

Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee



Reading
Borough Council

Working better with you

08 July 2026

Title	Best Start in Life Strategy 2026-2028
Purpose of the report	To note the report for information
Report status	Public report
Executive Director/ Statutory Officer Commissioning Report	Lara Patel, Executive Director of Children's Services
Report author	Becky Bateman, Head of Early Years and Childcare
Lead Councillor	Cllr Wendy Griffith, Lead Councillor for Children
Council priority	Safeguard & support the health & wellbeing of Reading's adults & children
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That Committee endorse the Best Start in Life Strategy 2026-2028 2. That Committee note that governance and oversight of the Strategy, including monitoring of delivery plans against agreed objectives and reviewing of outcomes, will be through the Health and Wellbeing Board

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. In March 2026 the Health and Wellbeing Board agreed that the Best Start in Life strategy is one of the 3 priorities for the Board over the next 3 years.
- 1.2. Reading's Best Start in Life Strategy focuses on early help, joined-up services and removing barriers to support, especially for families who need it most. Strong integrated pathways—midwifery, early years, health visiting, Family Hubs and voluntary and community partners—provide wraparound support from pregnancy to school entry. Through improved early intervention, targeted support, strengthened early years provision and high-quality Family Hubs, Reading is committed to:
 - supporting children's development from birth
 - improving Good Level of Development (GLD) outcomes for all children
 - ensuring more children thrive by the time they enter Reception
 - enabling every child to have the strongest possible start in life
- 1.3. In Reading, we want every baby and child to grow up feeling safe, loved and able to flourish. The Strategy sets out how we will work as one team in Reading to support our children and young people to live lives free from fear and harm, to help them feel safe, be healthy, achieve their potential and experience a sense of belonging.
- 1.4. By working together with families and communities, we will help families from pregnancy through to starting school for children to:

- feel secure and supported
- be healthy, happy and confident
- develop strong communication and learning skills
- experience a sense of belonging.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1 In July 2025, HM Government published *Giving every child the best start in life*: The government's strategy for improving child development and meeting the ambition that 75% of 5-year-olds in England have a good level of development by 2028. The government's strategy required all local authorities to develop and publish local Best Start in Life plans by the end of March 26. Publication of the Reading strategy followed endorsement from the Health and Wellbeing Board.
- 2.2 The Best Start in Life strategy forms part of the national early years transformation agenda, with a focus on improving outcomes for children aged 0-5. The strategy aligns with national and local priorities; Families First reforms, SEND reforms and early years transformation through integrated system delivery via Best Start Family hubs.
- 2.3 The approach reflects the strong evidence base that early childhood - particularly the earliest years - has a significant influence on long-term health, wellbeing, and life chances. As such, the programme prioritises prevention, early help, and improving outcomes for families at the earliest stage.

3. The Proposal

- 3.1. The Best Start in Life strategy aims to increase the proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) from 68% to 75% by 2028, while reducing inequalities for groups, including children with SEND, those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), and those with English as an Additional Language (EAL).
- 3.2. The programme strengthens early identification and intervention and delivers integrated, accessible services through a Family Hub "single front door" approach. This reflects a shared system priority to improve outcomes in the early years through prevention, early intervention, and integrated working.
- 3.3. The strategy directly supports the priorities set out in Reading Borough Council's Corporate Plan, particularly:
- Ensuring children and young people in Reading can reach their full potential
 - Tackling inequality and deprivation across the borough
 - Delivering early intervention to reduce escalation into higher-cost services
- 3.4. Reading has a diverse and growing population, with areas of significant deprivation alongside relative affluence. This contributes to:
- Variation in school readiness and early years outcomes
 - Health inequalities, including maternal health and child development
 - Increased demand for early help, SEND support, and safeguarding services
- 3.5. The Best Start in Life Strategy responds to these challenges through a targeted, place-based approach, focusing resources on communities with the greatest need.
- 3.6. The Strategy is aligned with key partnership arrangements across Reading, including:
- The Thames Valley NHS Integrated Care System (ICS) and local health priorities

- The Reading Health and Wellbeing Board Strategy, which prioritises improving health outcomes and reducing inequalities

- Local safeguarding partnerships, ensuring protection and early identification of need

3.7. Partnership working in Reading is critical, particularly through:

- Integration of health visiting, Best Start family hubs, and early help services
- Collaboration with early years providers, schools, and the voluntary sector
- A shared focus on prevention and early intervention

4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

4.1. The Best Start in Life Strategy supports the Council's strategic priority to 'Safeguard and support the health and wellbeing of Reading's adults and children', improving outcomes for children and families through a stronger focus on early intervention and prevention. The development of integrated Best Start Family Hub services will improve access to support by providing a more coordinated and streamlined offer for families.

4.2. This approach is expected to contribute to improved school readiness, better health and wellbeing outcomes, and increased family resilience. It will also support earlier identification of need, reducing escalation to higher-level statutory services and improving overall service effectiveness.

4.3. In delivering these priorities, we will be guided by the following set of principles:

- Putting residents first
- Building on strong foundations
- Recognising, respecting, and nurturing all our diverse communities
- Involving, collaborating, and empowering residents
- Being proudly ambitious for Reading

5. Environmental and Climate Implications

5.1. There are no environmental or climate implications arising from the Best Start in Life Strategy

6. Community Engagement

6.1. Community engagement involved extensive consultation with young people, parents and carers and partners in order to shape the priorities of the Best Start in Life Strategy. Staff and councillors were also consulted before publication of the strategy.

7. Equality Implications

7.1. The policy is not expected to lead to direct or indirect discrimination, harassment, or victimisation under the Equality Act 2010.

7.2. The strategy is explicitly designed to be inclusive, accessible, and family-centred, supporting all families in Reading. It focuses on improving access to services and the policy will affect access to services and participation, but in a positive way, with the intention of reducing inequalities.

7.3. Key impacts include:

- Improved access to integrated services (e.g. Family Hubs, health visiting, early years support), designed to be inclusive, local, place-based and accessible.
- Targeted outreach and early intervention for families facing the greatest challenges, including those affected by poverty, poor housing, or other adversities.

- Enhanced support for children with SEND and neurodivergence, including earlier identification and intervention.
 - Focus on closing development gaps which are already evident in early childhood and linked to deprivation.
- 7.4. Protected characteristics most positively affected include:
- Disability (SEND and neurodiversity support)
 - Race and ethnicity (through inclusive, accessible services and outreach)
 - Sex and pregnancy/maternity (perinatal support)
 - Socio-economic disadvantage (local characteristic)
- 7.5. Locally defined characteristics also supported:
- Experience of care (targeting vulnerable families and children in care)
 - Armed forces community (via universal access routes, though not explicitly targeted)
- 7.6. Potential risks (to be mitigated):
- Unequal uptake of services among some groups (e.g. marginalised communities)
 - Access barriers (e.g. language, digital exclusion, cultural barriers)
 - Outcomes for all children and families, with additional targeted support for those experiencing disadvantage, which is consistent with lawful positive action.
- 7.7. The strategy is expected to have a positive impact on community cohesion and understanding.
- 7.8. The strategy promotes inclusive, respectful, and trauma-informed services that recognise diverse family needs. It has been co-produced with families, communities and partners, helping ensure different voices are represented.
- 7.9. By improving early support and reducing disadvantage, it contributes to long-term social inclusion and reduced inequality, which are key drivers of cohesion.
- 7.10. If not implemented equitably, perceived inequalities in service access could lead to dissatisfaction or reduced trust

8. Other Relevant Considerations

- 8.1. Key risks include workforce capacity, effective cross-agency integration, data system maturity, and engagement with priority groups. Mitigation will focus on governance, partnership working, and performance monitoring.

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1. To be confirmed in consultation with Legal Services prior to submission.

10. Financial Implications

- 10.1. The Best Start in Life grant will include both revenue and capital allocations provided under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003.
- 10.2. Reading Borough Council's provisional allocation for financial years 2026-29 of the programme is £2,612,000
- 10.3. Table 1: Distribution of funding allocation across the relevant programme strands for financial years 2026-27, 2027-28 and 2028-29.

Table 1: Grant Strands	2026/2027	2027/2028	2028/2029	Total
	£	£	£	£
Delivery	345,200	282,000	289,000	916,200
Parenting	104,500	10,5700	110,400	320,600
Home Learning Environment (HLE)	139,200	141,000	147,100	427,300
Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)	175,400	280,600	280,600	736,600
Total Revenue	764,300	809,300	827,100	2,400,700
Delivery – Capital	69,100	70,400	71,800	211,300
Total Capital	69,100	70,400	71,800	211,300
Total Allocation	833,400	879,700	898,900	2,612,000

10.4. A detailed budget plan has been developed and formally agreed within the Directorate of Children’s Services. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed between the Executive Director of Children’s Services and the Deputy Director of the Best Start Family Hubs LA Delivery Division, confirming roles, responsibilities, and financial oversight arrangements.

10.5. The first two quarterly instalments of the grant were received on 29 May 2026, in line with the agreed funding schedule.

10.6. Funding beyond the 2026–29 period will be subject to future government spending review processes. Key financial risk relates to the sustainability and transition of funded activities beyond the grant term. Without continuation funding, this may result in:

- Service reduction or discontinuation
- Workforce implications, including potential redundancies at contract end

10.7. Mitigation planning will be required to manage exit strategies and explore future funding opportunities.

10.8. This section has been reviewed by Steven Davies, Strategic Finance Business Partner.

11. Timetable for Implementation

11.1. Delivery will take place from **2026 to 2029**, with phased implementation, ongoing monitoring, and evaluation through programme governance arrangements.

12. Background Papers

12.1. There are none.

Appendices

1. The Best Start in Life Strategy

2. Equality Impact and Needs Assessment