Telford & Wrekin Co-operative Council

Protect, care and invest to create a better borough

# Borough of Telford and Wrekin

## Cabinet

## Thursday 3 December 2026

## Best Start in Life Plan 2026-2028

---

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Cabinet Member:** | Cllr Shirley Reynolds - Children, Young People, Education, Employment and Skills | |
| **Lead Director:** | Helen Onions, Director of Public Health<br>Darren Knibbs, Director: Children's Safeguarding & Family Support,<br>Rebecca Carey, Director: Education & Skills | |
| **Service Area:** | Children Services and Public Health | |
| **Report Author:** | Helen Onions, Director of Public Health | |
| **Officer Contact Details:** | **Tel:** 01953 381366 | **Officer Contact Details:** helen.onions@telford.gov.uk |
| **Wards Affected:** | All Wards | |
| **Key Decision:** | Key Decision | |
| **Forward Plan:** | 14.05.2026 | |
| **Report considered by:** | SMT 16.06.2026<br>Cabinet 16.07.2026 | |

---

### 1.0 Recommendation

1.1 HWB is requested to endorse the Telford & Wrekin Best Start in Life Plan 2026-2028, noting: the recent progress on partnership delivery and improvement in outcomes, and the next steps for implementation.

### 2.0 Purpose of Report

2.1 The purpose of this report is to introduce the Best Start in Life Plan, which all LAs were expected to publish for the first time in 2026. Our partnership plan has been developed across council teams, local NHS organisations and voluntary and community sector (VCSE) partners.

## 3.0 Background

3.1 The Department for Education published the new strategy Giving every child the best start in life in July 2025, as part of the Government's Opportunity Mission. Local Best Start Delivery Plans are expected to build on existing local Children & Young People's strategies, and should:

- Set a bold vision for improving child development and health outcomes with local delivery across partners, including: children's services, nurseries, childminders, schools, health services, local voluntary and community groups;
- Identify the local needs of babies, children and families, set out plans to address gaps in provision and scale innovative practice.

The DfE expects local plans to describe how delivery actions will be: carried out in partnership, tracked and tailored to local needs to continually drive progress.

3.2 The Council Plan and Health & Wellbeing Strategy both highlight the importance of all Telford & Wrekin children getting the best start in life, to ensure they have maximum opportunities throughout their lives. Our Children and Young People's Strategy aims to ensure that all our children and young people - *start well, stay well, keep safe, and enjoy and achieve*. Becoming a Child Friendly Borough, a key part of the strategy commitments, is strengthened by this focus on the best start in life.

3.3 Healthy pregnancy, support for families in the early years and early years education are all fundamental building blocks to ensuring our children experience the best physical, cognitive and emotional development possible. Certain parents and children face disadvantage for different reasons, including; experience of care, poverty, having global majority ethnic backgrounds, and being affected by drugs and alcohol and domestic abuse. Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) often require focussed attention to ensure they reach their full potential.

3.4 Good Level of Development (GLD) is a measure used to determine whether children are working at the expected level for their age by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (Reception year). Children's development at the end of Reception Year, is measured in school through 12 Early Learning Goals in the following 5 areas:

- **Communication and Language**: Listening, Attention and Understanding, Speaking;
- **Physical Development**: Gross Motor Skills and Fine Motor Skills;
- **Personal, Social and Emotional Development**: Self-Regulation, Managing Self, Building Relationships;
- **Literacy**: Comprehension, Word Reading, Writing;
- **Mathematics**: Numbers, Numerical Patterns.

3.5 The Government's ambition is that 75% of 5-year-olds in England will have a good level of development by 2028. Improving Good Level of Development is also a key regional Department of Health and Social Care priority, and is included in the Midlands Director of Public Health's *Critical Six for 2026*. In August 2025 all local authorities were allocated individual targets by the Department for Education (DfE) to improve good level of development outcomes in 5-year-olds by 2028.

3.6 The National Centre for Family Hubs, hosted and delivered by the Local Government Association, has offered support to local authorities to develop their best start plans in collaboration with Nesta, the UK innovation agency for social good.

## 4.0 Summary of main proposals

4.1 The Good Level of Development outcome in 5-year-olds is part of the Council's performance monitoring process and is also incorporated in the Health & Wellbeing Board and Children & Young People's Strategy outcomes frameworks. The GLD measure is included in the newly published Local Outcomes Framework.

4.2 In 2024/25 67.3% of 5-year-olds in Telford & Wrekin achieved a good level of development, and the DfE have assigned an overall local target of 78% for 2027/28. This local target increase expected for Telford & Wrekin is 11% over the next three years on the 2024/25 baseline figure. This stretch target is higher than the average across all local authorities, which is 7% increase. Our target translates into an additional 235 5-year-olds expected to achieve a good level of development in 2027/28.

4.3 Data profiling work on Telford & Wrekin 5 year olds achieving a good level of development in 2024/25, indicated that our target groups of children who are less likely to achieve a good level of development are: boys, children born in the summer and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, for example children receiving free school meals.

4.4 The DfE has also set local authorities an inequalities target for pupils receiving Free School Meal (FSMs). In 2024/25 50.6% of Telford & Wrekin 5-year-olds receiving FSMs achieved a good level of development, and our target for 2027/28 is 64.6%. This translates into an additional 62 5-year-olds receiving Free School Meals achieving a good level of development in 2027/28.

4.5 The Telford & Wrekin CYP Strategy, approved by Cabinet in February 2025, provides the local strategic context for our best start in life plan. Given the broad scope and context of achieving a good level of development, the partnership and ownership for the agenda spreads across the council and beyond. Work on the best start in life agenda with the NHS, through; health visiting, school nursing, dental health, speech and language therapy and SEND, strongly aligns with the neighbourhood health shift, which is part of the delivery of the NHS 10-year plan.

4.6 The national SEND reforms, set out in the Thrive and Achieve White Paper, will be progressively implemented in Telford & Wrekin ensuring the sharing of

commitments for both agendas. Within the Best Start in Life Plan, the alignment with SEND Reform is being delivered through shared actions across education and health and care partners. This should ensure an integrated early years approach is embedded, which prioritises early identification, provides a consistent graduated response and timely access to specialist support for children who need it.

4.7 Healthy Babies and Best Start Family Hubs services are funded by the Government as part of the best start in life priority. Telford & Wrekin Safeguarding Children & Family Support Team deliver Family Hubs (FHs) services in the borough. All Family Hubs are expected to include the following core “strands” as part of the service offer, which is tightly defined by the DfE:

- Perinatal Mental Health and Parent–Infant Relationships
- Infant Feeding Support – from Health Visiting and community peer supporters
- Parenting Support - antenatal education and targeted support
- Home Learning Environment – support for pre-schoolers
- Healthy Babies Offer publication for families covering first 1,001 days families
- Parent & Carer Panels – to ensure family voices shape service design
- Wider Services – VCSE, reducing parental conflict, domestic abuse etc.
- Children with additional needs (a new strand from 2026)

4.8 The parenting support, home learning environment and new children with additional needs Family Hubs strands are the elements of the overall offer which most closely support children to achieve good level of development. The DfE specifies which evidence-based interventions can be funded through the local authority Family Hubs grant for these strands. The DfE expects local authorities to submit costed delivery plans across the stands.

4.9 The Council’s Early Years and Childcare Team delivers the Family Hubs home learning environment strand as part of their role, which includes: managing childcare sufficiency, delivery of Wrap Around and Healthy Active Holidays programmes, and support, advice and guidance to Early Years Foundation Stage settings.

4.10 The interventions currently delivered in Telford & Wrekin across Family Hubs and Early Years settings, which are specified DfE Evidence-Based Interventions are for:

- Parenting: Triple P Group Work, Stepping Stones. Triple P for Baby Online
- Home Learning Environment: Early Talk Boost, Making it REAL, Triple P – Stepping Stones.

4.11 The Telford & Wrekin best start in life working group, established in September 2025 developed the delivery plan using DfE and Nesta guidance and support resources. The working group, which continues to oversee the Plan’s implementation, includes: colleagues from public health, education, family hubs and Health Visiting and Speech and Language leads from Shropshire Community Health NHS Trust.

4.12 Our Best Start in Life Plan framework is shown below, and the plan includes a series of detailed actions owned across partners. The partnership, engagement and co-production pillar is being expanded to include our family outreach work.




4.13 Given the wide partnership collaboration and ownership required on this agenda, the governance and reporting of this Best Start in Life plan includes: SMT and Cabinet, Safeguarding Children Board, Health & Wellbeing Board and Telford & Wrekin Integrated Place Partnership and the Education Strategic Partnership.

4.14 The first iteration of the best start in life plan was published on 31 March 2026, which was a DfE requirement. The plan has since been updated and refreshed and many actions are now being delivered, key examples of progress across the plan's framework headings include:

- **Building on community strengths through Family Hubs:** Strengthening Families Team has been re-modelled into Family Hubs, introducing community practitioner roles, including Youth and Community Practitioners. Expanded drop-ins and community activities sit alongside targeted Family Help, providing earlier and more accessible opportunities for families to seek support and build connections.
- **Extending accessible support and community reach:** The first Family Hub Shop in Wellington launched in November, opened by Sue Robb OBE, alongside continued development of community-based and outreach approaches. The activity figures demonstrate strong engagement with families on the family hubs service offer.
- **Bringing together expertise to support inclusion:** The new Best Start Inclusion Practitioner and Experts at Hand multi-disciplinary team model across

the BSIL and SEND agendas, strengthens the approach to early identification and support for children with emerging additional needs. Recent recruitment secured 5.6 full-time equivalent Best Start Inclusion Practitioner posts, combining expertise in early years, SEND, communication and health nursery nursing. Alongside Experts at Hand specialist capacity, the model will provide family-facing, locality-based support, strengthen the home learning environment and improve access to appropriate early years provision.

- **Building communication skills and practitioner confidence:** Early Talk Boost has trained 107 practitioners and delivered 302 groups. Further funding has been secured to continue the programme, providing a foundation for continued speech, language and communication support.
- **Making developmental support easier to access:** Text reminders to parents for the 2 to 2½ year and 9 to 12-month Health Visitor reviews, together with four open well-baby clinics in Dawley, Donnington, Woodside and Sutton Hill, support access to early developmental checks. Improved guidance and reporting arrangements support consistency. Nesta is also exploring Telford's use of data, reminders and targeting around the 2 to 2½ year review as potential peer learning.
- **Supporting participation for children with SEND:** Work to identify children approaching school who are not accessing early education is helping link families with appropriate provision and support. The developing inclusion model will connect families with Family Hubs, Health Visiting, therapies and settings, with a focus on enabling children to participate and develop their strengths.
- **Learning with parents through Stronger Together:** The Stronger Together SEND parenting offer combines Stepping Stones Triple P and Making it REAL with PODS. In Q2, eight parents joined the programme and six remained engaged. Parental feedback is shaping the next programme in Sutton Hill, and learning has been shared through the Nesta evaluation. This provides an opportunity to build on parents' experience and strengthen the offer.
- **Building shared confidence in early years assessment:** Professional dialogue with EYFS teachers is supporting greater consistency and accuracy in the assessment and reporting of Good Level of Development, strengthening the evidence available to guide support.
- **Using evidence to make support more targeted and responsive:** Detailed analysis of 2025 assessment outcomes by deprivation, SEND, gender, ethnicity, birth month and school provides a stronger basis for understanding differences in children's outcomes. This is informing targeted support which will contribute towards the 2027/28 Good Level of Development targets and ambition.
- **Building everyday independence and school readiness:** Selection for the Kindred Squared toileting initiative provides an opportunity to support children's independence through a consistent approach across Family Hubs, Health

Visiting, early years settings and schools. Baseline information will be followed by shared resources, campaigns and support for families and practitioners.

- **Connecting families with early support:** Since November 2025, 201 Early Help Assessments have been completed for children aged 0–5. This provides a foundation for understanding families' strengths and support needs and strengthening connections with the Best Start in Life offer.

4.15 The priorities for the next six months of BSIL plan implementation include:

- **Building children's independence through Kindred Squared**: establishing a baseline for toileting independence and introduce consistent resources and support across Family Hubs, Health Visiting, early years settings and schools. Implement and evaluate the school-readiness work, and progress the proposed 0 to 2 preventative pilot to support earlier conversations with families about independence and school readiness.
- **Embedding an integrated inclusion offer**: bring Best Start Inclusion Practitioners and Experts at Hand into a shared early intervention approach across Family Hubs, SEND, Health Visiting, early years settings and specialist services. Introduce a shared outcomes framework covering reach, family experience, developmental outcomes and evidence of reduced escalation.
- **Building trusted relationships through Parenting Circle:** pilot the approach through Family Hubs and selected schools, initially focusing on transition into Reception and primary-to-secondary transition. Use trusted community settings to build connections with families and schools, ensuring the approach is accessible to SEND parents and families who may face barriers to traditional school-based offers.
- **Develop Stronger Together with parents:** use learning and parental feedback from the initial cohort to deliver the next programme in Sutton Hill. Strengthen connections between evidence-based parenting support, home learning, Family Hubs and SEND pathways, building on families' knowledge and experience.
- **Build on Early Help Assessments and Family Hub pathways:** strengthen the connection with Best Start in Life by using assessments to recognise families' strengths, identify support needs early and connect families with community and universal help wherever possible.
- **Use data and evaluation to guide the next phase:** bring together Good Level of Development, developmental review, SEND, Family Hub and intervention data to identify where additional support is needed. Evaluate reach and outcomes to understand which approaches are helping children and families and whether interventions are narrowing inequalities.
- **Maintain shared oversight of the 2027/2028 ambition**: report regularly through BSIL governance on delivery, reach, outcomes and inequalities. Building on approaches that show promise and adapt activity where evidence indicates that

a different response is needed. Linking to the neighbourhood health programme and the children and young people's priority will be crucial going forward.

### 4.16 Improving Outcomes

The figures for GLD levels in 4-5 year olds at the end of reception year measured in the Summer Term 2026 have recently been released. There has been impressive progress towards meeting our DfE targets, alongside a narrowing the gap during the past year:

- 71.8% (1,481 of 2,063[1]) of 4-5 year olds met the GLD threshold in 2025/26, compared to 67.3% in 2024/25. An additional 129 children need to meet GLD to meet the 2027/28 target.
- 57.5% of 4-5 year olds who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) met the GLD threshold in 2025/26, compared to 50.6% in 2024/25. An additional 27 children eligible for FSM need to meet GLD to meet the 2027/28 target.

## 5.0 Alternative Options

5.1 None, the DfE expects all local authorities to work in partnership to develop best start in life delivery plans in order to deliver the local targets which have been nationally set.

## 6.0 Key Risks

6.1 Improving childhood development has lifetime health and social economic benefits. Family Hubs and Health Visiting are funded through local authority grants from Government and the best start in life offer being developed would be at risk without these vital funding streams.

## 7.0 Council Priorities

7.1 Every child, young person and adult lives well in their community.

## 8.0 Financial Implications

8.1 The Best Start in Life Plan will be delivered primarily through a combination of existing base budget and external funding streams, including Government grant funding for Family Hubs and the Healthy Child Programme (HCP).

8.2 The Healthy Child Programme has an ongoing budget allocation of £3.3m per annum, funded through the Public Health Grant.

8.3 Family Hubs grant funding from the Department for Education commenced in 2022/23, with Telford & Wrekin receiving £4.2m up to and including the 2025/26 financial year. Further funding through the Best Start Family Hubs and

[1] There was a 140 reduction in the number of 4-5 year olds in reception in 2025/26 compared to 2025/26

Healthy Babies programme has been confirmed for the period 2026/27 to 2028/29, with a maximum allocation of £5.33m over the three years. This is supplemented by an annual Council contribution of £0.7m to support delivery.

8.4 The Council remains reliant on these external funding streams to sustain delivery of the programme. Should the grant funding referenced in sections 8.2 and 8.3 reduce or cease, the Council would need to review the scope and affordability of the Best Start in Life offer, as the current delivery model would not be sustainable without this funding.

## 9.0 Legal and HR Implications

9.1 Following the policy paper 'Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life' the Best Start in Life Plan follows the requirement for Children and Young People's strategies under the Children Act 1989 (as amended) and the Children and Young Persons Act 2008. SEND provision is addressed in the SEND Code of Practice (January 2015) and Children and Families Act 2014 with health responsibilities under the NHS Act 2006 and joint commissioning under the Health and Care Act 2022. Education duties are addressed under the Education Act 1996 and with additional regard to the EYFS Statutory Framework. Overarching consideration should be given to the Best Start Family Hubs and Health Baby Guidance (2025-26) on implementation.

## 10.0 Ward Implications

10.1 Borough-wide impact, but particularly wards with highest levels socio-economic deprivation.

## 11.0 Health, Social and Economic Implications

11.1 Children's early years are crucial to their development, health and life chances. Starting Well is a Health & Wellbeing Strategy priority and taking a life course approach is also critical for tackling inequalities. Improving good level of development at the end of reception is a key local and national goal, for health but also for social and economic reasons given its relationship to educational attainment, employment and economic opportunity. The national and local GLD targets are part of Government's Opportunity Mission.

## 12.0 Equality and Diversity Implications

12.1 National research shows there are obvious variations in the Good Level of Development in children at 2-2.5 years in children across protected characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity, and these inequalities are know to persist at age 5 and beyond for future educational attainment.

## 13.0 Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environmental Implications

13.1 None

## 14.0 Background Papers

None

## 15.0 Appendices

Appendix 1 Telford & Wrekin Best Start in Life Plan 2026 -2028 (July 2026)

## 16.0 Report Sign Off

| Signed off by | Date sent | Date signed off | Initials |
|---|---|---|---|
| Director | 09/06/2026 | 03/06/2026 | HO |
| Legal | 09/06/2026 | 16/06/2026 | ON |
| Finance | 09/06/2026 | 18/06/2026 | PT |