

Foreword from the Portfolio Holder for Children & Young People

Every child in Rotherham deserves the very best start in life. As a council, and as a partnership, we are united in our belief that a child's background must never determine their future. This Best Start Local Plan sets out our ambition to make that belief a reality — through decisive action, strong collaboration and an unwavering focus on child development.

Rotherham is a borough with enormous strengths: committed professionals, dedicated early years settings and schools, an established Family Hub network, and families who want the very best for their children. But we also face real challenges. Too many children start school without the communication skills, language, confidence or early learning experiences that set them up to thrive. Inequalities across our neighbourhoods. — in access to early education, in health, and in early development — are persistent and must be addressed head-on.

This plan is our collective response. It is built around **six shared priorities** that reflect both our evidence and our values:

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 (GLD).

2. Increasing early education access for disadvantaged children

Despite good overall uptake, 12.9% of 3–4-year-olds living in the 30% most deprived IMD areas still do not access their funded early education places. Reducing this shortfall is key to closing our GLD gap

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 RISE to improve practice, strengthen transitions and raise outcomes for all children.

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.

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.

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.

Together, these priorities represent a bold and ambitious programme for change — one that reflects our values as a borough and our belief in children's potential. By 2028, we want to see more children achieving a Good Level of Development, fewer inequalities, stronger early relationships and families who feel supported from the very beginning.

This plan belongs to all of us. I would like to thank our partners across health, education, early years, the voluntary and community sector — and especially our parents and carers — for shaping it. By working with unity, compassion and determination, we can ensure that every child in Rotherham is ready to learn, ready to grow and ready to thrive.

Cllr Cusworth

Cabinet Member for Children & Young People | RMBC

Deputy Leader | RMBC

1. Our Shared Vision

Every child in Rotherham thrives in their earliest years — safe, nurtured, curious, and ready for a lifetime of learning and wellbeing.

Together, we will:

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- **Work in genuine partnership with parents and carers**, recognising them as children's first and most important teachers.
- **Create highquality early years environments** that inspire play, curiosity, and early learning.
- **Identify needs early and provide the right support at the right time** so every child has the chance to thrive.
- **Ensure smooth, positive transitions** between home, childcare, nursery, and school so families feel confident and supported.
- **Tackle inequalities from the earliest point**, ensuring every child—wherever they live—has the same chances to succeed.
- **Build connected services around families** making it easier to access help, information, and opportunities during pregnancy and the early years.

Our Shared Ambition

The six shared priorities reflect the voices of our families, the expertise of our practitioners and the realities shown by our local data. They set a clear direction for the next three years — a shared commitment to improving early development, strengthening family support and reducing inequalities.

Together, we will ensure that **every child in Rotherham begins school ready to learn, ready to grow and ready to thrive.**

In Rotherham we have developed Four Cornerstones which we believe are essential for ensuring that good practice in working with children, young people, parents and carers is achieved. These are:



By working together, we can give every child the chance to reach their full potential and thrive—now and in the future.



The national Best Start in Life strategy, published in July 2025, aims to

- enhance family services and early intervention through 'Best Start Family Hubs'
- provide affordable and accessible childcare
- deliver high quality early education.

Rotherham's Best Start Local Plan will play a key role in delivering the Government's national commitment to improve early child development and reduce inequalities. This will contribute to achieving one of the key aims of Rotherham's Health and Wellbeing Strategy, which is 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."

2. Strategic Priorities and Actions

Rotherham Council's plan 'Forging Ahead' has "children and young people achieving" as one of its five key outcomes for 2025-2030.

Partners in Rotherham are passionate about children getting the best start in life and going on to achieve their potential. **The Health and Wellbeing Strategy for 2025-2030** has just four aims, with the first being 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."

Fit for the Future, the NHS 10 year plan, has a vision of a neighbourhood health service, with care happening as locally as it can. Rotherham is a pioneer site for the national neighbourhood implementation plan, and has a well-developed family hub network that already forms an important part of health services delivered in community settings.

This Best Start Local Plan therefore builds from a strong strategic position locally

There is no need for this plan to start from scratch, as it also builds on other key existing strategies, plans and frameworks that address different aspects of the early lives of Rotherham children. These are all already working together to help improve the life chances of Rotherham's current and future generations of children and young people. This plan's main purpose is to bring these existing plans, initiatives and working arrangements together to best achieve the vision of the best start for life for every child, and in particular that all Rotherham children should be starting primary school ready to learn.

The Government's 'Giving every child the best start in life' strategy focuses on three areas: better support for families; better access to early years childcare and education; and improving quality in early years and Reception. Rotherham already has plans and programmes across all of these areas, providing excellent foundations for this Best Start Local Plan.

Rotherham Baby Pack

This programme is part of the Council's commitment to ensuring every child in Rotherham gets the best possible start in life. It provides every Rotherham expectant parent (with very high uptake) a box of high quality essential items for the first six months of a baby's life, and also contains the booklet 'Giving your child the best start in life', co-designed by Rotherham parents and offering information on access to services, activities, and help via local Family Hubs and online, focusing on early development and wellbeing.

Best Start Family Hubs and Health Babies Programme

Rotherham has a well established Family Hub network of sites and organisations working collaboratively across the borough, anchored by three Best Start Family Hubs, serving the north, south and central localities, and offering appointments, drop-in clinics and groups, social connection, and access to a wide range of health, family help and other support services, which include infant feeding support, perinatal mental health assistance, and strengthening parent-infant relationships

Best Start and Beyond Framework

This is owned by a partnership steering group, and it provides a tool to help achieve the Health and Wellbeing Board's aim to give all children the best start and enable them to maximise their capabilities.

It is a toolkit, providing lenses to focus attention on different aspects of the children's workforce, available family support services and wider determinants of health, in order to identify system improvement opportunities within four key phases of a child's journey – the first 1001 days; the early pre-school years; primary and secondary school years; the transition to adulthood.

Rotherham Early Years Education & Childcare Strategy 2024–2027

The strategy sets out to realise the vision, in the early years education and child care strategy, that “in Rotherham there will be no barriers to children achieving the best they can and realising their full potential.”

It aims to achieve this through universal access to affordable, high-quality childcare, supporting provider sustainability and continuous improvement, with a focus on vulnerable children.

‘No Family Left Behind’ child poverty strategy

Seeks to mitigate the impact of poverty and work with organisations to reduce the barriers that children, young people, and families who live in poverty may experience, and puts families at the heart of decision making.

Early Help Strategy: Family Help in Rotherham 2024-2029

Rotherham has a vision for Family Help that has been co-produced and agreed by partners, stakeholders, children, young people, and families. The vision is for all agencies to be working together to ensure that children, young people, and families have their

needs identified early so that they can receive swift access to targeted help and support under the Families First Partnership Programme.

Rotherham SEND Strategy: My Life, My Rights 2024-2028

Rotherham aims to be just as ambitious for children and young people with SEND as for every other child. The vision places a strong emphasis on equity and inclusion, recognising that SEND is everyone's responsibility and that systems should adapt to children and families – not the other way round.

3. Best Start Local Plan Needs Assessment

Introduction

This needs assessment provides an overview of development outcomes and engagement of young children and families in Rotherham. It draws on local and national datasets to understand levels of need, identify inequalities, and inform priorities for the Best Start Local Plan.

The analysis highlights both areas of strong performance and those that require targeted intervention to improve early childhood outcomes.

Unless otherwise identified data has been used from 2023/2024. This is because the target to increase the number of children achieving a good level of development was set based on data from 2023/2024.

Indicator	Period	England	Yorkshire and Humber	Rotherham
Proportion of children who received a 2 to 2½ year review, Persons, 2–2.5 yrs	2023/24	78.4%	89.3%	90.7%
Child development: % of children achieving a good level of development at 2 to 2½ years, Persons, 2–2.5 yrs	2023/24	80.4%	85.7%	88.2%
School readiness: % of children achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception, Persons, 5 yrs	2023/24	67.7%	66.1%	64.3%
School readiness: % of children achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception, Male , 5 yrs	2023/24	60.7%	59.0%	56.4%
School readiness: % of children achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception, Female , 5 yrs	2023/24	75.0%	73.5%	72.3%
School readiness: % of children with free school meal status achieving a good level of development at end of Reception, Persons, 5 yrs	2023/24	51.5%	50.1%	47.6%
School readiness: % of children without free school meal status achieving a good level of development at end of Reception, Male , 5 yrs	2023/24	43.2%	41.4%	39.0%
School readiness: % of children without free school meal status achieving a good level of development at end of Reception, Female , 5 yrs	2023/24	60.1%	59.2%	57.4%
Free school meals: % eligible, Persons, school age	2023/24	24.6%	26.8%	27.7%

Local Context and Demographics

Rotherham has a population of 265,800 and faces significant socio-economic challenges, ranking 35th among England's upper-tier local authorities by deprivation. Levels of child poverty are notably high: 30.0% (2023/24) of children aged 0–15 live in relative low-income households, well above the national average of 22.1%. The scale of deprivation is further reflected in the educational landscape, with 27.7% of pupils eligible for free school meals in 2023/24 (and evidence that this has declined further to 29.1% in 2024/25).

The borough also supports a substantial cohort of children with statutory social care involvement. As of late 2023, there were 505 children in care and 323 care leavers, highlighting the continued demand for targeted early help, safeguarding, and family support services.

Early Development and School Readiness

Early developmental outcomes are encouraging at age 2–2½. Completion rates for the mandated health review are high at 90.7%, and 88.2% of children meet

developmental expectations at this stage—both results exceeding national benchmarks. These outcomes suggest strong early identification systems and effective early years provision during the first years of life.

However, outcomes at the end of the Reception year show a decline, with only 64.3% of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD), below national and regional comparators. This means 102 fewer children are achieving GLD than would be expected if Rotherham matched national performance.

The data suggest that **literacy and communication are key limiting factors** for overall GLD attainment. Expected levels in writing (67.8%) and word reading (72.1%) fall below other prime and specific areas. Additionally, 22.2% of children are still at emerging levels in Communication and Language, highlighting a need for enhanced speech, language, and communication support both pre-school and during Reception.

A **gender gap** persists, with boys significantly less likely to achieve GLD than girls (56.4% vs 72.3%). Outcomes for children eligible for free school meals (47.6%) are also lower than national averages, demonstrating entrenched socio-economic inequalities in school readiness.

Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Rotherham has a higher proportion of children with identified SEND than the national picture, with 20.4% of pupils recorded as having SEND compared to 17.1% nationally. The number of children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) has grown by 44% in three years, rising to 3,192 children aged 0–25.

Despite these barriers take-up of early education among SEND children is strong. In the most recent term, 72% of eligible 2-year-olds with SEND took up a funded early education place, increasing to 93.3% among 3 and 4-year-olds. This suggests effective targeting of early education entitlements to support early intervention, though the increasing demand underscores the pressure on local SEND services and the need for continued investment in early identification and specialist support. - and 4-year-olds. This suggests effective targeting of early education entitlements to support early intervention, though the increasing demand underscores the pressure on local SEND services and the need for continued investment in early

Early Help and Family Hub Engagement

Engagement with Family Hubs and Children's Centres is a particular strength. Registration levels are high, with 89% of all children aged 0–5 registered, rising to 92% among those living in the 30% most deprived areas. Participation in Family Hubs and Children's Centre activities is also strong: 73% of all 0–5s and 78% of those in the most deprived neighbourhoods access services. This level of engagement provides a strong platform for early intervention and family outreach.

Early Education and Childcare Take-Up

Take-up of early education entitlements is high across all age groups, though a small but significant inequality persists. For 2-year-olds, take-up ranges from 85.7% to 96.6% across the academic year. Among 3- and 4-year-olds, universal entitlement take-up ranges from 90.6% to 97%. - - and 4-year-olds, universal entitlement take-up ranges from 90.6% to 97%.

However, children living in the most disadvantaged areas are less likely to access early education than their peers: 12.9% of disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds did not take up a place compared with 8.9% in more affluent areas. This disparity suggests potential barriers to access—potentially including availability, parental awareness, or practical challenges—that disproportionately affect families in deprived communities.

Reassuringly, children in care have 100% take-up of early education entitlements across both age groups, reflecting strong multi-agency processes and prioritisation.

Summary of Key Needs

Rotherham has a strong foundation in early developmental outcomes in the first years of life, high levels of engagement with Family Hubs and Children's Centres, and strong uptake of early education among most groups. However there are some important challenges to address:

- **Developmental inequalities** persist and widen between the ages of 2½ and school entry, particularly for boys, children from low-income families, and children in deprived neighbourhoods.
- **Literacy and communication** difficulties are some of the primary barriers to achieving a Good Level of Development.
- **Rising SEND demand**, including a 44% increase in EHCPs, is placing significant pressure on services.
- **Early education take-up gaps in the most disadvantaged areas**, indicating a need for targeted intervention. **-up gaps in the most disadvantaged areas,**
- **School readiness outcomes** at the end of Reception remain below national expectations despite strong early progress at age 2–2½.

Implications for the Best Start Local Plan

To address these challenges, the Best Start Local Plan will prioritise:

- Maintaining high levels of Family Hub and Children's Centre engagement while tailoring services to emerging needs.

- Enhancing early SEND identification, specialist support, and inclusive early years practice.
- Strengthening early language, literacy and communication pathways from birth to age 5.
- Targeting support to disadvantaged communities, focusing on narrowing gaps in early development and school readiness.
- Improving early education access in the most deprived areas through targeted outreach and provider capacity building.
- Strengthening the transition pathway from early years settings into school to maintain strong development trajectories.

4. Our Priorities

This section of the plan sets out our priorities and what we will do to deliver on them. Details about delivering, commissioning and funding will be included in the subsequent comprehensive action plan.

Priority 1 – Strengthening Early Communication, Language and Literacy for all children

Early communication, language and literacy lay the foundations for learning, relationships and wellbeing. In Rotherham, these areas are our most significant barriers to children reaching a Good Level of Development, with **writing (67.8%)** and **word reading (72.1%)** lower than other domains.

We will:

- Universally promote early interaction, talking, reading and play from pregnancy onwards.
- Expand targeted communication and language programmes in communities where children need the most support.
- Strengthen speech and language pathways and embed evidence-based practice across settings and schools.

Priority 2 – Increasing Access to Early Education for Disadvantaged Children

Take-up of early education is high in Rotherham overall, but too many children in our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods still miss out on the benefits of early learning. **12.9% of 3–4-year-olds** in the 30% most deprived areas did not access a funded place in Summer 2025.

We will:

- Work with settings, health visitors and Family Hubs to identify and support families not accessing early education.
- Address practical and cultural barriers to take-up.
- Promote early education as a universal opportunity to learn, play and grow.

Priority 3 – Improving the Quality of Early Years Provision, Including Reception for all children

High-quality early years provision has a powerful impact on children's outcomes and helps reduce inequalities. While many settings in Rotherham provide excellent support, GLD outcomes show that more must be done to strengthen quality and consistency across settings and into Reception.

We will:

- Partner with Stronger Practice Hubs, RISE, MATs and schools to strengthen practice.
- Embed evidence-based professional development, including communication-rich practice and early literacy approaches.
- Improve transition into Reception so all children experience continuity and stability.

Priority 4 – Identifying Needs Early and Supporting Children with SEND and Vulnerable Families

Rotherham has **higher SEND prevalence than national (20.4% vs 17.1%)**, and a **44% rise** in EHCPs over three years — one of the strongest signals that families need help earlier.

We will:

- Strengthen early identification pathways across health, early education and family support.
- Provide timely SEND support within settings and Family Hubs, reducing escalation and waiting.
- Ensure vulnerable families are identified early and connected to support through coordinated early help.

Priority 5 – Providing Joined-Up Family Support Through Rotherham's Family Hubs

Family Hubs are central to our vision. With **89% of 0–5s registered**, and even higher engagement in our most disadvantaged communities, Rotherham already has a strong platform for truly integrated family support.

We will:

- Strengthen the offer across maternity, health visiting, early help, parenting support and early learning.
- Create seamless pathways so families do not have to repeat their story.
- Make Family Hubs the trusted, visible, accessible first point of contact for parents.

Priority 6 – Tackling Inequalities Across the 0–5 System

Rotherham experiences significant inequalities in income, health and early development. **21.9% of children live in absolute low-income families**, and GLD rates for children eligible for free school meals are **47.6%**, well below those not eligible.

We will:

- Target support and investment to the communities where the barriers are greatest.
- Work across Family Hubs, settings, health and the VCS to remove inequalities in access and outcomes.
- Ensure that all actions in this plan contribute to closing the gap by 2028.

5. Engagement with Children and Families

We place children's and families' voices at the heart of the Best Start Local Plan. Their lived experiences, ideas, and feedback shape our decisions to make services inclusive, relevant, and empowering. Engagement is not a one-off activity, but a continuous process built on trust, respect, and collaboration.

We will continue to work restoratively with families, turning every interaction into an opportunity to truly understand what life is like raising babies, children, and young people in Rotherham. Through Family Hubs, community outreach, and co-production opportunities, we will create accessible and welcoming spaces for families to share their experiences, ideas, and priorities. This includes targeted efforts to reach underrepresented groups, ensuring every family feels heard and valued.

Their voices will guide and shape everything we do, ensuring that our work reflects their hopes, challenges, and aspirations. Feedback will be acted upon transparently, with clear communication about how it influences decisions. By embedding these principles into our approach, we aim to empower families as active partners in designing and improving services, leading to better

outcomes for children and stronger communities. Rotherham has already well-established mechanisms for engaging with children and families which will be maximised for the Best Start Local Plan.



6. Partnership and Governance

Proposed Governance Structure for Best Start Local Plan



- Oversight of the Best Start Local Plan will be provided by Rotherham's existing **Best Start and Beyond Steering Group**.
- The Steering Group brings together key local partners and **reports to the Health and Wellbeing Board**, aligning with Rotherham's Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

- The group supports the shared aim of **giving all children and young people (up to age 25) the best possible start in life**, helping them to thrive and reach their potential.
- Membership and terms of reference will be **reviewed and updated** to ensure the right organisations are involved and children's outcomes remain the focus.
- The plan will be delivered through a **combination of existing partnerships**, supported by **newly formed subgroups and short-term task and finish groups** where needed. **-groups and short-term task and finish groups**
- One of the group's first priorities will be to develop a **detailed action plan** following publication of this high-level Best Start Local Plan.
- Progress and delivery will be **monitored and reported regularly** through the Health and Wellbeing Board.

7. Delivering this plan

Key Outcomes

We will know we have made a difference if there is an improvement in proportion of children:

- **Aged 5 years old achieving a good level of development measured by the Early Years Foundation Stage profile**
- **Aged 5 years old and eligible for free school meals achieving a good level of development measured by the Early Years Foundation Stage profile**

Lots of factors affect child development; it can take many years for impact to be seen.

Child and Family Voice

- A parent-carer panel will support us to ensure the voice of children and families influences the development and oversight of the delivery plan.
- Feedback from children and families will help us understand the impact of the delivery plan.
- Parent-carer voice will influence decision making at the Best Start and Beyond Steering Group

Data

Data can help to monitor and measure the impact of the plan. We will collect data about activity and outcomes that will support us to improve outcomes.

- Proportion of children receiving a 2-2.5-year review
- Proportion of children registered with a family hub
- **Proportion of 2-year-olds** accessing a funded place

- **Proportion of 3–4-year-olds** accessing a funded place
- **Proportion of 2-year-olds** in the 30% most deprived areas accessing a funded place
- **Proportion of 3–4-year-olds** in the 30% most deprived areas accessing a funded place
- Children reaching a Good Level of Development, with **writing**
- Children reaching a Good Level of Development **word reading**

Delivery Plan

A detailed delivery plan will be developed for each priority. Wherever possible we will work as a system (across early years, education, health services and family help).

Glossary of Acronyms – Best Start Local Plan

E

EHCP – Education, Health and Care Plan

EYFS – Early Years Foundation Stage

G

GLD – Good Level of Development

I

IMD – Index of Multiple Deprivation

M

MAT – Multi-Academy Trust

N

NHS – National Health Service

R

RISE – Regional Improvement Support in Education

S

SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

V

VCS / VCSE – Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise