

Portsmouth's Best Start in Life Strategy

2026 – 2029



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Foreword

Every child deserves the best possible start in life. The earliest years, from conception to age five, lay the foundations for lifelong physical health, emotional wellbeing, learning and achievement. These formative experiences shape not only how children grow, but how they thrive throughout their lives.

In Portsmouth, we recognise that while many children begin school equipped with the skills, confidence and curiosity they need to flourish, too many still face barriers that may limit their potential. Families across our city often experience complex and interrelated challenges, such as poverty, housing instability, parental mental health, or limited access to services, which can significantly affect child development. No single organisation can address these challenges alone.

This strategy sets out our shared ambition to give every child in Portsmouth the very best start, ensuring that all children move into year 1 with the foundational skills they need to grow, learn and

thrive. Achieving this requires strong, integrated partnerships across health, education, social care, the voluntary sector and communities themselves.

At the heart of our vision is a commitment to reducing inequalities, strengthening protective factors, and empowering parents as their child's most important educators. By working collaboratively and using our collective resources, expertise and relationships, we are confident we can make meaningful, sustained improvements that benefit all children, now and for generations to come.



**Sarah Daly – Director for Children's Services,
Portsmouth City Council**



Introduction

The Best Start in Life Strategy sets out our shared ambition to ensure all babies, young children and families have the support they need so they are ready to thrive. The early years of life are critical for children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development; and these experiences shape our long-term health, wellbeing and learning outcomes.

Who is this strategy for?

This strategy is for families with young children and the professionals and services who support them. It provides a framework for partners across health, education, children's services, family hubs, the voluntary sector and the wider community to work together to improve outcomes, reduce inequality and ensure every child has the best possible start in life.

How was this strategy developed?

The strategy was developed through a combination of data, insight and partnership working. A Best Start in Life Needs Assessment

drew on available data to identify key needs and priorities. This was complemented by insights from parents and carers, services and professionals to understand strengths, challenges and gaps in provision. Through multiagency collaboration across education, children's services, family hubs and health, partners worked together to develop a shared vision and priorities to improve outcomes for children and families.

The strategy aligns with wider reforms and partnerships including Families First, SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and neighbourhood health. Our Best Start in Life and SEND strategies work together to align universal, targeted and specialist support, ensuring every child, including those with complex needs, receives the right support at the right time. These strategies sit alongside five others under our Children's Trust Plan (see page 39), collectively aiming to improve outcomes for children across the life course.

This strategy aims to align national priorities within the local context, providing a framework for shared aims and targeting resources to improve outcomes.



Our Vision and Aim



Vision: “Every child in Portsmouth has the best start in life – equipped with the early foundations to learn, develop and thrive, with inequalities reduced and families empowered to reach their full potential.”



Strategic Aim: To significantly narrow the early development and Good Level of Development (GLD) gap, addressing disparities both relative to national outcomes and within local communities, by strengthening early foundations and delivering proportionate, targeted support where it is most needed to secure equitable outcomes from the very start.



Our Targets

Our target is that by **2028, 74.2%** of all children, and **62.3%** of children accessing free school meals (FSM) reach a Good Level of Development (GLD). This equates to at least **191** more children than today.

Our long-term ambition is to **continue improving beyond 2028**, consistently raising outcomes and narrowing inequalities year on year.

Our additional and interim indicators include:

- Increased uptake and reach of **The Healthy Child Programme (HCP)** reviews to support earlier identification of need.
- Greater inclusion and consistent attendance of children accessing **early years education and childcare**.
- Increased uptake and reach of **evidence-based parenting and home learning environment programmes**.
- Improved **quality and consistency of Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP)** provision and assessment through increased engagement in workforce development activity.

The Case for Change



National Context

Nationally, the **Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life Strategy (2025)** sets out a clear ambition to transform early years outcomes, committing to expanding Family Hubs across all local authorities, strengthening integrated support from pregnancy to age five, and working toward the national target of **75% of children achieving a Good Level of Development by 2028**. It aims to:

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

This national direction places strong emphasis on improving the accessibility, quality and coordination of early years services, with a focus on tackling inequalities and ensuring that families receive timely, responsive support.



Local Context

Early Years Population

Portsmouth is home to more than 13,500 children aged 0–5. Although birth rates are declining, many young children live in neighbourhoods with higher levels of deprivation, and the city's population is becoming increasingly diverse.

Overall, these factors suggest the need for a strategy that prioritises reducing inequalities, directs support to communities with the greatest need, ensures services are culturally and linguistically responsive, and strengthens support for families experiencing financial pressures.



**13,579 children aged 0–5
live in Portsmouth**



Births are declining



**High levels of
deprivation**



**Concentrations of
young children in high-
deprivation areas**



**Greater ethnic diversity
than the wider population**



**Above-average levels of
families in relative poverty**

Data source: 1 & 8

Local Context

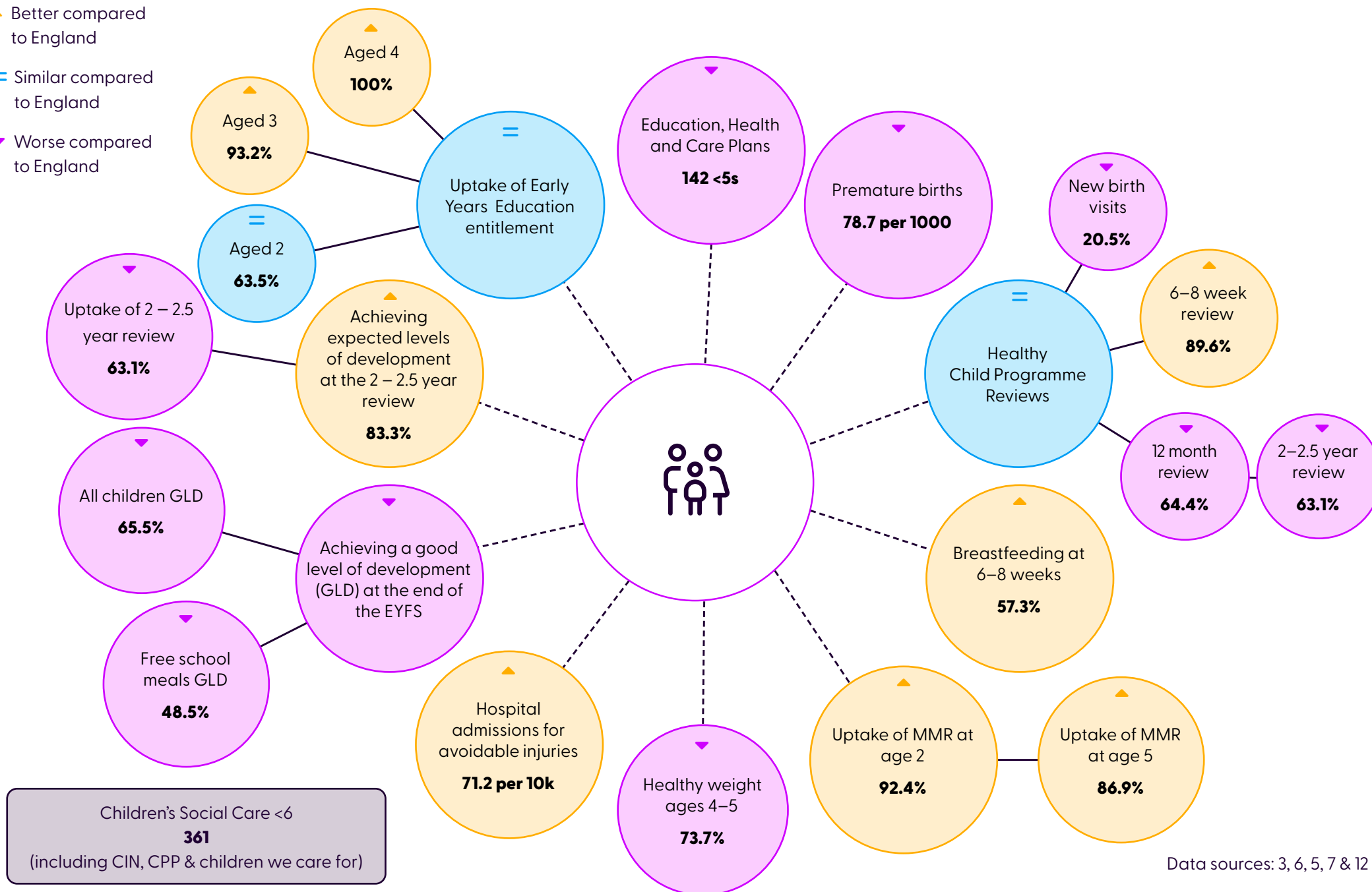
Early Years Outcomes

The Common Outcomes Framework (Common Outcomes Collaborative 2025) provides a shared set of national measures to understand children's wellbeing and life chances. Early years services in Portsmouth demonstrate many strengths, but some children and families still face barriers to accessing the support they need.

Applying this framework to Portsmouth and our target to improve and reduce inequalities in GLD, highlights key strengths but also clear areas where outcomes are not improving at the pace needed. Taken together, these findings demonstrate the need for a more preventative, equitable and integrated Best Start in Life and early years system.



- ▲ Better compared to England
- ▬ Similar compared to England
- ▼ Worse compared to England



Data sources: 3, 6, 5, 7 & 12

Local Context



The Good Level of Development (GLD)

The Early Years Foundation Stage ‘Good Level of Development (GLD)’ is the statutory assessment that takes place at the end of reception. It indicates whether children have achieved expected levels in the prime areas (Communication and Language, Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Physical Development) and in Literacy and Maths. GLD reflects whether children have the core foundations needed to be “school ready” for Year 1. Nationally, 68.3% of children achieved the GLD in 2024/2025.

Data source: 4 & 5

GLD outcomes in Portsmouth remain below the national average, with 65.5% achieving the benchmark in 2024/2025. Meeting future targets will require a further 191 children achieving GLD; an annual improvement of 2.9%.

Outcomes for disadvantaged children are significantly lower. Only 48.5% of children eligible for free school meals achieve GLD with an additional 59 children needed to meet future goals. Achievement gaps persist for boys, English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, summer-born children and children with SEND, with the largest disparities relative to national averages seen amongst girls, EAL learners and FSM eligible children. Attainment varies between settings and neighbourhoods with no clear correlation to deprivation.

Outcomes also differ across Early Learning Goals. The biggest gaps are in writing, numeracy and fine motor skills. In 2024/25, 43 children missed GLD by one goal, and for 40 this was writing. Overall, the data highlights the need for focused action on early literacy and numeracy, reducing inequalities, and improving consistency across the early years system.



Local Context

Early Years Outcomes

Children who use services generally achieve good outcomes, for example, most meet expected development at the 2–2.5-year review. However, only around two-thirds of families take up this review, meaning that opportunities for early help may be missed. The uptake of funded childcare places is good; however, professionals have raised concerns about inconsistent attendance. Data suggests that there are rising numbers of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). While a higher proportion of local children with EHCPs achieve a good level of development than seen nationally, this requires further exploration to understand. Family Hubs deliver positive, evidence-based programmes, but their uptake and reach could be improved.

Data source: 4, 5, 6, 7



Emotional health needs appear to be rising. Professionals report rising personal social and emotional concerns amongst primary aged children and at the 2–2.5 year review around 1 in 5 children are identified with a social and emotional need requiring further monitoring or support. Whilst national and local data related to parental mental health and parent infant relationships is limited, it is estimated that 13.2% of adults in Portsmouth may experience mental health need, rising to 25% in areas of higher adversity. Evidence also suggests that in communities with great adversity only around half of children will develop a secure attachment (Parent Infant Foundation 2023).

Data source: 7, 8, 9



Children's health outcomes show a mixed picture. While breastfeeding and immunisation rates are above national averages, immunisation coverage falls as children get older, risking herd immunity. Booking into maternity services early fluctuates, and birth outcomes, such as prematurity and low birth weight are above the national average and may be related to preventable factors. Fewer families are using Healthy Start, reducing access to nutritional support for those on the lowest income and by reception, just over a quarter of children are overweight or obese.

Data source: 2, 3, 8



Demand on family support and safeguarding is increasing, with more children being assessed for concerns such as abuse, neglect, domestic abuse and parental mental health issues. Poverty remains a significant pressure, and in 2025 nearly one in six homeless households in Portsmouth included children.

Data source: 12, 13



Insights from Families

Family voices have shaped this strategy through extensive engagement in 2024–2025, including three Family Forum events, two annual surveys, and a community research project. Together, these activities identified priority areas and key themes to strengthen our Best Start in Life, Family Hubs, and Early Years offer.

93%

of parents report feeling confident supporting their child's development.

92%

of parents are aware of available services.

What did families tell us they wanted?



Clear and simple information

Difficulty navigating digital platforms and booking systems



Easier access to services

Increased capacity, variable options including weekends and clearer pathways



Consistent advice and continuity

Joined-up help across services



Improved perinatal mental health support

Better support following miscarriage and birth



More parenting support

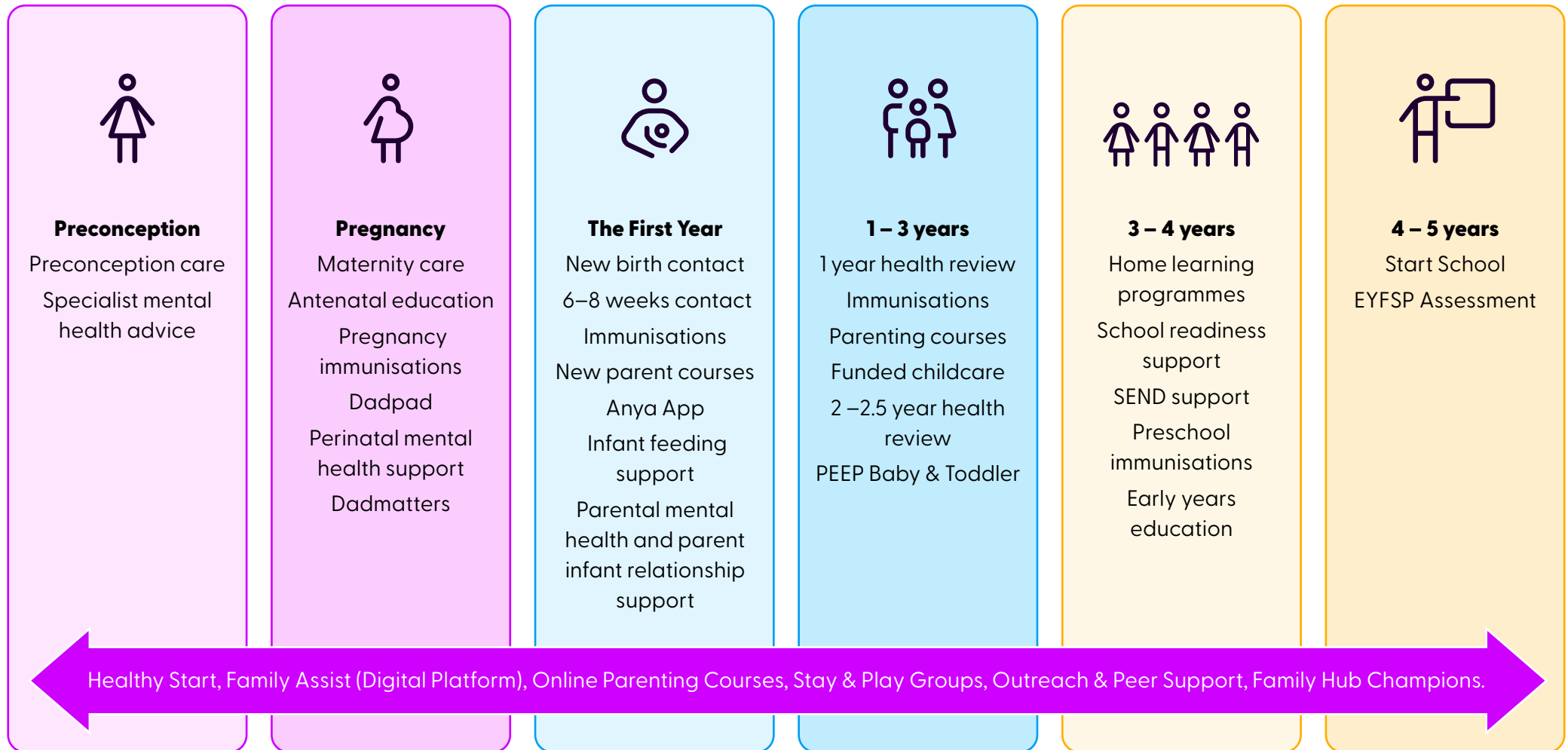
Help with school readiness and toddler challenges



Enhanced SEND and specialist support

Clearer pathways and shorter waits

Understanding Our Best Start in Life System



Understanding Our Best Start in Life System

Portsmouth is fortunate to have previously benefitted from 'Family Hub and Start for Life' funding. There is a well-established Family Hub system, underpinned by an integrated leadership and delivery approach across local authority, voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) and health services.

There are 5 Family Hubs located across the city; 3 of which are in the top 30% Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Each Family Hub is supported by a dedicated Family Hub Champion who builds trusted relationships within the community and acts as a vital navigator, helping families to access the right support at the right time. Through this coordinated offer families have access to a range of free services:

- Antenatal and postnatal education.
- Maternity and health visiting.
- Stay and play groups.
- Parental mental health support.
- Parent infant relationship support.
- Infant feeding support.
- Home learning and school readiness programmes.
- Parenting courses.
- Support for dads and male care givers.
- Support for SEND, neurodiversity and speech and language (ELSEC).
- Advice on childcare, finances and housing needs.
- Online delivery and digital information through website and apps.
- Peer support and outreach.
- Parent- carer voice groups.



Professional Insights

Professional insights from conversations held in 2024 as part of a community research project have highlighted strengths, challenges, opportunities and areas of improvement in our Best Start in Life system.



Enablers of Positive Outcomes



Integrated, multidisciplinary support.



Flexible, tailored delivery through Family Hubs, home visits and outreach.



Trusted relationships built through consistency.



Drivers of Negative Outcomes



Workforce capacity pressures



Increasing complexity of need



Unequal access for vulnerable groups, including SEND and non-English speakers.



System Improvement Priorities



Clearer pathways, and communication.



More tailored provision for vulnerable groups and diverse language needs.



Enhanced health promotion in partnership.

Understanding Our Best Start in Life System

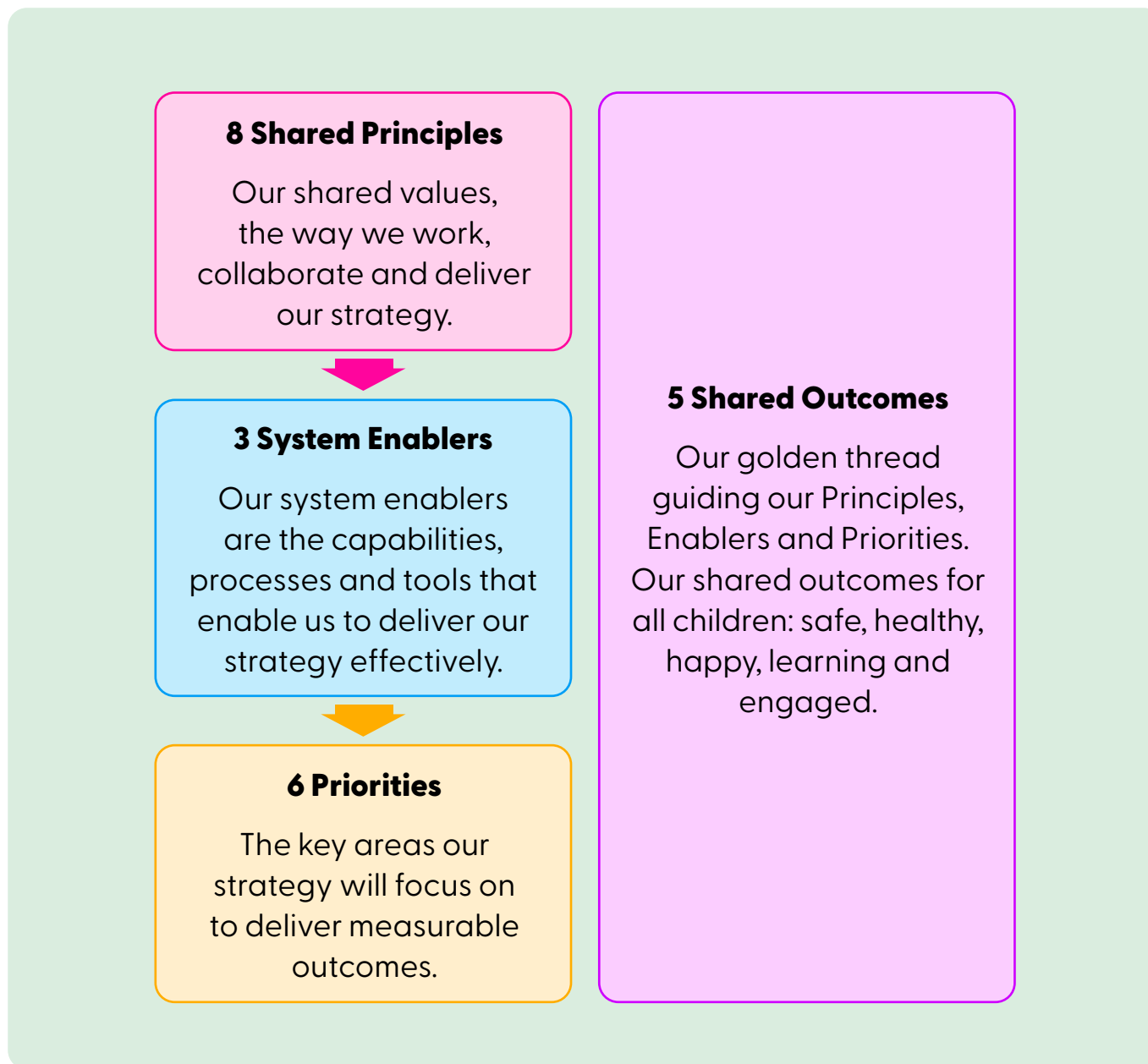
Strengths	Challenges & Areas of Improvement
Shared Vision & Partnership Working • Strong, shared values focused on improving outcomes. • Well established multi-agency partnerships at both leadership and delivery levels, including strong VCSE involvement. Family Support Infrastructure • A mature family hub network offering support in areas of need. • Comprehensive 0–19 parenting offer. • Evidence-based home learning environment (HLE) programmes in place, supporting early development (e.g. PEEP). • Healthy Babies offer is well-established and demonstrates a positive impact. Early Years, SEND & Prevention • Strong early years prevention and early intervention programmes (e.g. ELSEC, My Happy Mind). • A well-developed SEND network focused on co-production, needs-led support and inclusion. • Generally positive early years sufficiency, with most families able to access childcare. Digital Access • A broad digital offer supports families with information, guidance and access to services. Inclusion • Inclusive support for fathers and co-parents. Parent voice groups are established, valued and embedded within the system.	Gaps in Early Years and SEND Provision • No dedicated early years provision for young children with SEND. • Parents are not always confident that mainstream education will provide the support their child and family needs. • Lack of evidence-based parenting interventions targeted at 3–4-year-olds in line with Best Start in Life guidance. Variation and Inconsistency in Quality • Variation in Ofsted outcomes across early years settings, with strong examples but also areas requiring improvement. • GLD remains an unmoderated statutory assessment. Training has been offered, but uptake is inconsistent, leading to variation. Integrated Pathways & System Coordination • Integrated pathways between services could be strengthened to improve coordinated support to families. • Early years settings are variably linked with health and family hubs. Accessibility and Inclusion Challenges • Long wait times for some services, with limited coordinated support available for families while waiting. • Inclusion for families with literacy, language and digital access barriers could be improved. • Family hubs are not all located in the highest-need areas. Workforce Capacity • Workforce capacity pressures in several services may impact on service delivery and training uptake.

A close-up photograph of a woman and a young child with curly hair looking at a book together. The woman is on the left, and the child is on the right, pointing at the book. The image has a soft, warm tone with a slight purple overlay.

Strategy Framework

Strategy Framework

This strategy framework provides an overview of our approach; guiding principles, enabling systems and priorities to drive improvement.



Our Shared Principles

Our shared principles shape the way we work, collaborate and deliver our strategy.

Start Early, Act Early

Support begins before birth and continues through the first 1,001 days and early childhood. We prioritise early identification and early intervention to give every child the strongest possible start.

Reduce Inequality, Not Just Improve Averages

We target resources where they're most needed while maintaining a strong universal offer, narrowing gaps and improving outcomes for disadvantaged children.

Needs-Led and Accessible

Support is shaped by what families need, not diagnoses or labels. We respond flexibly and remove barriers, so help is available early.

Whole-Family Approach

Children thrive when their families thrive. We strengthen adult wellbeing, stability and skills to improve outcomes for children.

Inclusive Practice

Support is culturally informed, accessible and adapted for language, communication and learning needs, ensuring every family can engage fully.

Joined Up, Not Siloed

Health, education, social care and community services must work as one. We commit to coordinated pathways, shared information and collective responsibility for improving outcomes.

Continual Improvement

We test, learn and evolve. Feedback, data and insight drive our ongoing improvement and help us adapt to changing needs.

Co-Production and Lived Experience

Children, parents and communities shape design, delivery and evaluation to ensure services are relevant, trusted and respectful.

System Enablers

Our system enablers are the capabilities, processes and tools that enable us to deliver our strategy effectively.

Integrated Early Childhood Services

We will create locally connected services through strong partnership and multiagency working. We will improve peoples' experiences of early years services, by joining up our support around children and families. We will strengthen place-based integration, so every child and family experiences seamless care.

Together we will:

- Expand family hub networks and partnership sites to ensure services are accessible in every community.
- Link health and early years and family hubs within local clusters for joined-up support.
- Strengthen integration with adult services that support parents, recognising the whole family context.
- Align delivery with wider strategies and reforms including Families First, SEND and Neighbourhood Health partnerships.

A Skilled and Supported Workforce

By understanding workforce needs, strengthening partnerships across organisations and investing in capacity, we will support services to deliver effective support to children and families.

Together we will:

- Identify workforce gaps and priorities through training needs analysis.
- Promote shared learning across services; sharing knowledge and skills and embedding best practice.
- Improve stakeholder engagement and strengthen cross sector collaboration and shared ownership of GLD outcomes.
- Increase workforce capacity through the Family Hub delivery grant.

Integrated Data and Intelligence

We will strengthen data sharing, intelligence and system-wide ownership by enabling timely, secure and coordinated information flow across partners, ensuring decisions are informed by shared insight.

Together we will:

- Strengthened information-governance arrangements to ensure safe, lawful and timely data-sharing across partners.
- Develop an Integrated Early Years Data Set and shared insight tools to provide a single, comprehensive view of the early years journey.
- Create accessible dashboards that support partners in practice, planning, performance and earlier identification of risk, vulnerability and need.
- Use shared information to identify families and groups earlier, coordinate support and reduce duplication.

Our Priorities

Our priorities are the key areas we will focus on to deliver measurable outcomes.



1.

**Early Identification and Timely
Access to Support**



2.

**High-Quality Early Learning and
Family Support for All**



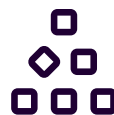
3.

**Healthy Start for Life and
Early Childhood Health**



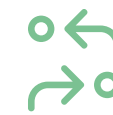
4.

**Emotional Wellbeing and
Secure Relationships**



5.

**Early Learning and
Development Needs**



6.

**Seamless Transitions Across
the Early Years Pathway**



Priority 1:

Early Identification and Timely Access to Support

We will ensure that children's developmental, health, communication and social-emotional needs are identified early through integrated pathways, high-quality reviews and effective screening. Families will be supported to access timely, coordinated and equitable help that prevents needs from escalating.

Local insight shows that opportunities for early identification are sometimes missed and families and professionals report challenges in navigating and accessing support.

Our ambition is that more children have their needs identified earlier, with families accessing the right help at the right time; reducing inequalities, preventing escalation and improving long-term outcomes.



Priority 1: Early Identification and Timely Access to Support

Together we will:

Awareness and Navigation of Support

- Strengthen families' and professionals understanding of how, when and where to access support.
- Strengthen the navigation role of Family Hubs to include early development and learning needs and SEND.

Early Identification and Prevention

- Improve early identification of developmental, health and social-emotional needs and risk factors.
- Improve engagement with universal screening and reviews.

Access and Inclusion

- Reduce barriers and improve access for communities and groups who may be less likely to engage.
- Strengthen the place-based navigation and community outreach role of Family Hub Champions.

How will we know we have made a difference?

Early Identification and Screening

- Percentage uptake of The Healthy Child Programme (HCP) reviews completed within the recommended time frame.
- Percentage uptake of Year R vision and hearing screening.
- Percentage uptake variations across vulnerable groups (implied within IMD and SEND-related data).
- Number of children identified, requiring additional support, through individual level data sharing.

Family Awareness, Navigation & Confidence

- Number of contacts with the Family Hub Champion.
- Percentage of respondents reporting satisfaction and awareness indicators in the annual Best Start in Life survey.



Priority 2:

High-Quality Early Learning and Family Support for All

We will ensure every child benefits from high-quality early education, childcare, and a strong home learning environment. Parents will be supported as partners in their child's development through accessible early education and childcare, parenting programmes, and Family Hub support. Parents will feel confidently engaged with schools and early years settings, with clear opportunities to build on activities and learning their child experiences in early years provision and year R.

Local insights show that although childcare uptake is generally good, engagement and attendance remain inconsistent. Parenting and home-learning support is available through Family Hubs, but gaps persist for 3–4-year-olds, and uptake and reach vary. Parents and carers told us they want more accessible support on the issues that matter most to them.

Our ambition is for more children to experience high-quality learning at home and in early years settings, improving their cognitive, social, and emotional development by school entry and throughout Year R.



Priority 2: High-Quality Early Learning and Family Support for All

Together we will:

Improve Access and Participation

- Increase uptake of and attendance in high-quality early education and childcare and schools.
- Target outreach to priority areas and groups for equitable access.
- Align health, education, and Family Hubs to provide seamless parenting and home-learning pathways.

Strengthen support for parents as their child's first educator

- Commission evidence-based parenting programmes for families with children aged 3–5.
- Improve parent engagement in early years settings and schools, especially Year R.

Increase Inclusion

- Enhance SEND inclusion through evidence-based programmes and local inclusion hubs.
- Work in partnership to align the Best Start in Life with the SEND Strategy, ensuring a joined-up approach to high-quality education, inclusion, and sufficiency.

How will we know we have made a difference?

Access to Early Education & Childcare

- Percentage of eligible children taking up funded places.
- Uptake of early years provision in priority or disadvantaged areas.
- Numbers of children attending regularly.
- Numbers of children where suitable provision is not available.

Parenting Support, Confidence & Home Learning

- Number of parents completing evidence-based programmes.
- Percentage of families reporting improved confidence.
- Difference in uptake between the highest and lowest IMD quintiles.

Inclusive Support for Children with SEND

- Number of settings supported through the local inclusion hub.
- Number of parents completing SEND focused evidence-based parenting programmes.

Family Experience & Satisfaction

- Percentage of respondents reporting satisfaction and awareness in the annual Best Start in Life survey.



Priority 3:

Healthy Start for Life and Early Childhood Health

We are committed to enabling all children to have a healthy start in life and reducing health inequalities. This includes supporting children's physical and emotional development so that children can attend early years education regularly, engage in learning, and build strong foundations for lifelong wellbeing.

Local insights highlight several strengths in childhood outcomes. However, there are also challenges in relation to healthy pregnancy and birth, as well as healthy weight and nutrition in early childhood. Parents told us that continuity and consistency of information is important to them. Similarly, professionals highlighted the importance of consistent evidence-based information.

Our ambition is that children and families will experience healthier beginnings, strengthening development, wellbeing and opportunities to learn.



Priority 3: Healthy Start for Life and Early Childhood Health

Together we will:

Promote Positive Health and Wellbeing

- Deliver consistent evidence-based information.
- Use data to target outcomes, groups with the highest need.

Increase Access and Uptake of Services

- Increase uptake of prevention and public health interventions or programmes (e.g. Healthy Start, immunisations).

Encourage Physical Activity

- Use mixed-method insights to better understand families' physical activity and guide improvement.

Integration

- Strengthen links between whole-family health, care, attendance, child development and learning.

Partnerships and Neighbourhood Approaches

- Support neighbourhood-based approaches that bring partners and services together.
- Align activity with key strategies and partnerships (e.g. Children's Public Health Strategy).

How will we know we have made a difference?

Access to Universal Health Services

- Percentage of expectant parents booking by 10 weeks.
- Percentage of families accessing Healthy Child Programme (HCP) reviews.

Healthy Birth outcomes

- Percentage of premature births.
- Percentage of infants born at low birth weight.
- Percentage of parents with specific health indicators at booking and birth (e.g. smoking).

Preventative Healthcare for Children

- Percentage of children who have received specific immunisations.
- Percentage of eligible families taking up Healthy Start.

Positive Early Health Outcomes

- Percentage of infants who are receiving breast milk.
- Percentage of children who are overweight or obese in Year R.
- Health inequality variations.



Priority 4: Emotional Wellbeing and Secure Relationships

We will promote family's emotional wellbeing and strengthen relationships, improving early identification of emotional and mental health needs. This includes increasing access to parental mental health and relationship support and targeted interventions. Insights suggest high levels of mental health concerns, and that up to 50% of children may be at risk of not forming secure attachments.

Previous start for life funding has supported the integration of evidence-based support, however locally the personal, social and emotional needs of children appear to be increasing, and families have highlighted gaps in support. Early access to information and support for the whole family is considered essential.

Our ambition is that families will experience improved emotional wellbeing and stronger early relationships, reduce early social and emotional concerns and help children develop the resilience, confidence and stability needed for learning.



Priority 4: Emotional Wellbeing and Secure Relationships

Together we will:

Promote Positive Emotional Wellbeing and Early Relationships

- Provide consistent, coordinated evidence-based information and advice.
- Create nurturing early-years and community environments.
- Embed programmes and curricula that build resilience and wellbeing.

Early Identification of Needs

- Strengthen early identification of parental mental health, parent–infant relationship, and healthy-relationship needs.
- Improve early identification of children’s personal, social, and emotional needs.

Access to Support and Evidence-Based Interventions

- Expand access to timely, evidence-based support for families.
- Ensure services meet the needs of the whole family, including fathers.

Integrated Working, Information Sharing and Data Improvement

- Strengthen integrated working and partnership across pathways.
- Improve data to identify needs, track outcomes, and drive improvement.
- Support neighbourhood-level approaches to family mental health.

How will we know we have made a difference?

Children Early Social–Emotional Development & Resilience

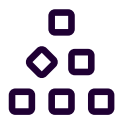
- Number of children participating in resilience-building programmes.
- Percentage of children assessed using ASQ–SE at the 2–2.5 year review.
- Percentage of parents screened for parent–infant relationship concerns at the 6–8 week review.
- Number of families accessing parent–infant relationship support.
- Percentage of parents reporting improved relationships.

Early Identification & Support for Parental Mental Health

- Percentage of parents screened for mental health concerns.
- Number of fathers accessing evidence-based services.
- Number of parents accessing mental health support services.
- Percentage of parents reporting improved emotional wellbeing.

Healthy Parental Relationships

- Percentage of parents screened for healthy relationship indicators.



Priority 5: Early Learning and Development Needs

Children in Portsmouth will develop strong early communication, interaction and vocabulary skills, with reduced inequalities and earlier identification of any speech, language, communication or wider developmental needs.

Strong spoken language underpins children's reading and writing, and local insights show that improving early literacy and writing outcomes can raise overall GLD.

Our ambition is that all children, including those with emerging SEND, receive timely, coordinated and high-quality support from birth. By strengthening early identification, evidence-based interventions, reducing delays in pathways, and embedding inclusive practice.



Priority 5: Early Learning and Development Needs

Together we will:

Quality Early Interaction

- Strengthen citywide early-interaction initiatives (e.g., Chat Play Read, 50 Things) through an aligned partnership approach.

Support for Parents & the Home Learning Environment

- Embed outreach support, Portage and home-learning programmes.

Accessible, Integrated Services

- Embed evidence-based tools and specialist support (ELSEC, specialist HVs, SEND services) within Family Hubs for coordinated access.
- Improve integration of health and early-years reviews and help families 'wait well' for specialist services.

Evidence-Based Approaches

- Expand and embed evidence-based programmes (e.g., ELSEC) and work with Family Hubs to deliver targeted approaches.

Skilled Workforce & Inclusive Practice

- Support settings to build and sustain inclusive culture (i.e training).

Data-Driven Improvement

- Use individual and population-level data to target support, shape priorities, reduce inequalities and improve outcomes.

How will we know we have made a difference?

Child Developmental Outcomes

- Percentage of children achieving positive ASQ outcomes.
- Percentage of children meeting key learning goals (e.g., writing).

Early Communication & Interaction

- Percentage of children on-track for communication at 2–2½ (ASQ-3).
- ELSEC screening outcomes.

Support for Parents & the Home Learning Environment

- Number of parents engaging with outreach.
- Uptake difference between highest/lowest IMD quintiles.

Accessible, Integrated Services

- Number of integrated reviews completed.

Evidence-Based Approaches

- Percentage of staff/settings trained in ELSEC (or similar).
- Number of children screened through ELSEC.
- Number of families reached by citywide initiatives

Skilled Workforce & Inclusive Practice

- Number of staff completing inclusion training



Priority 6:

Seamless Transitions Across the Early Years Pathway

We will ensure children and families experience smooth, well coordinated transitions across the entire early years journey; from maternity and health visiting, into early years settings, Reception and Year 1. With clear handovers, strong partnerships and consistent support at each stage.

Local insights highlight the importance of integrated working and improved communication.

Our ambition is that children experience improved continuity, reduced disruption and smooth transitions, helping them feel confident, secure and ready to engage in learning at every stage of their early years journey.



Priority 6: Seamless Transitions Across the Early Years Pathway

Together we will:

Joined-Up Systems and Information Sharing

- Align health and education processes to provide holistic, coordinated support and improved information sharing.
- Ensure early years settings share timely, high-quality information with schools.
- Strengthen the accuracy, moderation and consistency of EYFSP data, including professional dialogue between Year R and Year 1.
- Use the School Readiness Questionnaire to identify needs and deliver a joined-up, timely response across services.

Supporting Families Through Transitions

- Support parents to understand and navigate the school admissions process so every child secures a school place.
- Embed initiatives that help families prepare for transitions and strengthen the home learning environment.
- Improve access to services for families at key transition points.

Targeted and Enhanced Support for Children with Additional Needs

- Ensure enhanced, multi-agency transition plans for children with additional or complex needs.
- Use data to coordinate earlier and more effective support.

Measures of success:

Early Identification & Pathways

- Number of children referred to the Early Years Panel.
- Number of SEND transition plans and joint meetings.

Family Engagement & Readiness

- Percentage of families completing the school readiness questionnaire.
- Percentage of children applying for school within required timescales.

Transitions Into School

- Percentage of completed transfer records shared with schools.
- Number of attendees at transition events.
- Number of EHCPs and Individual Support Plans (ISP).

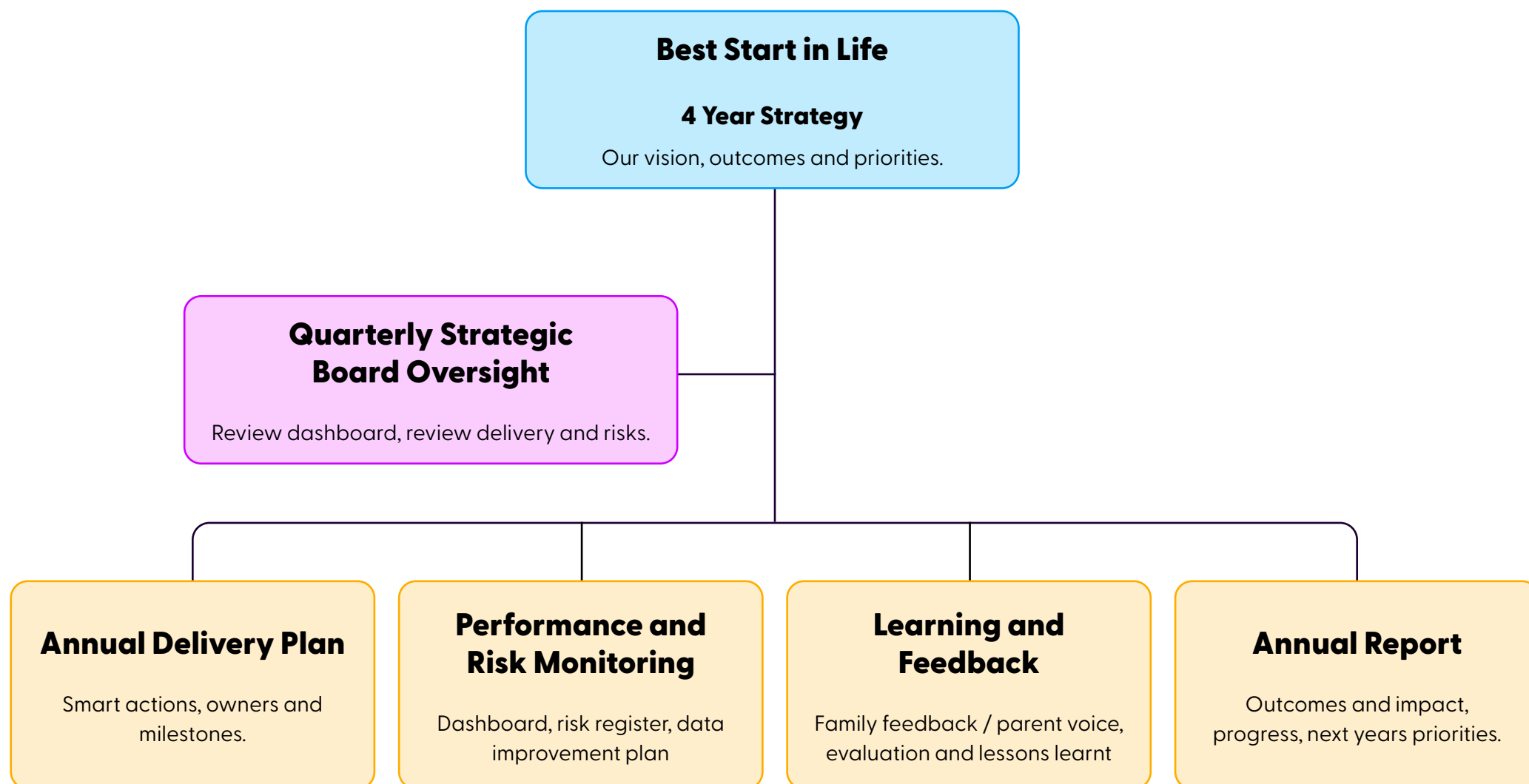
Workforce Development & Capacity

- Number of attendees at EYFSP-related workforce training or activity.

A photograph of a man with a beard, seen from the side, feeding a young child with curly hair sitting in a white high chair. The man is holding a piece of bread with white spread on it. The child is looking down at the food. The background is a simple indoor setting with a white wall. The image has a soft, slightly blurred quality.

Delivering the Strategy

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning



Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Measuring and monitoring success is essential to ensuring the Best Start in Life Strategy delivers meaningful outcomes for Children and Families.

This Strategy will be monitored by:

A Delivery Plan

We will maintain a detailed delivery plan that sets out specific actions, timescales and responsibilities, ensuring clarity and accountability across the strategy.

A Shared Outcomes Framework

We will agree a shared outcomes framework across all partners, clearly defining outcomes we aim to achieve for children and families. This will guide the selection of indicators, priorities and monitoring of progress.

A Shared Data Dashboard

We will develop and maintain a shared data dashboard that brings together key indicators linked to our priorities and outcomes, including service delivery, access, reach and engagement. The dashboard will support evidence-based decision making and provide a life view of progress.

A Data Improvement Plan

We will implement a data improvement plan to address gaps or quality concerns, ensuring that all monitoring and reporting is based on accurate timely and reliable information.

Family Forums and Annual Survey

We will engage families through forums and surveys to gather lived experience and feedback and ensure the voices of children and families shape service design and delivery. We will 'close the feedback loop' by communicating how insights have informed decisions.

Quarterly Partnership Meetings

We will hold quarterly partnership meetings to review progress, monitor risks and consider insights from the dashboard and family feedback, and make shared decisions to drive improvement.

An Annual Report

We will produce an annual report summarising progress against outcomes, learning, service reach and experience providing transparency, accountability and evidence for all stakeholders.

A Risk Register

We will maintain a risk register to identify and manage any delivery risk, consider actions and mitigations and ensure risks are monitored and addressed proactively and collaboratively.

A Test, Learn, Adapt and Scale Approach

Together these elements will ensure that our monitoring and evaluation processes support a continuous approach, enabling us to respond to emerging needs, expand successful interventions and refine or redirect activity to the greatest need.

Governance and Accountability

The Best Start in Life Strategy will be owned by the local authority, with shared accountability across health, education and early years partners. We will expand our current governance and accountability arrangements to ensure the high-quality delivery of our Best Start in Life Strategy with a focus on multiagency ownership, coordination, shared responsibility and improvement.

The delivery of Portsmouth Best Start Strategy and delivery plan will be overseen by the Best Start in Life Board and collaborative. Chaired by the Director for Children's Services, the collaborative will bring together senior

leaders from across the local authority, health services, early years providers, voluntary and community sector organisations, and parent carer group representatives. There will be clear links from the board to operational managers and delivery groups.

The board will hold responsibility for delivery oversight and for ensuring that decisions are grounded in shared values, data and lived experience.

The strategy will have clear links to the Children's Trust Plan and associated strategies and boards:

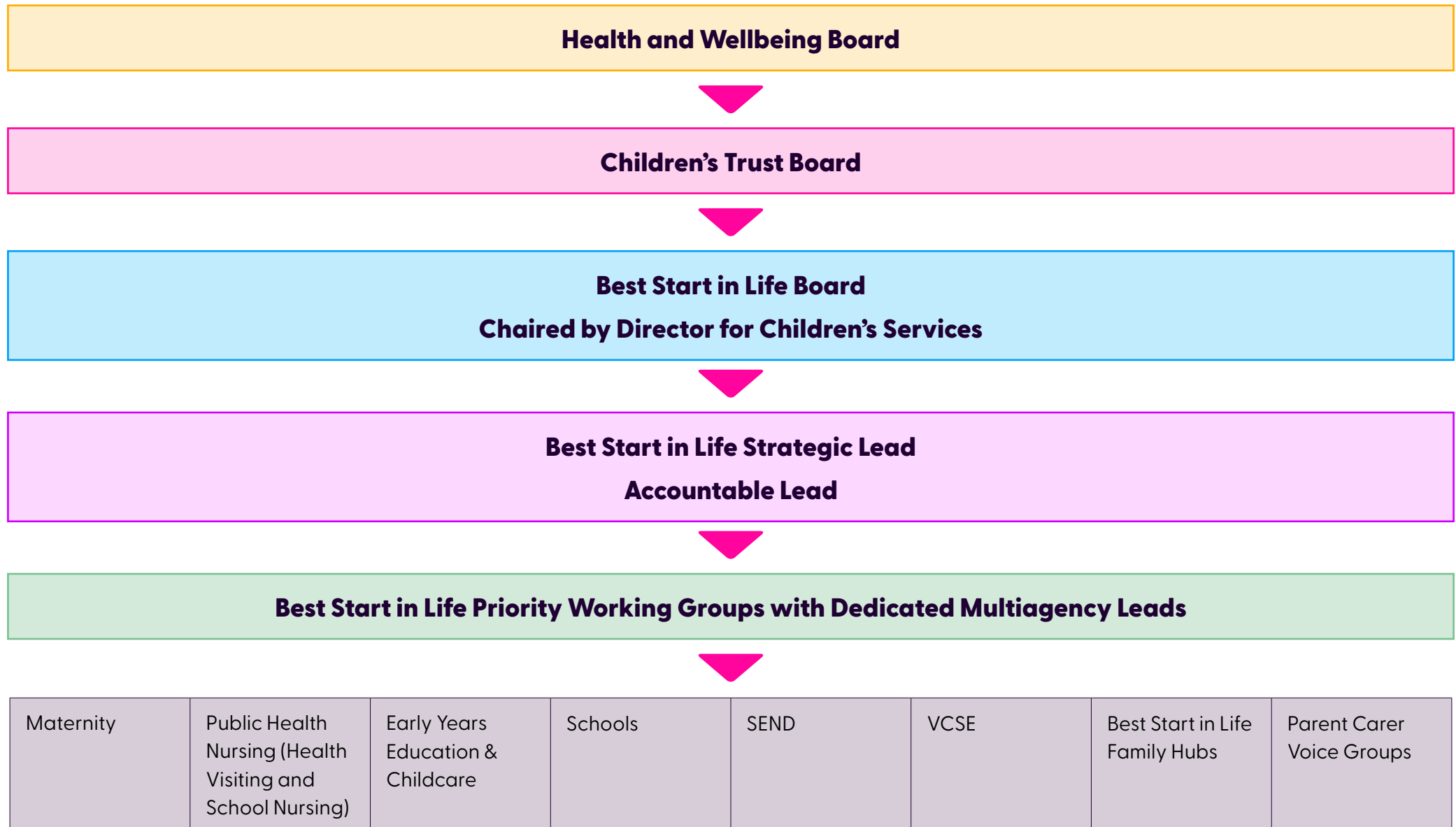
Children's Trust Plan 2024 – 2029

Best Start in Life Board	Education Partnership Board	Safeguarding Children Board	Children's Public Health Board	Social, Emotional and Mental Health Board	Corporate Parenting Board	SENDAP Board	Youth Justice Partnership Board
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Best Start in Life Strategy	Education Strategy	Safeguarding Children Strategy	Children's Public Health Strategy	Social, Emotional and Mental Health Strategy	Corporate Parenting Strategy	SENDAP Strategy
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Neighbour Health / Community Wellbeing, Families First & SEND Reforms

Governance and Accountability



Communication and Engagement

Effective communication and engagement are essential to ensure our Best Start in Life strategy is understood, supported and delivered collaboratively across partners and with families.

To support effective communication and engagement we will:

- Develop a communication and engagement plan.
- Share the strategy and priorities with partners, practitioners, parents and families.
- Provide regular progress updates via partnership meetings and the annual report.
- Share learning and good practice across partners to strengthen collaboration support continuous improvement.
- Promote awareness of available support and services through clear, accessible communication.
- Engage with families to gather feedback and ideas, to help shape services, improvements and the future direction of the strategy.



Funding

Effective use of funding and resources will be central to delivery. We will ensure financial decisions are aligned, collaborate with partners and explore additional funding opportunities. We will maximise value of available resources and strengthen sustainability.

Priority actions

- Align the Best Start in Life delivery grant with the strategies priorities and the child outcomes we aim to improve, whilst ensuring compliance with the programme guidance.
- Review commissioned services to ensure compatibility with the Best Start in Life priorities and intended outcomes.
- Explore opportunities for pooled funding and joint commissioning across strategies and partners that share common outcomes.
- Identify opportunities for match funding to increase available income and enhance delivery capacity.
- Support VCSE partners to identify and access additional funding sources and grants that support delivery and contribute to outcomes.



Glossary

CIN: Child in Need

CPP: Child Protection Plan

DFE: Department for Education

DHSC: Department for Health and Social Care

EAL Learners: English as an Additional Language

EHCP: Education Health Care Plan

ELG: Early Learning Goal

EYFSP: Early Years Foundation Stage Profile

FSM: Free School Meals

GLD: Good Level of Development

HCP: Healthy Child Programme

IMD: Indices of Multiple Deprivation

ISP: Inclusion Support Plan

SEND: Specialist Educational Needs and Disabilities

VCSE: Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise



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7. **Portsmouth City Council (PCC) (2026)** – SENDAP Self Evaluation
8. **PCC (2025)** – 1001 Days Needs Assessment
9. **PCC (2025)** – Joint Strategic Needs Assessment
10. **PCC and Homestart Portsmouth (2024/2025 and 2025/2026)** – Family Hub Annual Survey
11. **Homestart Portsmouth Family Focus Forums x 3 in 2024-2025**
12. **PCC** – Snapshot taken from Insight Hub as of March 26
13. **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Department for Levelling Up, House and Communities (2026)** – Tables on homelessness – www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness
14. **Community Conversations (2024). Embedded within 8.**

Appendix 1: Theory of Change

Why?

Context

Children experience unequal outcomes.

Only 65.5% achieve GLD; significant gap for FSM children.

Low uptake of health reviews; missed opportunities for early identification.

Early education entitlement uptake is good; but concerns about attendance and inclusion.

Gaps in parenting pathway for 3–4 year-olds.

Variable health outcomes.

Families report a lack of awareness and difficulty navigating systems and services.

Who?

Target Population

All children 0–5 and their families.

Targeted support ensures those with the greatest need received timely interventions.

A priority focus on disadvantage groups including;

- Children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).
- Children with English as an Additional Language (EAL).
- Families in areas of deprivation.
- Children with identified early learning and development needs.

How?

Mechanisms of Change

Information and navigation support for families.

Earlier identification of need through health, education and family hub contact.

Provision of evidence-based interventions.

A skilled workforce.

Integrated pathways and partnership working.

Locally connected services.

Strengthen data sharing, intelligence and system-wide ownership.

Strengthen inclusion.

What?

Outcomes

Short term:

Increased service uptake (health reviews, early education, family support).

Parents are more confident in supporting development.

Earlier identification of need.

Medium term:

Improved speech, language and communication.

Stronger emotional wellbeing and parent – child relationships.

Improve attendance and engagement with early education.

Improved child health outcomes

Reduced development gaps.

Long term:

More children achieve GLD.

Children start school and move into year 1 ready to learn and thrive.

Inequalities in early childhood outcomes reduce.

Families are empowered to support their children.



You can request this information in large print, Braille, audio or in another language by emailing healthandcare@portsmouthcc.gov.uk