



 **BEST**  
 **START**  
 **IN LIFE**



# Worcestershire Best Start in Life **Strategic Plan**

**2026-2029**

# Contents

<b>Section 1:</b> Introduction and Context.....	<b>3</b>
<b>Section 2:</b> Understanding Local Needs.....	<b>4</b>
Early Years Outcomes.....	<b>4</b>
Good Level of Development (GLD).....	<b>7</b>
Effective Targeting of System Resource.....	<b>8</b>
<b>Section 3:</b> A Systemwide Best Start Vision.....	<b>10</b>
<b>Section 4:</b> Our Approach in Worcestershire.....	<b>12</b>
<b>Section 5:</b> Links with System Work Programmes.....	<b>13</b>
<b>Section 6:</b> Worcestershire Delivery Plan - Overview.....	<b>14</b>
<b>Section 7:</b> Worcestershire Delivery Plan.....	<b>15</b>
Perinatal Health and Wellbeing.....	<b>15</b>
Child Development.....	<b>16</b>
Communication and Accessibility.....	<b>19</b>
<b>Section 8:</b> Scaling Innovation and Practice.....	<b>20</b>
<b>Section 9:</b> Engagement and Coproduction.....	<b>20</b>
<b>Section 10:</b> Local Governance and Measuring Impact.....	<b>21</b>

# Section 1: Introduction and Context

## The early years of a child's life are critical in shaping lifelong learning, health and wellbeing.

Experiences during this period have a lasting influence on development and life chances, making early support and intervention essential to improving outcomes and reducing inequalities. Early, coordinated action across health, education and community support services is therefore essential to prevent needs escalating and to give every child the best possible start in life.



The publication of the national [Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life strategy](#) in July 2025 has renewed and sharpened the focus on improving early years outcomes, with a clear ambition to increase the proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) at reception age by 2028.

This sits alongside wider national reforms, including the expansion of Best Start Family Hubs, funded childcare, and a stronger emphasis on early language, inclusion, SEND, safeguarding and prevention. This reinforces the importance of a joined-up, whole-system approach across health, education, early years and community support to improve outcomes and reduce inequalities.

In response, Worcestershire is building on and strengthening its current Best Start work programmes to align with a renewed national direction, with a clear emphasis on strong partnership working and integrated, cross-sector delivery across education, health, social care, community services and libraries.

A refreshed Best Start approach sharpens the focus on improving outcomes for children, evidenced through improved GLD.

Through this collaborative approach, the local system aims to deliver **coherent, data led, timely and proportionate support** for children and families. By improving early years outcomes and **reducing inequalities** we can ensure that every child in Worcestershire is supported to have the best possible start in life.



In addition to existing work programmes focused on improving early years outcomes, an additional layer of universal and targeted support for schools and early years settings is being shaped.

This approach not only supports school and setting improvement but also strengthens partnerships with wider health and community services, enabling schools and settings to adopt a more holistic, whole-family approach to education and learning. This recognises that educational outcomes are shaped by a broad range of factors beyond attainment in the settings alone.

# Section 2: Understanding Local Needs

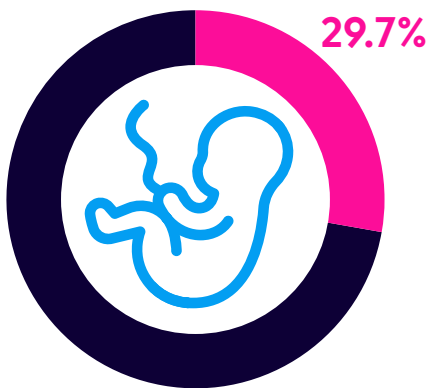
## Early Years Outcomes

Analysis of local early years data shows that overall outcomes for children in Worcestershire are broadly positive, with evidence of improvement in recent years.

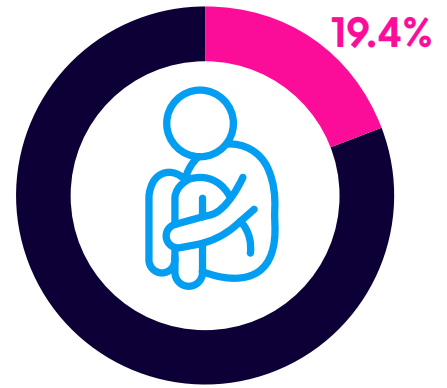
However, data also highlights variation across the county and persistent inequalities between population groups. Local Best Start work planning builds on existing strengths while targeting areas of greatest need, focusing support where it can have the greatest impact to reduce inequalities and improve outcomes for babies, children and families.



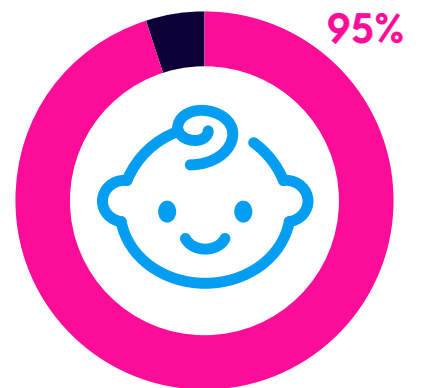
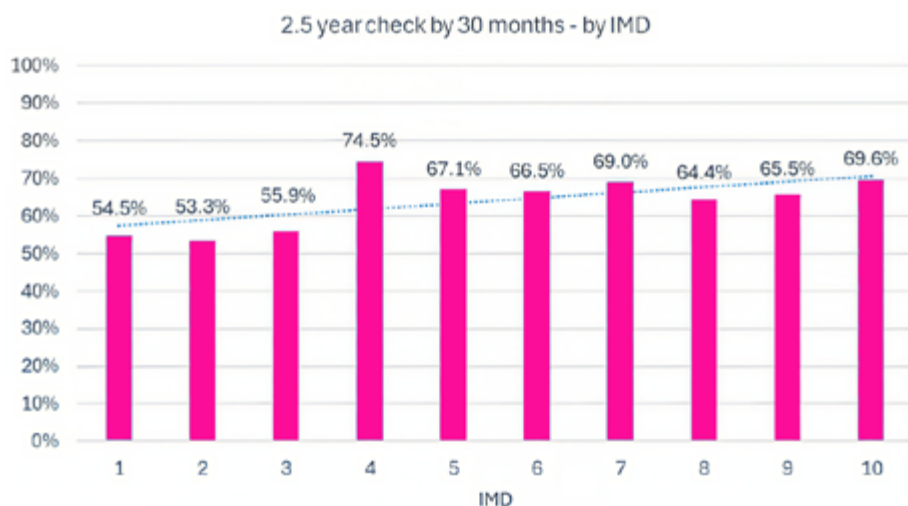
Fewer people **smoking** during pregnancy  
**2024 at 8.3%**  
**2025 at 6.3%**  
 (Time of delivery)



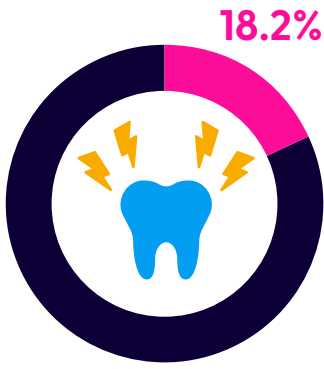
**Obese** in early pregnancy **2023/24**.  
**Higher rates** than England



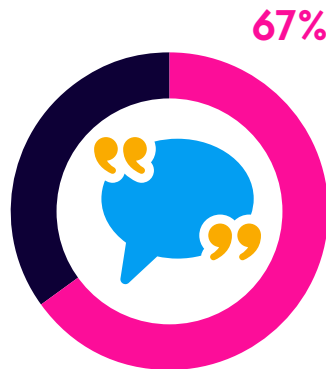
Children under 16 are living in **relative poverty 2023/24**  
**Lower rates** than England



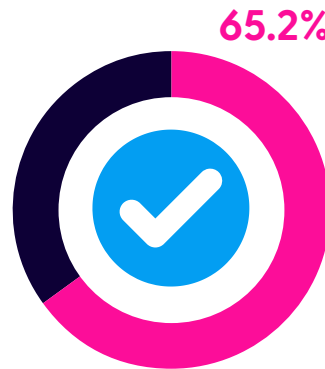
Families who have taken up **childcare funding for 3-4 year olds** in Worcestershire



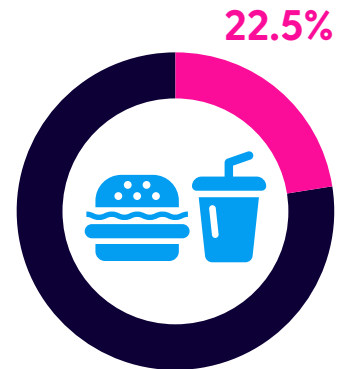
Visible **tooth decay** in 5 year olds **2023/24**  
**Lower rates** than England



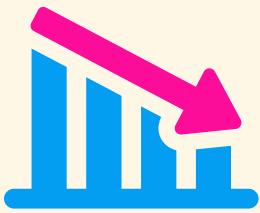
5 year olds in Worcestershire achieve expected level across **communication and language early learning goals 2024/25**



Received **2.5 year checks** by 30 months in **2024/25**  
**Lower rates** than England

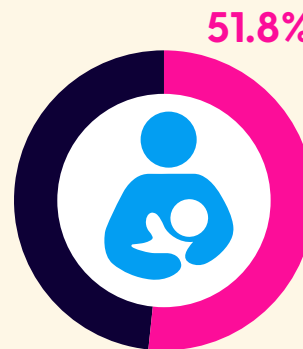


Percentage of children **obese or overweight** at reception **2024/25**

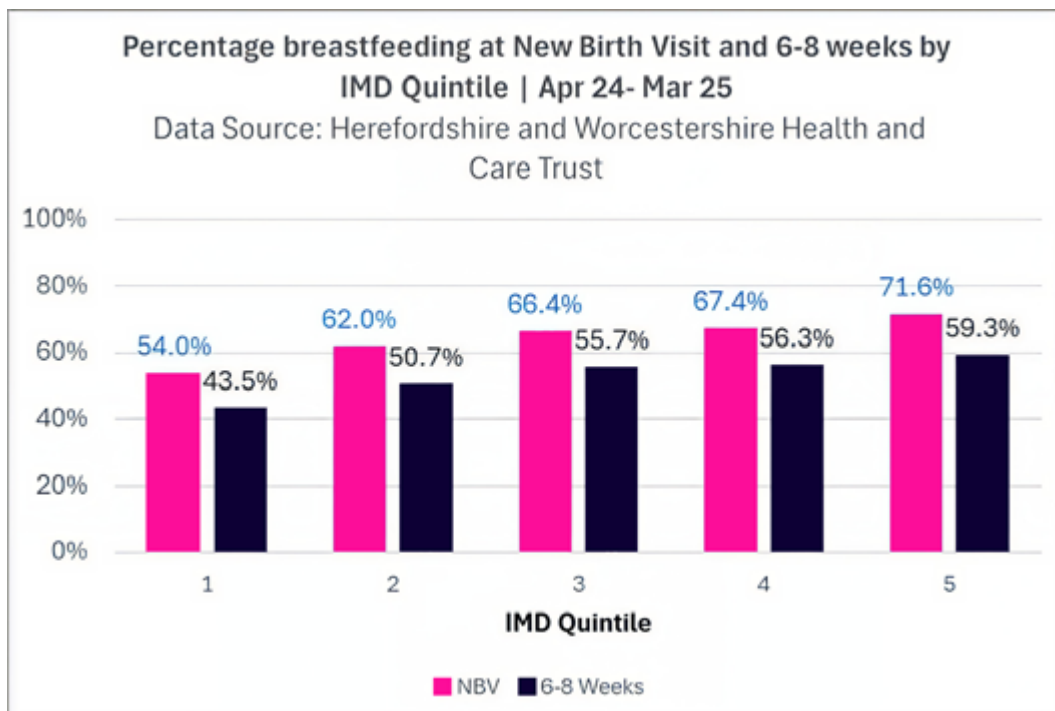


**\*Reduction in Child in Need** rate over the last 3 years (2023-25) in Worcestershire  
 From **329.7** to **302.9** per 100,000

**\*Rate at 31 March, based on ONS mid-year population estimates children 0-17**



**Breastfeeding** at 6-8 weeks has **increased 2024/25**





These early years outcomes sit within a challenging context of increasing poverty and financial pressure on families. In Worcestershire, **around one in five children live in low-income families**, with recent Department for Work and Pensions data indicating that approximately **20–23% of children are growing up in relative poverty**, depending on district and household circumstances.

A significant proportion of these children are under five, meaning financial hardship is disproportionately affecting families during the most critical period of child development.

Poverty is not evenly distributed across the county. Families in **Redditch, Worcester City** and parts of **Wyre Forest** and **Wychavon** experience higher levels of child poverty and deprivation, as highlighted through the [Worcestershire Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#) and local deprivation profiles.

This reinforces the need for services to be effectively targeted and proportionately delivered to ensure those facing the greatest disadvantage are identified early and supported.

# Good Level of Development (GLD)

In Worcestershire, **68%** of reception-aged children achieved a GLD in 2025, slightly below the national figure of **68.3%**. While overall performance is broadly in line with the England average, significant inequalities remain. Disadvantaged pupils in Worcestershire experience a **7.9%** point gap compared with their peers nationally. Further inequalities remain linked to district, gender, SEND and ethnicity.

A local deep-dive analysis of GLD data has underpinned the development of Worcestershire's refreshed Best Start strategic planning. This is critical in the context of new national GLD targets to identify strengths, gaps and inequalities in GLD outcomes to support 0-5 work planning.

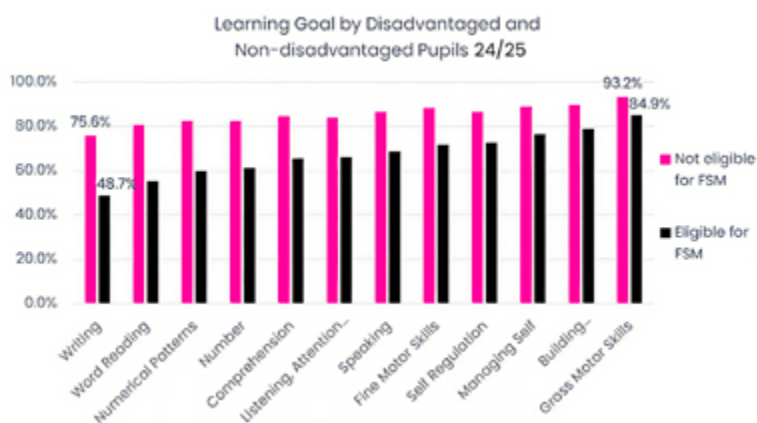
Worcestershire's GLD data analysis considered multiple indicators to build a detailed understanding of performance and variation.

This included examining the extent of variation between each school's highest and lowest achieved learning goals, the proportion of children reaching expected development across individual learning goals and linking school-level GLD outcomes to feeder early years settings.

Schools were also plotted to identify statistically significant variation, accounting for school size, alongside direction of travel to support proportionate targeting and interpretation of outcomes.

Worcestershire's GLD Target 2028
76.6%

Disadvantaged GLD Target 2028
52.9%

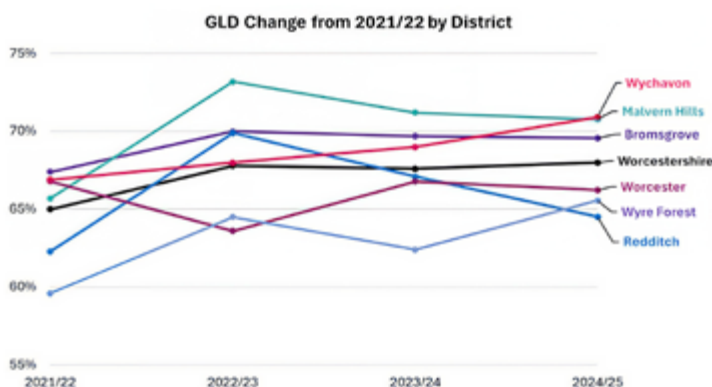


↑ You can view the graph above in larger format [here](#).

## Varying Trends Across Districts

Wychavon and Wyre Forest GLD has increased from 23/24.

Malvern Hills and Redditch have the largest reduction in GLD over the last two years.



↑ Source: **Early years foundation stage profile results, Academic year 2024/25**

Although identified factors, such as disadvantage are clearly linked to GLD outcomes, local data indicates that schools most associated with these factors are not always those with the highest levels of need. Data analysis has informed the design of a strengthened universal, targeted and bespoke offer of enhanced support for settings, alongside the development of place-based support delivered by health and community partners.

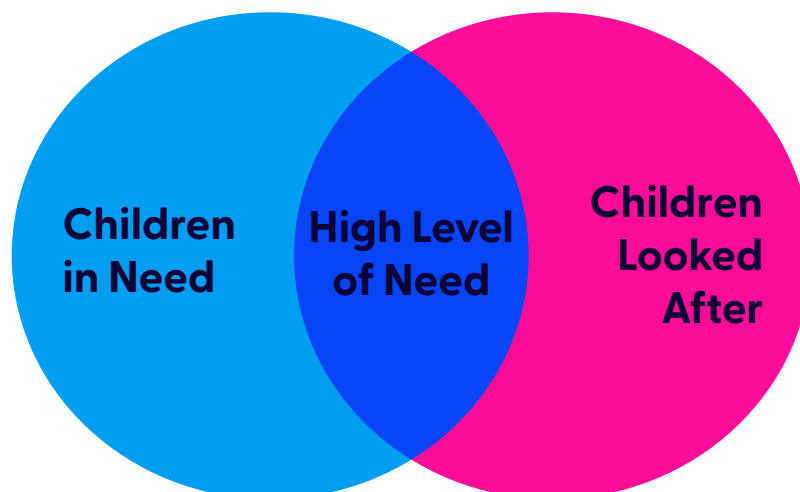
# Effective Targeting of System Resource

Public Health has developed a bespoke analysis to identify priority areas of need across Worcestershire. Building on initial work, the analysis was expanded to focus specifically on childhood vulnerability, using data on **Children in Need (CIN)** and **Children Looked After (CLA)**.

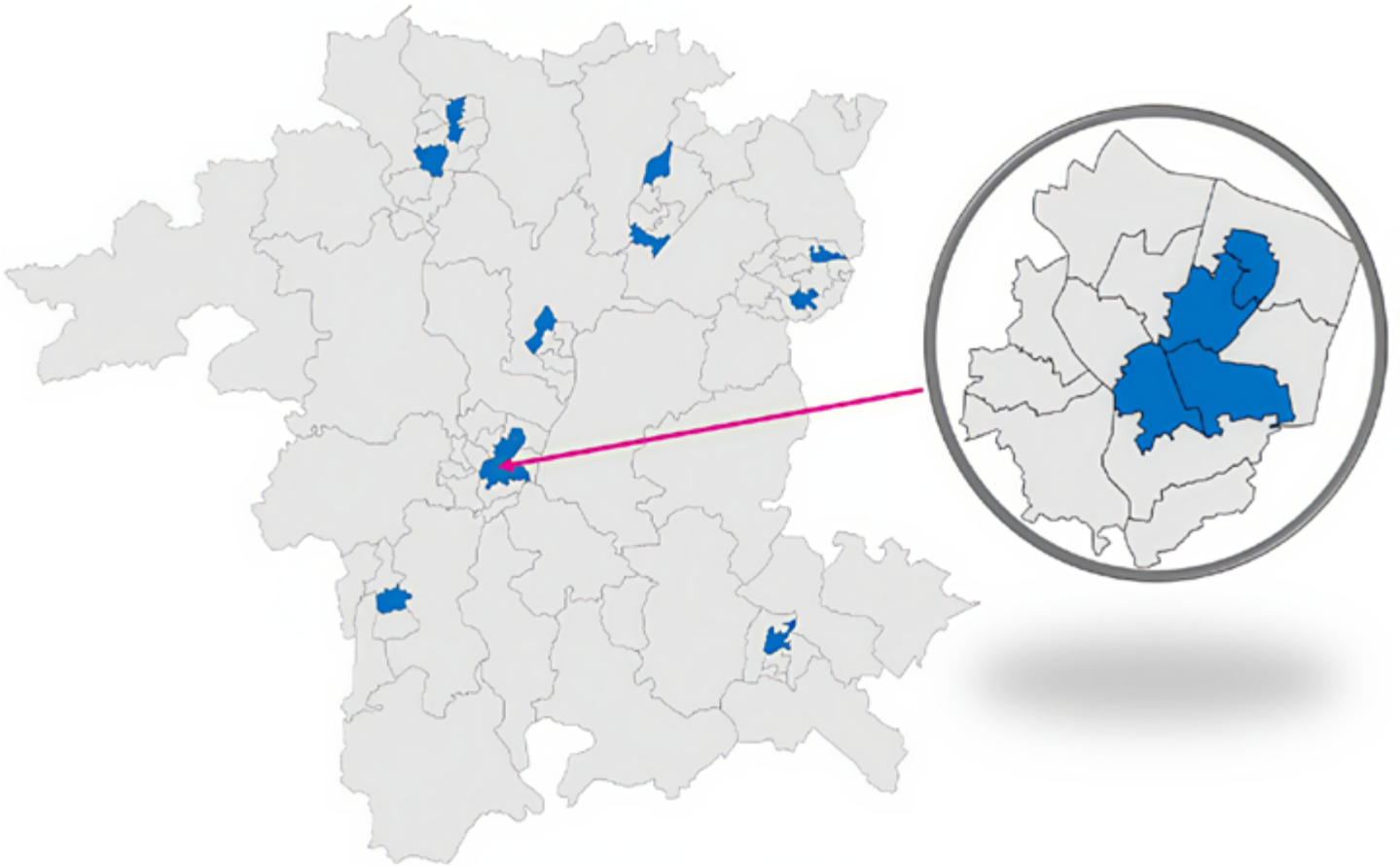
This analysis identified 13 **Middle Super Output Areas (MSOAs)** across the county that sit above statistical control limits and therefore represent the highest levels of unmet need. These areas have been designated as **Childhood Priority Neighbourhoods**. Identifying these targeted areas is critical to enabling a place-based approach to ensure early years activity is focused where it can have the greatest impact, supporting prevention and early intervention and reducing the escalation of need later in childhood.

Earlier phases of this work identified Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs), which continue to be used within local Family Hub Network profiles to support service prioritisation. Given the strong link between increasing levels of family need and poorer child development outcomes, this approach is essential to successfully implement proportionate universalism.

Priority MSOAs	Districts	IMD Decile
Malvern Pickersleigh	Malvern Hills	2
Warndon West	Worcester	1
King George's Field	Worcester	1
Droitwich Spa West & North	Wychavon	3
Birchen Coppice	Wyre Forest	1
Bromsgrove Charford	Bromsgrove	5
Church Hill South	Redditch	2
Greenlands	Redditch	2
Kidderminster Town	Wyre Forest	1
Catshill	Bromsgrove	6
Ronkswood and Nunnery	Worcester	4
Worcester Town South	Worcester	4
Evesham Central	Wychavon	3



## Outline of Worcestershire's priority MSOA areas



A similar neighbourhood-level approach was applied across a range of early years datasets, including **2–2½ year review uptake**, **childhood obesity prevalence**, and **breastfeeding** rates. Applying this approach to 2–2½ year review service data highlighted specific challenges within Worcester and Redditch. In response, targeted action plans now aim to strengthen pathways and increase the consistency and timeliness of 2–2½ year review uptake, a key milestone to identify and support GLD needs.

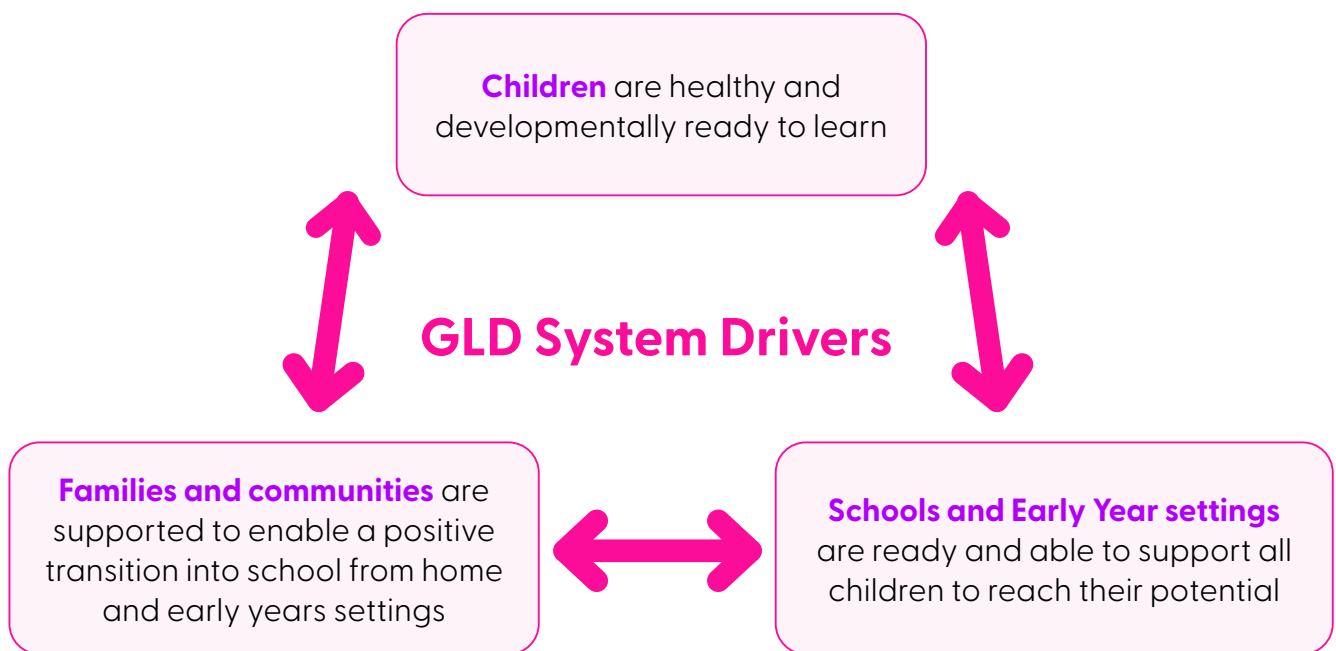
Similarly, a neighbourhood-specific analysis of breastfeeding data has informed the targeted development of additional group peer support. Grant funding has been used to focus activity in areas with poorer outcomes, enabling a more proportionate and effective response to local need.

# Section 3: A Systemwide Best Start Vision

Achieving the best outcomes for babies, children and families in Worcestershire depends on strong, purposeful collaboration across health, education, social care and community services.

Each partner contributes distinct but interconnected support that shapes child development and school readiness. In Worcestershire, this is being put into practice through shared data and insight, aligned priorities, and co-designed system offers that provide consistent, joined-up support from the perinatal period through to starting school and beyond.

This whole-system approach underpins Worcestershire's refreshed Best Start governance and work programme. While services have traditionally delivered effectively within their own remits, the establishment of a new Child Development Partnership is bringing these strands together to strengthen shared ownership of cross-cutting themes and pathways.



Through strengthened relationships and refreshed governance arrangements, partners are working more closely to shape local Best Start planning, improve pathway consistency and enhance shared communication with families and practitioners.

This joined-up approach is already enabling more targeted system planning across key areas including **2–2½ year review delivery, the home learning environment, parenting support, parent–infant mental health, breastfeeding, and district-level Best Start Family Hub development.**



In addition, closer partnership working between early years teams and health and community services, including health visitors, speech and language services and Family Hubs, is helping to develop clearer and more coordinated offers of support for schools.

This is enabling a more holistic, family-centered approach that responds to wider child and family needs, recognising that educational outcomes are shaped by a broad range of factors beyond learning in the setting alone.



# Section 4: Our Approach in Worcestershire

## Worcestershire's Approaches to Best Start Strategic Planning:



Working in partnership as an integrated system to reduce inequalities in early learning and health outcomes.



Identifying and supporting families at risk of adversity, complexity and vulnerabilities as early as possible, including through early years and education pathways.



Whole family and community centered approaches that support children's early learning, development and positive transitions into education.



Taking a holistic approach to address the wider determinants of the Best Start in Life, recognising the impact on early education.



Using a data-led approach to identify need and apply proportionate universalism in how we respond, with prevention and early intervention embedded throughout Best Start planning.

To ensure Worcestershire families have the Best Start in Life, we aim to achieve the following outcomes:

**Improved maternal and infant health outcomes from pregnancy onwards**

**High-quality, inclusive early years education supporting positive child development**

**More children reaching school ready to learn and thrive**

**Earlier identification of need, reducing escalation and future demand**

**Improved parent-infant mental health and wellbeing**

**Stronger outcomes through place-based, community-led support**

**Increased access to a joined-up Best Start offer for families most in need**

**A resilient workforce delivering sustained improvement in early years outcomes**

## Section 5: Links with System Work Programmes

The importance of aligning and integrating Best Start work planning within wider system strategies and work programmes is well recognised in Worcestershire.

By aligning strategic planning across partners, duplication can be reduced, community and system assets maximised, and pathways for families strengthened. This approach is essential to ensure local planning and delivery are aligned to shared priorities, make best use of available resources, and work more efficiently to improve outcomes for children and families in increasingly challenging times.

To deliver a joined-up, whole-system approach, Best Start work planning in Worcestershire will align with and integrate across work programmes including:



# Section 6: Worcestershire Delivery Plan - Overview

## Worcestershire Best Start in Life Strategic Plan

Ensure every baby has the healthiest possible start in life, by promoting healthy **pregnancies & perinatal health**

Provide high quality **early years education**, alongside joined-up **health and community support**, to promote child development

Empower families with the **support, information, & connections** they need to thrive

**Cross Sector Working and Collaboration**

To achieve the best outcomes for children at age 5, every stage of the early life course matters—from preconception through to the early years.

This strategic plan builds on the already strong base of action planning and delivery across perinatal health and wellbeing and creates a new platform to apply a system lens to several interconnecting child development work areas.

**Positive birth and perinatal health outcomes** lay the foundations for future growth and development, while what happens in the early years provides the crucial building blocks for **child development and educational attainment**.

Local work planning has been split into these two interconnecting key themes and partnerships above.



Worcestershire's Best Start Strategic Plan reflects the importance of both **'starting well'** and **'developing well'**. Key objectives within each of these focus areas are set out in more detail in the next section.

# Section 7: Worcestershire Delivery Plan

## Perinatal Health and Wellbeing

Work Area 1: Ensure every baby has the healthiest possible start in life, by promoting healthy pregnancies & perinatal health

### Key Objectives we aim to achieve

Strengthen **preconception** information and access to postnatal contraception

Increase access to high quality **antenatal education**

Strengthen pathways for **vulnerable families** with multiple and complex needs

Improved perinatal **mental health** and wellbeing

Reduce rates of **maternal obesity**

Increase initiation and continuation of **breastfeeding**

Reduce **smoking in pregnancy** and the perinatal period

### How we will achieve these

Systemwide partnership meetings driving cross sector action planning

Commissioning of system-linked lifestyle service offers within maternity

Review of local vulnerability data to strengthen needs led pathways

Review and expansion of systemwide preconception and antenatal support and information

Ensuring data informs the identification and reduction of perinatal inequalities

Whole system Infant Feeding, Smoking in Pregnancy and Maternal Obesity action plans



# Child Development

Work Area 2: Provide high quality early years education, alongside joined-up health and community support, to promote child development

## Key Objectives we aim to achieve

Improved **GLD outcomes** at age 5, with reduced inequalities for disadvantaged children

Supporting the take up of **high-quality childcare** and early education

Timely uptake of the **2–2½ year integrated review**, with clear, effective pathways for required interventions

Improved early **speech, language and communication** outcomes

Reducing inequalities in outcomes for children with **SEND**

Delivery of an expanded **Family Hub offer**, accessed by those that require it most, linking with schools and settings

Delivery of a robust universal, targeted and bespoke offer of **quality support for schools and EY settings**

Families feel confident and supported to create strong **home learning environments**

**Parents feel confident and empowered** to provide positive and nurturing parenting

## How we will achieve these

**Data informed** quality improvement support for settings, targeting those most in need

Systemwide partnership meetings driving **cross sector** action planning

Promoting continued **access, awareness and pathways** into high-quality childcare and early education

Enhancing cross-sector relationships to embed **Family Hub links** within schools and settings

Developing a network of **district-based** Family Hub networks to support effective, outreach and targeting

Implementing a range of targeted, **evidence-based** interventions and programmes of support

Children are supported to **develop healthy behaviours** that enable them to thrive, grow well and be ready to learn



# Best Start: Universal, Targeted and Bespoke GLD Support for Schools and Settings

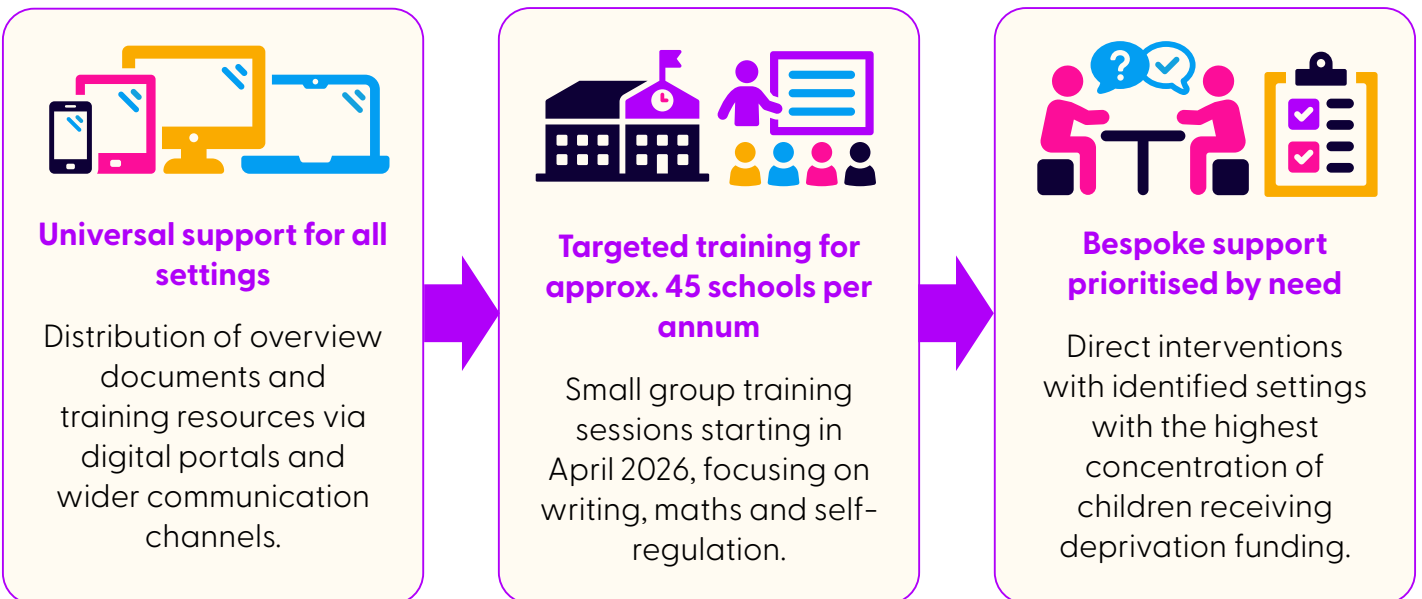
Alongside a whole-system focus on the early years, from pre-conception through to starting school, education leads in Worcestershire have developed a strong local offer of universal, targeted and bespoke support for schools and early years settings.

Best Start funding has been invested to expand and sustain capacity of this new data-informed offer, underpinned by short, medium and long-term planning focused on improving GLD by 2028.



You can view the guidance page [here](#).

A blended approach of data-led support, high-quality evidence-based CPD and guidance, alongside targeted interventions, will **strengthen provision**, improve the **accuracy of assessment**, and build **leadership confidence** in holding practitioners to account for outcomes. This new and innovative approach to providing high-quality support for settings aims to increase the proportion of reception-aged children achieving a Good Level of Development by 2028, through a three-tiered intervention model.



In addition, targeted **speech and language support** is being expanded. Recognising its critical role in GLD, work is underway to strengthen a universal and targeted offer of support for schools, early years settings and families, alongside a review and promotion of the local speech and language pathway.

## The Bespoke Support Journey



### Initial Planning & Observation

A planning call followed by a site visit to identify setting-specific strengths and weaknesses.



### Co-audit & Action Planning

Collaborative audits using national tools to create a formal improvement plan.



### KIT Calls & Impact Review

Regular 'Keep In Touch' calls followed by a final visit to observe developmental impact.

# Communication and Accessibility

## Work Area 3: Empower families with the support, resources and connections they need to thrive

### Key Objectives we aim to achieve

Consistent Best Start **branding** across the early years system

Joined up **system communication** to ensure key Best Start messages reach families

A clear, accessible and well used **digital single point** of access

Families are empowered to use their **lived experience and voice** to shape the support they access

**Family Hubs** are embedded and utilised within communities as a clear, physical single front door

A robust system-led **campaign plan** that supports key Best Start priorities

**Community grants** that build on local strengths, enhance existing **assets** and build community **capacity**



This document sets out the high-level objectives for each of the key work areas driving the Best Start system, alongside an outline of the planned steps to support delivery. Detailed actions will be developed and managed through separate workplans within the wider Best Start governance and partnership arrangements.

# Section 8: Scaling Innovation and Practice

## Innovation will be scaled by:

- Identifying what works locally—seeking ongoing feedback and parent/infant voice
- Refining and expanding good practice through Family Hubs and universal services
- Embedding effective practice into core universal pathways and commissioning
- Sharing learning to support sustainable, equitable impact.
- Building a confident, skilled and sustainable workforce to support consistent, high-quality delivery

Local examples of these principles in practice:

Data-informed scaling of GLD improvement support to prioritise need

Digital innovation pilot ongoing to utilise AI/digital tools within Health Visiting

Maternity lifestyle pilots to test expanded delivery models

Review of early years workforce knowledge and skills gaps

Staged expansion of programmes such as PEEP to ensure effective scaling

Early years grants supporting the scaling of community-led innovation

# Section 9: Engagement and Coproduction

## Engagement and coproduction are central to Best Start planning in Worcestershire.

Families and practitioners actively involved in shaping, testing and improving support across the system.

Newly established Family Hub networks in each district include parent representatives, ensuring that community voices directly inform the design and delivery of services. Family Hub services also routinely gather feedback through a range of methods, ensuring the voices of infant and parents drive continuous improvement.

Through the development of priority neighbourhood projects, services work alongside families to co-produce support, enabling communities to shape provision in ways that reflect local strengths and assets.

An example of this approach in practice is in Woodrow, where local feedback informed the development of a new pop-up Family Hub site within the shopping centre. Co-production has also been a key element in shaping priority work areas,



including targeted support for dads. Specific engagement events and surveys continue to ensure local voices are consistently informing programme development.

## Section 10: Local Governance and Measuring Impact

Local Best Start in Life governance has been refreshed to align with the responsibilities, delivery requirements and outcomes set out in the national Best Start strategy.

Two key partnership groups will feed into a Best Start Strategic Group, whose primary role is to provide strategic leadership, oversight and accountability for delivery of the local Best Start Action Plan and its outcomes.

The Best Start Strategic Group will report into the local Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and the Health and Wellbeing Board, ensuring that Best Start priorities are fully aligned with, and embedded within, wider health and children's system planning and delivery.



The headline outcome for the Best Start in Life Strategic Plan is improvement in GLD at age 5, with a specific focus on narrowing the gap for disadvantaged children.

A supporting suite of early years health, wellbeing, family and child development indicators will be monitored through a new Worcestershire Best Start in Life dashboard to provide system oversight, identify strengths and gaps, and drive coordinated improvement across partners.

The dashboard will bring together a focused set of shared indicators, spanning early years provision, education outcomes, and perinatal and early years health and wellbeing including:

- Smoking at time of delivery
- Maternal obesity
- Breastfeeding initiation and continuation
- Early language and communication milestones
- Developmental outcomes at 2–2½ years
- Good Level of Development at age 5
- Take-up of funded early education and childcare
- Engagement with Family Hub services
- Outcome gaps by deprivation and population group
- Reach of services to families with the greatest need

Final indicators will be confirmed once the refreshed governance arrangements are in place and system priorities and ambitions have been clearly agreed.

For further information about Worcestershire's Best Start work programme please contact:

Claire Mitchell, Head of Service in Public Health  
(Pregnancy, Early Years and Families)

[cmitchell@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:cmitchell@worcestershire.gov.uk)

