

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet – 16 March 2026

Report Title

Best Start Local Plan 2026 - 2029

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

Yes

Executive Director Approving Submission of the Report

Nicola Curley, Executive Director of Children & Young People's Service

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

The Department for Education (DfE) issued targets for Local Authorities (LAs) to improve Good Level of Development (GLD) as part of its "Best Start in Life" strategy, aiming for 75% of 5-year-olds nationally to reach GLD nationally by 2028, issuing new data tools and funding to guide local planning and intervention.

This report provides an overview of current activity across Rotherham to improve early years outcomes, tackle inequalities, and ensure that all children, especially those who are disadvantaged, get a strong foundation for school, contributing to the Council's wider ambition that children and young people achieve.

The report outlines the key activity undertaken in developing the new Best Start Local Plan, including a comprehensive needs analysis, engagement, and consultation.

The report seeks approval of the Best Start Local Plan and outlines the timeline for implementation to achieve the ambitions identified.

Recommendations

That Cabinet:

1. Note the activity to date to improve early years outcomes and tackle inequalities.
2. Approve the Best Start Local Plan for implementation from April 2026.

List of Appendices Included

- Appendix 1 Best Start Local Plan
- Appendix 2 Best Start Summit summary
- Appendix 3 Best Start and Beyond Framework
- Appendix 4 Equality Analysis
- Appendix 5 Part B – Equality Impact Analysis
- Appendix 6 Carbon Impact

Background Papers

[Rotherham Health and Care Place Plan](#)

[Rotherham Council plan 'Forging Ahead'](#)

[Rotherham Health and Wellbeing Strategy for 2025-2030](#)

['Fit for the Future', the NHS 10 year plan](#)

[Rotherham Early Years Education & Childcare Strategy 2024–2027](#)

['No Family Left Behind' child poverty strategy \(Rotherham\)](#)

[Early Help Strategy: Family Help in Rotherham 2024-2029](#)

[Rotherham SEND Strategy: My Life, My Rights 2024-2028](#)

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Best Start Local Plan 2026 - 2029

1. Background

1.1 Purpose of the report

1.1.1 The purpose of the report is to:

- Provide an overview of current activity contributing to the achievement of the DfE issued target to improve Good Level of Development (GLD) so that at least 73.3% of 5-year-olds across Rotherham reach GLD by 2028.
- Seek approval of the Best Start Local Plan 2026 – 2029 and outline the timeline for implementation to achieve the ambitions identified.

1.2 Statutory Duty and Local Responsibility

1.2.1 Under the Childcare Act 2006, the Secretary of State has powers to set local authority (LA) targets relating to early years outcomes and the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.

1.2.2 Under Section 1 of the Childcare Act 2006, Local Authorities have a mandatory duty to improve the well-being of all young children in their area and reduce inequalities between those with the poorest outcomes and their peers.

1.2.3 Under Section 6, LAs must secure sufficient childcare for working parents and ensure it is of high enough quality to support school readiness.

1.2.4 The Government's "Plan for Change," giving every child the Best Start in Life, requires LAs to secure quality early years education, use new data tools and co-ordinate Family Hubs and relevant health services.

1.2.5 All LAs must develop and publish "Best Start" local plans by 31st March 2026 in line with guidance issued. These plans must outline strategies to reach the agreed local contribution to the national 75% GLD target and address regional disparities.

1.2.6 The reinforced legal and strategic framework shifts the local focus from simply providing childcare places to achieving specific developmental outcomes. Rotherham Council is required to improve the percentage of five-year-olds reaching a Good Level of Development in their Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) assessments to 73.3% (and 56.6% of five-year-olds eligible for free school meals) by 2028.

1.3 Rotherham Context

1.3.1 Rotherham has 14,893 children aged 0-4 according to the 2023 mid-year population estimate.

- 1.3.2 In Rotherham, 27.7% of pupils are eligible for FSM, which compares to an average of 24.6% across England Authorities. 23.5% of pupils have either a statutory plan for Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND), known as an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or are receiving SEND support (previously known as school action and school action plus). This compares to an average of 19.6% across all England Authorities.
- 1.3.3 In the 2023/24 academic year, 64.3% of Rotherham 5-year-olds reached a Good Level of Development (GLD). In the 2024/25 academic year, Rotherham’s GLD rate was 65.0%. This is slightly below National (68.3%), Yorkshire & Humber (66.3%) and Statistical Neighbours (66.4%).
- 1.3.4 Despite other strengths, 35% of children are not achieving GLD — with a significant proportion needing targeted support. To meet the local target of 73.3%, Rotherham needs an increase of 8.3 percentage points within three years from the current 65.0%.
- 1.4 **Existing activity aligned to Best Start priorities**
- 1.4.1 Rotherham Council’s ambition for a family-friendly Borough, where all children and young people achieve, ensures child-focused strategies create a golden thread aligning high level goals with practical, community-based support focused on early intervention and integrated partnership working.
- 1.4.2 The Rotherham Council Plan (2025–2030) includes the establishment of Best Start Family Hubs and an associated network of community sites and services to provide single points of access to advice and support. There is also an expansion of Early Education to create capacity to meet the Government’s expanded 30-hour free childcare entitlement for working parents of children from 9 months to age five by September 2025 and activity to address inequality including the provision of cost-of-living support packages, auto-enrolment of eligible children for free school meals and school uniform assistance.
- 1.4.3 The Health and Wellbeing Strategy commitment to “Enable all children and young people up to age 25 to have the best start in life, maximise their capabilities and have influence and control over their lives” underpins a partnership response which starts before a child is conceived. This includes activity in community health to facilitate easier access to wellness services via the launch of the "Rotherhive" digital platform, delivery of the universal Baby Packs and targeted outreach support focusing on improving take-up of early education places in specific areas like Central Rotherham to close development gaps.
- 1.4.4 The Children and Young People’s transformation workstream under the Health and Care Place Plan was instrumental in the development of the Best Start and Beyond Framework (Appendix 3). Key activities include the Health and Wellbeing Board’s “Supporting a Breastfeeding Borough” declaration and the development and delivery of the associated

"Rotherham Backs Breastfeeding" campaign, community support and early identification of speech and language needs.

1.4.5 Key activities in the Early Help Strategy include the expansion of the physical and digital Family Hub Start for Life offer, to ensure that families have access to the information and tools they need to care for and interact positively with their babies and children, and to look after their own wellbeing. This includes a focus on activities and interventions to support GLD and which promote language and emotional bonding, such as the Peep Home Learning Programme, as well as access to evidenced-based parenting support and a range of targeted family help.

1.5 **Proposed next steps**

1.5.1 Approval is sought for the Best Start Local Plan 2026 – 2029. This will meet the requirement to publish a Best Start Local Plan by 31st March 2026 and ensure continued progress towards the achievement of the DfE-issued target to improve Good Level of Development (GLD) so that 73.3% of 5-year-olds across Rotherham reach GLD by 2028.

2. **Key Issues**

2.1 **Developing the Best Start Local Plan**

2.1.1 On the 1st of December 2025, a Summit led by Rotherham Council brought together multi-agency partners, aiming to foster collaborative discussion and actionable strategies for improving early years development outcomes. Presentations provided a comprehensive needs analysis with a range of quantitative and qualitative information, including feedback from children and families, delivered by Children and Young People's Services, Early Years Education and 0-19 Public Health. Participants engaged in two workshops: the first focusing on current practices and the second on generating ideas for doing things differently. The summit concluded by agreeing the appropriate next steps, informing the development of the Best Start Local Plan.

2.1.2 The Summit captured examples of current activity evidencing delivery of a comprehensive early years support system through integrated health checks, family engagement, robust multi-agency delivery including a vibrant voluntary and community sector and workforce development. Collectively, these actions aim to improve school readiness, reduce inequalities, and foster strong home learning environments. Some key examples of such activity are set out in the following paragraphs.

2.1.3 Health services provide key developmental reviews and performance in this area is high and compares positively to regional and national averages.

2.1.4 The Family Information Service promotes activities, SEND updates, and regular communications to strengthen family support.

- 2.1.5 Parenting initiatives are delivered via Family Hubs, complemented by home learning programmes that promote parental engagement.
- 2.1.6 Community engagement is enhanced through partnerships with the voluntary sector, for example Grimm & Co, which delivers creative literacy, cultural storytelling, and parental support, alongside links to Sheffield Hallam University for impact evaluation.
- 2.1.7 Professional development is embedded through the annual Early Years Conference, bespoke school visits, moderation and best practice meetings and targeted training on curriculum, assessment, and EYFS requirements led by Rotherham School Improvement Service (RoSIS).

2.2 **Guiding Principles**

- 2.2.1 The Strategy has been developed in line with the principles of the Rotherham Charter (Four Cornerstones): 1. Welcome and Care 2. Value and Include 3. Communicate 4. Work in Partnership.
- 2.2.2 In line with the Four Cornerstones, the Summit proposed the key principles to underpin the Best Start Local Plan should be:
 - **Partner with parents and carers** as the most important people in a child’s life.
 - **Provide high-quality early years experiences** that spark curiosity and build strong foundations.
 - **Offer timely support** for any additional needs (child or family) so no child is left behind.
 - **Make moving between stages smooth and positive**, so every child and family feels supported as they grow.

2.3 **Analysis of local need**

- 2.3.1 Rotherham shows high expected levels in Physical Development (82.0%) and Personal, Social and Emotional Development (79.3%), which support GLD attainment.
- 2.3.2 Expected levels in Writing (67.8%) and Word Reading (72.1%) are lower than other domains, potentially holding back GLD achievement. Rotherham is not exceptional in this respect, as the writing domain is also a limiting factor nationally, affecting a significant proportion of children.
- 2.3.3 22.2% of children are still at the emerging level in Communication and Language, which can impact readiness for Key Stage 1 and overall GLD.
- 2.3.4 “Expected” and “emerging” are specific judgments used in assessing a child’s development against each of the 17 early learning goals (ELGs). Where a teacher judges that a child has not met the expected level of development for a particular ELG, the child should be assessed as “emerging” for that particular ELG, and further context should be provided within the profile.

2.3.5 A Good Level of Development is achieved when a child reaches the expected level against the 3 prime areas of the EYFS (communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; physical development), and for literacy and mathematics.

2.3.6 The proportion of children with EHCPs continues to increase which means that more SEN places will be needed in mainstream schools, special schools, and post 16 provision.

2.4 **Best Start Local Plan**

2.4.1 Based on the analysis of local need, the following priorities are identified (text shown below is verbatim from the plan):

1. Strengthening early communication, language, and literacy for all children

We know that communication and language are the biggest drivers of school readiness. Improving early speech, language and literacy is central to our ambition to increase the proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development.

2.4.2 **2. Increasing early education access for disadvantaged children**

While many families take up funded early education places, too many children in our most disadvantaged communities still miss out, including 12.9% of 3–4-year-olds who live in one of the most deprived 30% of areas in England, based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Closing this gap is essential to closing our GLD gap.

2.4.3 **3. Improving the quality of early years provision, including Reception, for all children**

The first years of education shape life chances. We will work with providers, childminders, schools, Stronger Practice Hubs and the Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) in the Department for Education (DE) to improve practice, strengthen transitions and raise outcomes for all children.

2.4.4 **4. Identifying needs early and supporting children with SEND and vulnerable families**

With SEND prevalence above national levels and rising EHCP demand, we must act earlier and more collaboratively to ensure children get the right help at the right time – reducing escalation and improving long-term outcomes.

2.4.5 **5. Providing joined-up family support through our Family Hubs**

Rotherham's Family Hubs network is already strong. Through these hubs we will offer integrated health, early help, childcare, and community support so families experience a seamless pathway from pregnancy to school age.

2.4.6 **6. Tackling inequalities across the 0–5 system**

We are determined to narrow the gaps linked to deprivation, SEND, health inequalities and access to opportunity. Our actions will target the communities who need us most, helping to level the playing field and improve the life chances of every child.

2.4.7 The Best Start Local Plan 2026-2029 details the outcomes under each priority with clear milestones and performance metrics. The Best Start Local Plan is included as Appendix 1.

2.5 **Governance**

2.5.1 Progress against the Best Start Local Plan will be monitored by the Best Start and Beyond Steering Group. Regular updates will be provided to the Health and Care Place Board, Children and Young People's Change Management Board and Senior Leadership Team. Overarching responsibility will sit with the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People who will report into the Health and Wellbeing Board.

3. **Options considered and recommended proposal**

3.1 **Option 1:** Consideration has been given to not developing and publishing a Best Start Local Plan. This option of doing nothing would create a risk that the Council does not meet the statutory duty and expectations detailed in Policy guidance. Should the Council choose not to deliver the key activities described in the Best Start Local Plan it is likely that fewer children in Rotherham will achieve a Good Level of Development in 2028. This may present a reputational risk if Rotherham is unable to achieve the target set by Government.

3.2 **Option 2 (preferred option):** Approval of the Best Start Local Plan to be published by 31st March 2026 will deliver against the Council's statutory duty, meet the requirements of Policy guidance, and support coordinated multi-agency activity to support more children to achieve a Good Level of Development.

4. **Consultation on proposal**

4.1 Due to the challenging timeframe set by Government for publication of the Plan, there has been insufficient time to undertake widespread public consultation specific to the Best Start Local Plan. Relevant in-depth consultation and engagement has been completed as part of the ongoing work to support children and families; this has been used to inform the development of the Plan. This has included events with Rotherham Parent

Carer Forum, work with the Family Hub parent/carer group, quality feedback from families accessing Family Hubs and feedback from families following engagement with 0-19 public health services. Child and family voice is also captured as part of regular quality assurance activity.

4.2 The Summit included stakeholders across Education, Health, Care, Regeneration and Environment, SEND and the Voluntary Sector. There were representatives from 0-19 service, Child Development Centre, Family Hubs, Grimm and Co, Rotherham Parent Carer Forum, Children's Social Care, Education and Inclusion, Culture, Sport and Tourism, NHS South Yorkshire Rotherham Integrated Care Board, Public Health, School Improvement, Early Years, Commissioning and Performance.

4.3 Updates have been provided to the Lead Member for Children and Young People, the Lead Member for Adult Social Care and Health, Children and Young People Directorate Leadership Team and the Senior Leadership Team.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

- 5.1
- Approval of the Best Start Local Plan – March 2026
 - Publication of the Best Start Local Plan – 31st March 2026
 - Implementation of the Best Start Local Plan – from April 2026
 - Review of the Best Start Local Plan – March 2027

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 Starting in April 2026, the UK government is transitioning the current Family Hubs and Start for Life programme into a new national model called Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs). Provisional funding allocations have been confirmed by the Government covering the 3 financial years 2026-2029. All local authorities will receive funding to:

1. Develop and implement Best Start local plans.
2. Establish and deliver BSFHs.
3. Provide evidence-based parenting and home learning environment services.

6.2 Funding is split into two streams:

Delivery grant

The delivery grant supports local authorities to establish and run Best Start Family Hubs by funding staff capacity, leadership, outreach and engagement, multi-agency workforce training and development, digital systems, and service integration. It is intended to help areas deliver their Best Start local plans, strengthen joined-up working across health and family services and improve outcomes for babies, children, and families.

Capital grant

Capital funding is a small, ring-fenced element of the delivery grant and must be used for capital works only. It supports adaptations to existing

buildings, such as improving accessibility, upgrading IT and facilities, and providing equipment and furniture to enable multi-agency working and co-location of services within Best Start Family Hubs.

6.3 Rotherham has received indicative funding allocations for the next three financial years, detailed below:

	2026-27 Allocation	2027-28 Allocation	2028-29 Allocation
Delivery Grant	1,633,600	1,560,300	1,592,200
Capital Grant	87,200	88,900	90,600
Total	1,720,800	1,649,200	1,682,800

6.4 Funding beyond the 2026-29 period will be subject to future Government spending review processes, but local authorities are required to consider long-term sustainability, including join up with statutory services, in the development of their local offer.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 Section 1 of the Children Act 2006 places a general duty on local authorities to improve the wellbeing of young children in their area. Section 1(2) defines wellbeing which includes education, training, and recreation. Section 1(3) provides for the Secretary for State to set targets for the improvement of the wellbeing of young people and a reduction of inequalities between young children.

7.2 The Government’s Best Start in Life Strategy was published in July 2025, and as a result, local authorities are expected to develop Best Start local plans to achieve the Plan for Change milestone to get a record number of children school-ready every year by 2028. The Strategy set out that plans should detail each local authority’s approach to achieving and measuring their progress towards their 2028 target. Each local authority received a target in August 2025, and these were confirmed in November 2025. Under section 1(4), a local authority must act in the manner that is best calculated to secure that any targets set by the Secretary of State are met.

7.3 Guidance published by the Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care in December 2025 states that Local Plans should be published by no later than 31 March 2026. Under section 1 (1) (5) a local authority in performing their duties must have regard to any guidance from the Secretary of State.

7.4 The options outlined at Paragraph 3.1 and 3.2 of the report provides 2 options, the recommended option is Option 2 at paragraph 3.2 following the statutory guidance to each Local Authority to publish its plan. Option 1 (paragraph 3.1) does not comply with the statutory guidance. There are no legal implications with following option 2.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 There is no direct HR implication within this report.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 Additional focused activity to improve early identification of barriers to learning the home learning environment and the quality of teaching and assessment within the borough will give more children and young people the opportunity to achieve a Good Level of Development.

9.2 Key considerations are referenced within the report.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 Children not achieving a Good Level of Development are more likely to be from areas of deprivation. Targeted activity to address inequalities and increase engagement in provision is included within the Plan.

10.2 An equalities impact assessment is an appendix to this report.

11. Implications for CO₂ Emissions and Climate Change

11.1 Wider consideration of indirect implications or unintended consequence of work in this area has on CO₂ Emissions and Climate Change is considered across all partners as the Council are committed to long term targets to mitigate these areas of concern in the Borough. An environmental impact assessment has been completed and is an appendix to this report.

12. Implications for Partners

12.1 Achieving the target for 73.3% of children to achieve a Good Level of Development in 2028 will require a coordinated partnership response. Key considerations are referenced throughout the report.

12.2 Ongoing updates will be provided to key stakeholders including Parent/carers forum, health leaders, school leaders, and other associated stakeholders.

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 Processes oversight will be provided through the Best Start and Beyond Steering Group and Children and Young People's Services Change Management Board, which involves all key internal parties including legal, assets, HR, procurement, transport, finance, commissioning, and education specialists.

13.2 There is a risk that despite coordinated work to improve the home learning environment, early identification and targeted support for children who need it and effective workforce development and quality assurance Rotherham will still not achieve the target set. The DfE's target

methodology was not differentiated based on the level of need in local areas and therefore does not take into account the intersectionality of need in Rotherham specifically.

14. Accountable Officers

Helen Sweaton – Joint Service Director, Commissioning, Performance and Quality

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	John Edwards	27/02/2026
Executive Director of Corporate Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	26/02/2026
Service Director, Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Phil Horsfield	26/02/26

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