

REPORT TO CABINET

DATE 12/03/2026

REPORT OF CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM

CABINET DECISION

Children and Young People - Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Claire Besford

Stockton-on-Tees Best Start in Life Plan 2026–2031

Summary

This report provides an overview of the Stockton-on-Tees Best Start in Life Plan 2026–2031. The plan sets out the Borough's vision, strategic priorities and commitments for improving outcomes in the earliest years of a child's life spanning pregnancy to age five.

Reasons for Recommendation(s)/Decision(s)

The plan aligns with the Government's Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life policy and delivers on both local and national ambitions to improve school readiness, reduce inequalities and strengthen early years provision. It also reflects the commitment to the development of Best Start Family Hubs, supported by DfE Best Start grant funding provided to each local authority to expand and enhance accessible, high-quality services for families. The plan supports priorities within the Stockton-on-Tees Plan, particularly priority one - the best start in life to achieve big ambitions.

Recommendations

1. Cabinet is asked to approve the Stockton-on-Tees Best Start in Life Plan 2026 – 2031.

Detail

1. As part of national policy direction, Stockton-on-Tees has been set ambitious targets by Government for the proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of reception. By the 2027/28 academic year, at least 78.5% of children are expected to achieve a GLD, with a specific target of 63.1% for children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). For context, in 2024/25, 69.6% of children in Stockton-on-Tees achieved a GLD, compared with 53.8% of children eligible for FSM. The Best Start in Life plan aims to align and mobilise our collective resources to support progress toward these targets, which will serve as core metrics for monitoring performance and assessing impact over the lifetime of the plan.
2. The Stockton-on-Tees Best Start plan identifies five strategic priorities:
 - **Foundations for a Healthy Childhood** – supporting healthy routines, nutrition, immunisation, physical activity and home safety.

- **Home Learning and Play** – supporting parents to integrate play, talk and learning into daily life.
 - **Speech, Language and Communication** – promoting early communication skills and streamlining pathways for additional support.
 - **High Quality Early Years Education** – ensuring access to high quality provision, inclusive practice and sufficient childcare places.
 - **Emotional Health and Wellbeing** – supporting secure parent child relationships, early identification of needs and access to appropriate programmes.
3. To support delivery, each priority has a named lead and a multi-agency working group responsible for driving actions forward and ensuring progress is monitored effectively. The development of the Best Start Family Hub – a requirement of DfE Best Start funding - is a central component in delivering the plan and has its own multi agency working group.

Next Steps & Governance

4. SBC Communications Team are leading on the design and formatting of the plan, which has been produced in accordance with the Council's policy and standards for the publication of strategies.
5. As part of the terms of the Best Start Grant, the plan must be published on our website by 31st March 2026 in line with DfE requirements, and this includes adherence to the national 'Best Start' branding.
6. An annual delivery plan will outline how partners across the local system will implement the priorities set out in this strategy, including the key milestones, actions and performance measures required to monitor progress and impact. The delivery plan will be overseen and coordinated by the Best Start Strategic Group with regular reporting to the Families First Partnership Board and Health and Wellbeing Board.

Community Impact and Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment

7. An Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment has been completed. No groups with protected characteristics will be negatively impacted by the implementation of the strategy. Individuals with a disability, experiencing pregnancy and maternity & low income and disadvantaged families may be positively affected.

Corporate Parenting Implications

8. The Best Start in Life (BSIL) Plan 2026–2031 directly supports these responsibilities by strengthening early identification, targeted intervention, and access to high-quality early years support for children in care and those with a social worker.

Financial Implications

9. Initial Best Start Development Grant funding has been received by the Local Authority to support with the implementation of the Best Start Agenda. Subsequent funding is due to be received annually from April 2026.

Legal Implications

10. The Best Start in Life (BSIL) Plan 2026–2031 supports the Council in meeting its statutory duties relating to early childhood development, safeguarding, early education, health integration,

and SEND. There are no new or additional legal risks arising directly from the approval of the plan

Risk Assessment

11. The implementation & delivery of the plan will be managed through existing governance structures coordinated by the Best Start Strategic Group with regular reporting to the Families First Partnership Board and Health and Wellbeing Board.

Wards Affected and Consultation with Ward/Councillors (refer to Concordat for Communication and Consultation with Members)

12. The Best Start in Life Plan 2026 – 2031 will support families across all wards of the Borough. A programme of family and stakeholder engagement and feedback took place during December 2025 – January 2026 which has informed the development of the plan.

Background Papers

13. Draft Best Start in Life Plan (2026-2031).

Name of Contact Officer: Jane Smith

Post Title: Head of Service – Children Strategy & Commissioning

Telephone number: 01642 527237

Email address: jane.smith@stockton.gov.uk