



Best Start Local Strategy / Plan

‘Case for Action’ Gloucestershire

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Case for Action

Current position, strengths and gaps

Within Gloucestershire, notable inequalities persist in several localities, particularly in areas of Gloucester, Cheltenham and the Forest of Dean. These disparities mirror wider trends in school readiness, oral health and healthy weight, each strongly influenced by the social and commercial determinants of health, including income, cost of living, food and housing security, transport and access to childcare.

Emerging evidence also highlights rising levels of excessive screen exposure in the early years, which is increasingly recognised as a risk factor for delayed communication, reduced attention span and behavioural challenges. Families facing socioeconomic disadvantage are disproportionately affected, often due to limited access to alternative play and learning opportunities. This further reinforces the need for a proactive system-wide approach.

A comprehensive strategy should therefore combine a broad universal offer delivered through Best Start Family Hubs and Family Hub networks, complemented by targeted, place-based outreach with a strong emphasis on strengthening the support for parents.

1. Early Education and Childcare (EEC)

Strengths:

Gloucestershire benefits from a large and high-quality early years sector; around 600 early years providers operate across the county, the majority of which (97%) are rated good, outstanding, compliant/met. Government investment in early years expansion programmes has supported the development of an additional 781 Early Year places over the past 18 months; 613 places for children under 3 and 168 spaces created for 3-4 year olds.

Early Years Attainment: Attainment of the Early Learning Goals at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is rising each year across Gloucestershire and the South West, although the pace of improvement is gradual. This steady progress reflects strengthening early development and provides a solid foundation for embedding population-level early years prevention.

Early Education & Child Development Team: The Council's Early Education & Child Development Team (EE&CDT) supports Early Years providers across Gloucestershire through three interconnected offers: Quality, Inclusion, and Child Development/ Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The primary focus of the Quality Team is to ensure that babies and young children access Early Years provision that delivers consistently high-quality care and education. They work with Early Years and Childcare providers to meet statutory Early Year Foundation Stage (EYFS) requirements and embed strong, effective practice across settings. Support includes bespoke, in setting guidance tailored to each provider's context, alongside a broad programme of professional development such as training opportunities, annual conferences, termly Leaders and Managers meetings, and regular provider communications. Together, these elements promote high standards and strengthen the quality of provision across the sector.

Inclusion: The Council's Inclusion Team supports practitioners to embed strong, everyday inclusive practice through a comprehensive offer of support, Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) cluster meetings, and the Early Years Advice Line. The Inclusion Champion Award further celebrates and promotes good inclusive provision across the sector. Alongside this, the Child Development & SEND Offer provides specialist, child focused interventions including outreach support within Early Years

settings and Portage home visiting for children with significant developmental needs. Providers can also access targeted funding such as Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fundmand the Disability Access Fund to ensure children with additional needs can fully participate in high quality Early Years provision

Gaps:

Despite generally high-quality early education and childcare provision, inequalities in early learning and school readiness persist. Children eligible for Free School Meals and those with SEND continue to achieve significantly lower outcomes than their peers, with Good Level of Development (GLD) gaps wider than the England average.

In 2025, 68.57% of Gloucestershire children achieved a GLD (slightly above the 68.3% England average). However, Free School Meal (FSM) attainment in Gloucestershire, at 48% is lowest than the national average of 52%.

Funding Take Up: Take up of funded early years entitlement has started to increase following a dip in 2025. Currently 67% of children from families in receipt of income related benefits are accessing their entitlement of funded childcare. The County's Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (published September 2025) reflects sufficient childcare provision across most of the county but identifies some areas where more places are needed.

Workforce development is an identified area for improvement, within Gloucestershire's early years system. There is currently no unified, cross system training programme that brings together essential domains of practice - including oral health, nutrition and healthy weight, infant feeding, early communication and language, SEND inclusion and cultural competence. This results in variable quality and inconsistency of practice across settings. National guidance highlights the importance of equipping early years practitioners with comprehensive oral health and wider health improvement training, yet the absence of a coordinated local offer limits our ability to embed best practice consistently.

Communication and Language: Communication and language development is one of the strongest predictors of school readiness and later attainment. National research shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can be up to 19 months behind their peers in language development by school entry. Local data suggests similar patterns in Gloucestershire, targeted interventions such as high-quality language environments, parental engagement programmes, and specialist workforce training would directly support improvements in GLD outcomes and narrow inequalities for FSM and SEND children.

2. Learning and School Readiness and Transitions

Strengths:

Gloucestershire's headline outcomes for early years attainment broadly align with national patterns. Specific to Gloucestershire, the Early Year Foundation Stage (EYFS) GLD has risen to 68.6%, which is in line with the Southwest regional average.

EYFS Outcomes: Gloucestershire's EYFS outcomes have improved consistently year-on-year and remain marginally above the national average, however the FSM and SEND gaps remain wider than national trends, specifically the 28.1-point FSM gap.

Phonics performance has largely recovered following the pandemic. In Gloucestershire, 81% of pupils achieved the expected phonics standard in 2024, broadly in line with the national figure of 80% and just below the pre-pandemic high of 82%. Disadvantaged pupils have shown notable improvement: 65% met the expected standard in 2024, matching pre-pandemic levels, though a substantial attainment gap with their peers continue to remain.

GLD: The priority is therefore to narrow the GLD gap for children eligible for FSM and those with SEND by strengthening early communication and language, improving support for parents including the home learning environment (HLE), and enhancing equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care and early health services.

RFL Tool: Gloucestershire's Ready for Learning (RFL) tool helps Gloucestershire Early Years providers track children's progress during their preschool year and support successful transition into school. Completed in October, January, and April, the RFL assesses four areas of development—Language & Cognition, Emotional Resilience, Daily Living Skills, and Family Support. Practitioners use the outcomes to identify any emerging needs, implement targeted strategies, and share clear, consistent information with receiving schools. Parents play an important role by contributing information, supporting recommended actions at home, and working with practitioners throughout the transition process to help their child make progress across the RFL focus areas.

Gloucestershire's Guide to Good Transitions outlines a structured approach to supporting children as they move from Early Years settings into primary school. The pathway provides three levels of transition—Universal, enhanced (for children with emerging needs), and Individual (for children with identified additional needs)—each driven by regular review, collaboration with parents, and multiagency planning where required. Early Years providers play a central role, completing transition records, updating My Plan or My Plan+ where appropriate, sharing information with receiving schools, and engaging support such as the Early Years Advice Line when concerns arise. This systematic process ensures children experience well planned, developmentally informed transitions that reflect their individual need.

Gaps:

Despite having a clear countywide framework, significant variation remains in the quality and consistency of transition information shared between Early Years providers and schools. Providers are expected to assess children's readiness for school using the RFL tool and related resources, yet practice varies, and schools report concerns that the information they receive does not always accurately reflect children's developmental needs or their level of school readiness. At the same time, many Early Year (EY) providers feel that schools do not consistently read, use, or act on the transition information they carefully prepare, reducing the impact of their assessments and planning.

A further gap lies in the unevenness of provider–school relationships. Some Early Years settings send children to more than ten different primary schools each year, making effective communication, relationship building, and consistent transition practices far more challenging. Others have most children moving into a single feeder school, allowing for stronger partnership working and deeper mutual understanding. This variability creates inequitable transition experiences for children depending on their setting's local context.

Transition Pilot: To address these challenges, the Transition Pilot Programme is bringing Early Years providers, schools and families together to strengthen children's readiness for learning and to establish a consistent, countywide approach to transition. By promoting the RFL as the shared transition tool, developing common processes and expectations, and improving communication between Reception teachers and EY practitioners, the programme is beginning to address longstanding issues around variable information quality, differing perceptions of children's readiness, and the challenges faced by providers sending children to multiple schools. Early feedback shows strong professional buy in, improved collaboration, and clearer alignment of practice, with the next phase focusing on increasing the proportion of settings using the RFL consistently,

improving parental engagement, and embedding an agreed transition pathway so that every child experiences a positive, well supported start to school.

3. Maternal and early health services (Public Health Nursing, Oral Health, Healthy Weight, maternal mental health)

Strengths:

Public Health Nursing Service: Gloucestershire's health system has strong universal infrastructure in place. Public Health Nursing (PHN) delivers key components of the Healthy Child Programme and acts as a gateway to specialist support. The Children and Young People's One Plan focuses the role of health services in early prevention by strengthening earlier identification of need, improving pathways between services, enabling better data sharing, and ensuring the consistent use of Family Hubs as points of access for health and wellbeing support for both children and parents.

Oral Health: The county has established oral health initiatives such as First Dental Steps and the Supervised Toothbrushing Programme that collectively align with national evidence and provide a strong basis for reducing oral health inequalities. Preventive programmes, particularly the Supervised Toothbrushing Scheme, extend evidence-based oral health practice into nurseries and reception classes in more deprived areas, improving exposure to fluoride, establishing healthy habits, and supporting staff through training and resources.

GHLL: The county's Healthy Living and Learning infrastructure supports schools and early years settings to embed health promotion, strengthen emotional wellbeing, improve diet and nutrition and encourage physical activity reinforcing the interconnectedness of the home learning environment, health, and Early Childhood Education and Care.

Healthy Beginnings is a free programme delivered through Healthy Lifestyles Gloucestershire, designed to support parents, parents-to-be and families in the early years to build healthy habits as a family. The programme offers personalised 1-to-1 support from trained advisors, helping families improve wellbeing during pregnancy and early parenthood, including guidance on healthy eating, active lifestyles, emotional wellbeing, and creating a healthy start for young children.

Breastfeeding initiation rates in Gloucestershire remain significantly higher than national levels, providing a strong nutritional start for many babies and creating an opportunity for professionals to reinforce early attachment, responsive feeding, and parental confidence from birth. This also offers a platform for wider maternal health support, including emotional wellbeing, early identification of perinatal mental health concerns, and strengthened continuity of care in the postnatal period.

Perinatal Mental Health: In terms of perinatal mental health, the Gloucestershire local maternity and neonatal system have developed a perinatal mental health workstream, which continues to strengthen Gloucestershire's systemwide support for women, birthing people, partners, and infants during the perinatal period. The network is focused on improving collaboration across statutory and Voluntary, Community and Community Enterprises (VCSE) services, reviews actions to streamline pathways, enhance communication, and ensures families receive consistent and timely support.

Recent updates of the workstream included progress on the Birth Anxiety and Trauma Service, increasing clarity around referral routes, and recognising rising demand for specialist support. The network is also reviewing its future structure, membership, and alignment with Best Start governance to ensure a sustainable and coordinated approach, with next steps including pathway development, updated action logs and a refreshed work plan.

Gloucestershire also benefits from a Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) service, which supports parent–infant relationships and enhances parental sensitivity and confidence. This represents a significant strength within the early relational health offer. (The service is currently funded until September 2026, with future recurrent funding to be confirmed in June.)

Gaps:

Efforts to tackle health inequalities continue to take shape across the system. As a response to significantly poorer oral health outcomes in areas of deprivation, with the prevalence of dental decay among 5-year-olds almost three times higher in the most deprived quintile compares to the least. While several NHS dental access initiatives for children are developing across the county, dental capacity and workforces' shortages continue to present a challenge in meeting need.

Infant feeding: while infant feeding peer support groups continue to develop in community settings across the county, there is opportunity to ensure more equitable access, particularly in more rural communities and areas most likely to experience breastfeeding discontinuation at 6–8 weeks. Breastfeeding inequalities are also evident geographically and demographically, with the lowest breastfeeding rates observed in Gloucester and the Forest of Dean, and among White British women. This highlights the need for more targeted support in communities where early feeding outcomes are poorest.

Obesity in children, while lower than national averages overall, is strongly patterned by deprivation and geography, with children in the most deprived areas twice as likely to experience obesity. While Gloucestershire continues to take a targeted approach towards supporting children and families above their ideal healthy weight, families continue to face barriers such as rural transport, food insecurity, and affordability, which compound difficulties accessing timely support.

For priority population groups such as Children in Care, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and families facing severe multiple disadvantage the system remains fragmented, with inconsistent pathways across oral health, Public Health Nursing, nutrition, and Early Childhood Education and Care.

Data quality presents ongoing challenges. The One Plan explicitly identifies the need to improve ethnicity recording, strengthen multi-agency data flows and reduce the burden on families retelling their stories, particularly during transitions or escalation of need. Strengthening data quality is essential to understanding patterns of inequality, improving early identification of need and enabling partners to plan targeted, evidence-informed interventions.

Partners acknowledge the importance of shared data and the need to use data profiles, diagnostic tools and structured planning processes to understand child development performance, to identify areas of support in need of strengthening, and to plan targeted interventions.

4. Special Educational Needs (SEN) support

Strengths:

SEND: Gloucestershire's Early Years system has a strong and coherent foundation for supporting children with SEND, aligned with the Best Start in Life (BSiL) ambition to reduce inequalities and improve early child development outcomes. A robust offer provides consistent guidance and support to settings through the countywide Inclusion Team, SENCO networks, training and the Early Years Advice Line, helping practitioners to embed inclusive, evidence informed practice. The Child Development & SEND Team strengthens early identification and timely intervention through specialist developmental support, Portage

home visiting and targeted outreach within settings. This is further enhanced by the Early Years Multi-Disciplinary Team (EYMDT), which brings together professionals across health, education and SEND to coordinate support for children with the most complex needs. Inclusion related funding streams, including Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund and the Disability Access Fund, provide additional capacity to remove barriers and enable children to access high quality provision.

The county's comprehensive Early Years Local Offer ensures families and practitioners have clear pathways, expectations and resources to support early identification and inclusion. Importantly, Early Education & Child Development Team representation on weekly Request to Assess Panels ensures Early Years expertise informs decisions on Early Help Communication Needs Assessment requests, promoting consistent decision making and stronger alignment between early years practice and statutory SEND processes. Collectively, these strengths demonstrate an integrated, proactive system that is well positioned to deliver the BSIL priority of improving outcomes for children with SEND from the earliest stage

Gaps:

Children with SEND are less likely to access an Early Years setting, and when they do, many do not take up their full funded entitlement, limiting opportunities for early learning, socialisation and intervention factors central to improving school readiness.

The system also faces a shortage of specialist early years provision for children with Education, Health and Care Plans resulting in some children lacking appropriate placement options or entering school without the right support package in place.

In addition, pressures across health services mean families experience long waiting lists for diagnosis, speech and language therapy, and other health led interventions, further compounding delays in meeting children's developmental needs.

A growing concern in the increasing number of children with SEND whose families are choosing to defer school entry in the hope of securing a specialist school placement the following year, reflecting both rising levels of need and the limited availability of suitable early specialist provision across the county. This trend reflects both rising levels of need and the limited availability of suitable early specialist provision, leaving families uncertain about the right pathway and resulting in inconsistent support for children during the deferral period.

These gaps collectively contribute to unequal access, delayed intervention and poorer early outcomes for children with SEND areas that the BSIL strategy seeks to address through stronger coordination, earlier support and more equitable provision across Gloucestershire.

5. Parenting, Home Learning Environment (HLE) and Play

Strengths:

Parents and carers are young children's first and most important educators. The home learning environment continues to be a central touchpoint for early prevention and is strongly supported by Gloucestershire's Public Health Nursing (PHN) service. The Health Visiting offer reaches the vast majority of 0–5-year-olds, with good coverage across mandated reviews and high engagement from families, providing a vital platform for early identification of need.

The One Plan reinforces these strengths by prioritising positive parent–infant relationships, early communication and language, and consistent early years support through Family Hubs.

Current Provision: A strong universal offer of parenting support is delivered across Gloucestershire through Children & Family Centres (C&FCs) and a wide range of Voluntary

and Community Sector (VCS) organisations. These services form a critical foundation for prevention, supporting parents to build confidence, establish positive home learning habits, and access help at the earliest opportunity.

C&FCs and developing family hubs provide accessible support for all families with young children. Staff offer guidance on early child development, routines, communication, feeding, sleep, play, and behaviour, ensuring families can seek advice early and informally within a safe environment. Families can also be connected to additional support where needed, making C&FCs a key universal access point within Gloucestershire's early years system.

Universal Stay & Play and Parent–Child Groups: A wide network of Stay & Play provision enhances community-based support for early development. These groups provide safe environments for babies and young children, enabling parents to engage in play-based activities that build early language, social development, and emotional security. Examples include:

- Universal Stay & Play and toddler sessions delivered through community organisations such as the Early Years Village CIC, offering inclusive play experiences for families with children aged 0–4.
- SEND friendly Stay & Play groups, such as “Little Treasures” and Allsorts’ specialist early years sensory sessions, which provide tailored support for children with additional needs and opportunities for parents to connect with peers and early years practitioners.

These groups strengthen the Home Learning Environment (HLE) by modelling high quality play and communication, reducing parental isolation, and enabling families to build supportive networks in their local area.

Parenting Support: Gloucestershire provides a comprehensive landscape of parenting support that is underpinned by the county's Early Help Strategy (2025–2028). Parenting support is delivered through a network of Family and Youth Hubs, Children & Family Centres, and wider multi-agency early years services. These services collectively offer advice, group-based parenting programmes, targeted support, and pathways for families with children aged 0–4.

This system operates within a structured framework guided by the Levels of Intervention Guidance, which supports consistent professional decision making from universal through to intensive and specialist levels of need. The Early Help approach emphasises voluntary engagement, whole family working, and collaborative support planning led by multidisciplinary practitioners.

Home Learning Environment (HLE) Support: HLE support is provided through early years settings, Children & Family Centres and the Education Inclusion Service. These services offer guidance on routines, play, communication, child development concerns, and home education. Nationally endorsed resources, including the Department for Education's HLE improvement model, inform Gloucestershire's approach and ensure that local guidance aligns with evidence-based principles for promoting early language and literacy in the home.

PEEP (Peep Learning Together Programme): Gloucestershire benefits from the availability of the Peep Learning Together Programme, an evidence-based intervention

endorsed by the Department for Education for improving the home learning environment. PEEP helps parents and carers to build on everyday interactions—listening, talking, singing, playing and sharing stories—to strengthen early communication, bonding and school readiness. Its strengths based and flexible design means it can be delivered universally by trained practitioners across children’s centres, early years settings and community venues, supporting families from birth to age five.

Additionally, other HLE toolkits and professional development resources are available to settings within Family Hub areas strengthen practitioner capability to work effectively with families on home learning practices.

Gloucestershire’s Play Strategy: High-quality play opportunities—both at home and in early years settings—are essential to giving every child the best possible start. As part of our Best Start approach, we commit to promoting play as a core element of early learning and development.

Gloucestershire is developing a countywide Play Strategy to strengthen children’s early development, wellbeing and school readiness through high-quality, accessible play opportunities. The strategy will set out a shared vision for play across early years settings, Family Hubs, community organisations and public spaces, promoting play as a vital mechanism for communication development, emotional regulation, physical activity, creativity and early learning.

The Play Strategy will prioritise accessible, culturally inclusive and developmentally rich play environments, with particular focus on communities experiencing deprivation, rural isolation or limited access to safe outdoor space. The Play Strategy will also support parents and carers to understand the importance of play in the home learning environment offering practical guidance, modelling and resources to help families build everyday play into routines. By aligning with national principles for early childhood development and Gloucestershire’s wider Best Start ambitions, the strategy will provide a coherent framework for improving equity in early learning experiences, strengthening community assets, and ensure all children have opportunities to thrive through play.

Gaps:

Inequalities: Despite the above strengths, substantial inequalities persist across HLE. Families living in areas of higher deprivation, or those experiencing cultural or digital barriers, are less likely to access early learning support or benefit from consistent preventive messaging. Public Health Nursing datasets show gaps in ethnicity recording and a rising proportion of families from minority ethnic backgrounds, highlighting the need for more culturally competent, linguistically accessible support. It is important to note, the GLD disadvantage gap (28.1 points) and the stalled phonics outcomes for disadvantaged children illustrate the persistence of inequalities.

Breastfeeding continuation remains inequitable, with lower rates in districts with greater deprivation, indicating limitations in the availability and reach of postnatal and peer support pathways.

Although Gloucestershire has broad provision, support can vary geographically and between services. The implementation of new Early Help arrangements recognises the need for

improved consistency and capacity across the system to ensure equitable access for all families.

Parenting Programmes: While parenting programmes are well established, their reach remains variable and does not always extend effectively to families facing multiple and complex vulnerabilities. Measuring programme impact and achieving consistency in delivery remain developmental priorities.

National evidence highlights inequalities in parental confidence, skills and access to resources for supporting children's early learning at home challenges magnified for families experiencing poverty or social disadvantage. Provision for supporting the HLE of children with SEND, though improving, varies across the county and currently relies on pockets of best practice rather than a uniform offer.

Although families are encouraged to seek support through existing professional relationships, navigating the breadth of services can feel complex, particularly for those not already well connected to health, early years support networks or have low literacy and advocacy skills.

The ambition and breadth of the Early Help transformation require sustained workforce capacity and resources. Increasing demand, rising complexity, and system pressures create challenges in meeting need consistently and delivering support at the scale required.

6. Speech, Language and Communication

Strengths:

Speech and Language Therapy Service: Gloucestershire children are supported by the local NHS children's Speech and Language Therapy Service. The service has an open referral system meaning any person who is worried about a child's Speech, Language or Communication can contact for support. Whilst the remit of the service includes supporting children with specialist needs, universal and targeted support is available via an active school age advice line, online training and advice on the service website.

ELSEC: In 2024, Gloucestershire was identified as a pathfinder site for Early Language Support for Every Child (ELSEC). The programme of work was initially funded for 2 years with the aim of supporting children aged 2-5 needing universal and targeted language support. This service is currently supporting children attending 45 Early Years settings (including Reception classes). Settings were chosen if children were consistently not achieving Early Learning Goals relating to communication among other criteria. Funding for this project has been extended until June 2027 and an evaluation of the first 2 years has taken place. This evaluation and lessons learnt will support further programme development.

ELSEC currently offers screening, training, parent sessions/drop-ins and group interventions.

Gaps:

Building on these strengths, there are clear opportunities to further strengthen Gloucestershire's early speech, language and communication system. Streamlining initial screening processes would help maximise capacity of the current ELSEC team and enable children to access support even more quickly.

Expectations: As demand grows and delivery expectations increase, there is scope to refine staffing models and workload planning so that timely, equitable support can be sustained across all participating settings. Practitioners value the quality of training, and there is a strong need for broader access to specialist modules, flexible refresher sessions and graduated opportunities to embed learning into daily practice.

Parental engagement is a notable strength, and there is potential to build on this by improving the consistency and accessibility of communication for example, by providing earlier notice for workshops and expanding digital options. Strengthening data quality and streamlining child level data processes would further enhance the system's ability to monitor impact, plan effectively and scale interventions with confidence. Together, these development opportunities highlight the potential to build clearer processes, increase workforce capacity, improve communication with families and strengthen data systems ensuring speech, language and communication support is delivered consistently, proactively and at a scale that fully meets local need.

Early Talk Boost will be one of the Home Learning programmes that we will be using in Gloucestershire and has been chosen to complement the ELSEC work.