

From Conception to Reception

Stockton on Tees Strategy for Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life 2021-25

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Foreword

We are delighted to share with you 'From Conception to Reception', the Stockton-on-Tees strategy to give every child the best start in life, supporting parents, carers and families from conception, through pregnancy and the child's early life to the age of five.

The Stockton-on-Tees Health and Wellbeing Board has a clear commitment to focusing on pregnancy and the earliest years of life as a way to give every child the best start. We recognise the weight of evidence that exists which tells us that getting it right in these years presents the best early intervention and prevention opportunity, and leads to improved outcomes for children, families and communities.

We are proud to support this Strategy which has been developed in partnership and builds on the existing relationship with key partners from Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, NHS Tees Valley Clinical Commissioning Group, NHS Acute and Community Health Service Providers, Early Years Providers including schools and the private, voluntary and independent sector, as well as families. We recognise that by working together we will be more effective in enabling all children to get the best start in life.

There is much to be gained by creating a more integrated approach which maximises the benefits of services working together better and involving families and communities at every stage. The principles of co-production are central this and we are committed to continuing to value, listen and learn from our children and families. We also have a strong and dedicated workforce who we will continue to work closely with to help shape the services they deliver.

We recommend the Strategy to you and look forward to working alongside you to deliver the resulting best start action plan.

Cllr Lisa Evans

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

1. Introduction

Welcome to 'From Conception to Reception' the Stockton-on-Tees strategy for giving every child the best start in life. This strategy sets out the vision and strategic priorities for the Stockton-on-Tees area during the period 2021-2025. It outlines our commitment to driving developments across our system and the services within it so that collectively we empower families and communities to support their children's development and improve outcomes. We recognise that communities which seek to improve the health and development of its children are helping to build strong foundations for future economic growth and prosperity and happy, healthy and nurturing families.

The development of this strategy is the culmination of a journey during which we have listened to families and the practitioners who work directly with them, undertaken a multi-agency self assessment, sought an external view of our system through a peer challenge process and implemented new ways of working within our 0-19 Healthy Child Programme service as part of our wider commitment to family wellbeing and prioritising the needs of our youngest children. The strategy sets out our vision, ambition and priorities for children and describes the actions we will take to ensure that, as a borough, we are prioritising the early care, support and nurturing relationships that our children need for healthy development, to be ready to learn and ready for school, and to, in turn, develop positive relationships themselves.

This strategy has been coproduced with a range of key partners who have a shared commitment to give every child the best start in life. Our partners include:

- Families
- Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
- NHS Tees Valley Clinical Commissioning Group
- Providers of NHS services including Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust, North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust and Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust
- Stockton Parent Carer Forum
- Early education providers including private, voluntary and independent settings and schools
- Voluntary and Community Sector organisations

We are publishing this strategy at a time of significant change with the COVID-19 pandemic impacting on all aspects of everyday life, and public services facing increasing demands and financial pressures. Whilst the pandemic has affected everyone, its impact has been greater for some sections of the population including families, with babies and young children uniquely vulnerable. The priorities and work programmes identified will support us to ensure that we are well placed to respond to the challenges ahead whilst identifying new strengths and opportunities.

2. What the Evidence tells us

The first five years of a child's life are one of the most important periods of their development. Early experiences for children and their family during this key time shape the rest of their lives. Over the last decade, the strength of evidence about the effect of positive early life experiences on social and emotional development, academic achievement and lifelong health has continued to increase.

“The period from pregnancy to age three is the most critical, when the brain grows faster than at any other time; 80% of a baby's brain is formed by this age. This is a window of opportunity to lay a foundation of health and wellbeing whose benefits last a lifetime and carry into the next generation”.

(World Health Organisation 2018)

While children are born with the ability to learn and develop, they need their environment to provide them with support to enable them to fulfil their potential. Children's earliest relationships play a key part in stimulating their brain development. Within six months of birth, babies can recognise sounds and associate them with objects and ideas. In order to translate these sounds into language, babies need input from the people around them – through reading, play, talking and sharing positive experience. These day to day interactions in the home environment between babies and their families support them to thrive and understand the world around them. Loving, secure and reliable relationships with parents alongside a quality home learning environment will support a baby's emotional wellbeing, language development, ability to learn and the capacity to form and maintain good relationships with others.

As children move through their early years, attending high quality early education not only prepares children for their transition to school but has long lasting benefits for their learning outcomes. Children who attend early education (from 2 years) show improvements in reading, language and number skills that continue into primary school and beyond. School readiness is a strong indicator of how prepared a child is to succeed in school socially, emotionally and cognitively.

When children's health and development falls behind their peers during this phase of their lives, they can struggle to catch up. Evidence tells us that these gaps can increase as children get older and can affect their future life chances. Taking action to support issues and problems as soon as possible is crucial, before they become difficult to reverse. We have, as a result, prioritised the value of early years as part of the Fairer Stockton-on-Tees framework we are currently developing, as this emphasis creates the opportunity to undo some of the significant causes of inequality.

A range of factors can impact on families and family life which may adversely affect their ability to support their child. This includes domestic abuse, mental health issues, experiencing stress or having many vulnerabilities or social needs. Parents can also be impacted by events and experiences from their own childhood which can continue to have a profound effect on their wellbeing and parenting behaviour. We know that stable housing, supportive family and social networks, access to good education and healthcare can protect children from experiencing poor outcomes and enable families

to deal with difficulties when they arise. There is strong evidence that when needs are identified early many children can catch up with their peers.

This strategy sets out our long term vision to enable parents, children and families to thrive in the early years and lay the foundations for happy and healthy children and into the school years and beyond.

3. Our Vision

Our vision for children and young people living in the borough is: ***that Stockton-on-Tees is a great place to grow up, where children and young people are protected from harm and supported to be the best they can be in life.***

For families with children in the earliest years of life, this vision will be realised through a prevention and early intervention approach which focuses on strengthening relationships – between parents and their children, the wider community and the services that provide help and support in communities. Inclusion is at the centre of our work and we are committed to building and further developing our connections within our communities to ensure all children and families thrive.

The workforce is key to achieving our vision. We are focusing our work programme on improving outcomes for child development, readiness to learn and readiness for school. This requires us to go beyond our traditional early years offer, ensuring that the workforce is up to date on the best available evidence for early child development, actively engaged in the coproduction, design and delivery of services and able to support families to provide the best start for their child.

4. Our Priorities

To achieve our vision, we have identified five key priorities informed by analysis of local data, reviewing the evidence base of what works in this crucial developmental stage, and listening to feedback from our families and key partners.

We are committed to:

Priority One

Work alongside families to develop a clear offer of support for all children from conception to five years

Why is this important?

The early years is a critical time when foundations are laid which can last a lifetime. In Stockton-on-Tees we aim to create the environments where children and families can thrive and reach their full potential. There may be points in a child's life where additional support is needed, and this support should be as quick and easy to access for families as possible.

Family life at times can be challenging, but the strengths within families creates the environment which enables children to thrive. One size does not fit all, and having a joined up, responsive range of support for all needs will give families a helping hand along the way, when they need it.

The skills, knowledge and resources within families and communities are central to the development of this support. We are committed to working in a way which encourages and equips families to influence the development and delivery of support, both for themselves and for families across the borough and offering:

1. clear and consistent information, advice and support
2. a range of contact points with health and early years professionals
3. easy access to activities, information and advice that supports families to help their children thrive during the early years.
4. a joined up approach between different agencies that work across the early years, providing swift and easy access to more support when families need it.

We will:

- Involve parents at each stage of building the early years pathway through co production, design, delivery and evaluation.
- Develop resources, communication campaigns and share information to enable a consistent understanding across parents, communities and the early years system about the parenting journey and key milestones for children across the early years.

- Measure the impact of what we are doing to understand what effect interventions and services are making to reduce inequalities and improve outcomes in our areas of greatest need.

Priority Two

Building and strengthening early relationships

Why is this important?

The single best resource a child has to thrive is the important adults in their lives. The relationship between children and the adults who care for them is crucially and profoundly important. How a child develops is rooted in those early bonds with their primary carers.

Babies and children learn through all of their interactions and early relationships shape how a child's brain develops from the start of life. The quality of relationships, the way we interact and communicate, the things we do together and for each other all have their foundations in the bonds and relationships from the early years of life. Babies have an inborn capacity to connect to others and the more responsive the primary carer and other key people in their life, the deeper the bond and more likely that the child will develop healthy ways of responding to the people around them.

Listening and responding to children's needs, playing and spending quality time together supports their development and growth, reassures them that their needs will be met and supports resilience into adulthood. Sometimes this comes naturally to parents whilst some may need additional support to do this - this should be easily available and sensitive to their family context and experiences within their own relationships.

As children grow, they will form new relationships with adults and peers in their community and early years settings. It is vital that these relationships and environments are also nurturing and responsive. This combination of communities, families and services coming together will have a lasting impact on the wellbeing of children and young people.

We will :

- Ensure that parents/carers are asked about their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their child at each contact from before birth through to starting school
- Provide training for staff to support them to feel confident to sensitively discuss parent-child relationships and attachment, and ensure that their practice is trauma informed.

- Develop and share inclusive, high quality information and resources for parents/carers to support their child's development through secure and supportive relationships.
- Ensure that the range of services involved in the early years pathway work in an integrated way, so that when additional needs are identified, families receive support from the service that is best placed to meet their needs.

Priority Three

Supporting children and families with the development of early speech, language and communication

Why is this important?

Being able to speak clearly, understand and use language well, and communicate socially with others are building blocks to success in life. Difficulties with speech, language and communication can affect a child's ability to form friendships and maintain their social and emotional wellbeing. The effect of continuing speech, language and communication difficulties can build and become more established if left unaddressed. This can continue into adulthood, seriously affecting quality of life and can contribute to unemployment, social isolation, mental health issues and criminal activity.

Examining and putting support in place in a child's everyday environment (including their home, childcare and education settings) can be the most valuable tool to influence a child's future.

Building a broad base of skills amongst our community can support all children to develop speech language and communication skills and for those who require more personalised and 'targeted' help. It can also help us to identify if 'specialist' help is needed beyond this, through considering referral to our Speech and Language Therapy service recognising that, for a smaller number of children with more complex and persisting difficulties, specialist support should be easy to access by all who need it.

Across Stockton-on-Tees, we aim to offer a seamless journey from broad 'universal' strategies to help develop speech language and communication skills, to more individualised support when needed. We will ensure that advice for families is available when needed from a variety of sources including people and services they already know.

We will :

- Promote clear, consistent and accessible messages to families to support them to develop their child's speech, language and communication.

- Work alongside families to co-produce a speech language and communication pathway which develops strengths, responds to needs and provides swift access to support.
- Develop and promote communication rich, inclusive environments which support children's learning.
- Empower the early years workforce through training and ongoing learning to be confident and competent to identify and support Speech Language and Communication needs.

Priority Four

Supporting families to provide a positive home learning environment

Why is this important?

Babies are born ready to learn and their development is dependent upon their parents and carers as their first teacher.

Strong, nurturing relationships and early experiences lay the foundation for every child's future development. This includes everything a parent does with their child. Families playing, listening and responding, talking, reading and singing can make a significant amount of difference to their learning, confidence and success in life.

We recognise the importance and value of home learning as one of the biggest influences on early childhood outcomes. We are committed to working in partnership with our families to ensure they have the right tools at the right time. We will ensure that parents and carers have swift access to the best resources, advice and support available when they need it.

We will:

- work in partnership to develop a borough wide communication strategy which sets out clear and consistent messages and resources for parents to support them with their child's development from birth. This will include promoting messaging from national resources including the Tiny Happy People programme.
- develop Family Led councils within the Borough's Family Hubs to ensure that parents shape the development of a range of support and services.
- work with local voluntary and community organisations to promote opportunities for babies and children to play, learn and have new experiences with their families.

Priority Five

Encouraging access to high quality, inclusive and affordable Early Years education

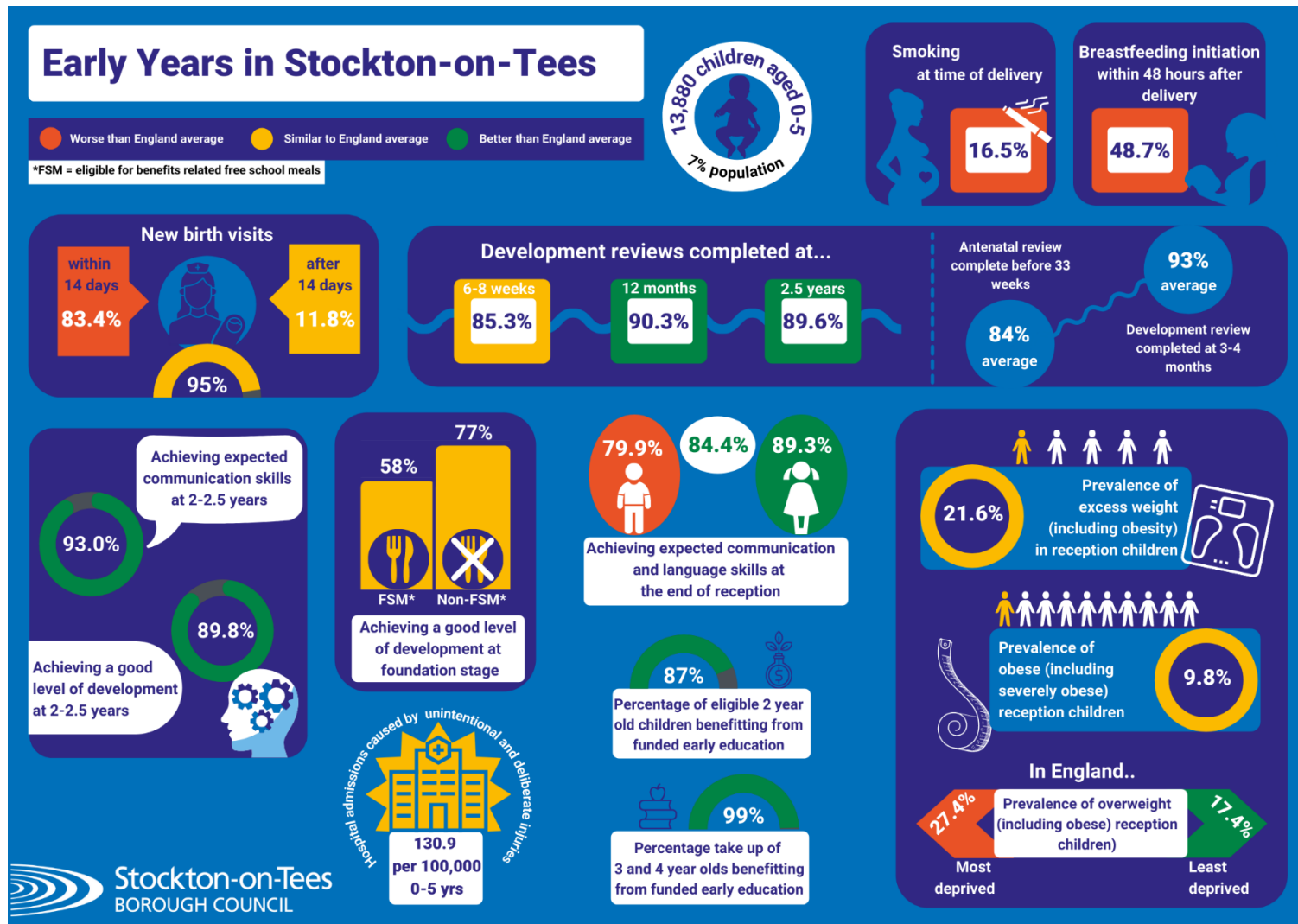
Why is this important?

Quality early years experiences help to build a strong foundation for future learning, success and achievement. High quality early years provision offers children a wide range of opportunities to play, develop skills, build relationships with others and make friends. It also supports preparation for and transition to school by encouraging children and their families to form supportive networks and adopt positive habits (e.g. regular attendance). We want every child to start their education in excellent provision which will build on their experiences from home. This means we work in partnership with all providers and offer a range of training and support opportunities which help to strengthen the workforce and meet the needs of every child.

We will:

- Provide support and challenge to early years settings including schools and childminders to ensure quality is maintained and enhanced.
- Provide support and challenge to early years settings to ensure that they meet the needs of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and their families
- Further develop the Stockton-on-Tees Healthy Schools Programme to support early years settings to take a 'whole setting' approach to promoting the wellbeing of their children and workforce
- Encourage positive communication between settings so information is shared which will help to support children's individual needs.
- Ensure there is enough high quality childcare across Stockton to meet the needs of parents/carers through the annual assessment of childcare
- Ensure childcare is affordable to meet the needs of all parents/carers and that there are sufficient free early years funded places
- Increase take-up of the 2 year free childcare entitlement for eligible parents
- Continue to invest in the skills and expertise of the early years workforce by offering training and professional development opportunities

5. Where are we now?



6. Recognising the Impact of COVID 19

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed society. Controlling and reducing the spread of the virus has impacted on every aspect of how we live our lives and has come at significant cost to some, widening existing inequalities across society. It is important that we reflect and acknowledge within this Strategy the changing needs of babies, young children and their families as a result of Covid-19 and the associated restrictions.

Recent evidence looking at the effect of the pandemic on parents and children in the earliest years highlighted impacts on their pregnancy, baby or young child. An increase in anxiety, stress and loneliness has been reported by families and many are experiencing food insecurity. Domestic abuse is likely to have increased. The number of children living in poverty is rising.

There is a risk to child development, particularly social and emotional development, as a result of reduced social interaction, reduced contact with the wider family unit, disruption to services and fewer opportunities to identify needs and offer support. Significant changes in family circumstances have created and increased vulnerabilities for babies, children and families meaning that the impact of the pandemic will be felt for years to come.

The pandemic has also provided the opportunity to think differently and be innovative in the support that we offer. It is more important than ever that we use our collective resources to support children and families to thrive during pregnancy and the earliest years.

Whilst we will continue to restore the delivery of high quality, face to face support for families including health visitor contacts and community-based parenting programmes, we will strengthen our support to children and families rapidly through the development of a borough wide communication strategy which sets out clear and consistent messages and resources for parents to use to support their child's development, with a specific focus on speech, language and communication. This will be a vital part of our recovery and will help to mitigate the impact of reduced social contact for children in the earliest years and their families.

7. Measuring Impact and Progress

We have looked across our early years system, reviewed the evidence base, taken advice and guidance from external peer challenge and completed our own self-evaluation. Through this we have identified six key outcomes which describe what we want our system to look like. They are:

- Co-production is embedded as our way of working and families feel that they are listened to and communicated with
- The early years system is joined up, supportive and accessible
- Families and the early years workforce understand their role in supporting children's development
- Speech, Language and Communication Needs are identified early and reduced where possible
- All children are able to access early years education in a setting that is 'good' or 'outstanding'
- Children are ready to learn and ready for school.

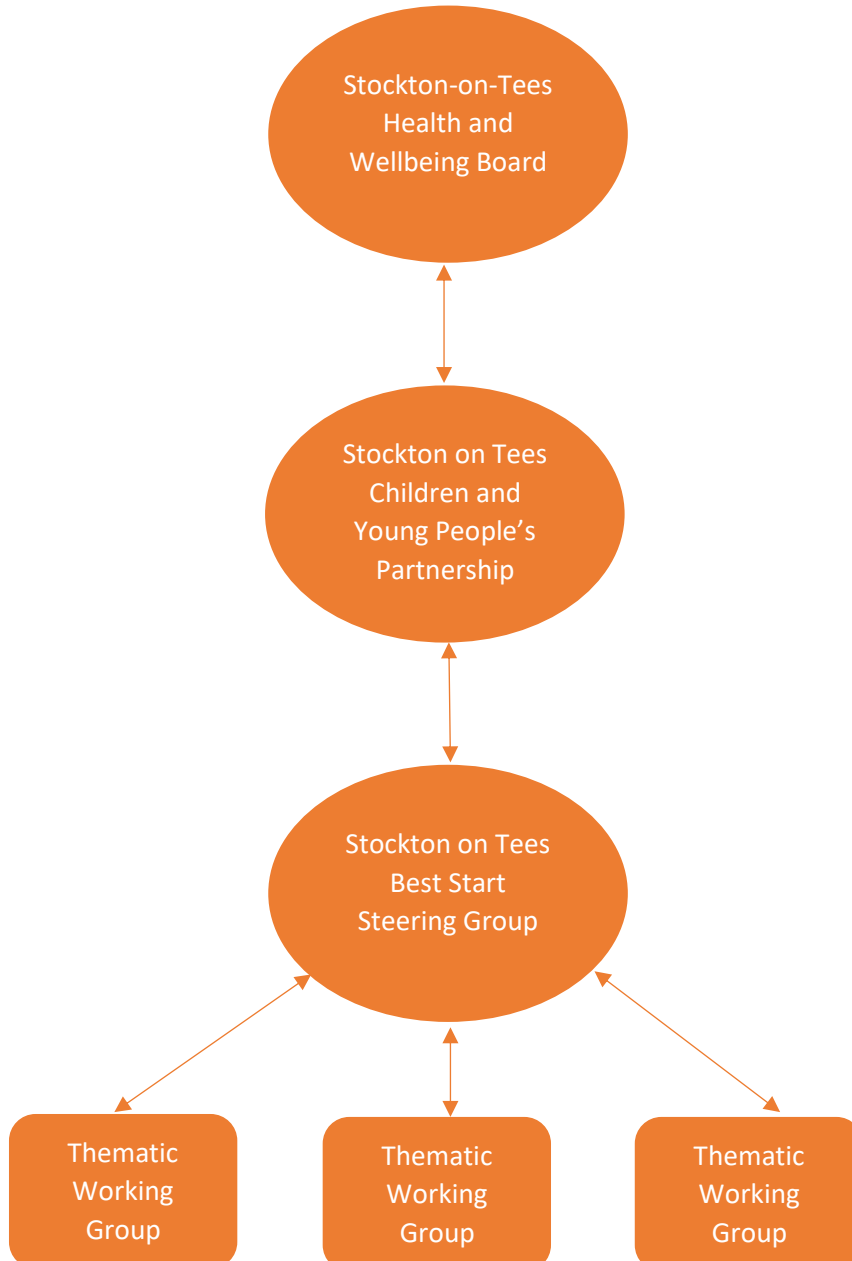
We will use a range of sources to help us assess how we are performing against the six outcomes. A Best Start strategic outcomes framework has been developed and is included in Appendix One. This sets out the data and performance indicators, qualitative measures and feedback which will be monitored and scrutinised to identify good practice and challenges to delivery.

8. Delivering the Strategy

The delivery of this strategy will be led by the Stockton on Tees Best Start steering group which brings together partners who will work to deliver the shared vision, strategic priorities and action plan. Working groups and task groups will be developed as needed to drive work and deliver improvements. Progress against the strategy will be monitored and scrutinised by the Stockton on Tees Children and Young People's Partnership with strategic oversight from the Health and Wellbeing Board to ensure that outcomes for children and young people are continuously improving. The priorities will be refreshed during 2025 and will be co-produced with families and key stakeholders from across the Best Start system.

We envisage additional investment will be required to deliver the strategy, including support for early years communication programmes, and improving the quality of early years provision and learning environments which can help to support these ambitions.

We will continue to seek funding opportunities from a variety of sources as they arise.



Appendix One - Best Start System Outcomes Framework

What we want to achieve	How we measure			How we deliver
OUTCOMES	Data and Performance Indicators	Quality assurance	Feedback	Strategic Priorities
<p>1. Co-production is embedded as our way of working and families feel that they are listened to and communicated with</p>	<p>% of organisations providing early years services who are signed up to the principles of the co-production charter</p> <p>% of families feeling that education , health and care services are working with them to coproduce the SEND system</p> <p>Uptake of Stockton Information Directory</p>	<p>Reduction in complaints</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Satisfaction Survey • Family Hub feedback groups • Early years settings surveys • Parent/Carer Forum workshops • Coproduction survey feedback • EHCP survey feedback 	<p>1, 3 and 5</p>
<p>2. The early years system is joined up, supportive and accessible</p>	<p>% offer and % uptake at key contact points: antenatal, birth, 6 to 8 weeks, 3 to 4 months, 9 to 12 months, 2 to 2 ½ years and 3 ½ to 4 years.</p> <p>Uptake of training programmes (HENRY, Early Talk) by staff group</p> <p>Uptake of programmes by parents/carers and referral source</p> <p>Breastfeeding initiation rate</p> <p>Breastfeeding rate at 6-8 weeks</p> <p>Smoking at time of delivery</p>	<p>Multi-agency casefile audits</p> <p>Achievement against UNICEF baby friendly accreditation</p> <p>Benchmarking of provision against evidence base and effectiveness of training programmes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family satisfaction survey • Family Hub feedback groups • Early Years settings surveys • School readiness forum • External review – peer challenge • Friends and Family Test • Case studies • Training programme evaluation • Early Years matters meeting minutes 	<p>1, 2, 3, 4</p>
<p>3. Families and the early years workforce understand their role in supporting children’s development</p>	<p>% of children achieving a good level of development</p> <p>% lowest 20% achievement gap</p> <p>% free school meals achievement gap</p> <p>% gender achievement gap</p>	<p>Practice Observations</p> <p>Service level Audits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family satisfaction survey • Family Hub feedback groups • Early Years settings surveys • School readiness forum • External review – peer challenge • Friends and Family Test • Case studies 	<p>1,2,3,4 and 5</p>

What we want to achieve	How we measure		How we deliver	
	% SEND achievement gap % English as an additional language achievement gap % ethnicity achievement gap % take up of 2 year old free early education % of 3 year olds taking up free early education entitlement Number of home safety visits delivered (split by postcode) Number of home safety training sessions offered and uptake Hospital admissions for 0-4 year old injuries		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training programme evaluation (including HENRY, Early Talk, Home Safety) for parents/carers and workforce – impact on knowledge 	
4. Speech Language and Communication Needs are identified early and reduced where possible	Numbers of early years workforce trained in evidence based SLC interventions % Use of Early Language Identification Measure tool at 2 to 2 ½ year review % of children at expected level in communication and language development early learning goal Numbers of children and families attending ICAN SLCN programmes within Family Hubs Numbers of children referred into specialist SALT services	Service Level audits Multi agency audits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family satisfaction survey • Family Hub feedback groups • Early Years settings surveys • School readiness forum • External review – peer challenge • Friends and Family Test • Case studies • Evaluation of ICAN SLCN programmes by families and workforce 	1,2,3,4,and 5
5. All children are able to access early years education in a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of early years settings judged to be ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by OFSTED 	OFSTED inspection EIS Early Years advisers record of contacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family satisfaction survey • Early Years settings survey • School readiness forum 	5

What we want to achieve	How we measure			How we deliver
setting that is 'good' or 'outstanding'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case Studies • Early Years Matters meeting minutes 			
6. Children are ready to learn and ready for school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of children achieving a good level of development • % lowest 20% achievement gap • % free school meals achievement gap • % gender achievement gap • % SEND achievement gap • % English as an additional language achievement gap • % ethnicity achievement gap • % take up of 2 year old free early education • % of 3 & 4 year olds taking up free early education entitlement • % nursery and school settings delivery toothbrushing programmes • % 5 year olds with visible dental decay • % 4-5 year olds with excess weight and obese (split by deprivation) 	Practice Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family satisfaction survey • Early Years settings survey • School readiness forum • Case Studies • Early Years Matters meeting minutes 	2,3,4 and 5

References

World Health Organisation (2018) Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development : A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential