustful of statutory services.

Oasis Hub Waterloo exemplifies the open-access model, offering advice on debt, benefits, housing, and immigration, alongside wellbeing sessions, youth programmes,

and community workshops. The hub also provides basic resources through a Community Fridge, a give-and-take clothes rail, and free hot drinks. Its youth work team collaborates closely with Oasis Academy South Bank to deliver therapeutic and developmental programmes for young people aged 10–25, including sports, mentoring, therapy, and gender-based activities.

A common thread across all hubs is their commitment to building trust and sticking with families over time. This approach not only helps individuals navigate complex challenges but also fosters long-term engagement with statutory services. In communities hit hard by the pandemic, hubs have placed particular emphasis on employment skills and confidence-building, helping families move towards greater independence and resilience.

### **Supporting a high-quality local childcare market**

With most children spending a significant amount of their early years in childcare settings, ensuring local childcare settings are high-quality is essential to boosting child development. Access to high-quality and affordable childcare is also necessary to make it easier for parents with young children to work. However, as set out in previous chapters, average access to childcare in England has declined since 2020.<sup>39</sup> Decline in access has not been evenly spread across the country, with some areas more affected than others. This has resulted in inconsistency across local areas, with some areas becoming ‘childcare deserts’ – areas that have ‘persistently low accessibility’ and ‘low and variable accessibility’ clusters.<sup>40</sup>

The Best Start in Life Strategy makes several welcome commitments to improving the quality of and access to early education and childcare by expanding funded hours, increasing the availability of spaces through new nurseries and additional support for low-income families.

The extent to which Family Hubs are linked with local childcare providers and early years settings varied across local authorities we engaged with. Many Hubs and centres had closed their onsite childcare provision over the past decade. Local authorities can play a key role in shaping the local childcare market through strategic partnerships with local providers to deliver a consistent offer of support, encourage take up of entitlements, and share advice, training and information to boost capacity and upskill the wider workforce – key factors in supporting local authorities in reaching the good level of development milestone.

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<sup>39</sup> HM Government (2024) Commentary: Changes in access to childcare in England; Ofsted; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-access-to-childcare-in-england/commentary-changes-in-access-to-childcare-in-england>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

**Case study E** is a unitary council in the Yorkshire and Humber region. Every Hub across the local authority area also has a daycare setting either operating within the Hub (providers renting space in the building) or otherwise have a daycare ‘a stone’s throw away’. The local authority used additional funding through the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme to invest into workforce capacity and strengthen their local childcare offer. Start for Life and Family Hub practitioners operating across Hubs are connected with early years settings in the area surrounding the Hub to build trusted relationships with early years staff and provide advice, support and information about local authority delivered training opportunities for early years providers. Staff from the Family Information Service operate out of Hubs, available to give advice to parents and carers about their childcare entitlements and the local offer. Additionally, Baby Zone will be partnering with Onside Horizon Youth Zone, due to open late 2025 in this area.

**Case study F**, a local authority in the North West has a large, centralised early years team that has expanded to include maintained and non-maintained provision of childcare and strengthen join up. This supports the provision of consistent levels of support across early years settings regardless of where families access their entitlement. There is also a robust training offer for childcare providers delivered in part by local authorities (statutory elements such as safeguarding), alongside other aspects delivered by commissioned partners. This operates with a membership system where providers can pay for training and network opportunities delivered by the local authority. This local authority reported levels of childcare entitlement take up for two-year-olds and has between 97-99% take up of the three- and four-years entitlement.

## **Employment support**

At the end of 2024, 10% of all children in England (1.1 million) were living in workless households, an increase from 8.9% from the previous year,<sup>41</sup> and 7.8% of all children were living in long-term workless households.<sup>42</sup> Research shows that children who experience parental joblessness at any age are more likely to live below the poverty threshold in later life and suffer from impacts on their longer-term health.<sup>43</sup> Additional challenges of emerging trends such as poor mental health among children and young people, rising school absence, and the failure of mainstream schools in meeting the

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<sup>41</sup> HM Government (2025) Workless households and educational attainment statutory indicators 2025; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/workless-households-and-educational-attainment-statutory-indicators-2025/workless-households-and-educational-attainment-statutory-indicators-2025#statutory-measure-1-children-living-in-workless-households-in-england>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Martinez-Jimenez, M. (2020) How parental unemployment impacts children’s health in the long run; <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/business-school/ib-knowledge/health/how-parental-unemployment-impacts-childrens-health-the-long-run/>

needs of children with SEND further add to the challenge for parents of finding and retaining stable employment. Single parents or parents with young children – especially in areas where access to childcare is poor – will face additional challenges entering and remaining in employment.<sup>44</sup>

One of the primary roles of Sure Start Children's Centres was in offering employment support to parents through strong links to Jobcentre Plus. Strengthening this link should be a key priority for Best Start Family Hubs, with DWP as a core partner and Hubs investing in strong working relationships with local Jobcentres to deliver employment support through Hubs.

### **Domestic abuse**

Domestic abuse is a highly prevalent and harmful crime. In 2018, then Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield published evidence on the prevalence of children affected by domestic abuse, estimating that more than quarter of children were living with families affected by domestic abuse, although the true figure is likely to be even higher.<sup>45</sup> The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognised children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right for the first time, acknowledging that children don't just witness or over hear domestic abuse but face very severe and wide-reaching impacts on their safety, wellbeing, happiness, relationships, and future life chances. Pregnancy and the postnatal period in particular is a high-risk time for escalation of domestic abuse and homicide for both the non-perpetrating partner and the infant.<sup>46</sup>

Family Hubs are likely to be in constant contact with families affected by domestic abuse and are well placed, if equipped appropriately, to recognise and respond safely to domestic abuse and intervene early to ensure families receive the right support.

In 2022, the Department for Education set out welcome expectations for the response to domestic abuse in Family Hubs. However, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner has found that many Family Hubs are still failing to fulfil these basic expectations, and opportunities to intervene early are being missed.<sup>47</sup>

In a roundtable the Domestic Abuse Commissioner held with frontline practitioners working in a Family Hub, 66% of respondents were unaware of the minimum service expectations for domestic abuse. For Family Hubs managers, just 54% were aware of the document and 30% did not know about the expectations. Concerningly, several

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<sup>44</sup> Clery, E., Dewor, L., Edney, C. (2023) The Single Parent Employment Challenge: Suitable Employment, Final Report, January 2023; [The-Single-Parent-Employment-Challenge-Report-SPEC.pdf](#)

<sup>45</sup> Children's Commissioner. (2018). Estimating the Prevalence of the 'toxic trio': Evidence from the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey. [Vulnerability-Technical-Report-2-Estimating-the-prevalence-of-the-toxic-trio.pdf](#)

<sup>46</sup> Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2025) Victims in their own right: Babies, children and young people's experience of domestic abuse; [dac\\_bcyp\\_main-report\\_V6-DIGITAL.pdf](#)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

practitioners lacked clarity and were ambiguous about the difference between domestic abuse and parental conflict, with some even speaking about parental conflict provision as a domestic abuse response, which is inappropriate and potentially dangerous.

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner recommends that:<sup>48</sup>

- The Department for Education invests in specialist domestic abuse work in Family Hubs as a priority, ensuring co-locations and opportunities for domestic abuse support services to play more of an active role in each Family Hub.
- The Department for Education makes implementing both the 'Minimum expectations' and the 'Go further' sections of the Family Hubs Service Expectations document in responding to domestic abuse mandatory and holds Family Hubs to account in the implementation.
- All Family Hubs practitioners are comprehensively trained in an understanding of domestic abuse, its distinctions from parental conflict, and how to best identify and support child victims.

### **The Voluntary and Community Sector**

The voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) is an important partner in the delivery of Best Start Family Hubs, with many organisations holding strong subject expertise and links with families in need of support. As statutory services have been squeezed, community-based voluntary organisations have been key to propping up services and filling gaps in support for children and families. The voluntary sector could strengthen the capacity and reach of family support into communities, particularly in traditionally 'hard to reach' or underserved communities.

**High Trees**<sup>49</sup> is a multi-disciplinary voluntary organisation delivering a broad range of services for adults, children, young people and families across Lambeth, London. Their children and young people's services include an adventure playground, mentoring in schools, family support, youth employment and peer research. Their services for adults includes adult education, employment support, support for local groups and community research. Their Community Research and Impact team also focuses on delivering continuous learning from their service delivery, informing future provision to meet the needs of those who most need support in Lambeth. This works to centre the voices of local residents and strengthen understanding of the landscape in Lambeth through community-based research.

High Trees has paved the way for collaborative VCSE sector working in the borough. Building Young Brixton (founded in 2017) is a partnership of ten youth organisations that work together to embed a culture of collaboration and draw on strengths of their

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> [High Trees](#)

organisations to support children and young people by providing a seamless offer of support. High Trees also coordinate other VCSE sector partnerships in the borough, all of which work to strengthen the sector as a whole and improve the services and support available to residents – Lambeth Community Research network brings together locally rooted organisations, academics and universities, community stakeholders and commissioners, working together to ensure that research taking place in Lambeth is ethical, high-quality and action-focused. Lambeth Community Hubs Network is a partnership of five place-based Lambeth organisations, focusing on providing capacity building support and open access resources to their VCSE sector peers.

Speaking recently about the proposed Family Hubs model, one of the Co-CEOs of High Trees was enthusiastic about the potential for organisations to work more intentionally and strategically together to support more families in Lambeth. They were however cautious about another initiative that was founded on the local authority having pre-determined the role they intend the VCSE sector to play, and that council-VCSE models based purely on a pre-determined commissioning model can miss out on some of the benefits that emerge when the VCSE sector are truly included as a strategic partner from the start of any such initiative. High Trees, with other local partners, continue to work towards creating an infrastructure support strategy for the charity sector in Lambeth that would be designed and owned by the sector and strengthen their capacity and ability to play a strategic role in designing and delivering support to those who need it most, making sure the full expertise and capacity of all partners is fully utilised.

A clearly defined and meaningful role for VCSE organisations in strategic planning, and co-production in the design and delivery of services should be set out in national guidance and in local delivery plans, and the sector should be funded to play a role in supporting the delivery of Hubs. Exploring partnership working through joint-commissioning arrangements which provide accountability for the VCSE sector and ensure that voluntary organisations are formally recognised for their contribution and work to strengthen their join up with local authority services.

### *Strategic multi-agency working*

Effective strategic multi-agency working, supported by strong senior leadership, is needed to align the system behind shared outcomes, enhance the impact of service delivery, and remove duplication of working at a time where resources and capacity are stretched. Multi-agency working, where it is working well, is often supported by senior leadership level 'buy-in' across all local partners. Several key factors were identified in encouraging strong integration and effective multi-agency working, including:

- An over-arching area-wide strategy that sets key priorities, visions and outcomes for children and young people – that establishes Best Start Family Hubs as a key means to achieve this.
- Joint or strongly aligned strategies across early years, early help and Family Hubs. These strategies should be co-designed by all relevant partners.
- Nested levels of integration through routine meetings across strategic, managements and operational level staff from local agencies and stakeholders. This ensures that key decisions are taken together and have system-wide buy in.
- A senior leadership-level meeting (including Directors of children's and public health, CEOs, Cabinet and Lead Council members) to provide direction and accountability of priorities relating to family support and broader outcomes for children, young people and families.

Mandating integrated working through governance arrangements could support local authorities and partners to prioritise a joined up approach. The Families First Partnership Programme offers a precedent for how local areas can be supported to adopt an integrated approach.

A statutory duty on local agencies (including the local authority, education and health) to collaborate through multi-agency strategic arrangements and to develop and implement a joint strategy and delivery plan for family support could support local areas to drive systems change and deliver an integrated approach to family support. A duty should include the requirement to conduct a strategic needs assessment to form the basis of local action plans, alongside regular reporting on provision to Secretary of State level to boost accountability and ensure local areas are meeting the needs of children and families. Such a duty would require funding to allow local authorities to effectively meet requirements.

### *A highly skilled and professional workforce to deliver systems change*

Delivering effective Family Hubs requires not just area-expertise but strong ability to influence and shape local systems, secure buy-in, and plan strategically. Implementation and development of Sure Start made clear the importance of strong leadership to effectively deliver multi-agency working and deliver integrated support for families, such as through the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL).<sup>50</sup>

An evaluation of children's centres in 2012 found that in those centres where managers held specific qualifications like the NPQICL, staff were more likely to report greater

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<sup>50</sup> Bouchal, P., Norris, E. (n.d.) Implementing Sure Start Children's Centres; JRF; [Implementing Sure Start Childrens Centres - final\\_0.pdf](#)

levels of safeguarding and emphasis on vision and standards.<sup>51</sup> An emphasis on leadership skill development should also reflect the importance of having a diverse workforce that reflects the families that are accessing support. Reinforcing the importance of these skills across the workforce is essential to delivering long-term systems change to strengthen family support. Plans for workforce reform should support the need for more skilled leaders with system-wide knowledge and experience that supports multi-agency working, systems change, and strong local, strategic partnerships.

A skilled and qualified workforce working in and around Family Hubs enhances the impact of services being delivered to children and families. Joint training and Communities of Practice (at national and local levels) to share advice and best practice would support a workforce that skilled in a consistent way to identify need, work across the wider system and deliver a consistent and joined up response to families seeking help. Government should consider the role of regional bodies such as Combined Authorities, and the new National Centre for Family Hubs run by the Local Government Association in supporting local areas in recruitment, retention and workforce development opportunities.

### *Joining up national policy on Family Hubs*

Joining up policy at a national level is crucial in supporting local partners to integrate at a strategic and service level. One of the founding principles of Sure Start was the necessity for a cross-departmental unit which was essential in the design of a programme that delivered integrated care to children and families with significant impact across health, employment, education, and wider outcomes. The Government's commitment to deliver through cross-departmental missions is an important opportunity to support the integration of Family Hubs; and Hubs in turn have a potentially crucial role in realising the ambitions of the Opportunity Mission at a local level.

Central government can support the delivery of integrated local systems by joining up policy at a national level and embedding the role of Family Hubs to strengthen their long-term and system-wide impact. Best Start Family Hubs could be a central vehicle for the Opportunity Mission and should be a running agenda item for the mission board.

A cross-departmental plan for family support, supported by jointly owned national guidance, would help to support local partners to come together strategically. A range of existing plans to transform policy, including the Youth Strategy, 10 Year Health plan, the Young Futures programme and the SEND White Paper – are key opportunities to establish the role of Family Hubs in delivering joined up early intervention.

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<sup>51</sup> HM Government (2015) Organisation, services and reach of children's centres; Evaluation of Children's Centres in England, ECCE Strand 3; Department for Education; [Organisation, services and reach of children's centres](#)

The upcoming Youth Strategy, due to be published later this year, should recognise the role of Family Hubs in delivering joined up services and continuity of support to children and their families throughout their entire journey to adulthood. National guidance should clearly define the role of Family Hubs as part of an ambitious offer of support for older children and their families. Alongside an offer for older children within family hubs, there should be clear pathways between wider local authority youth provision and family hubs, ensuring that frontline professionals have a clear understanding of the support available to children and families through Family Hubs and the Young Futures programme.

### **Partnership with health**

The cross-departmental nature of the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme was one of its greatest strengths, with joint funding and guidance for Hubs from the DfE and DHSC supporting the delivery of a more integrated model of family support. With the rollout of Best Start Family Hubs, the Government should make explicit the role that DHSC and local health partners will play in service delivery, through clear guidance and matched funding from DHSC to reflect those expectations. This is especially important in the context of the structural changes to Integrated Care Boards which will likely impact their ability to deliver healthcare and play a strategic role in joining up services. Strengthening integration with Family Hubs could serve to avoid duplication across services and boost capacity across both partners.

### *Recommendations*

**The Department for Education should establish a cross-departmental plan for Best Start Family Hubs**, co-signed by key departmental partners including DfE, DHSC, DCMS and MHCLG. This plan should be a running agenda item at the Opportunity Mission Board and supported by a cross-departmental team of senior officials. This should include the join up of existing national policy to maximise the role of Best Start Family Hubs as a key means of delivering a range of ambitions of this mission-led Government

- The Department for Health and Social Care plans for **Neighbourhood Health Centres** should establish a specific role for join up and delivery through Best Start Family Hubs. This should include delivering CAMHS in community settings such as hubs.
- The Department for Education should establish a formal SEND role for Family Hubs in the upcoming **Education White Paper**, including facilitating early identification of children with SEND, delivering needs-led support, and bringing down SEND rates in the long term. This should include upskilling Family Support and early years staff with the tools required to support early intervention for children with SEND.
- The upcoming **Youth Strategy** should set out a clear and defined role for Family Hubs in the network of support available for older children. While this may not

necessarily mean co-location of youth services in Family Hubs, the strategy should set out the need for strong partnership working between Hubs and Youth services, including Young Futures Hubs to ensure continuity of support for the child as they grow up, and their family.

- **The Government should establish a Family Hubs working group of senior civil servants** across DHSC, DfE, MHCLG, MoJ, Home Office, DCMS, DWP, DEFRA and beyond to be tasked with supporting joint working through family hubs across a range of children's services. This should include the role of Family Hubs as effective springboards for a wide range of new government policies such as support for Domestic Abuse, children's social care reforms, SEND reforms and Youth Provision.
- **The Test, Learn and Grow Programme should explore scalable and effective examples of best practice** of a wide range of support for children and families to be delivered with and through Best Start Family Hubs.

**The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should publish one single and comprehensive, cross-departmental guidance document for Best Start Family Hubs**, co-signed by key departmental partners including DfE, DHSC, DCMS and MHCLG. This guidance document should apply to health partners and local authorities, in order to ensure agencies are engaging with the same guidance when planning jointly for the delivery of Best Start Family Hubs. This guidance should also:

- **Facilitate stronger data-sharing arrangements.** Supported by the establishment of a single unique identifier, data-sharing pilots should be established to understand what works well in ensuring smooth data-sharing between health and other local partners.
- **Facilitate stronger join up between family support and local childcare providers.** Each of the Government's 3,000 school-based nurseries should be home to a Family Hub or children's centre on at least a part-time basis. Family Hubs guidance should also clarify the role of Hubs in improving quality and establishing links within the childcare market through training, guidance, and holding drop-ins.
- Agree standards for delivering an offer for older children.
- Clarify the role of integrated mental health support for teenagers through Family Hubs and Young Futures Hubs.

**The Department for Education should establish a workforce leadership programme** to equip local leaders with the knowledge, tools and professional development to deliver strong leadership, systems change and project capacity across Family Hub staff and wider Children's Services. This should include expanding the role of the National Centre for Family Hubs to support local authorities to strengthen and expand workforce

capacity. This should include a unified national training programme for all Family Hubs staff and the sharing of best practice through Communities of Practice.

**Through new Best Start Local Plans, local authorities should support the delivery of integrated local systems by:**

- **Establishing formal arrangements to embed multi-agency decision making from the earliest possible stage of service design and delivery.** This should include relevant partners across local authority teams, children's social care, education, health, public health, criminal justice, employment services and the VCSE sector.
- **Identifying and clearly defining where responsibility and accountability for Family Hubs sits within the wider system.** This should include establishing formal procedures to bring together senior leaders across partners.
- **Exploring effective ways to ensure multi-agency working is happening,** such as through co-location of services (where appropriate), expansion of multi-disciplinary teams operating in and around Family Hubs, or bringing together Early Years, Early Help and Family Hub teams under one directorate.
- **Establishing a clearly defined, formal and strategic role for the VCSE sector in service design and delivery.** This might include working with the local VCSE sector to audit local voluntary sector services delivering for children and families across the area as a starting point for identifying gaps in provision, and exploring ways to strengthen the role for local VCSE sector into service design and delivery, including through commissioning arrangements, formal and strategic-level partnerships, co-production of services, and development of strategy and training programmes for VCSE partners.

## 2. Family support where the voices of children and families are heard

We know that many families – especially those who are most vulnerable - can be wary of public services and sometimes have poor experiences in accessing help or having no agency, caught up in processes that seem to take over their lives. Best Start Family Hubs must be different. They must 'get alongside' families to provide support when and how its needed rather than contributing to a feeling among families that services are 'doing it to them'. Recognition of how families perceive and understand family support across the whole system must be at the heart of every decision through the implementation of Best Start Family Hubs with meaningful co-production of services embedded as routine practice.

### Best practice in engaging children and families

Part of the success and widespread acceptance of Sure Start was the co-production of services with parents, carers and families in communities, identifying need and designing and delivering services in response. In 2012, the Children's Centre Census highlighted the widespread use of parent and community volunteers in roles such as outreach, delivering open access activity sessions such as stay and play and organising events.<sup>52</sup>

Every local authority we engaged with had different mechanisms in place that gave space for parent and community voice to be heard. Examples of best practice include a range of roles and responsibilities for parents and wider communities from service delivery through peer support and volunteering opportunities, to a more embedded, system-level role in strategic decision making around service design and delivery, such as Parent and Carer Panels. One local authority had a *Family Mentor Service* which employs local people in paid peer support roles, further supporting the building of trust, reducing isolation, and raising aspirations within communities, while several others had paid and volunteer roles for parents and community members as parent champions or community navigators signposting families to support.<sup>53</sup>

These approaches show that engaging parents and community members either through voluntary or paid roles strengthens trust, increases service uptake, fosters community ownership, and raises aspiration and empowerment of parents and the wider community by upskilling them and building confidence.<sup>54</sup> We heard from several local authorities that parent and community engagement also strengthened the capacity and sustainability of the workforce.

### Co-production of service design and delivery

Embedding parent and community and engagement through co-production from the early possible stage in service design and delivery is essential to designing a system of support that is reflective of local needs and contexts and is accessible and accepted by the families they are there to serve.

Involving parents and carers in service delivery through peer support and volunteering opportunities and paid roles can work to upskill local communities with much broader and long-lasting impacts for communities. It also strengthens the proactive outreach of

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<sup>52</sup> Parliament UK (2013) Best Practice for a Sure Start: The Way Forward for Children's Centres; All Party Parliament Sure Start Group; <https://www.4children.org.uk/Files/cffc42fe-49eb-43e2-b330-a1fd00b8077b/Best-Practice-for-a-Sure-Start.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> National Lottery Community Fund (2021) A Better Start Through Better Systems: Parent, Family and Community Engagement; National Children's Bureau; <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Insight-3-A-Better-Start-Through-Better-Systems-Parent-Family-and-Community-Engagement-FINAL3-lo-res.pdf?mtime=20210329111948&focal=none>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Hubs into communities, encouraging families to access the support when they need it through trusted relationships with other parents as service users.

Co-production – with children, parents and community voices – is most successful when embedded at the earliest possible stage, such as during decisions around the commissioning of services, and is continued right through to frontline delivery. As such, co-production must be built into the system from senior, board-level meetings and commissioning arrangements to requiring delivery partners to co-produce services delivered in the community. Parent Champions and Parent-Carer led Advisory Boards offer valuable means through which to embed the voices of communities into service design and ensure that family support reflects and is responsive to the communities they serve. Paid roles for parents and carers, such as through community navigator roles or peer support opportunities, would recognise and reward the contribution of communities in service delivery.

### *Recommendations*

**Learning from the benefits of co-production under Sure Start, guidance from Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should support local authorities to embed co-production into Best Start Family Hubs** to ensure that the voices of children and families are heard, issuing guidance to local authorities on effective ways to embed co-production into service design. This should be supported by the sharing of best practice and practice guides from the National Centre for Family Hubs.

**Local authorities should encourage parent and carer voice in the co-production of family support services through:**

- **Exploring means of embedding parent and community voice into service design and delivery** from the earliest stage through strengthening the role of Parent Carer Forums and Panels, Parent Champions and Parent-Care Advisory Boards to feed in at a strategic level.
- **Encouraging parent-led services in Best Start Family Hubs through peer support and volunteering opportunities and training** to strengthen proactive outreach into the community and build trusted relationships with new and potentially 'harder to reach' parents.

## 3. Family support that is embedded into communities

Securing the trust and engagement of children and families is integral to the ability of family hubs to reach and realise change in the lives of their communities. For this to be possible, families need to know what support exists, trust that they will receive the right support for their needs and be confident in the knowledge that the system will

provide support throughout the journey of childhood. For families to build these trusted relationships with services, integrated family support needs to be visible to families and be long-term and sustainable to become embedded into the hearts and minds of communities.

### *Lessons from Sure Start Children's Centres*

There has been no new legislation on joined up family support since 2006. The introduction of the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme introduced a new model of delivering support, without a strong legislative basis. Our analysis found that Family Hubs make up only 40% of family support provision, with the rest delivered through remaining children's centres.<sup>55</sup> This is likely more than what is delivered through the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme, as many local authorities took the decision to rebrand and remodel their family support in line with the Family Hubs even though they didn't receive additional funding.

The remaining 60% of family support provision is made up of children's centres, which are on a statutory footing under the 2006 Childcare Act and amendment in 2009. This has resulted in inconsistencies across the provision of family support as a whole. The lack of a consistent legislative basis for joined up family support has also meant uncertainty in the longevity of the programme, which hinders the ability of local leaders to plan for the long-term and embed hubs into the local ecosystem of support.

During the roll out of Sure Start, the first phase of implementation placed significant focus on branding.<sup>56</sup> Those efforts saw Sure Start, in its many iterations over the following decade, become a household name that families knew and trusted to help them access support. Decades later, the current provision of family support delivered through remaining children's centres and new Family Hubs, has become a patchwork of different providers and operating models, and as a result there lacks an overarching awareness and understanding from families of what Family Hubs are and what support they deliver. As a result, families may be less inclined to seek out support when they most need it.

A further challenge in recent years has been the lack of sustainable, long-term funding that prevents local authorities planning for longer-term provision and the strategic delivery of family support. We heard from local authorities that the previous short-term funding arrangements, particularly for elements of the Start for Life offer, can result in challenges in the recruitment and retention of skilled staff to deliver those services. This can undermine efforts to build a sustainable workforce where families recognise faces of frontline staff and build trusted relationships with service professionals.

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<sup>55</sup> Analysis conducted by Centre for Young Lives of FOL returns for Part one of this research.

<sup>56</sup> Institute for Government (.d.) Implementing Sure Start Children's Centres; [Implementing Sure Start Children's Centres - final 0.pdf](#)

### *Establishing the longevity of Best Start Family Hubs through legislation*

The lack of a statutory footing for Family Hubs poses a risk to their longevity, with challenges both in building trust in the community, and for long-term workforce security and sustainability.

In 2006, a statutory basis was created for Sure Start through the 2006 Childcare Act, which created legal duties for local authorities to establish and run children's centres. In 2009, further legislation was passed to put children's centres under local authority control on a statutory footing. However, with the introduction of new guidance that lessened requirements, and the removal of the ringfence for Sure Start funding, this legislation has failed to protect children's centres and other early intervention support from severe cuts.

Unlike children's centres, Family Hubs have no legal basis which creates confusion and jeopardises the sustainability of the programme. The establishment of a new legislative basis for joined up family support, which incorporates remaining children's centres and Best Start Family Hubs, would create clarity and secure the sustainability of the programme.

Government should replace the existing legislation underpinning children's centres and replace it with fresh legislation that places all family support on consistent statutory footing under the Best Start Family Hub model, stronger than that for children's centres which will ensure security and longevity of the programme going forward. This will require the Department for Education to work alongside local authorities to support them in redesigning and rebranding children's centres to integrate them into one consistent, clear offer of family support that form the Best Start Family Hub model, underpinned by a strong and consistent legislative footing and a national Best Start Family Hubs brand.

### *A Best Start Family Hubs Brand*

The rollout of Best Start Family Hubs offers the opportunity to build on the legacy and lessons of Sure Start in developing a Better Start brand that re-establishes family hubs as the first port of call in the minds of families in every community. While we spoke to several local authorities who are keen to start to - or are already working on - develop branding across their hubs and centres, funding constraints and competing priorities mean many local authorities have been prevented from doing so.

Central government should develop, and rollout coordinated outreach and public awareness campaigns, compelling visual branding for family hub and existing local authority children's centres buildings and documentation, and a universal online platform offering advice and information on where to access support. The recent launch

of the Best Start in Life website and Parent Hub app<sup>57</sup> that brings together key information and advice for parents into one space is a welcome first step in developing a universal brand and online one-stop shop for parents seeking support.

### *Recommendations*

**The Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care should establish a clear delivery plan for reaching 500,000 more children by 2028 through new Best Start Family Hubs.** Funding should be targeted to areas of greatest need and include longer-term funding arrangements for Family Support to allow local authorities to plan for the future of family support provision.

**The Department for Education should develop a new and meaningful nation-wide Best Start Brand.** This should replace Family Hubs and Sure Start branding and include coordinated public awareness campaigns, to remove confusion and ensure families know what support is available to them, and where to access it.

**The Department for Education should consult on plans to establish a statutory basis for Best Start Family Hubs, bringing all existing family support under one Best Start Family Hub framework. This legislation should ensure:**

- A legal definition of a Best Start Family Hub, which replaces previous Sure Start legislation and establishes clarity about the remit of hubs and centres.
- Clear principles are set for Best Start Family Hubs and wider Family Support.
- A duty is placed on local partners, including local authorities, health providers, and schools, to work together to support families through hubs.
- The financial sustainability of Best Start Family Hubs is protected through a duty to provide or commission support.
- A duty is placed on local partners to report on key metrics relating to the provision of Best Start Family Hubs.

## **4. Family support that is easy to reach**

Ensuring easy access to support is essential to ensuring children and families are getting the help they need, when they need it. Over the past decade, local authorities have had to adapt as a result of cuts to funding and make do with what remains, which has resulted in no two local authorities delivering family support in the same way. Our supplementary chapter explores the different operating models of family support across the country and identifies three key typologies.

Regardless of the specific operating model, easy access to support in every community should be a key priority as local authorities deliver Best Start Family Hubs. Proactive

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<sup>57</sup> Best Start in Life; <https://www.beststartinlife.gov.uk/>

outreach and a strengths-based approach that draws together all of the existing support already being delivered across communities will support in the delivery of integrated system of family support that is easily reached by families in need of help.

### *Challenges for local authorities in reaching children and families*

Even in local authorities that are delivering a strong offer of integrated family support through hubs, there was widespread recognition that some families may not be accessing the support they need.

Previously, children's centres traditionally operated within a model of "pram-pushing distance", with a high level of capital investment to build a stock of children's centres across each community. Yet the closure of over well over 1,000 children's centres since 2010 means the reality in many local areas is a much smaller number of physical hubs or centres, often targeted in communities of highest deprivation.<sup>58</sup> While the emphasis on delivering support to the families most in need is welcome, the removal of physical centres across communities has likely resulted in many families going without the support they need. We spoke to several local authorities who were forced to close their Children's Centres as Sure Start funding came to an end, while others who received DfE funding had only recently begun to rebuild their offer from the ground up.

For larger or more rural local authority areas in particular, the closure of centres over the past decade presented challenges in ensuring that families across local authority areas could access support. Some local authorities identified further barriers to engagement with services, such as perceived stigma among some families or communities in accessing family support delivered by local authorities.

We spoke to many local authorities operating a hub and spoke model of provision to outreach proactively into communities, with a particular focus on reaching traditionally underserved communities. Several local authorities are working closely with local community groups such as faith groups to reach into communities and make families aware of the local support available, for example through newsletters. One local authority delivered parenting groups in different languages to reach communities identified as not accessing that type of support. However, the collection of reach data is patchy and inconsistent across the country which undermines local authority ability to understand the impact of their services and target underserved communities proactively.

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<sup>58</sup> UNISON (2024) Cuts to children's centres hitting the most disadvantaged; [Cuts to children's centres hitting the most disadvantaged | News, Press release | News | UNISON National](#)

## *Reaching more families through Best Start Family Hubs*

The implementation of Best Start Family Hubs should include the routine collection of rigorous reach data to identify the scope, scale and impact of services delivered in communities.

Adopting a strengths-based approach to delivering family support that draws on existing community assets was identified as an effective way of ensuring family support is easy to reach. This included hub and spoke models that draw on existing community assets to deliver linked sites or mobile satellite hubs through schools, libraries, churches and other community buildings. The role of ‘community connectors’ or ‘navigators’, present in the community – at the school gates, in GP’s offices or community events – provide an effective means of signposting families to support services and providing information and advice about where to go for support.

### **A strengths-based approach**

Recognition of the full range of support offered for children and families across communities enables local authorities to adopt a strengths-based approach that joins up the wider network of support and create a more coherent offer for children’s families. Doing so will address some of the gaps in support that have resulted from statutory thresholds and the decline of more universal early intervention from local authorities.

Alongside stronger integration with health partners, schools and early years settings as outlined in Principle One, a strengths-based approach should recognise the valuable support delivered by the VCSE sector for children and families. Local mapping exercises or audits to identify the wider network of organisations can strengthen and shape the development of Family Hub networks. This is particularly crucial for older children where the traditional Family Hub services may not necessarily be appropriate for older children and therefore partnerships with youth organisations are essential to ensuring the network of support as they grow up.

Strong partnership working between the VCSE sector and Family Hubs allows for the broadening of the offer of support for children and families and the sharing of expertise to improve consistency and quality in provision. Networking, training and development opportunities for Family Hubs and voluntary sector organisations are effective means for raising awareness to families about the wider offer of available support in the community, providing a cohesive, community-wide offer of support, and upskilling staff across services to improve the quality of support for children and families.

## *Recommendations*

**Guidance from Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should establish routine collection of reach data for services delivered by and**

**through Best Start Family Hubs.** This would enable local authorities to better understand impact, target underserved communities and strengthen proactive outreach.

**The Department for Education should support the national rollout of community-facing ‘navigator’ roles** to strengthen proactive outreach to families and connections across services. This should include co-producing a national role specification and training network for navigators with local authorities, families and the VCSE sector.

**Local authorities should establish delivery plans for proactive outreach of services into communities through Best Start Family Hubs.** This should draw on existing community assets such as schools, community spaces and community networks, and factor in the role of the VCSE sector in reaching underserved communities.

## 5. High-quality Family support in every community

As family support provision evolves and expands, the importance of ensuring that services remain of consistently high quality across local areas and are responsive to the needs of the communities they serve, must not be lost. This ensures that there is no postcode lottery for families looking for support, and they can be confident in the standard or support they receive no matter where they live.

While the commitment to establish 1,000 hubs is welcome, the success of Best Start Family Hubs – and their ability to secure a range of improvements in family outcomes – will rest in the quality of the provision in every interaction with babies, children and families across services. Alongside sufficient and sustainable investment, a consistent core offer, regular feedback and monitoring of services, strong guidance on the delivery of evidence-based interventions, and investment into workforce development and leadership are essential to ensuring maximum impact of Family Hubs and driving systems change locally to deliver for children and families.

To ensure that Best Start Family Hubs deliver high-quality services that respond to and meet the needs of the local communities they serve, Hubs require the following:

- A consistent core offer of support for children of all ages and their families.
- Sufficient and sustainable funding to enable local authorities to deliver high quality services.
- Standardised collection and monitoring of data on service up-take and engagement, explicitly linked to outcomes, would help to ensuring high-quality provision and needs-led service design.
- A common outcomes framework for babies, children and young people to set clear, national ambition and align local systems behind shared outcomes.

- Support from central government for the delivering and high-quality implementation of evidence-based interventions for children and families.

### **A consistent core offer**

It is vital that there is consistency in the baseline offer of family support across local areas to avoid a postcode lottery for families in which some families have access to a wide range of high-quality services, and others do not, simply because of where they live. In the implementation of Best Start Family Hubs, the Government should establish a centrally mandated core offer of support delivered through hubs, while allowing local authorities the flexibility and freedom to deliver additional services tailored to the needs and context of the communities they serve. Nesta's survey highlighted the value for families in having a clear, one-stop shop for support where even if they don't know what help they need, you can arrive at a hub and be given the support you need - services such as health visiting, stay and plays and parenting advice were particularly valued.<sup>59</sup> Their feedback highlighted however that gaps between touchpoints and a lack of consistency could undermine the effectiveness of support.

### **How has the core offer evolved?**

As a result of funding cuts since the peak of Sure Start, the nature of services delivered through integrated family has shifted, resulting in inconsistency across local areas. The transition from children's centres to the Family Hub model included the end of clear statutory guidance that set out clear expectations for service delivery.

Funding cuts and the absence of statutory guidance from the early 2010s precipitated changes in service delivery that were also widely reported by local authorities, including withdrawal of staff by partner agencies, reduced funding from lead agencies and direct funding cuts by partner agencies.<sup>60</sup> This was reported to lead to an overall reduction in aspects of services, and a reduction in the hours or days and number of locations where services were provided. The nature of the core offer has become hollowed out and inconsistent, making it much more difficult for parents and carers to understand what support is available to them. Sure Start Children's Centres were targeted to children under five and were expected to deliver a core offer of services including children and family health services, family support and outreach, and links with Job Centre Plus as well as other services in response to local need.<sup>61</sup> Centres in the most disadvantaged communities were required to have childcare places for a minimum of five days a week, 10 hours a day, 48 weeks a year.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Nesta (2025) A New Era of integration;

[https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/A\\_new\\_era\\_for\\_the\\_early\\_years.pdf](https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/A_new_era_for_the_early_years.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Children, Schools and Families Committee (2010) Sure Start Children's Centres;

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/130/13006.htm>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

The main conclusion from a DfE evaluation in 2015 was that the overall capacity of children's centres was overstretched in their aims to meet the needs of those in their local communities. With the rollout of the Family Hubs and Start for Life, the age range was broadened to 0-19 (25 in the case of SEND), with hubs to work with families from preconception including through the Start for Life offer and some services could include signposting and partnerships rather than direct delivery from a physical space.

### **How do we get there?**

In the Best Start in Life strategy, the DfE has committed to developing a 'core offer for families, to create a clear local parent pathway from conception through to the early years', with the additional commitment to fund more evidence-based parenting and home-learning offers to support local authorities in reaching the 75% GLD target.<sup>63</sup> This is a welcome step towards providing clarity and consistency in the offer delivered through Hubs and reinforcing the importance of support in the early years.

These core services should be centrally mandated and set out clearly in statutory guidance which follows legislative changes set out earlier in this report, offering a consistent, baseline level of support to children and families through every Hub across the country. Beyond the core offer set out in guidance, local authorities should have ownership over the delivery of Hubs across their locality, allowing for adaptation to local need and parent voice.

In the box below, we set out our recommendation for the services that Government should include in the core offer. Drawing on lessons from Sure Start service requirements and insights from local authorities, the below list of core services reflects Government's focus on school readiness, while ensuring that wider whole-family, all-age support across the 0-19 age range is available across hubs. The Centre for Young Lives supports recommendations for an approach to services of 'proportionate universalism', where hubs offer a universal baseline of services, with a disproportionate focus on those with the highest levels of need.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> HM Government (2025) Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life; Department for Education; [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/689b39d55555fb89cf3f5e7d/Giving\\_every\\_child\\_the\\_best\\_start\\_in\\_life\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/689b39d55555fb89cf3f5e7d/Giving_every_child_the_best_start_in_life_web_version.pdf)

<sup>64</sup> Nesta (2025) A new era for the early years; [https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/A\\_new\\_era\\_for\\_the\\_early\\_years.pdf](https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/A_new_era_for_the_early_years.pdf)

**The core offer should include** early language support, health visiting, infant feeding support, midwifery and maternity services, parenting support, SEND support and services for all ages, dedicated support for parents with older children (5+), and a universal offer of stay and play.

Statutory guidance should also establish a **core requirement for hubs to provide appropriate advice and strong referral pathways** to the following services, as a minimum: parental employment support, debt and welfare, domestic abuse support, mental health services, housing and homelessness.

Beyond these core services, hubs have an important role in ensuring families with specific needs, such as debt, housing challenges, and domestic abuse, get the support they need. We therefore call for the Government to establish a core requirement for hubs to provide as a minimum training, advice and clear referral pathways to a wider range of essential support, recognising that in all areas it may not be feasible to deliver these services directly out of the physical hub.

Beyond core provision, local authorities should be given the flexibility and freedom to provide additional services that respond to the unique needs of the communities they serve, with support from central Government in delivering evidence-based services with a key focus on high-quality implementation. Selection of these additional services by local authorities should be directed by the voice of parents and children and local strategic needs assessments.

### *Sufficient and sustainable funding to deliver high-quality services*

There was considerable variation in local authority spending on joined up family support, with annual spend per centre ranging from £30,000 to over £1m.<sup>65</sup> While this can in part be explained by the specific context and demographic of the local authority (for example county councils reported on average higher spend per centre due to larger geographical coverage), the range in spend is likely indicative of inconsistent quality of family support provision across local authorities, creating a postcode lottery for families accessing support. Similarly, our FoI returns revealed very inconsistent collection of reach data by local authorities. Some local authorities did not collect reach data for their hubs and centres, while those that did were not collecting the data in a standardised or comprehensive way. What this means is a lack of clarity on who is and isn't accessing support, and the contribution that family hubs make to improving the lives of families.

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<sup>65</sup> Analysis by the Centre for Young Lives of FoI Returns from Part one of this research.

## **Long-term, sustainable and sufficient funding for joined up family support**

Since the publication of Part one of this series, the Government has announced its new Best Start in Life, committing to reform support in the early years through expanding family services, improving affordability and accessibility of early education and childcare, and raising quality across the early years system and childhood. The strategy sets out plans for a new Best Start Family Service and the rollout of up to 1,000 new Best Start Family Hubs for 0 – 19s and their families across every local authority by 2028, backed by £500m investment from the DfE.

As we set out in this report, to embed Best Start into communities as a trusted source of help for children and families, its implementation must be supported by long-term, sustainable funding and a framework of excellence to deliver effective, high quality and reliable services. We start with the following assumptions set out in Part One of our research, based on Fol returns from local authorities:

- In 2023/24, £577m was spent by local authorities to provide 2,100 hubs and centres
- The average spend per hub was £275,000 per year, on average approximately half of what was spent per hub under Sure Start.<sup>66</sup>

Cuts to funding over the past decade have resulted in the hollowing out of the offer of family support being delivered through hubs and centres. With the rollout of Best Start Family Hubs, high quality implementation, backed by sufficient funding, is essential to ensuring hubs are delivering effective interventions that deliver their intended impact.

As stated, the DfE has committed an additional £500m over the next three years to deliver 1,000 Best Start Family Hubs. We welcome the recent announcement from the DfE to invest an additional £12m in extra grant funding to 65 underserved local areas under Best Start Family Hubs. This will include existing Family Hubs whose previous funding is coming to an end. There are three scenarios of how that money could be spent, adjusting the spend per centre.

- £500m split evenly across 1,000 hubs amounts to just under £167,000 per hub per year.
- Distributing this funding in line with an average spend per centre based on our findings (£275,000 per hub per year) would deliver just over 600 hubs.
- Funding an average spend per centre in line with what was spent per centre under Sure Start (£500,000<sup>67</sup>) would deliver just over 330 hubs.

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<sup>66</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) Analysis of Fol returns in Part one of this research.

<sup>67</sup> According to the NAO, in 2006 the average expenditure of Sure Start Local Programme children's centres was £580,000. For other centres the average was £350,000. The value of the second figure, in 2023-4 terms using HMT deflator tables, is £534,000.

## **What more is needed?**

As with the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme, the DHSC need to jointly fund Best Start Family Hubs with the DfE to ensure these ambitions can be delivered. Many local authorities and health partners who we have talked to have raised concerns about the high cost of health services delivered through Start for Life, and the need for sufficient and long-term funding to place these services on more stable and sustainable footing.

Funding should also be used to support local authorities to convert remaining children's centres into Best Start Family Hubs. Our estimates suggest that children's centres made up 60% of total integrated family support provision in 2023/24.<sup>68</sup> 124 Upper Tier local authorities reported delivering just over 1,000 children's centres which could be integrated into a Best Start Family Hub model with the support from central Government.<sup>69</sup>

Based on the above assumptions, there are two scenarios for the additional funding required for the DHSC to ensure the delivery of 1,000 hubs.

- To deliver 1,000 hubs over three years with an average spend per hub of £275,000 per year, an additional £325m would be required, bringing the total cost over three years to £825m.
- To deliver 1,000 hubs over three years with an average spend per hub of £500,000 per year, a further £1bn would be required, bringing the total cost over three years to £1.5bn.

If the DHSC matched the £500m investment over three years from DfE, it would bring the total investment in Best Start Family Hubs to £1bn over three years, to deliver 1,000 hubs. This amounts to an annual spend per hub of £333,000.

The Government should also explore new and innovative ways to unlock funding and boost investment into Family Hubs, including with the impact economy. Social outcomes partnerships could be piloted to work with local authorities and service providers to deliver services to meet outcomes set be a clearly defined shared outcomes framework for children, young people and families.

## **Targeting the areas of highest need**

It is vital that support is reaching the children and families who need it most. It is welcome that Best Start Family Hubs will be open to all but located in areas of disadvantage. Today, 100,000 children living in relative poverty from birth to age four

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<sup>68</sup> Analysis by the Centre for Young Lives on FoI returns from Part One of this research.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 124 Upper Tier local authorities reported delivering 645 Family Hubs and 1,015 Children's centres in 2023/24.

do not live within easy reach of the vital services provided by existing family hubs.<sup>70</sup> While local authority average deprivation scores are useful in targeting support, affluent areas can contain ‘pockets of deprivation’ which can be among the most deprived areas nationally and so Government must take a strategic approach to targeting funding to ensure those most in need receive support.<sup>71</sup>

Likewise, the Government should reconsider proposals as part of the Fair Funding Review to fairly redistribute local authority funding based on deprivation and need. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that the current Government’s baseline funding reform proposals are not particularly redistributive and in fact some of the most deprived areas in the North are set to lost out the most.<sup>72</sup>

### *Improving accountability and oversight*

Under Sure Start, regular Ofsted inspections of children’s centres both raised the profile of their work, identified key targets and outcomes, and assured quality in the provision of services. However, Ofsted’s role has since been removed. Effective oversight and accountability is crucial to ensure that Family Hubs are delivering high-quality services and delivering impactful interventions for families. Ofsted has already been commissioned to review Start for Life services nationally, and its evolving early years inspection framework covers safeguarding, leadership and children’s welfare, tools directly relevant to family hub practice. Stakeholders suggest that there remains an important role for the Inspectorate in relating to the safeguarding function that Family Hubs play.

In discussion with local authorities, there were mixed views on whether Ofsted inspections should be reintroduced for Best Start Family Hubs. While some viewed inspections as central to ensuring high quality service provision, others felt that it would place unnecessary additional burdens and resource requirements on already overstretched and under-resourced local authorities. Instead, a focus on outcomes-based accountability, underpinned by standardised data collection, monitoring and transparent reporting, would be an effective first step in ensuring a greater level of accountability on Best Start Family Hubs provision than existed for the Family Hubs programme.

### **How do we get there?**

Standardised collection and monitoring of data on service up-take and engagement, explicitly linked to outcomes, would help to ensuring high-quality provision and needs-led service design. Embedding feedback from service users would also help to drive

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<sup>70</sup> Nesta (2025) A Fairer Start Press Release; [Data can strengthen family hub rollout as new analysis reveals 100,000 children living in relative poverty in England have no access to vital services | Nesta](#)

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies (2025) Fair Funding Review 2.0: the impacts on council funding across England; [Fair Funding Review 2.0](#)

continuous improvement and influence strategic decision making. As discussed elsewhere in this report, joining up high-quality data across partners delivering family support would allow for the identification and proactive outreach of services to underserved groups in the community and influence service design to be responsive to the specific needs of communities.

To deliver this, addressing the current gaps in local authority data through strengthening and expanding the routine collection and monitoring of services delivered through hubs is necessary. Joint operational guidance from Government to support local authorities in implementing these processes would remove some of the current challenges. Likewise, enhancing data-sharing between local agencies would serve to provide a full picture of the engagement and impact of service delivery.

The recent Family Hubs Framework guidance for 2025/26 sets out best practice in relation to measuring outcomes, and quality improvement.<sup>73</sup> Government guidance for Best Start Family Hubs should build on and strengthen that guidance to ensure all Best Start Family Hubs are meeting the 'Go Further' expectations for setting outcomes, data collection and sharing across agencies and routine evaluation and quality improvement, as routine practice.

### *Delivering outcomes-based accountability: a shared outcomes framework for Opportunity*

For local authorities and health partners, there are several outcomes frameworks such as the Children's Social Care National Framework and Public Health Outcomes Framework underpinning/driving national action and applied to local authorities and their partners with outcomes relating to babies, children and young people. Across national and local systems, there is a current lack of a consistent and common approach to how outcomes are defined and measured and how data are collected. This results from, and perpetuates, siloed working and leads to duplication and gaps across systems and missed opportunities to understand and capture the impact of collective action and specific interventions, such as Family Hubs, that influence transformation and drive forward improvement and quality.

The current focus on good level of development is welcome in setting a clear and achievable target outcome for local authorities and in recognising the importance of getting it right in the first few years of a child's life. However, there is a risk that viewing good level of development in isolation as the only key outcome, will miss the bigger picture for children and families and longer-term outcomes across the full 0-19 age range. The draft proposals for a Local Government Outcomes Framework (LGOF) are a

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<sup>73</sup> HM Government (2025) Family Hub model framework 2025-26; Programme guide; [Family Hubs Model Framework](#)

positive commitment from central Government to streamline and clarify their expectations of local authorities.<sup>74</sup>

### **How do we get there?**

A common outcomes framework for babies, children, and young people would set high ambitions and help national and local systems focus on what matters most. It would drive improvement, quality, and integration across services, supporting children and families more effectively. By aligning strategies around shared goals, the framework would strengthen partnerships, reduce duplication, and minimise the potential of conflicting priorities and incentives across partners working to support children and families. At a time where demand is rising and resources and capacity are limited, this is especially vital. Recognition of a wider outcomes currently overlooked in the LGOF like the mental health and wellbeing of babies children and young people – which underpins lifelong wellbeing - would be a welcome addition. The rollout of national wellbeing measurement, such as that recommended by #BeeWell<sup>75</sup>, would plug the current gap in data collected on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing at a local level, as well as providing strategic direction to wellbeing interventions to support children locally.<sup>76</sup>

For Family Hubs, as central delivery points within children's services, a common framework would unify local efforts behind clear outcomes, enhancing collaboration and ensuring consistent, integrated support from universal services to targeted care.

The Common Outcomes for Children and Young People Collaborative has developed a Common Outcomes Framework for all babies, children and young people, based initially on the findings of a review of 20 outcome framework from the UK and abroad, including Every Child Matters.<sup>77</sup> The work spans three aspects: outcomes for babies, children and young people; outcomes for parents and carers; and system and service-level enablers. This framework is already being used in several London boroughs to shape and drive local children's services reform and transformation and in others as the focus of review and update of local strategies and plans.

We recommend that the Government build on the Common Outcomes Framework as the foundation for a cross-departmental national outcomes framework for babies, children and young people and their families. This aligns with Nesta's call for a single, nationally defined framework that brings clarity and coherence across delivery systems, while still enabling local relevance and adaptation. The framework should align

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<sup>74</sup> HM Government (2025) Local Government Outcomes Framework: Priority Outcomes and draft metrics; [Local Government Outcomes Framework – Priority outcomes and draft metrics](#)

<sup>75</sup> <https://beewellprogramme.org/>

<sup>76</sup> [Support for a national wellbeing measurement programme in the House of Commons - #BeeWell](#)

<sup>77</sup> Common Outcomes for Children and Young People Collaborative (n.d.) The Framework; <https://www.commonoutcomes.org.uk/the-framework>

strategically with the Local Government Outcomes Framework and establish a core set of centrally set outcomes, indicators, and metrics, reflecting national priorities for both central and local action. Critically, it must also allow flexibility for local authorities and partners to define and monitor additional place-based outcomes and indicators that respond to community specific needs and contexts.

### *Support to deliver high-quality, evidence-based interventions*

We welcome emphasis in the Best Start strategy on the delivery of evidence-based programmes based on what works for children and families. We support Nesta's call for a menu of evidence-based programmes for local authorities to choose from, with discretion on how they implement them to reflect their local context.<sup>78</sup> Strengthened collection of data and feedback as outlined above will support local authorities in ensuring that these evidence-based services are being delivered with high-quality implementation.

### *Recommendations*

**The Department for Education should design and deliver a centrally mandated 'core offer' of service 0 – 19 to be delivered through Best Start Family Hubs.** Guidance for local authorities should outline a clearly defined offer for older children aged 5-19 that draws on wider system partners to build a network of support throughout childhood. This will be complemented by additional services delivered by local authorities that respond to the specific local context and needs of the communities they serve.

**The Opportunity Mission board should establish a 'common outcomes framework for Opportunity', a cross-departmental common outcomes framework for babies, children and young people,** with clear accountability across Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to build on the well-developed and tested framework from the Common Outcomes for Children and Young People Collaborative and align at a strategic level with the Local Government Outcomes Framework for local authorities.

- The framework should be used to identify national priorities for children and young people, while allowing for flexibility and leadership by local authorities to identify local level priority outcomes based on local context and need.

**The Department for Education should support the delivery of evidence-based services with a focus on high quality implementation.** This may include a national database for local authorities and service providers of evidence-based interventions

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<sup>78</sup> Nesta (2025) A new era for the early years;

[https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/A\\_new\\_era\\_for\\_the\\_early\\_years.pdf](https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/A_new_era_for_the_early_years.pdf)

which support the roll out and scale up of delivery of well-evidenced interventions to increase reach and accessibility and improve outcomes.

**Guidance from Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should support local authorities to strengthen standardised data collection and effective monitoring of take-up, engagement and outcomes of service delivery** through Best Start Family Hubs to drive accountability and continuous improvement and target outreach to underserved and under-reached families in the community.

**Government should match ambitions for family support and commit to long-term, sustainable funding into new Best Start Family Hubs and shore up existing family support provision.**

- The Department for Health and Social Care should match the initial investment of £500m into Best Start Family Hubs through Start for Life, to boost investment to a total of at least £1bn over the next three years.
- The Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care should scale up investment into joined up family support over the next decade to strengthen provision and embed Best Start Family Hubs into communities for the long-term. Part 1 of our research sets out a costed model that recommends an iterative approach to scale up funding to reach £2.2bn and 2m more children by the ninth year.
- The Department for Education should consider innovative means to raise investment for Family Hubs. This should include establishing National Social Outcomes Partnerships pilots for Family Hubs to unlock additional investments.

**The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education should provide a dedicated funding pot for youth service provision** as part of Best Start Family Hubs.

**Local authorities should develop area-specific common outcomes frameworks to reflect the needs and priorities of their communities.**

- This should build on the nationally defined common outcomes framework, identifying which require the greatest local focus and adding any additional outcomes-related detail or enablers needed to address community context.
- Area-specific common outcomes frameworks should encourage local authorities to strengthen partnerships across health, education, public health, the voluntary and community sector, and youth services to agree collective action and deliver the system enablers required for progress.
- Responsibility for delivering central and local priorities should sit with the Children and Young People's Board, ensuring strategic oversight, cross-sector collaboration, and active engagement with communities.

## 6. Family support for children of all ages and their families

A core element of Best Start Family Hubs must be to work across the whole life of a child as they grow up, offering support across the whole 0-19 range – from pregnancy through to the teenage years. This helps families build trusted relationships with services, prevent cliff edges in support and help families navigate the challenges that can occur for children throughout their childhood.

### *Support for older children*

There are unique challenges facing older children. Child criminal exploitation has increased by over 50% since 2022.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, school absence is increasing – with one in five pupils now persistently absent, missing 10% or more of school.<sup>80</sup> Britain is also the European leader for youth unhappiness, with one in five children and young people aged eight to 25 having a probably mental health condition.<sup>81</sup> This rises to nearly one-in-four among 17-19 year olds.

At the same time, the wider network of support for older children (5-11) through youth services, extended school and free activities has been depleted. Many schools and local authorities have been unable to provide the programmes of after school and holiday activities they once did due to budget pressures and the removal of ringfenced funding for the Extended Schools Programme. In the youth sector there has been a real terms cut of £1.2bn to youth services between 2010-11 to 2023-24 in England,<sup>82</sup> and some 643 youth centres have closed.<sup>83</sup> As a result, there is a paucity of opportunities and family support for school-aged children (primary and secondary), and their families. Other vital support and services for children and young people face significant pressure. In 2022/23, of the 1.4 million children and young people estimated to have a mental health problem, less than half (48%) received at least one contact with CAMHS.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, the

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<sup>79</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) State of the Nation: Identifying Vulnerable children and young people and supporting them to thrive; [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/659fd56cbd8d3f4a80aaac76/6882852fd4477a8133bb7a05\\_State%20of%20the%20Nation%20Centre%20for%20Young%20Lives.pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/659fd56cbd8d3f4a80aaac76/6882852fd4477a8133bb7a05_State%20of%20the%20Nation%20Centre%20for%20Young%20Lives.pdf)

<sup>80</sup> Department for Education. Pupil absence in schools in England.

<sup>81</sup> NHS England. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey.

<sup>82</sup> YMCA (2025) Beyond the Brink? The state of funding for youth services; <https://ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/youth-services-report-A5-2025WEB-compressed.pdf>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Children's Commissioner's Office (2024) Children's mental health services 2022-23: <https://cfyl.org.uk/ref/GVWDMjK>

SEND system is in desperate need of reform to address current crisis where many children are waiting months, and in some cases years, for the support they need.<sup>85</sup>

While recent announcements such as free breakfast clubs, the extension of funding for the Holiday Activities and Food programme, Young Futures Hubs and the Better Futures Fund are all welcome steps forward in rebuilding that network support and activities for older children, Best Start Family Hubs provide an important opportunity to ensure families can access wraparound throughout childhood, when they need it. Key milestones or transition points, such as children moving from primary to secondary school, can be particularly challenging time and are often when families may need that additional wraparound support to guide them through transition.

### *Delivering support to children of all ages through Best Start Family Hubs*

While strong partnership working with schools can be effective in identifying need early and providing support to families with school-aged children, local authorities were aware that the majority of service users were families with younger children and highlighted the inherent challenge in delivering services across the full age range due to the different needs and preferences of say a two-year-old and sixteen-year-old.

It is self-evident that those Family Hubs which have been primarily operating and are viewed as being for children aged 0-5 will need to extend their offer to older children. There is also a challenge for traditional services for older children and young people to develop a stronger family support element and more specialist services for young people in response to need, to become part of a Family Hub. While the Best Start Family Hubs will be open to all in the local community as a universal service, so too should they be a place and opportunity for young people to seek support. More targeted support for children and young people of all ages will then be provided in response to need. This principle must be a golden thread that runs throughout provision for all ages and their families.

#### **A 0-19 Offer**

These case studies highlight how support for children and young people of all ages and their families can be successfully delivered through Best Start Family Hubs. The councils below are all at different stages of implementing the 0-19 model, building on trailblazer 0-19 children's centres that developed over the last 25 years.

**Doncaster** has been a trailblazer in rolling out a 0-19 offer. It offers 12 family hubs across the local authority which work in collaboration with key partners including City of

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<sup>85</sup> Children's Commissioner (2024) Waiting times for assessment and support for autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions;  
[https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2024/10/CCo-report-on-ND-waiting-times\\_final.pdf](https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2024/10/CCo-report-on-ND-waiting-times_final.pdf)

Doncaster Council, local NHS trusts, and local organisations. The Family Hubs in Doncaster offer a range of support for families, including midwife appointments, baby groups, parenting classes, and infant feeding. They also run a range of Adult, Family and Community Learning workshops which includes programmes to support parents with helping their children learn maths, phonics, and reading.<sup>86</sup> Doncaster Family Hubs have implemented the Solihull Approach, which is a series of online courses for parents, including 'Understanding pregnancy, labour, birth and your baby', 'Understanding your baby,' and 'Understanding your child'. These courses increase accessibility for parents in remote areas or who do not want to attend a group and increase accessibility for men. They are available in several languages and the 'Understanding your child' course was awarded the CANparent Quality Mark by the Government. There are also courses for parents, relatives and friends of children with additional needs.

**Manchester** also offers services for families with children of all ages through the Family Hubs. This includes the enhanced Start to Life offer, which covers maternity services, Sure Start Children's Centres, perinatal mental health support, and information on building early language and a home learning environment. For children 11-14, Family Hub staff offer support for families to assess, diagnose and support children 0-16 who have speech, language and communication needs, alongside the MoreLife Junior Physical Activity Referral Service (PARS), a free programme for children aged 5-17 who are above a healthy weight, connecting them with sports and activities opportunities in their local area. Likewise, some Family Hubs offer activities for older children, or otherwise signpost to other community-based offers. Children aged 11-19 can access BeeWell's trained coaches, join the youth forum, and those aged 16-18 can access Career Connects Advisers and Coaches.<sup>87</sup>

**Southwark** operates an 11 plus, 'Adolescent Sure Start' team which offers drop-in services in Family Hubs and local community spaces to raise awareness among families accessing Hubs of a space where families with older, adolescent children can go for help specifically targeted at older children. The 11+ team sits alongside the under 11 team which operates on a locality basis, centred around local primary schools. For example, drop-in sessions by the 11+ team, at a library on a local estate has been successful in engaging families with older children. One Youth Centre in the Southwark constituency also has a multi-agency delivery team, where the 11+ team are there every fortnight to support older children and their families. Referrals to the 11+ team come from drop-in sessions run by the 11+ team, local schools, front-door Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) teams or youth justice teams. For example, local schools will make families with

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<sup>86</sup> City of Doncaster Council (2025) Family Hubs and Services, <https://www.doncaster.gov.uk/services/schools/family-hubs-and-services>

<sup>87</sup> Manchester City Council (n.d.) Family Hubs, <https://hsm.manchester.gov.uk/kb5/manchester/directory/familyhub.page?familyhubchannel=0>

older children aware of the drop-in, or the team will be notified by schools of an at-risk child or family, which the 11+ team will then coordinate with to carry out a home visit, meet with them at a drop-in session and support the family and child to be connected with other services. Southwark emphasised the role of hub managers in bringing together community organisations to strengthen the network of support for older children. For example, regular briefings bring community-based delivery partners for adolescent services around the table, alongside the Council, to facilitate funding bids for support services for older children.

Delivering an all-age offer through Family Hubs requires a new ambition in support for children, young people and families that understands the differing needs of children as they grow up and the different pressures on families. For some hubs with access to good buildings and space, it may be possible to provide all age provision on one site with different access points and areas and making use of the fact that most older children will be in school during the day.

**Youth Zones**, delivered by OnSide, offer state of the art Youth Zones in the most economically deprived areas. They also host BabyZones<sup>88</sup> which deliver services for parents of younger children, such as soft play and parenting workshops and engagement sessions, services similar to Family Hubs and children's centres. They provide a strong example of how co-located services can be delivered across the full age range. For example, the Youth Zone in Wigan provides support and services for older children in the evenings and weekends and delivers services for young children and their parents during the day when most older children are in school.

Youth Zones (and BabyZones) are embedded into communities with strong local partnerships. Increasingly, local areas are working to incorporate BabyZones into their Family Hub network. One local authority in the Yorkshire and Humber region told us that they will be delivering a BabyZone later this year and joining up services with their Family Hubs.

For those with more limited space, it may be necessary to link provision across a community in a hub and spoke approach. One local authority in London maintained specifically targeted youth hubs alongside their Family Hub offer in separate physical spaces, however, has strengthened join-up between services to deliver the all-age offer by integrating hubs at management level to deliver a joined up approach. Whichever model fits locally, it will be vital that the services and support are seen as part of the same entity and brand, and that the approach, values and principles we set out here are

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<sup>88</sup> [Babyzone](#)

consistent throughout. Central to embedding an ambitious all-age offer into Family Hubs is flexibility and adaptability in the support available that is tailored to the individual young person.

Local authorities should therefore develop and build a seamless approach building on the wider network of youth services supporting children and young people locally. This should include the upcoming rollout of new initiatives like Young Futures Hubs. In areas where these flagship hubs are developed, there should be a strong connection and join up between the Family Hub and the Young Futures Hub. Likewise, in the context of the new neighbourhood health model being rolled out in the 10 Year Plan, Family Hubs should consider how integration with neighbourhood health centres could support delivery of mental health support for children and young people through stronger join up with CAMHS and Mental Health Support Teams in schools.

### *Recommendations*

**The Department for Education should support the delivery of an ambitious offer of support children across the full 0-19 offer** through setting clear standards and expectations for Best Start Family Hubs.

**The National Centre for Family Hubs should promote best practice in supporting older children through hubs** by providing resources and guides for tailoring your space and the offer of activities and services to children of different ages based on examples of best practice. This should include strengthening partnerships with voluntary and community organisations delivering services for older children.

## Conclusion

The Centre for Young Lives welcomes the renewed ambition from the Government to begin rebuilding vital support for families. This report brings together our research from the past year to paint a picture of family support today as the starting point for a new era of support for children and families.

Over the past nearly two decades, the dismantling of Sure Start left a vacuum that many communities are still struggling to fill, while a legacy of underinvestment and fragmented provision has seen support for families has depleted, and in some areas been entirely decimated.

The Best Start in Life strategy places support for children and their families back at the heart of national policy. We know what families want. Consistent, easy to reach, joined up support that prevents them having to tell their story many times over; where they can ask for help wherever they go and whatever their circumstance, and be given the help they need.

Best Start Family Hubs offer a crucial opportunity to transform what remains of family support, tying together the valuable lessons learned over the past twenty-five years from Sure Start through to the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme.

Success will depend on more than funding alone. This report sets out what is needed from Government and local authorities to effectively deliver Best Start Family Hubs that have the potential to transform the lives of children and families. Beyond that, it establishes a new and ambitious vision for a reinvigorated family support system, one that delivers consistent, recognisable and long-term support, embedded into communities under a new Best Start Family Hubs model reminiscent of Sure Start when it was at its best.

## Annex A

| Local authority       | Percentage of children with good level of development in 2023/24 | Number of children per childcare placement | Childcare desert rank | Rank of average IMD rank (1=most deprived, 150=least deprived) |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Manchester            | 59.6%                                                            | 3.82                                       | 118                   | 2                                                              |
| Salford               | 60.7%                                                            | 2.88                                       | 66                    | 17                                                             |
| Halton                | 61.2%                                                            | 2.64                                       | 46                    | 31                                                             |
| Middlesbrough         | 61.3%                                                            | 4.55                                       | 140                   | 14                                                             |
| Bradford              | 61.5%                                                            | 4.16                                       | 131                   | 18                                                             |
| Sandwell              | 61.8%                                                            | 4.38                                       | 137                   | 8                                                              |
| Tameside              | 62.0%                                                            | 2.18                                       | 13                    | 20                                                             |
| Liverpool             | 62.0%                                                            | 3.35                                       | 98                    | 4                                                              |
| Luton                 | 62.0%                                                            | 4.1                                        | 129                   | 41                                                             |
| Rochdale              | 62.2%                                                            | 3.17                                       | 85                    | 15                                                             |
| Peterborough          | 62.3%                                                            | 3.01                                       | 76                    | 42                                                             |
| Sefton                | 62.7%                                                            | 3.33                                       | 96                    | 63                                                             |
| Wolverhampton         | 62.8%                                                            | 4.91                                       | 146                   | 16                                                             |
| Dudley                | 62.9%                                                            | 4.67                                       | 144                   | 74                                                             |
| Leicester             | 63.0%                                                            | 4.71                                       | 145                   | 19                                                             |
| Knowsley              | 63.1%                                                            | 4.15                                       | 130                   | 3                                                              |
| Blackpool             | 63.2%                                                            | 3.82                                       | 119                   | 1                                                              |
| Coventry              | 63.3%                                                            | 4.03                                       | 124                   | 58                                                             |
| Oldham                | 63.6%                                                            | 3.02                                       | 77                    | 25                                                             |
| Nottingham            | 63.6%                                                            | 3.84                                       | 121                   | 10                                                             |
| Bolton                | 63.8%                                                            | 3.38                                       | 101                   | 37                                                             |
| Wigan                 | 63.9%                                                            | 2.77                                       | 57                    | 69                                                             |
| Stoke-on-Trent        | 63.9%                                                            | 4.07                                       | 128                   | 13                                                             |
| Rotherham             | 64.3%                                                            | 4.61                                       | 143                   | 40                                                             |
| Blackburn with Darwen | 64.4%                                                            | 3.22                                       | 89                    | 12                                                             |
| Sheffield             | 64.5%                                                            | 3.47                                       | 106                   | 66                                                             |
| Kingston upon Hull    | 64.5%                                                            | 5.07                                       | 147                   | 9                                                              |
| North Lincolnshire    | 64.7%                                                            | 3.45                                       | 105                   | 79                                                             |
| Lancashire            | 64.8%                                                            | 2.47                                       | 29                    | 78                                                             |
| Derby                 | 64.8%                                                            | 3.76                                       | 117                   | 64                                                             |
| Leeds                 | 64.9%                                                            | 2.99                                       | 74                    | 65                                                             |

|                                  |       |     |      |     |     |
|----------------------------------|-------|-----|------|-----|-----|
| <b>Westmorland and Furness</b>   | 64.9% |     | 4.24 | 133 | 86  |
| <b>Bury</b>                      | 65.0% |     | 2.82 | 60  | 75  |
| <b>Birmingham</b>                | 65.0% |     | 3.7  | 116 | 6   |
| <b>Islington</b>                 | 65.1% |     | 2.4  | 25  | 24  |
| <b>Portsmouth</b>                | 65.2% |     | 2.92 | 67  | 45  |
| <b>Cumberland</b>                | 65.2% |     | 4.24 | 135 | 86  |
| <b>Kirklees</b>                  | 65.5% |     | 2.93 | 69  | 61  |
| <b>Hartlepool</b>                | 65.5% |     | 5.14 | 148 | 21  |
| <b>Newcastle upon Tyne</b>       | 65.6% |     | 3.27 | 92  | 54  |
| <b>Darlington</b>                | 65.7% |     | 3.37 | 100 | 73  |
| <b>Walsall</b>                   | 65.7% |     | 6.55 | 151 | 26  |
| <b>St Helens</b>                 | 66.0% |     | 3.2  | 87  | 32  |
| <b>North East Lincolnshire</b>   | 66.0% |     | 4.07 | 127 | 51  |
| <b>Southend on Sea</b>           | 66.1% |     | 3.34 | 97  | 83  |
| <b>Durham</b>                    | 66.1% |     | 4.23 | 134 | 50  |
| <b>Wirral</b>                    | 66.2% |     | 3.03 | 79  | 56  |
| <b>Bedford</b>                   | 66.2% |     | 3.21 | 88  | 97  |
| <b>Tower Hamlets</b>             | 66.4% |     | 4.03 | 125 | 23  |
| <b>Cambridgeshire</b>            | 66.5% |     | 2.22 | 16  | 128 |
| <b>Cheshire West and Chester</b> | 66.5% |     | 2.36 | 22  | 111 |
| <b>Hillingdon</b>                | 66.5% |     | 3.32 | 93  | 94  |
| <b>Southampton</b>               | 66.6% |     | 2.92 | 68  | 44  |
| <b>North Northamptonshire</b>    | 66.6% | N/A | N/A  | N/A |     |
| <b>Plymouth</b>                  | 66.7% |     | 3.43 | 104 | 52  |
| <b>West Berkshire</b>            | 66.8% |     | 2.12 | 10  | 145 |
| <b>Havering</b>                  | 66.8% |     | 2.49 | 34  | 110 |
| <b>Derbyshire</b>                | 66.8% |     | 3    | 75  | 103 |
| <b>Reading</b>                   | 66.9% |     | 2.98 | 73  | 90  |
| <b>Redcar and Cleveland</b>      | 66.9% |     | 3.84 | 120 | 48  |
| <b>Brent</b>                     | 67.0% |     | 4    | 123 | 39  |
| <b>Sunderland</b>                | 67.0% |     | 5.73 | 150 | 27  |
| <b>Calderdale</b>                | 67.1% |     | 2.65 | 47  | 55  |
| <b>Barking and Dagenham</b>      | 67.2% |     | 4.4  | 138 | 5   |
| <b>East Riding of Yorkshire</b>  | 67.3% |     | 2.55 | 41  | 123 |
| <b>Hounslow</b>                  | 67.3% |     | 3.39 | 102 | 67  |
| <b>Norfolk</b>                   | 67.3% |     | 3.64 | 115 | 81  |
| <b>Dorset</b>                    | 67.4% |     | 2.97 | 72  | 116 |
| <b>Gateshead</b>                 | 67.4% |     | 3.1  | 82  | 43  |
| <b>Swindon</b>                   | 67.5% |     | 3.1  | 81  | 105 |
| <b>Suffolk</b>                   | 67.5% |     | 3.49 | 108 | 99  |
| <b>Worcestershire</b>            | 67.6% |     | 2.84 | 61  | 104 |
| <b>West Sussex</b>               | 67.7% |     | 2.48 | 33  | 124 |
| <b>Lincolnshire</b>              | 67.7% |     | 2.6  | 44  | 91  |
| <b>Nottinghamshire</b>           | 67.7% |     | 2.75 | 56  | 101 |
| <b>Kent</b>                      | 68.0% |     | 2.94 | 70  | 95  |
| <b>Shropshire</b>                | 68.0% |     | 3.03 | 78  | 100 |
| <b>Isle of Wight</b>             | 68.0% |     | 3.09 | 80  | 57  |

|                        |       |     |      |     |     |
|------------------------|-------|-----|------|-----|-----|
| Medway                 | 68.0% |     | 3.62 | 111 | 70  |
| South Tyneside         | 68.0% |     | 4.05 | 126 | 22  |
| Westminster            | 68.1% |     | 2.5  | 36  | 87  |
| North Tyneside         | 68.1% |     | 3.27 | 91  | 82  |
| Lambeth                | 68.2% |     | 2.19 | 14  | 34  |
| Gloucestershire        | 68.2% |     | 2.48 | 32  | 125 |
| Warwickshire           | 68.2% |     | 2.72 | 51  | 118 |
| Enfield                | 68.2% |     | 3.62 | 112 | 46  |
| West Northamptonshire  | 68.2% | N/A | N/A  | N/A |     |
| Milton Keynes          | 68.4% |     | 2.71 | 50  | 106 |
| Bristol                | 68.4% |     | 2.79 | 58  | 59  |
| Ealing                 | 68.4% |     | 3.12 | 83  | 62  |
| Doncaster              | 68.4% |     | 4.2  | 132 | 33  |
| Stockport              | 68.7% |     | 2.54 | 39  | 96  |
| Wakefield              | 68.7% |     | 4.27 | 136 | 49  |
| Oxfordshire            | 68.8% |     | 2.74 | 54  | 141 |
| Barnsley               | 68.8% |     | 3.94 | 122 | 30  |
| Torbay                 | 68.8% |     | 4.55 | 139 | 38  |
| Central Bedfordshire   | 68.9% |     | 3.37 | 99  | 137 |
| Devon                  | 69.0% |     | 3.33 | 95  | 109 |
| East Sussex            | 69.0% |     | 3.48 | 107 | 93  |
| Telford and Wrekin     | 69.0% |     | 3.53 | 109 | 71  |
| Wiltshire              | 69.1% |     | 2.41 | 26  | 132 |
| Slough                 | 69.1% |     | 5.69 | 149 | 53  |
| Cheshire East          | 69.2% |     | 2.47 | 28  | 130 |
| Hackney                | 69.2% |     | 2.47 | 30  | 7   |
| Sutton                 | 69.2% |     | 2.71 | 49  | 129 |
| Northumberland         | 69.2% |     | 3.55 | 110 | 84  |
| Croydon                | 69.3% |     | 2.74 | 55  | 72  |
| Somerset               | 69.3% |     | 3.64 | 114 | 92  |
| Essex                  | 69.4% |     | 2.85 | 64  | 113 |
| Stockton-on-Tees       | 69.5% |     | 3.4  | 103 | 76  |
| Brighton and Hove      | 69.6% |     | 2.08 | 7   | 89  |
| Leicestershire         | 69.6% |     | 2.34 | 21  | 136 |
| Thurrock               | 69.6% |     | 4.56 | 141 | 77  |
| Kensington and Chelsea | 69.7% |     | 2.36 | 23  | 80  |
| Cornwall               | 69.7% |     | 3.63 | 113 | 60  |
| Camden                 | 69.8% |     | 2.53 | 37  | 85  |
| Harrow                 | 69.8% |     | 2.95 | 71  | 117 |
| Hertfordshire          | 69.9% |     | 2.23 | 18  | 134 |
| Merton                 | 69.9% |     | 2.54 | 38  | 122 |
| Southwark              | 69.9% |     | 2.65 | 48  | 35  |
| Staffordshire          | 69.9% |     | 2.85 | 63  | 114 |
| York                   | 70.0% |     | 2.34 | 20  | 142 |
| Warrington             | 70.1% |     | 2.07 | 6   | 108 |
| Greenwich              | 70.1% |     | 2.58 | 43  | 47  |
| Bracknell Forest       | 70.3% |     | 2.23 | 17  | 143 |

|                                              |       |      |     |     |
|----------------------------------------------|-------|------|-----|-----|
| <b>Hammersmith and Fulham</b>                | 70.4% | 2.43 | 27  | 68  |
| <b>Windsor and Maidenhead</b>                | 70.5% | 2.1  | 8   | 149 |
| <b>Kingston upon Thames</b>                  | 70.5% | 2.56 | 42  | 139 |
| <b>Solihull</b>                              | 70.5% | 2.85 | 62  | 119 |
| <b>Bournemouth, Christchurch &amp; Poole</b> | 70.9% | 2.85 | 65  | 102 |
| <b>Herefordshire</b>                         | 71.0% | 3.19 | 86  | 88  |
| <b>North Somerset</b>                        | 71.1% | 2.63 | 45  | 127 |
| <b>North Yorkshire</b>                       | 71.2% | 2.48 | 31  | 126 |
| <b>Buckinghamshire</b>                       | 71.3% | 2.18 | 12  | 144 |
| <b>Barnet</b>                                | 71.3% | 2.73 | 53  | 112 |
| <b>Newham</b>                                | 71.3% | 4.58 | 142 | 11  |
| <b>Bexley</b>                                | 71.4% | 2.5  | 35  | 115 |
| <b>Rutland</b>                               | 71.6% | 2.55 | 40  | 148 |
| <b>Hampshire</b>                             | 71.9% | 2.2  | 15  | 135 |
| <b>Bath and North East Somerset</b>          |       |      |     |     |
| <b>Somerset</b>                              | 72.2% | 2.81 | 59  | 140 |
| <b>Trafford</b>                              | 72.6% | 2.02 | 5   | 121 |
| <b>Lewisham</b>                              | 72.6% | 2.37 | 24  | 28  |
| <b>Redbridge</b>                             | 72.6% | 3.13 | 84  | 98  |
| <b>South Gloucestershire</b>                 | 73.1% | 2.31 | 19  | 138 |
| <b>Bromley</b>                               | 73.2% | 1.97 | 4   | 131 |
| <b>Haringey</b>                              | 73.5% | 3.23 | 90  | 29  |
| <b>Wandsworth</b>                            | 73.7% | 2.11 | 9   | 107 |
| <b>Surrey</b>                                | 73.9% | 2.16 | 11  | 146 |
| <b>Waltham Forest</b>                        | 74.2% | 3.32 | 94  | 36  |
| <b>Wokingham</b>                             | 75.5% | 1.78 | 3   | 150 |
| <b>Richmond upon Thames</b>                  | 77.1% | 1.61 | 2   | 147 |
| <b>Isles of Scilly</b>                       | 83.3% | 2.73 | 52  | 133 |
| <b>City of London</b>                        | 84.2% | 0.5  | 1   | 120 |

**Sources:** Department for Education (2024) Early years foundation stage profile results<sup>89</sup>; New Economics Foundation (2024) Childcare deserts: the reality of access to early years education<sup>90</sup>

Please note, North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire Local authorities are excluded from this table.

<sup>89</sup> Department for Education (2024) Early years foundation stage profile results, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2023-24>

<sup>90</sup> New Economics Foundation (2024) Childcare deserts: the reality of access to early years education, <https://neweconomics.org/2024/05/childcare-deserts-the-reality-of-access-to-early-years-education>

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