

Sunderland Best Start in Life Local Plan

2026–2029



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Welcome

Welcome to Sunderland's Best Start Plan 2026-2029, which is a shared commitment from partners across our city to work together so every child grows up healthy, supported, and ready to thrive. Our plan supports families from pregnancy to primary school focusing on health, early learning and school readiness.

Creating the conditions for children to flourish is not the responsibility of one organisation alone. It is a shared endeavour that brings together families, communities, early years settings, schools, health services, voluntary and community organisations, and the council. Each plays a vital role in nurturing children's development, supporting parents and carers, and building the strong, resilient communities that help children grow.

Our plan reflects the collective belief that the earliest years of life matter profoundly. They shape a child's future learning, wellbeing, and life chances, and they lay the foundations for a fairer, stronger, and more vibrant Sunderland.

This plan sets out our vision, our priorities, and the practical steps we will take together to ensure every child, regardless of background, postcode, or circumstance, has the opportunity to enjoy the best possible start in life. It is rooted in local insight, shaped by the voices of families, and strengthened by the expertise of professionals who work with children every day.

Most importantly, it is a promise: that we will work collaboratively, compassionately, and with ambition for every child in Sunderland. By investing in early years, supporting families, and tackling inequalities, we are investing in the future of our city.

Our vision

Our vision is that expectant parents, parents and carers in Sunderland feel supported, confident and empowered to give their children the best start in life. Through access to friendly local services, practical advice, flexible childcare, early years provisions and to services which promote physical, mental and emotional well-being of all families. Our approach brings together every partner contribution into one joined up narrative: a child's pathway from pregnancy to Primary school, supported by consistent, high-quality services, evidence-based interventions, and a solid focus on narrowing inequalities.

We will ensure:

- Expectant parents are well prepared for parenthood.
- Mothers and babies have positive pregnancy outcomes.
- Babies and parents and carers have good early relationships.
- Parents/carers are engaged and participate in home learning from birth.
- Every child develops strong early communication, language and literacy foundations.
- Every child is healthy, emotionally secure and ready to learn.
- Families can access high quality early education and childcare entitlements early.
- Additional needs are identified early and met through a stepped support offer.
- Families experience a joined up 'Best Start in Life' system across health, education and community support.



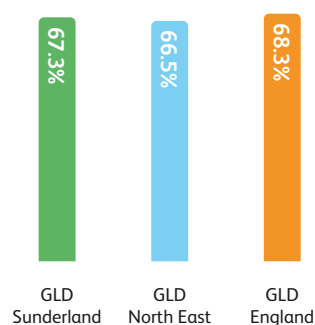
Simon Marshall
Starting Well Delivery Board Chair Director of Children's Services
Chief Executive, Together for Children



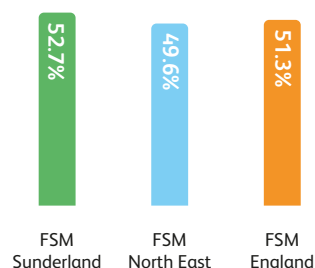
Local context

What Good Level of Development currently looks like in Sunderland:

Children in Sunderland achieving Good Level of Development (GLD) shows an improved position over the last three years from 66 % (2022/23) to 67.3 % (2024/25). Our current performance exceeds the current North East position (66.5 %), however is behind the England position at 68.3 % .

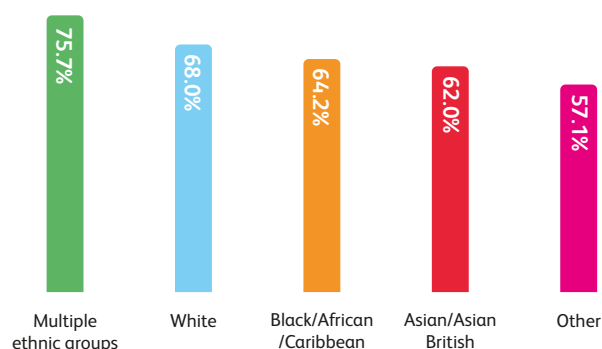


For our children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), 52.7 % achieve a good level of development at the end of reception (24/25). This exceeds both the North East (49.6 %) and England (51.3 %) position.



Girls have a higher and improving level of GLD at 76.5 % compared to boys at 58 % , which has worsened from the previous year.

Our ethnicity breakdown of GLD¹ is:



62 % of children in 24/25 live within IMD 1 and 2.

This means nearly two-thirds of Sunderland's children are growing up in the most deprived 40 % of neighbourhoods nationally.

1 BSIL Data Profile



Our targets

By the end of 2027/28 we want to see more children in Sunderland starting school ready to learn with a good level of development.

1. The proportion of children aged 5 years achieving GLD at the end of the 2027/28 academic year is at least 76 %, and;
2. Disadvantaged children have benefitted at least equally from this improvement, children eligible for FSM achieving GLD at the end of the 2027/28 academic year is at least 60.2 %.

Using the 2023/24 population profile, an additional 240 children would need to reach the GLD level to achieve the overall target, with an additional 43 children eligible for Free School Meals to be reached to meet the FSM GLD target.

We are aware that the definition of Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility will change during this period, therefore further DfE guidance will be applied and our targets amended where appropriate.

Local Needs Assessment

Children and population overview



Overall number of children
aged 0–4:

14,289



Overall number of children
aged 0–5:

17,033

Wider Social and Economic Context



Children in absolute
poverty 2023/24

24.7%



children eligible for Free School
Meals in Sunderland across all
state-funded schools in 2024/25

12,899

Good Level of Development



Children achieving GLD at
the end of reception
(2024/25)

67.3%



Children with Free School Meal
(FSM) status achieving a GLD at
the end of reception (2024/25)

52.7%

Early Years Education and Childcare



Number of under 2's accessing
a funded place:

979



2-year-olds accessing a
funded place:

1,648



3 and 4-year-olds accessing
a funded place:

13,649



Number of EHCP plans:

3,196

Local Needs Assessment

Early Years Education and Childcare

New birth visits completed within
14 days (2024/25):



98.8%

6–8 week review completed
(2024/25):



97.3%

12-month review completed
(2024/25):



98.2%

2–2½ year review
completed(2024/25):



96%

Hospital and Emergency Use

Hospital admissions of babies
under 14 days (per 1,000):



35.7

2023-24 A&E attendance
0-4 (per 1,000):



1.127.4

Hospital admissions for dental
care 0–5 (per 100,000)



98.7

Vaccinations and Preventative Care



MMR coverage for two doses
(2024–25):

92.7%



What we know in Sunderland



Access to early help and support

through Best Start Family Hubs
and Health Visiting services is helping
to improve the lives of children
and families



We are raising awareness

of the dangers of alcohol
during pregnancy



Tooth decay

remains one of the leading causes of
hospital admissions for young people



Smoking at the time of delivery rates

are reducing but still above
national average



Breastfeeding rates

have risen to 1 in 3 infants at 6–8
weeks, however rates remain
significantly below the national rate
of 1 in 2



Good level of health development

is achieved by 8 out of 10 2–2.5 year
olds (2–2.5 year review)



A good level of educational development

is achieved by almost 7 in 10
5 year olds (end of reception
year review)



Children living with overweight including obesity

nearly 3 in 10 reception children



Children living with overweight including obesity

4 in 10 year 6 children



Parental mental health

and wider family wellbeing are key
influences on child development



School readiness is gradually improving overall

however, half of children who are eligible for Free School Meals are not likely
to be school ready and reach a good level of educational development by
the end of reception



Assets and strengths

Early Years



35 PVI Daycare Providers in the city

there is a diverse mixture of different types of providers across Sunderland



3 maintained Daycare Providers

attached to schools who care for children from birth



All 7 Maintained Nursery Schools

have provision from 2 year old



5 out of 7 Maintained Nursery Schools

also have Childcare Provision from birth



84 schools in the city

1 of these is an independent school with provision from 2 years 9 months old



70 registered Childminders

in the city



22 schools (26%) offer 2 year old provision

4 % of this is provided by daycare on school site



42 schools (50%), have nursery provision

for 3 and 4 year olds only

Best Start Family Hubs

Sunderland's Best Start Family Hubs are based in five established centres situated in the 30 % most deprived LSOAs, placing services at the heart of the communities with the highest levels of need. The hubs provide families with a broad range of services and activities designed to support child development, health, and family wellbeing.

Best Start Family Hubs play a key role in supporting the crucial first 1,001 days of life.



Expectant parents can book their pregnancy check with midwives who are based across all the hubs. Attend high-quality antenatal education sessions, receive personalised infant-feeding advice and access a wide range of support through the Healthy Babies Programme. The programme provides targeted help during pregnancy and the early postnatal period, focusing on perinatal mental health, parent–infant relationships, and infant feeding.

Families can benefit from emotional wellbeing support, bonding and attachment activities, specialist infant-feeding guidance and activities across the Family Hubs that are designed to promote early language, social skills and emotional development.

Across the Sunderland Family Hub network, more than 50 services and activities are delivered through strong partnerships spanning community organisations, health services, education providers and the voluntary sector.

Baby Week is an annual celebration delivered in Sunderland by the Family Hubs for the past two years that brings together families, professionals and partner organisations to promote the importance of the early years and the first 1,001 days. It provides a high-profile platform to showcase the support available through Sunderland's Best Start Family Hubs and strengthens collaboration across the early years system.

The programme is further strengthened by 65 active volunteers and the involvement of five Parent Carer Panels, ensuring families have a strong voice in shaping services.



“The early help offer is well supported by five family hubs”

Ofsted ILACS inspection
January 2025

“There is extremely proactive partnership working from the family hubs with partner agencies”

Ofsted ILACS inspection
January 2025



System wide strenghts

Sunderland benefits from a strong, integrated early years system built through sustained partnership working across health, education, early help, SEND and the voluntary and community sector. This section outlines the breadth of the current offer that supports early development from Family Hubs and Healthy Babies services to high quality early years education, speech and language programmes, and targeted interventions. It highlights the strengths we can build upon as well as the areas where pressure points, variation, or capacity challenges limit impact. This understanding is essential to ensuring our future actions strengthen what works, extend reach to families who need more support, and align services around a shared Best Start ambition.

This offer is further strengthened through partnerships with community, voluntary, arts and cultural organisations that provide additional, non-formal opportunities for children and families to engage in language-rich, play-based activity within familiar and trusted environments.

- A strong city-wide emphasis on communication and language.
- Wide scale professional development and improved teaching quality Integrated multi-agency approaches and co-location, including:
 - Sunderland Communicates Together, which is additional support is provided by a range of services across Health, Education and Social Care and gives Parent Carers and Practitioners access to resources, learning and tools to ensure they can support children and young people to develop the skills they need.
 - Best Start Family Hubs, which provide a one stop shop for families offering support with infant feeding, mental health, relationship building, parenting, Home Learning Environment and Speech and Language support).
- All five Best Start Family hubs in Sunderland are located within neighbourhoods that are within the within the 30 % most deprived Lower layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in England.
- A strong Healthy Babies service (terminology has replaced Start for Life).
- A well established and experienced early years team that support all early year's providers to ensure a high quality of education and care from birth to five.
- A dedicated training offer for educators that is bespoke to the needs of children in Sunderland.
- Early identification and support for SEND.
- Evidence informed interventions with demonstrable impact. Robust Early Health Notification Pathway.
- A Stable HDFT 0-19 commissioning arrangement in place to provide the Healthy Child Programme.
- Close partnerships with voluntary and community sector oranisations providing family support in our communities of highest need, including significant investment in support for young parents.

- A well established Family Information Service (FIS).
- NHS speech and language services deliver support out of Best Start Family Hub settings.

Collectively, these activities support Sunderland’s ambition to ensure that every child has the best start in life and is equipped to enter school ready to learn, thrive and achieve.

Priority groups for accelerated progress

Many Sunderland children experience more than one barrier to achieving a Good Level of Development. Our approach recognises that vulnerabilities intersect, such as poverty, speech and language delay, SEND, ethnicity, trauma, housing instability, or being newly arrived in the UK. We will design and deliver interventions that explicitly respond to these overlapping factors, ensuring that children with multiple disadvantages benefit at least equally from accelerated progress.

Through data analysis, stakeholder engagement and gap analysis we have identified that the following groups require targeted support, evidence based interventions and progress tracking in Sunderland.

Children from low-income families/eligible for Free School Meals

Sunderland has some of the highest levels of child poverty in the North East, and children growing up in low-income households are more likely to experience limited early learning opportunities, reduced language exposure and higher levels of stress at home.

These factors directly affect early development, making this group a key priority for accelerated support.

Children with SEND or emerging needs

The city has a higher-than-average proportion of children with SEND, particularly in communication and interaction. Early identification is essential to prevent gaps from widening. Prioritising this group ensures children receive timely, coordinated support that strengthens their long-term outcomes.

Children with speech, language and communication delays

Speech and language delay is one of Sunderland's most significant early years challenges. These delays affect social development, school readiness and later literacy. Targeted intervention is crucial to closing the word gap and improving early communication outcomes.

Children not in early education or not attending Best Start Family Hubs

Some families face barriers to accessing early education or engaging with Family Hubs, particularly in areas of high deprivation or among newly arrived communities. These children are less likely to have their needs identified early and miss out on vital early learning experiences, making them a priority for outreach and engagement.

Families impacted by adversity (domestic abuse, parental mental health, instability)

Sunderland experiences higher rates of domestic abuse, parental mental health challenges and family instability. These adversities can disrupt children's emotional security and early development. Prioritising these families ensures support is trauma-informed and responsive to complex needs.

Boys

Local EYFSP data shows a persistent gender gap, with boys achieving lower outcomes in communication, literacy and self-regulation. This makes boys a clearly identifiable local cohort requiring targeted approaches to accelerate progress.

Cared for children

Many cared for children have experienced trauma or disrupted early attachments, which can affect development. Prioritising this group ensures they receive consistent, nurturing and specialist support from the earliest stage.

Children from ethnic minority communities

As Sunderland becomes more diverse, some children from ethnic minority backgrounds face additional barriers such as cultural exclusion, discrimination or reduced access to culturally responsive services. Prioritising this group promotes equity and inclusion across the early years system.

Young parents

Young parents may have fewer resources, smaller support networks and less experience navigating early years services. Their children can be at greater risk of developmental delay without targeted support. Prioritising this group strengthens parenting confidence and improves home learning environments.

Asylum-seeking and newly arrived migrant families

Sunderland has seen an increase in asylum-seeking families and newly arrived migrant communities. These children may face language barriers, disrupted early development or experiences of trauma. Prioritising them ensures they receive early language support, emotional stability and help navigating unfamiliar systems.

Children experiencing multiple disadvantage (two or more risk factors)

Many children in Sunderland experience overlapping vulnerabilities - such as poverty combined with language delay or housing instability combined with parental mental health challenges. These compounding risks significantly increase the likelihood of poor early outcomes, making this group a priority for coordinated, multi-agency support.



Our key challenges

Despite strong foundations, significant challenges remain that hinder progress towards improving GLD outcomes at scale. These challenges reflect both local pressures and national trends across the early years system from workforce capacity and rising levels of need, to inconsistent engagement, limited early education take up, and persistent inequalities in child development. This section outlines the barriers that must be collectively addressed if Sunderland is to close the development gap, improve early identification, and ensure consistent, high quality support. Recognising these challenges openly enables us to design solutions that are realistic, collaborative and rooted in the lived experiences of families and practitioners.

Local insight highlights the main barriers to Good Level of Development improvement:

- Uneven family engagement and varying take up of services, early education and support (across education, health and family support).
- Children not accessing early years provision early enough (especially funded entitlements).
- Speech, language and communication needs remaining high at Reception entry.
- Take up of the Two-year funded offer has decreased. Out of the eligible 2-year-olds in our local authority, 608 children took up their 2-year targeted funded place (for at least some of the available hours) in 2025. This equates to 63 % take up which is slightly lower than the national take up rate of 65 %. Although this is a 16 % decrease in take up rate since 2024 in Sunderland.
- Rising SEND/neurodevelopmental needs.
- System wide workforce pressures.
- Not being able to access training due to financial pressures and staffing levels.
- Recruitment of high quality, well trained staff who understand developmental milestones of children.
- Inconsistent quality of practice and outcomes across providers.
- Delays in identification and response to developmental needs (including Occupational Therapy related needs).
- Fragmented parent messaging.
- Lack of parental understanding around developmental milestones and the importance of consistent attendance and parental engagement.
- Local insight also highlights the need to maximise the use of trusted, informal community settings to support engagement, reduce anxiety and build relationships with families who may be hesitant to access statutory services.
- Perception by parents of support services available.



Our priorities



Expectant parents are well prepared for parenthood



Babies and young children experience strong early health and wellbeing



Families are supported to create a rich home learning environment



High-quality early years education and care is accessible and inclusive



Speech, language and communication needs are identified early and supported effectively



Children with SEND receive early, coordinated and inclusive support



Strong, connected communities support early childhood



Priority 1



Expectant parents are well prepared for parenthood

Why this is important:

The first 1001 days from conception to a child's second birthday are recognised nationally as a critical window for child development. During this period, a baby's brain grows faster than at any other time in life, laying the foundations for their future health, learning and emotional wellbeing. What happens in these early days shapes everything that follows.

For many families in Sunderland, the transition to parenthood can be challenging, especially where there are pressures such as low income, mental health difficulties, housing instability or limited support networks. When parents feel confident, informed and emotionally supported during pregnancy and the early months, they are better able to form strong, secure relationships with their baby something we know is vital in the 1001 critical days.

Priority actions:

1. Make it easier for parents to talk about how they are feeling through increasing drop in sessions, peer support groups and one to one guidance for expectant and new parents within the Best Start Family Hubs.
2. Vulnerable families will receive a Baby Box which provides the baby with a safe space to sleep, essential baby items and developmental toys and books.
3. Expand our antenatal parenting offer including use of digital tools.
4. Increase the uptake of GroBrain across the city. To strengthen parent-infant relationships, improve early interaction and emotional regulation.
5. Commission a dads and male carers service which includes parenting advice and support and support for male mental health.
6. Offer enhanced support for young parents, families experiencing poverty, mental health difficulties or housing instability.
7. Increase the number of families accessing the healthy baby offer who are open to Families First and the pre-birth team through use joint visits and shared pathways so families experience seamless support.
8. Promote evidence based messages consistently across all partners.
9. Develop our 'Healthy Babies' offer and refresh the partnership menu of support including publishing a hard copy so families can easily access help with parenting, perinatal mental health, parent–infant relationships, infant feeding and home learning.
10. Provide home learning resources and practical ideas.

We will measure this by:

- Monitoring the uptake of antenatal education, infant feeding support and early parenting programs.
- Track number of expectant parents accessing Best Start Family Hubs, including first-time parents and fathers.
- Qualitative feedback from Parents and Parent Carer Panels.
- Baby box distribution and qualitative family feedback.
- Monitoring Healthy Start Programme uptake.



Priority 2



Babies and young children experience strong early health and wellbeing

Why this is important:

Strong early health foundations from pregnancy through the first five years are essential to children's physical, emotional and cognitive development. Maternal wellbeing, infant feeding support, immunisation uptake, and early developmental reviews all contribute to a child's readiness for learning.

Building on the established offer delivered through our Family Hubs and Healthy Babies services, this section outlines how we will further integrate health and early help pathways, strengthen perinatal and early years mental health support, and ensure families most likely to experience health inequalities receive timely and trusted support. Our aim is to ensure that every child has the healthiest possible start in life.

Priority actions:

1. Strengthening continuity between maternity, health visiting and early help.
2. Embed whole-family approaches including perinatal mental health.
3. Provide additional staff training across the system in perinatal mental health.
4. Expand early years mental health and attachment-informed practice.
5. Further strengthen integration between health services and Family Hubs.
6. Use targeted outreach to ensure families least likely to engage receive early health and development support.
7. Expand the role of the current dedicated tobacco post to cover broader health promoting activity, supporting access to services.
8. Continue to commit resources to the peer support role in Family Hubs, who are key in supporting infant feeding, perinatal mental health and parent infant relationships.
9. Strengthen collaboration between primary care, health visiting and Family Hubs.
10. Offer specialist support where attachment difficulties are identified.
11. Best Start Family hubs will have UNICEF accreditation.

We will measure this by:

- Parent-reported improvements in emotional wellbeing and their experience of support.
- Improved immunisation coverage.
- Increased uptake of Healthy Child Programme contacts.

- Breast Feeding rates across the city.
- Increased access to perinatal and early years mental health support.
- Improved access for families least likely to engage, including those in IMD 1–2, newly arrived families and young parents.



Priority 3



Families are supported to create a rich home learning environment

Why this is important:

The home learning environment plays a crucial role in shaping children's early development, influencing communication, emotional security, and readiness for learning. Families are children's first and most important educators, and the support they receive during pregnancy and the early years can significantly narrow inequalities before children start school. This section sets out how we will strengthen our parenting and home learning offer ensuring families have the tools, confidence and relationships needed to foster strong early development.

Our approach prioritises universal access complemented by targeted outreach and specialist support for families facing additional barriers.

Priority actions:

1. Strengthen Best Start Family Hubs as the universal front door (pregnancy to 5) offering evidence-based parenting programmes, early learning support and early years readiness activity.
2. Facilitate access to nurturing environments to support families to create safe, loving homes where development is supported and prioritised.
3. Deliver a Sunderland-wide parent engagement and messaging campaign with clear, consistent "what to do when" messages.
4. Offer co-delivered 'getting ready for nursery sessions' across the city.
5. Target outreach to families least likely to engage, including those not accessing early education.
6. Embed whole-family approaches including parenting and perinatal mental health support.
7. Deliver Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED) programme – an initiative designed to support dads and male carers in building strong, lasting relationships with their children through daily reading.
8. Promote the National Year of Reading (2026) and align this with local communication activities promoting literacy skills.
9. Reinforce communication and listening skills through evidence-based interventions and creative, language-rich parent–child interaction (storytelling, music, play).
10. Co-produce parent messaging and engagement approaches with families and VCS organisations who understand local barriers.
11. Launch 50 things to do before 5 initiative.
12. Explore dual registration for hubs and libraries.

We will measure this by:

- Qualitative feedback from families, parents and carers.
- Monitoring uptake and participation of 'getting ready for nursery sessions'.
- Monitoring uptake of parenting programmes.
- Engagement through targeted outreach for families least likely to participate.



Priority 4



High-quality early years education and care is accessible and inclusive

Why this is important:

High quality early education is one of the strongest predictors of improved school readiness, yet access and uptake vary across the city. Ensuring all children particularly those from low-income families, those with SEND, and those not currently accessing funded places have early and sustained access to rich early learning experiences is essential to improving GLD outcomes.

We also know that a smooth and well supported transition into school has a lasting impact on children's confidence, emotional wellbeing and early learning outcomes. For many children especially those with emerging needs, SEND, or delayed communication, transition is a critical window where gaps can widen without coordinated support.

This section outlines the actions we will take to strengthen the quality of early years provision, support the workforce, improve transition and increase the uptake of childcare entitlements. By improving both the availability and consistency of high quality practice, we will ensure more children enter Reception with the skills they need to thrive.

Priority actions:

1. Strengthen early years quality frameworks, coaching and support across settings.
2. Provide targeted support to schools/settings with declining or below-average Good Level of Development outcomes.
3. Maintain universal literacy readiness support (Launchpad for Literacy) and aligned practice networks.
4. Strengthen locality based outreach to increase take-up of funded early education entitlements (9+ months, 2-year targeted, 3–4-year offer).
5. Use Family Information Service channels to support awareness and access to childcare.
6. Deliver targeted outreach to families least likely to take up early education offers.
7. Maintain our commitment to Sunderland Communicates Together offer.
8. Work with VCS partners to promote childcare entitlements through trusted, culturally appropriate messaging.
9. Support families to navigate childcare systems via face-to-face, community-based support (not solely digital).
10. Use moderated and consistent quality approaches to strengthen Reception practice, assessment confidence and transition to Year 1.

We will measure this by:

- Childcare sufficiency reports.
- Early years placement take up data.
- Qualitative family feedback.
- Local targets for 2 year entitlement.
- Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) data.
- Early Years Service data on training take-up and qualitative feedback from (practitioner) participants.



Priority 5



Speech, language and communication needs are identified early and supported effectively

Why this is important:

Speech, language and communication (SLC) skills are the building blocks for children's learning, relationships and long-term life chances. From the earliest months, children use communication to make sense of the world, form secure relationships and develop the foundations for reading, writing and emotional wellbeing. When these skills do not develop as expected, it can affect every aspect of a child's development.

Nationally, SLC needs are the most common primary need for children with SEND, and locally we know that children living in areas of higher deprivation are more likely to experience early language delay. In Sunderland, where a high proportion of children grow up in IMD 1 and 2 neighbourhoods, early identification and support is essential to narrowing inequalities before they become entrenched.

Through Sunderland Communicates Together, Sunderland will expand evidence based interventions (including Early Talk Boost) alongside universal language rich practice, Best Start Family Hub speech and language groups, and workforce training to reduce the proportion of children starting school behind in communication and language.

Priority actions:

1. Scale evidence based early language interventions and expand co-delivery (including Early Talk Boost) and embed quality assurance.
2. Strengthen universal and targeted speech and language support within Best Start Family Hubs.
3. Improve workforce confidence in high quality interactions and early language practice.
4. Use data and insights to evidence impact with a view to refine interventions and target support to cohorts and localities.
5. Equip community-based practitioners and volunteers with simple, consistent tools and messages to support early communication and language development.
6. Support voluntary and community settings (e.g. playgroups, toddler groups, community hubs) to embed language-rich practice and early identification.

We will measure this by:

- Performance reports received from commissioned providers, including engagement data and qualitative case studies.
- 0–19 data including statutory visits and targeted contacts.

- Monitoring referrals into specialist services, expecting to see a reduction in avoidable referrals.
- Monitoring the number of those trained to deliver high quality interventions, seeking qualitative feedback from professionals to provide ongoing quality improvement.



Priority 6



Children with SEND receive early, coordinated and inclusive support

Why this is important:

Early identification and timely support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is fundamental to improving long-term outcomes. Rising levels of need across Sunderland highlight the importance of a robust, co-ordinated approach that supports families early, reduces avoidable escalation, and ensures clear and accessible pathways. This section sets out our commitment to strengthen universal and targeted SEND support across the early years, improving early identification, building practitioner confidence, and ensuring smoother transitions into school. Our focus is on delivering joined-up, high quality support that enables children with SEND to thrive from the earliest stages.

Priority actions:

1. Strengthen early identification systems and joined-up pathways before school entry.
2. Deliver an Occupational Therapy “universal plus” model (advice, training, guidance) to reduce avoidable referrals and improve motor, sensory and self-care readiness.
3. Expand early years mental health and attachment-informed practice support.
4. Strengthen referral pathways between voluntary organisations and statutory services.
5. Provide the voluntary and community sector with clear guidance on SEND pathways, thresholds and escalation routes.
6. Include recommendations from the SEND inspection report.
7. Improve SEND transition planning into Reception.
8. Strengthen early identification routes and pathways before school entry (links to SEND and health).
9. Integrate more SEND support into the Family Hub offer, including implementation of the dedicated SEND practitioner role.
10. Expand SEND parenting offer, including a digital offer.

We will measure this by:

- Improved information-sharing between key partners (health visiting, Family Hubs, early years settings, SEND teams).
- Consistency of multi-agency planning, including the use of Early Support Plans, Team Around the Family or multi-agency reviews.
- Improved parent-reported experience of the SEND pathway (clarity, timeliness, support).

- Reduction in children reaching Reception with unidentified or unmet SEND needs.
- Improved school readiness indicators among children with SEND.
- Increased practitioner confidence in identifying and supporting SEND in the early years.
- Higher uptake of SEND-related training across early years, Family Hubs and health services.



Priority 7



Strong, connected communities support early childhood

Why this is important:

Children grow up not only within families, but within communities - and the strength of those communities has a powerful influence on their early development. When families feel connected, supported and part of a wider network, children benefit from richer experiences, stronger relationships and a greater sense of belonging. In Sunderland, where many families face pressures linked to deprivation, isolation or limited support networks, strong community connections can make a significant difference to a child's start in life.

Supportive communities help parents share knowledge, reduce stress and build confidence, while giving children safe places to play, learn and socialise. Local groups, voluntary organisations, Family Hubs and neighbourhood networks all play a vital role in creating these conditions

Priority actions:

1. Expand outreach so more families know what's available locally.
2. Increase community-led groups, peer support sessions and parent-run activities.
3. Work with community organisations to reach families who may not engage with formal services.
4. Expand spoke site delivery of Best Start Family hubs activities.
5. Embed creative and sensory based activities within community settings to support early skill development and emotional regulation, complementing transition support.
6. Create additional pathways for parents to volunteer within the community and become 'Champions in Best Start'.
7. Increase staffing within the Community Engagement team.
8. Increase the number of Parent Carer Panels and voice of seldom heard groups.
9. Provide training and capacity-building support to VCS groups delivering early years work.
10. Launch Neighbourhood Navigator roles to support School attendance.

We will measure this by:

- Best Start Family Hub registrations and engagement.
- Monitoring the number of volunteers recruited.
- Attendance at Spoke Sites.
- School attendance rates.



System enablers

Best Start Family Hubs

Early years education access

Community and voluntary sector

Information sharing and IT systems

Advice, information and guidance

Evidence of what works



Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Robust monitoring, evaluation and learning will ensure that we deliver meaningful improvements for children and families and continue to evolve in response to evidence and lived experience. By building a culture of shared learning and accountability across our partnership, we will be able to understand what is working well, identify where change is needed, and continuously strengthen our early years system.

Sunderland will use the DfE's View Your Education Data (VYED) platform to monitor GLD performance, track inequalities and inform continuous improvement. These tools will provide us with clear summaries of EYFSP data, including ELG level outcomes, pupil group analyses, contextual scores and trends over time. It will also allow us to compare performance against local, regional and national averages.

Sunderland will use VYED data to:

- Analyse GLD trends over three years
- Identify gaps between FSM and non-FSM pupils, by ethnicity, SEND, gender and IMD
- Understand which ELGs drive low GLD performance
- Support decision-making across Family Hubs, Early Years Quality Improvement, SEND and Early Help
- Target interventions to localities and groups with the widest gaps
- Monitor progress against the city's GLD targets (76 % overall; 60.2 % FSM by 2027/28)

Access to DfE's contextual GLD score will further help us identify whether GLD results are above, below or in line with contextual expectations, strengthening fairness and accuracy in local performance tracking

Progress will also be tracked through a shared multi-agency dashboard using:

GLD outcomes (primary measures)

- % GLD overall
- % GLD FSM

Supporting improvement indicators

- Take up of funded early education (9 month +, 2-year-old and 3- to 4-year-old entitlements)
- Engagement in key interventions (e.g. Early Talk Boost reach and impact)
- Best Start Family Hub reach and locality uptake
- SEND early identification routes and trends
- Workforce training, participation and setting level quality improvement engagement

The dashboard below sets out key measures Sunderland will track to assess delivery and impact. Headline indicators are monitored annually; leading indicators are monitored quarterly or termly to enable early course correction.

Outcome	Measure	Source/Owner	Frequency	Target/Direction
Headline Outcomes	% GLD overall (EYFSP)	LA/School Improvement	Annual	↑ to 76.0% by 2027/28
Headline Outcomes	% GLD FSM (EYFSP)	LA/School Improvement	Annual	↑ to 76.0% by 2027/28
Gap Measures	GLD gap: FSM vs non FSM	LA	Annual	↓
Gap Measures	GLD by cohort (boys/girls, SEND)	LA	Annual	↑ with narrowing gaps
Access	Take up rate funded	FIS/LA	Quarterly	↑
Language	Early Talk Boost reach (# settings)	School Improvement	Termly	↑
Language	Early Talk Boost outcomes (%)	SCT/S&L UK platform	Termly	↑
Best Start Family Hubs	Family Hub participation (0–	Family Hubs	Quarterly	↑ with reduced locality variation
Health & Development	0–19 service key measures (ASQ/	Public Health/0–19	Quarterly	↑
SEND/OT	Referrals into specialist	ICB/Providers	Quarterly	↓ avoidable referrals; ↑ timely
Quality	Settings/schools in targeted	School Improvement	Termly	100% delivery
Workforce	Early years CPD engagement	School Improvement	Termly	↑

The shared dashboard will be developed further, aligned to our Healthy City Plan, Starting Well Delivery Board key performance indicators, which is currently underway.

Priority actions:

1. Explore the standardisation of information sharing across health visiting, family hubs, early education settings and schools, building on existing frameworks in place.
2. In Sunderland, co-production is a key priority, family voice will continue to be at the centre of ongoing service development and evaluation. We will gather feedback from parents, carers and young children through surveys, focus groups, Family Hub engagement and community partners. Understanding families' lived experiences will help us shape services that are accessible, inclusive and responsive to local needs.
3. Explore opportunities with Council partners to broaden the data available in support of identifying families requiring support (data lake).
4. We will publish updates on progress and share learning across the early years workforce and community partners.

Accountability and governance

Progress will be overseen through existing governance structures, ensuring accountability across partners. Regular reporting to strategic boards will support shared decision-making, identify risks early and ensure that actions remain aligned with the plan's priorities. This includes:

- Sunderland Health and Wellbeing Board
- Starting Well Delivery Group
- Sunderland SEND Strategic Board
- Best Start in Life Strategic Board

Delivery will be co-ordinated through our Best Start in Life Operational Group and workstreams to ensure alignment of wider system transformation including Family Hubs and Families First programmes, with named leads attached to each priority that will report directly into these structures.

We would also expect to have additional oversight through our:

- Children Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee
- Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

Our plan will remain live, with regular updates based on progress, learning, and what is working best for Sunderland's children and families.

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Policy context

Our Best Start Plan aligns with national policy, reflecting the government's commitment to making early years development and school readiness a national priority through the Giving every child the best start in life policy.

Giving every child the best start in life: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life>

By strengthening our local approach in line with this direction, we ensure that children and families in Sunderland benefit from the latest evidence, investment, and focus on the early years.

The actions within this plan directly support the ambitions set out in national and local policy frameworks, including:

- The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-best-start-for-life-a-vision-for-the-1001-critical-days>
- Our Children, Our Future: Tackling Child Poverty:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-children-our-future-tackling-child-poverty>
- Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England:
<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20250707103655/https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/>
- Working together to safeguard children 2026:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69c2c4ce380a2a73a7cf9df4/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_2026.pdf
- Families First Partnership programme:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/families-first-partnership-programme>
- Sunderland Prevention and Early Help Strategy 2024–2028:
https://www.togetherforchildren.org.uk/media/34808/Prevention-and-Early-Help-Strategy-2024/pdf/tfc23287_Prevention_and_Early_Help_Strategy_2024_2028_A4.pdf?m=1737482531410
- Sunderland Healthy City Plan, Sunderland City Council:
<https://www.sunderland.gov.uk/healthycityplan>
- Child Poverty Strategy 2025–28, Sunderland City Council
<https://www.sunderland.gov.uk/child-poverty-strategy>
- North East Child Poverty Action Plan Child Poverty Reduction Unit:
<https://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/child-poverty-reduction-unit>



Glossary of abbreviations

GLD	Good Level of Development
EYFSP	Early Years Foundation Stage Profile
PVI	Private, Voluntary and Independent early years providers
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
FRED	Fathers Reading Every Day programme
IMD	Index of Multiple Deprivation
FSM	Free School Meals eligibility
HLE	Home Learning Environment
MMR	Measles, Mumps and Rubella vaccination
HCP	Healthy Child Programme
SLC	Speech, Language and Communication needs
PCN	Primary Care Network
LSOA	Lower Super Output Area
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector
ILACS	Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (Ofsted framework)
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
A&E	Accident and Emergency department
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training

