

# Stockton-on-Tees Best Start in Life Plan

## 2026-2031



Delivered by



**Stockton-on-Tees**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL



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## Foreword



**I am delighted to introduce the ‘Stockton-on-Tees Best Start in Life Plan 2026–2031’. At its heart, this plan reflects our shared belief that every child deserves the chance to grow, learn and flourish — and that every family should feel supported, confident and cared for from pregnancy through to age five.**

The early years shape so much of who we become. When children are surrounded by encouragement, kindness and opportunities to play and explore, they build strong foundations that carry them into school, adolescence and adulthood. This plan recognises just how precious these early moments are, and sets out a clear, hopeful and practical way for us to work together to reduce inequalities and help every child thrive.

One of the most inspiring parts of this plan is how it has been created. Families, practitioners, health colleagues, early years providers and community partners have walked alongside us throughout its development. Parents and carers have shared their experiences generously and honestly — telling us what helps, what could be better and what truly makes a difference. Their voices have shaped this plan, and I am deeply grateful to every family who contributed.

Together, we are united in our commitment to improving school readiness across the Borough. We know it is a key marker of children’s wellbeing, early development and future opportunities. This plan sets out the collective steps we will take to help every child enter Year 1 feeling confident, supported and excited to learn.

Finally, I want to offer my heartfelt thanks to our dedicated partners and to everyone who works every day to support children and families across Stockton-on-Tees. Your compassion, expertise and unwavering commitment are what make this plan not just possible, but full of promise.

**Councillor Clare Besford**

**Cabinet Member for Children & Young People**

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

# Welcome

Welcome to the 'Stockton-on-Tees Best Start Plan 2026–2031', which sets out how partners across the Borough will work together to give every child the best possible start in life, from pregnancy through to age five.

The Best Start Plan sets out our shared vision, ambitions and priorities for supporting children and families in Stockton-on-Tees. It reflects our joint commitment to building a strong, joined up system of support that works alongside families and communities, strengthens early help and prevention and helps improve outcomes for children in their earliest years.

The Best Start Plan has been co-produced with a wide range of partners who share a collective responsibility and commitment to improving outcomes for children and families. This includes:

- Families
- Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
- Stockton Parent Carer Forum (SPCF)
- North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENCICB)
- Providers of NHS services including Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust (HDTF), North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust (NTH) and Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust (TEWV)
- Early education providers including private, voluntary and independent settings and schools
- Voluntary and Community Sector organisations

Partnership working and coproduction are central to how this plan will be delivered, underpinned by a shared determination to learn, adapt and continuously improve our system so that it truly meets the needs of children and families in Stockton-on-Tees. To achieve this, we have worked hand in hand with partners across the children's system and with families themselves

We have actively gone out into communities to speak with families face-to-face, through focus group sessions in Family Hubs and conversations in settings they know and trust, as well as undertaking wider online consultation. These interactions have allowed us to capture, in families' own words, what matters most to them and what they need from services. Their insights have strengthened our understanding of the barriers they encounter and the support that makes the greatest difference, enabling us to coproduce a plan that reflects real needs, values family strengths, and sets a shared direction that partners and families feel ownership of.

**Note:** In this strategy, the term 'parent' is used inclusively to refer to any significant adult in a child's life and should be understood interchangeably with 'parent/carer'.

## What the evidence tells us

### Why the first five years matter

The first five years of a child's life are incredibly important. What children experience during this time – and the support their families receive – shapes their learning, their confidence, their health and their future. Over recent years, a growing body of evidence has shown just how much early experiences affect children's development, their wellbeing and even their long-term life chances.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2018) reminds us that the period from pregnancy to age three is particularly important, as a baby's brain grows faster at this time than at any other stage. By age three, around 80% of the brain has already formed. This makes the early years a window of opportunity to build strong foundations for a child's lifelong health and wellbeing.

### How children grow and learn

Children are born ready to learn, but they need the right environment and supportive relationships to help them reach their potential. From the very beginning, babies learn through the everyday interactions they have with the people who care for them—being talked to, played with, cuddled, listened to and loved.

By just six months, babies can recognise sounds and start to link them with objects and ideas. But to turn these sounds into language, they need people around them who talk, read, sing and play. These small, everyday moments help babies understand the world, feel safe and start building relationships that support their emotional wellbeing and learning.

As children grow, attending high-quality early education also helps prepare them for school and gives them skills that last well into primary school and beyond.

### Why early support matters

We know that if a child falls behind in the early years, it can be harder for them to catch up later. Small gaps in learning, communication and development can become bigger over time and may affect their confidence and the opportunities they have as they grow. This is why early support for children and families is so important. When concerns are spotted early and families receive the right help at the right time, many children catch up quickly with their peers and continue to thrive.

## Our vision

Our vision for children and young people living in the Borough is that they are given the best possible start in life, in an inclusive community where everyone can thrive as set out in the **Stockton-on-Tees Plan**: [www.stockton.gov.uk/council-plan-2024](http://www.stockton.gov.uk/council-plan-2024).

We will work hard to prevent children and families from experiencing the impact of poverty, creating a bright and healthy future with a shared sense of belonging. We will ensure that all children, young people and families are supported to achieve their full potential through our early years, health and wellbeing, childcare and education system. We know that when communities work together to support children's health, wellbeing and development, they're doing much more than helping in the early years. They're giving children a strong start in life and building the solid foundations that lead to happier, healthier families and a brighter future for everyone.

The work we're doing now is all about giving children the best life chances from the very beginning. By helping them grow, learn and play well in their early years, we can reduce barriers and help them feel confident, supported and ready for the world as they get older. A 'best start' means children are more likely to do well in school, enjoy better health throughout their lives and have more opportunities when they become adults.

Our Best Start Plan also supports the national policy direction with the Government, who have made early years development and school readiness a national priority through their **Giving every child the best start in life** policy:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life).

### **By the end of the 2027/28 academic year:**

- We want to see more children in Stockton-on-Tees starting school ready to learn, with the skills and confidence they need to make the most of their early education. To help achieve this, we have been set an ambitious goal by the Department for Education for at least 78.5% of children to reach a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of Reception by 2028
- For children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), our aim is that at least 63.1% achieve a GLD by the end of Reception by 2028. This reflects our belief that no child should be left behind and that every child deserves the same strong start and the same opportunities to do well, both now and in the future.

## Our priorities

To achieve our vision, we have identified five key priorities. These are based on an understanding of local needs, evidence of what works at this vital stage of development and what families and partners have told us matters most.

These are:

### 1. Foundations for a healthy childhood

We will help children eat well, stay active and build healthy habits from the very start.

### 2. Home learning and play

We will support families to make learning and play fun and part of everyday life at home.

### 3. Speech, language and communication

We will support children to develop the skills they need to communicate confidently.

### 4. High-quality early years education

We will ensure every child has access to great early learning experiences that help them grow and learn.

### 5. Emotional health and wellbeing

We will support families to ensure their children feel happy, safe and ready to learn.



# Priority 1: Foundations for a healthy childhood

**We will help children eat well, stay active and build healthy habits from the very start.**

## **Why is this a priority?**

Giving children a healthy start in life is one of the best things we can do for their future. Simple, everyday things like eating well, being active, getting enough sleep, keeping up with vaccinations, and having safe, consistent routines—make a huge difference to a child’s development, confidence and wellbeing.

Good nutrition helps children grow and learn, safe sleep keeps babies protected, and regular play and physical activity support strong bodies and healthy minds. Making homes safe reduces accidents, and routine immunisations protect children from serious illnesses. Together, these healthy habits help children feel their best and get ready for learning as they grow.

We want every family to feel supported in building these habits from the very beginning. By making sure parents and carers have clear, accessible information and the right help when they need it, we can reduce avoidable illness and make sure all children have the same chance to be healthy and happy. These priorities will guide our work to improve children’s early health and ensure every child in Stockton-on-Tees has the best possible start in life.

## **What actions are we committing to?**

We will:

- Support breastfeeding, guide families through healthy weaning, and promote access to Healthy Start vouchers.
- Encourage simple, daily active play for babies and toddlers, and help families reduce screen time in the early years.
- Make it easier for families to keep up with childhood vaccinations and provide clear information about vaccine schedules, including the new chickenpox vaccine.
- Help parents build warm, responsive relationships and create consistent routines that make children feel safe and supported.
- Share clear advice on safe sleep—day and night—and support families who may not have stable or suitable sleeping arrangements.
- Provide practical guidance on home safety, car seat use, water safety, choking risks, and day-to-day ways to keep children safe as they become more active.

## Priority 2: Home learning and play

**We will support families to make learning and play fun and part of everyday life at home.**

### **Why is this a priority?**

Home learning and play make a big difference to children's early development. Simple things like talking, playing and spending positive time together help build children's language, communication and thinking skills. These everyday interactions give children the best start and help them feel safe, confident and ready to learn.

Families are central to helping children develop good learning habits. By building play and learning into home routines, parents and carers can support their child's development whether they are at home, in early years settings or out in the community. We will ensure all activity is inclusive, culturally sensitive and accessible for children and families with additional needs.

This work supports the Best Start in Life aim to reduce inequalities and help every child be ready for school. It's important that all families can access support. When parents can't get to local groups or services, other ways of reaching them should be offered so they can still take part in home learning.

### **What actions are we committing to?**

We will:

- Codesign practical home learning actions with families and partners, ensuring they are realistic, culturally relevant, and grounded in lived experience
- Develop simple, accessible resources that help parents integrate play, talk, and learning into everyday routines, for example, talking to your child in the park, supermarket, or on the school run.
- Provide workshops and digital sessions that model effective home learning activities, including visual role modelling that parents can easily replicate at home.
- Build parental confidence by offering supportive, strengths-based guidance that recognises families' existing skills and knowledge
- Increase accessibility and inclusion by offering sessions in early years settings and nurseries, which are places parents already trust and providing alternative time slots for working families.
- Promote awareness and consistent messages through community engagement, local campaigns, and shared communication across partners.

- Target support for families facing barriers to engagement, including those unable to access place-based settings. Provide flexible, personalised options for learning at home or in the community.
- Signpost families to local opportunities such as libraries, playgroups, children and Family Hubs, and community groups and help these groups understand and reinforce home learning principles.



## Priority 3: Speech, language and communication

**We will support children to develop the skills they need to communicate confidently.**

### **Why is this a priority?**

The ability to talk, understand words and communicate with others is a vital part of how children learn, shaping their health, wellbeing and future success. These early skills help children express their feelings, build friendships, manage their emotions and enjoy learning as they grow.

We know that the everyday interactions children have with their parents, carers and the adults closest to them make the biggest difference. Talking together, sharing stories, playing, and spending time together helps children to develop strong speech, language and communication skills.

Most children will make great progress when the adults around them feel confident supporting communication from an early age. Some children, however, may need a little extra help along the way. When this happens, early support can make a big difference and help close gaps before they get bigger. For a smaller number of children who have more complex or ongoing communication needs, specialist support should be quick, easy to access and closely connected to the help families are already receiving.

### **What actions are we committing to?**

We will:

- Share simple, consistent messages with parents about how to support early communication at home, making sure these are easy for Stockton-on-Tees families to access through antenatal sessions, Family Hubs and early years settings. We will also regularly check with parents to understand how useful these messages are, so we can make sure they reach all families and make a real difference.
- Develop a simple, easy to understand offer that explains what support is available from pregnancy through the early years.
- Ensure early years practitioners, health professionals and wider teams that work with families feel confident in supporting babies' communication from birth. This includes training, practical tools and resources that show what good early communication practice looks like.
- Continue to introduce and grow evidence-based programmes that help children develop strong language skills early on.

- Strengthen how the Healthy Child Programme and education work together around the 2–2½ year developmental review. Families will receive a clear, coordinated response from health visitors, early years settings and, where needed, specialist Speech and Language Therapy (SALT).



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## Priority 4: High-quality early years education

**We will ensure every child has access to great early learning experiences that help them grow and learn.**

### **Why is this a priority?**

Quality early years experiences help to build the strong foundations children need for future learning, confidence and success. When children spend time in high-quality early years settings—such as nurseries, childminders and playgroups, they are given a safe, welcoming space where they can explore, be curious and learn through play.

In these settings, children have lots of opportunities to discover new things, develop their language and communication, build early problem-solving skills and grow their independence. They can play outdoors, try activities that spark their imagination, and learn how to share, take turns and work together.

Just as importantly, early years settings help children build trusting relationships with adults and make their first friendships. These early social experiences help children feel confident, secure and ready for school when the time comes.

### **What actions are we committing to?**

We will:

- Support early years settings to give children the best possible experiences, and we will challenge them where needed to help make sure quality keeps improving.
- 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
- Help nurseries, schools and childminders share information with each other so children get joined up support that meets their individual needs.
- Continue to offer the Stockton-on-Tees Healthy Schools and Healthy Settings Programme to support early years to take a 'whole setting' approach to promoting the wellbeing of their children and workforce.
- Ensure that Stockton-on-Tees has sufficient high quality, affordable, and flexible childcare places across the Borough to meet the needs of all parents and their children.
- Ensure there are sufficient free early years funded places and work to ensure childcare is accessible to all children including those from those who may need extra support.

- Actively promote the early learning entitlement for 2-year-olds to eligible families and make it easier for parents to find, understand and access their free childcare place.
- Work together so that the Healthy Child Programme and early years settings can share information, helping us understand and support each child's needs in the best way.
- Keep offering training, resources and development opportunities to help early years staff strengthen their skills and expertise.



## Priority 5: Emotional health and wellbeing

**We will support families to ensure their children feel happy, safe and ready to learn.**

### **Why is this a priority?**

A child's emotional wellbeing is just as important as their physical health. When children feel safe, loved and supported, they are better able to learn, build friendships, try new things and cope with life's ups and downs. Helping children feel emotionally secure early in life gives them strong foundations for their future health, learning and happiness.

Parents' and carers' wellbeing matter too. From pregnancy onwards, how parents feel can have a big impact on their baby's development. When parents receive the right support, whether that's during pregnancy or once their baby is born, it can help strengthen the bond with their child, support healthy brain development and build positive routines that make family life feel easier.

By focusing on emotional health and wellbeing for both children and parents, we can reduce inequalities, make sure families feel connected to the right services, and give every child the best chance to develop, learn and reach their full potential.

### **What actions are we committing to?**

We will:

- **Make it easier for both mums and dads to talk about how they're feeling from pregnancy onwards. By checking in early and regularly, we can offer support that feels right for each family and help parents feel more confident and connected.**
- **Work closely with families, early years settings and health professionals to notice any early signs that a child may need extra support with their emotions, behaviour or development. This helps us put help in place sooner, before small worries become bigger challenges.**
- **Work alongside families, recognising their strengths, values and what's already going well. Our support will build on these strengths—listening, encouraging and helping families find solutions that work for them.**
- **Actively promote a range of antenatal and early y-years programmes through our Family Hubs. By making these opportunities easy to find and access, we will help families feel confident, connected and supported right from the start.**

- Use the Mental Health Needs Assessment we have recently carried out to help shape and improve the support we offer to families, utilising what the data shows about emotional health needs across Stockton-on-Tees, ensuring the help available is relevant, accessible and in the right places.



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# Where are we now?



<b>Education</b>	The proportion of children in Stockton-on-Tees achieving a Good Level of Development at foundation stage is currently <b>69.6%</b> . FSM - currently <b>53.8%</b> .
	<b>170</b> Children aged 0-5 have an active Education, Health & Care Plan
	Percentage of children at expected level in Communication & Language and Literacy areas of learning is <b>70.1%</b> .

<b>Childcare</b>		
<b>1,005</b> Under 2s accessing a funded place	<b>925</b> 2 year olds accessing a funded place	<b>1,618</b> 3 and 4 year olds accessing a funded place

<b>Health</b>		
<b>8.4%</b> Smoking at time of delivery	<b>95.5%</b> New Birth Visits within 14 days	<b>4.5%</b> New Birth Visits after 14 days
<b>24.2%</b> Totally breastfed at 6-8 weeks 	<b>23.4%</b> Reception prevalence of overweight (including obesity) 	<b>12,585</b> A&E attendance, 0-4 
<b>95.7%</b> Development Reviews at 6-8 weeks	<b>96.1%</b> Development Reviews at 12 months	<b>96.5%</b> Development Reviews at 2 – 2.5 years

## Best Start Family Hub offer

Stockton-on-Tees' Best Start Family Hubs are part of the national Family Hub programme, giving families a welcoming place to find help, advice and support all in one place. From pregnancy and the early years through to adolescence (and up to age 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities), Family Hubs bring local services together to make life easier for families. Whether it's support with infant feeding, child development, emotional wellbeing or parenting, families can access the right help at the right time, close to home. The Best Start Family Hub offer is focused on giving every child the best possible start in life, reducing inequalities and helping parents and carers feel confident and supported as their children grow.

Over the next five years, Stockton-on-Tees will develop a network of Best Start Family Hubs — places where families can easily find help, advice and support, all under one roof. Family Hubs will support families from pregnancy, through the early years, and into adolescence, and will also offer help up to age 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). By bringing services together, we aim to make it simpler for families to get the right support at the right time, close to home.



Using local data on child development, early education, and family need, Redhill has been chosen as the first Best Start Family Hub in Stockton-on-Tees. This means that families in Redhill and the surrounding area will be the first to benefit from a more coordinated, welcoming and easy-to-navigate offer of support. Redhill will also lead the way in trying out new ideas around Home Learning and Play, helping parents and carers feel confident supporting their children's learning and development at home.

Partnership working will be at the heart of everything we do. Family Hubs will bring together health services, early years providers, schools, voluntary and community groups, and wider council services. By working as one team, we can make sure families experience a smoother, more joined-up journey, reducing the need to repeat their story, avoiding duplication, and ensuring support is offered when it is most needed.

**Our long-term ambition is simple:**

To give every child in Stockton-on-Tees the best possible start in life, reduce inequalities, and help parents and carers feel supported as their children grow. The development of Redhill Family Hub is the first step in building a strong and sustainable network of support for families across the Borough.



## Delivering the strategy: Monitoring progress and impact

Progress and impact against our commitments will be measured through a delivery plan with clear milestones and performance measures to track the difference being made for children and families. This plan will be refreshed each year so that we can build on what is working well, respond to new challenges and ensure our actions stay targeted and effective.

Delivery and oversight of the action plan will be led by the Best Start Strategic Group, which brings together partners from across Children's Services (including Early Help, Social Care and SEND), Strategy and Commissioning, Public Health, Education and Early Years, the Local Parent and Carer Forum, the NHS (including maternity, health visiting and community paediatrics), and the voluntary and community sector. Each priority will be supported by a working/implementation group, with a named lead responsible for driving delivery and providing regular progress updates to the Families First Partnership Board & Health and Wellbeing Board.



## Thank you

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all our partners across health, education, early years and the voluntary sector for their continued commitment to improving outcomes for children and families in Stockton-on-Tees.

Most importantly, we want to thank the families who supported the development of this plan by sharing their experiences, ideas and hopes for the future. Through conversations in Family Hubs, early years settings and online, families told us what makes a difference and how services can work better together.

As one parent shared during a face-to-face session, **“The parenting groups at the Hub have really helped us connect and learn new ways to interact with our little one, it’s made such a difference at home.”**

Another parent told us, **“The Family Hub is somewhere you can ask questions and get accurate support without feeling judged, that really matters.”**

Feedback like this has guided our priorities and strengthened our commitment to working alongside families as true partners.

Looking ahead, we are excited about what we can achieve together. With the continued dedication of our partners, the passion of our early years workforce and the invaluable insight of families, we are building a system that gives every child in Stockton-on-Tees the strongest possible start. This plan marks the beginning of the next chapter, one where support is joined-up and families are at the heart of every decision we make. By working together, we can create a future where children grow up happy, healthy and confident, with the foundations they need for lifelong wellbeing and success.



## Glossary of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
BSIL	Best Start in Life – the approach and programme focused on improving outcomes for children from pregnancy through the early years.
EY / Early Years	Early Years – the period from pregnancy to age five, including early education and childcare.
FSM	Free School Meals – support provided to eligible families, often used as an indicator of disadvantage.
GLD	Good Level of Development – a measure of children’s development at the end of Reception, covering areas such as communication, physical development and personal, social and emotional development.
HDFT	Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust – an NHS provider delivering services such as health visiting.
ICB	Integrated Care Board – part of the NHS responsible for planning and funding local health services (North East and North Cumbria ICB).
NTH	North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust – NHS provider delivering hospital and community health services.
PCF	Parent Carer Forum – a group representing the views and experiences of parents and carers of children with additional needs.
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities - A child or young person has special educational needs and disabilities if they have a learning difficulty or disability that means they need health and educational support.
SALT	Speech and Language Therapy – specialist support for children with speech, language and communication needs.
WHO	World Health Organisation – an international organisation focused on global public health.