

Staffordshire County Council

Giving every child the best start

(2026-2029)

Foreword

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Our vision for staffordshire

Our plans for Staffordshire are both ambitious and strategic, aiming to eliminate the correlation between a child's background and their future success. Through our Best Start Hubs, we are dedicated to offering comprehensive support to families by providing accessible and integrated maternity and family services, as well as facilitating access to high-quality early education and childcare for all children.

By offering comprehensive, collaborative support, our aim is to create a strong foundation for children and families, ensuring that every child can thrive.

This is important to us because we know the years from birth to age five are critical because the brain develops faster during this period than at any other time: from about 25% of its adult size at birth to around 90% by age five. Early relationships, communication and nurturing experiences strongly shape how children learn, regulate emotions and build social skills, creating the foundations for future health, wellbeing and educational success.

Families told us that transport and the physical location of our current Family Hub offer can mean that they can sometimes experience barriers to accessing our Early Years activities offer. A review of our financial support offer to help families with the cost of attending activities and groups for 0-5 year olds found that this could be more inclusive and that cost remains a key barrier for families in Staffordshire. This plan takes into consideration the need to deliver affordable services in the heart of the neighbourhoods and communities of our families.



This was echoed by our families when choosing an Early Years setting. When choosing childcare the majority of families said that a setting close to home and one that offered funded places were the most important factors for them.

98% of families surveyed in Staffordshire were happy with their childcare provider. For those that opted not to utilise their funded childcare entitlement for two-year-olds, the majority shared that they felt their children were too young.

This plan takes into consideration the need to deliver affordable services in the heart of the neighbourhoods and communities of our families, working in partnership to deliver a blend of high quality Early Years provision and engaging activities for our parents, carers and children aged 0-5.



A collaborative strategy

We have a unique opportunity within the Best Start in Life strategy to bring together partners to develop an ambitious local plan that sets out our approach to improving outcomes through strategically targeting resources and programmes where need is greatest. This builds upon our community strengths that aligns with the SCC Strategic Plan, the Families First Partnership and The NHS 10 Year Health Plan¹.

Accountability measure

For Staffordshire, the target provided by central government for this strategy is 78.9 % of children reaching the good level of development by 2028 (an increase of 8.3%) and the proportion of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) reaching the good level of development being at least 60.5% (an increase of 10.01%).

¹ Fit for the future: 10 Year Health Plan for England (accessible version) - GOV.UK



Where we are now

Staffordshire has a strong foundation on which to build:

- Family Hubs are established and supported by health, commissioning, maternity, education, libraries, community and voluntary sectors. Staffordshire's planned phased approach ensures hubs in the highest need districts are established first, with expansion across the county supported by strong partnership infrastructure over the three years.
- In Staffordshire, 97% of our early years providers are rated as good or outstanding. The take-up of childcare funding is very high for 3- and 4-year-olds (98%) and relatively high for two-year-olds (78%).
- Settings and partners are already embedding stronger inclusive practices, implementing new development opportunities such as Accredited SENCo and Dingleys Promise training, strengthening Early Years Forum pathways and improving integrated working to identify and respond to need earlier.
- An Early Years enhanced assess, plan, do, review (EAPDR) pathway supports settings and families to provide timely, tailored support for children with more complex needs. This approach uses a collaborative, co-production approach and provides access to specialist support from a range of professionals.
- The Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Local Transformation Plan for children and young people's mental health prioritises taking a prevention-focused approach to improving mental health. The Prevention Workstream Group has developed a robust delivery plan to guide their work. An Early Years Mental Health sub-group reporting into the Prevention Workstream Group provides a multi-agency early years partnership structure, focussed on bringing together experts and resources to promote and improve good emotional wellbeing for children under 5-year-olds and their families. In addition, early years setting can access training and support in the use of Emotion Coaching, a relational approach for supporting social and emotional development, promoting relationships, and supporting behaviour.



- A key indicator of success in early education is the proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) at age five, particularly in the prime areas of communication and language, personal, social, and emotional development, and physical development. In 2024/25, 70.6% (6,446) of all assessed children in Staffordshire achieved a GLD in their reception year.

² Healthy child programme - GOV.UK

³ Child development outcomes: data for 2025 to 2026 - GOV.UK

- Universal and targeted public health services provided by health visiting and school nursing teams in Staffordshire are crucial to improving the health and wellbeing of all children and young people. They deliver the Healthy Child Programme² which includes 5 mandated visits **by the age of 2.5 years**. The Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3) is used to assess five areas of development at 2-2.5 years of age. The latest data indicates that 85% of children in Staffordshire are at or above the expected level of development (all 5 areas), higher than the national average of 80%.³
- Staffordshire County Council has developed a comprehensive early years speech and language workforce development offer, funded screening tools, and an evidence based report showing the progress children make when settings use the tool.
- Maths and English Hubs are operational in Staffordshire and offer support and continuous professional development to primary schools around early language, reading and mathematics.
- The Hungry Little Minds digital campaign shares free tools and resources for parents and carers to support child development for 0-2 year olds in Staffordshire.

Priority 1: Supported families and strong communities

Priority 1 – Supported families and strong communities

We will strengthen access to services and empower families through co-designing a clear and accessible family support offer, ensuring families are aware of available support and how to access it.

- Establish three Best Start Hubs within the current Family Hub structure, providing inclusive environments tailored to district needs and embedded within a broader support system including within the newly developed community libraries and community help points.
- Ensure that improved child development is the primary objective in any revised partnership improvement activity.
- Ensure systems and delivery are shaped by local people through engagement activities from the outset and are aligned to the Staffordshire Co-production promise.
- Embed Parent Carer Forums ensuring that parents and carers remain central to shaping the Best Start offer. This includes actively recruiting and supporting Parent Carer Champion volunteers, who act as district figureheads and help co produce family focused services alongside our network partners.
- Invest in sustainable peer support for parent carers, including through the Healthy Parent Carer programme and SEND peer support groups, which equips volunteers with lived experience to deliver high quality support to others in similar circumstances and embed their insight into ongoing service development within Best Start plans.
- Establish peer support and enabling roles to build trusting relationships with families.
- Provide outreach services supported by a locally developed outreach strategy and an accessible digital offer.
- Bring our partnership closer to families and communities, removing barriers and ensuring services, information and support that families require are accessible.
- Facilitate quick access to early intervention and prevention support without the need for assessment, increasing opportunities to improve family resilience and outcomes.

- Build on existing offers and implement new evidence-based programmes and initiatives, ensuring key principles are embedded across systems.
- Ensure father - inclusive practice is embedded across our Best Start offer, ensuring dads are consistently welcomed, engaged and supported as equal partners from pregnancy onwards.

How will we know we've made a difference?

- Increase in workforce confidence to deliver evidenced based programmes
- Services coproduced with families and communities
- Increased access to early support for families in communities where GLD levels are the lowest through:
 - Evidenced based programmes
 - Digital offer
 - Family Hub offers
 - Childcare offers
- Higher uptake and increased parental confidence, as demonstrated through family voice

Priority 2: Healthy children and families



Priority 2 – Healthy children and families

We will promote maternal and infant health, nutrition, and mental wellbeing.

- Implement the Healthy Start scheme from 2026 to 2027.
- Implement preventative oral health strategies within the community.
- Share a range of supporting resources with families through the Patient Knows Best Programme following ASQ assessment and 2 year check.
- Implement an evidence-based relationship building-tool for practitioners to use with parents and their baby from birth to 3 months old, to understand newborn's unique communication.
- Offer the Health, Exercise, Nutrition for the young (HENRY)⁴ programme to children and families to improve their physical and mental health supporting the foundations for a good level of development.
- Promote safe baby and infant feeding and work towards UNICEF accreditation.⁵
- Ensure alignment and evolution with the principles and delivery of the Infant Mortality Programme. This includes a strong focus on addressing the wider determinants of health to ensure every child and family is given the best start in life.
- Increase access to vaccinations in targeted communities.

⁴ Homepage | HENRY

⁵ Accreditation - Baby Friendly Initiative

How will we know we've made a difference?

- Improved oral health, measured by a reduction in tooth decay at age five
- Reduced feeding related hospital admissions for infants
- Increased breast-feeding rates
- Improved family and infant health outcomes aligned to shared pathways
- Increase the vaccination rates as defined in the Public Health Outcomes Framework



Priority 3: Access to high quality education and childcare



Priority 3 – Access to high quality education and childcare

We aim to raise Good Levels of Development rates and close attainment gaps targeting the prime areas of learning. There remains a significant gap in outcomes for children eligible for Free School Meals, particularly in literacy and mathematics. We will build on our collaboration with the Stronger Practice Hub, Maths & English Hub, education and health colleagues, and early years settings to deliver consistent evidence-based approaches to improve outcomes.

- Build a shared understanding of early development and school readiness through unified messaging, local campaigns, and community engagement to support families in helping children thrive.
- Undertake a partnership research project to explore evidenced practice that could support increased attainment and progress for children aged 3-4 in a Staffordshire context.
- Remove barriers so that families feel confident to access early support, local family groups and funded early education places, ensuring they receive the right help at the right time in the right place.
- Develop a sufficiency strategy to deliver the governments mission for a connected childcare offer, prioritising the areas where need is greatest and places are required.
- Improve quality and inclusivity in early years settings, targeting areas of need with tailored support, programmes and initiatives.
- Ensure that our Best Start Hub and community partnership offer prioritises delivering universal and specialist activities for children with SEND while empowering families.
- Strengthen alignment with the Early Years Forum, ensuring our approach develops in step with its principles and delivery so families can easily access the support they need.
- Deliver universal and targeted interventions to support early communication, language, and literacy as a universal offer across the partnership.
- Expand the partnership with libraries to provide access to community based service and opportunities for professional development to support practitioner confidence in teaching and modelling vocabulary through language-rich play.

How will we know we've made a difference?

- Increased percentage of children achieving GLD at age five and a narrowed GLD gap between specifically locally identified groups
- Higher uptake and increased parental confidence to access childcare places and support
- Increased number of families of children with emerging or identified SEND needs attending the Best Start Hubs
- Increased take-up of places, with a focus on the Think 2 initiative
- Improved early language and literacy outcomes as identified through early communication screening
- Principles of our Meeting All Children's Needs (Ordinarily Available Provision) report embedded across the partnership



Staffordshire best start enablers

To give every child in Staffordshire the best possible start in life, our system relies on a set of core enablers that strengthen partnership working, improve outcomes for families, and ensure services are joined up, accessible and effective.

1. Strong partnerships

- We will work closely with Staffordshire's partners recognising the crucial role these organisations play in local neighbourhoods. Their trusted relationships with families will help us reach those who may not engage with traditional services, enabling earlier support and more responsive interventions.

2. Accessible, trusted advice and guidance for families

- Families in Staffordshire need easy access to reliable information, guidance, and signposting. Our Best Start system will provide consistent, high quality digital and face to face information in one place, ensuring families know where to go for help and feel supported at every stage.

3. Evidence based practice

- All activity within the Staffordshire Best Start approach will be underpinned by evidence about what works. We will build on national research, local data, and the lived experience of families to continually shape and improve our offer.



Monitoring and evaluation

A robust monitoring framework will enable Staffordshire to demonstrate progress to stakeholders and make data-informed adjustments over time, ensuring the strategy achieves its goals: more children thriving and reaching a good level of development.

- A Best Start Dashboard with key performance measures will track key indicators across our partnership.
- Midpoint review and final evaluation will assess impact and inform future planning.
- Continuous improvement will be supported through feedback from partners, families and practitioners to understand the context in communities, how our families experience the offer and the wider story beyond the data.