

Cheshire West & Chester Council

Best Start Local Plan



UK Government



Cheshire West
and Chester

Cheshire West and Chester Best Start Local Plan

Foreword

We all share a responsibility to ensure that every child can thrive, regardless of their background or circumstances.

This Best Start Local Plan focuses on prevention, early intervention, and strong relationships. It puts parents, carers and families at the heart of our efforts - because when parents are supported, children flourish. When we act early and work together, we can make a difference. Improving early childhood outcomes is one of the most powerful ways to improve life chances.

Developed with key partners from across the system, including families, this Plan reflects what we know about the building blocks for a healthy and fulfilling life. It recognises the challenges many families are facing and sets out a clear, collective commitment to act. By investing in the earliest years, beginning from pre- pregnancy, we can help every child reach their full potential.

Let's make Cheshire West and Chester a place where every child is given the best possible start - because a good start shapes lifelong health, wellbeing and prosperity.



Cllr Adam Langan,

Lead Member for Children and Families, Cheshire West and Chester Council

1. Introduction and Purpose of the Plan

This Plan will play a key role in delivering the Government's national commitment to improve early child development and reduce inequalities at a local level. The Plan is aligned to the national direction and sets out how collectively local Early Years system partners will work together to contribute to improving Good Levels of Development (GLD) for young children in our Borough and narrow the attainment gap. Our partners include health, family services, education, childcare providers, schools, the voluntary, community and faith and social enterprise sector and the wider community. We want to improve child development and health outcomes for babies and young children.

This Plan will focus on pre-birth to 5's to improve overall GLD and narrow the disadvantage gap. There will be a focus on system transformation to plan strategically for maximum scale and impact, setting out how programmes, resources and other local assets will be directed to make the greatest difference to outcomes.

Children who start school with strong language skills, social development, fine and gross motor skills and emotional regulation are significantly more likely to succeed throughout their education and beyond. Conversely, children who begin school behind their peers often remain behind as they progress through the education system.

2. National Context

As the local partnership embarks on this new phase of transformation, it will do so in line with the [Children's Social Care National Framework](#) and [Working Together: statutory guidance](#). The National Framework contains three chapters on key enablers of good practice (Multiagency working is prioritised and effective, Leaders drive conditions for effective practice, and the Workforce is equipped and effective), which local partnerships should have in place to facilitate the great work that everyone wants to see with families. The guidance also includes a strong expectation that improving outcomes relies on responding to the voices of children, young people and families. Working Together clarifies roles of safeguarding partners and relevant agencies including education and childcare providers, and the importance of multi-agency, whole family working.

[The Families First Partnership \(FFP\) Programme Guide](#) – Delivering Expectations for Safeguarding Partners, sets out the Government's expectations of safeguarding partners to implement reforms to Children's Services and multiagency working, establishing a Family Help service and Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams, as well as enhancing Family Group Decision Making. Nationally there is an expectation that all changes are embedded by April 2027.

In support of the Families First vision, the Government also published [Giving every child the best start in life - GOV.UK](#) strategy and [Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies – Preparing for implementation April 2026](#). These aim to ensure every child has the best possible start in life. To meet this aim, evidence shows families must be supported in providing the nurturing care that children need to thrive. The best of the existing Sure Start, Family Hubs and Start for Life approaches will be used to create Best Start Family Hubs to deliver on this national agenda in Cheshire West and Chester.

The Department for Education (DfE) is actively working to promote inclusion in education, focusing on improving outcomes for all students, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The SEND White Paper [Every child achieving and thriving \(HTML version\) - GOV.UK](#) published February 2026, focuses on improving SEND support in England. It aims to address long-standing challenges in the SEND system. The White Paper will guide future legislation and funding decisions, ensuring a more consistent and inclusive SEND system for children and families. It sets out a 10-year system reform to rebuild public services around schools and enable every child to 'achieve and thrive'.

There are 7 pillars of SEND reform which are designed to improve the support system for children with SEND:

- i) Early Intervention
- ii) Local Provision
- iii) Fairness
- iv) Effective Practice
- v) Shared Working
- vi) Parental Involvement
- vii) High Quality Service Delivery

[Applying the Child First Framework in Youth Justice Services \(June 2025\).docx](#) emphasises treating children as children and focussing on their needs within the justice system. Key principles include:

- Seeing children as children – the system aims to treat children fairly and help them build on their strengths to contribute positively to society
- Embedding Child First principles – this involves integrating these principles into all aspects of working with children in the youth justice system
- Evidence-based understanding – the approach is grounded in contemporary research on what works in youth justice, promoting a holistic view of the child.

This approach aims to prevent offending and create safer communities with fewer victims.

[The 10 Year Health Plan for England - GOV.UK – Fit for the Future](#) sets out the high-level vision by Government to establish a new model of care that is preventative and better supports those in most need, including those with long-term conditions. The NHS England Strategic Plan 2026 is the medium-term planning framework which sets out the aim to deliver 250 Neighbourhood Health Centres across England, which will provide accessible, integrated support that brings together primary care, community health, mental health, diagnostics, and wider wellbeing services in one place. These centres are designed to be open for extended hours and rooted in the communities they serve, supporting early intervention, reducing pressure on acute hospitals, and tackling longstanding health inequalities and waiting lists. The plan also prioritises the expansion of mental health support teams in schools and colleges and to provide additional support for children and young people’s mental health through Young Futures Hubs.

The [Neighbourhood health framework - GOV.UK](#) was published on 17 March 2026, setting out the next steps towards the shift to a Neighbourhood Health Service through joint working between local government, the NHS and civil society. Neighbourhood health is at the heart of the 10 Year Health plan. It will enable a more joined up approach that delivers more preventative, local, personalised, and digitally enabled care.

Together, Best Start in Life and neighbourhood health signal a whole-government commitment to integrated, locally tailored approaches, focused on prevention.

There are many interconnected national strategies, locally we want to ensure that there is a clear Golden Thread and joint understanding throughout the relevant partnerships that will be responsible for ensuring the national strategies are implemented. We want synergy, collaboration and coordination NOT duplication.

3. Local Context

The borough of Cheshire West and Chester covers approximately 350 square miles and is the fourth largest unitary authority in the Northwest. The 2021 Census recorded **357,213** residents in the borough. According to the Census, there are 8.8% residents from ethnic minority communities, which is significantly below the 26.5% national average. Overall, **3.3%** residents in Cheshire West and Chester speak a language other than English as their main language at home. Polish far outweighs all other languages spoken (other than English), followed by Romanian, Bulgarian, Italian and Hungarian.

In Cheshire West and Chester, there are approximately **21,480** children aged 0-5, **24,526** aged 6-11, **24,477** aged 12-17, and **7,045** aged 18-19, giving a total of **77,528** children and young people aged 0-19.

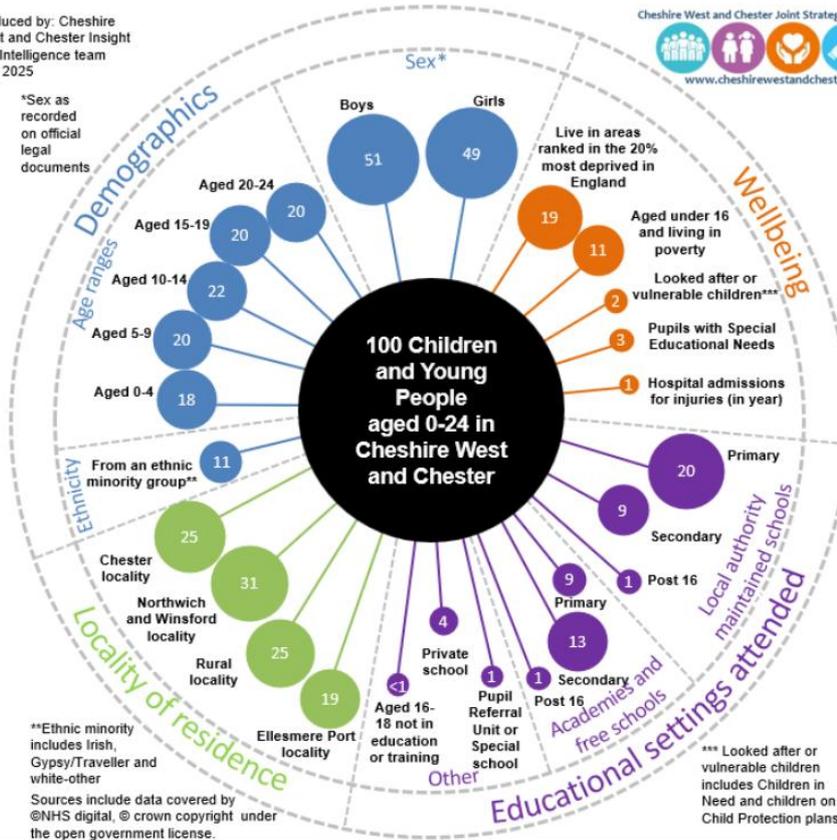
There are significant differences in the spread of poverty and deprivation within Cheshire West & Chester. The area has **53** Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) which fall into the top **30%** of deprivation in the country. These are mostly located within or close to the city of Chester and the towns of Ellesmere Port, Northwich and Winsford. Our Best Start Family Hubs will have a focus on supporting these communities.

In 2024/25, there were **51,181** children eligible for free school meals in Cheshire West and Chester across all state-funded primary and secondary schools. This figure is likely to rise from September 2026 in light of the extended eligibility of the programme.

In 2025, **19.9% (165)** of homeless households had dependent children, including **125** single-parent households.

In the 2024/25 academic year, **9,650** pupils in Cheshire West and Chester were identified as having Special Educational Needs. Of these, **Social, Emotional and Mental Health** is the most common primary need (2,360 pupils). For the 0-4 years cohort, Speech/Language & Communication is the most prevalent need.

Using this data and more, if Cheshire West and Chester was a village of 100 people, the breakdown of key data would as shown on the image on the following page below.



Integrated Neighbourhood Plan

Neighbourhood-level integration is central to national policy, including the NHS 10 Year Plan, to improve population health, reduce pressure on services, and help people live independently longer. This national context provides the backdrop against which Cheshire West has developed its own Integrated Neighbourhoods Plan. Cheshire West's Integrated Neighbourhoods Plan sets out a long-term place-based approach to improving outcomes, reducing inequalities and strengthening prevention. It describes how partners across health, local government, primary care and the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector will work differently by organising delivery around neighbourhoods and communities, supported by shared priorities, governance and system enablers. Integrated Neighbourhoods will address the whole life journey, organised around three interconnected themes;

- i) Starting Well
- ii) Living Well
- iii) Ageing Well

Governance arrangements for this will be through a West Integrated Neighbourhoods Steering Group that will provide focused strategic oversight of the Integrated Neighbourhoods programme, ensuring alignment across partners, unblocking barriers to delivery. This will be overseen by the Health and Wellbeing Board as the primary system leadership and assurance body.

Best Start Family Hubs

Families often experience services as fragmented and difficult to navigate. Parents may interact with health visitors, early years and Family Help practitioners, Best Start Family Hub staff, 0-19 Starting Well staff, schools and voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector organisations, but these interactions do not always feel connected or consistent.

Best Start Family Hubs provide an opportunity to organise local support, so families experience one coherent system rather than multiple disconnected services.

This will create a coherent, whole family approach that strengthens early help, integrates services and improves outcomes from pre- pregnancy through to adolescence.

Best Start Family Hubs act as the integrating infrastructure for the early years and family support system. They connect:

- The Healthy Child Programme
- Children's Centre Core Offer
- Early help and family support
- Early years providers and schools
- Community and voluntary sector organisations
- SEND and wider health services

Best Start Family Hubs provide a visible and accessible front door to this broader system, making it easier for families to find the right support at the right time and enabling professionals to work together more effectively.

This local approach is fully aligned with the Government's Families First reforms, which prioritise earlier help, stronger multiagency partnerships and ensuring families receive support before difficulties escalate.

The first Best Start Family Hub for Cheshire West and Chester will be in place in Winsford on April 1st, 2026, combining services from Over and Wharton. Overall, this will grow to become five Best Start Family Hubs focusing on our areas with the greatest needs in the following locations.

- Chester – Blacon
- Ellesmere Port – Stanlaw Abbey
- Northwich – Victoria Road
- Winsford – Over and Wharton.

The remaining sites will transition to the refreshed Best Start Family Hub identity through a phased rollout during 2026.

Local Intelligence

Based on a review of 0-19 Starting Well, Domestic Abuse and SEND Joint Strategic Needs Assessments the following actions have been highlighted within the Best Start agenda:

- *Deliver a joined-up Best Start in Life offer via Best Start Family Hubs and strengthen links with domestic abuse services.*
- *Strengthen antenatal and postnatal support (breastfeeding, early nutrition and movement), especially for disadvantaged families.*
- *Embed domestic abuse screening in antenatal/postnatal care and early years pathways.*
- *Improve early identification through health visitor reviews, integrated assessments, and SEND pathways.*
- *Embed consistent messaging across health, education, and Best Start Family Hubs using evidence-based models.*
- *Support parental mental health and confidence through evidence-based parenting programmes.*
- *Expand trauma-informed training for early years practitioners.*
- *Embed physical activity messages in early years and expand play initiatives.*
- *Increase the percentage of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) in Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.*
- *Improve school readiness by addressing gaps in communication, language, and personal, social, and emotional development, particularly for children with SEND, and those eligible for Free School Meals.*
- *Ensure sufficiency of childcare places for new entitlements (9 months – 2-years-old)*

4. Vision and Priorities

The Government has stated [their mission](#) is to break the link between a child's background and their future success by setting every child up for the best start in life. As part of their strategy, they have set an ambitious target of 75.5% of 5-year-olds reaching a Good Level of Development in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile by 2028.

Vision

Our vision for 2030 is to strengthen parenting, home learning, partnership and place, so more Cheshire West and Chester children are ready to thrive when they start school

To meet this vision, we have agreed priority areas of focus building on our current performance and evidence base. With the overarching priority to ensure that we join up services around families to ensure the provision of integrated service delivery through Best Start Family Hubs.

Priorities

- **Raise Good Level of Development (GLD) outcomes** and narrow inequalities while improving early health outcomes
- Strengthen early identification & **SEND** support and pathways
- Enhance the **Home Learning Environment (HLE)** and family support
- **Strengthen parenting confidence** through the delivery of evidence-based parenting programmes, peer support networks and increased promotion of play, talk and reading within Early Help and Early Years providers
- Making the system visible and easy to navigate through **improved digital access**

Why have we chosen these priorities?

Ensuring that every child has the best start in life requires a system that strengthens early development, reduces fragmentation between early years providers, and closes gaps linked to deprivation, language development and early health. Cheshire West and Chester has an ambition to improve Good Level of Development (GLD) outcomes for children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, to move from being slightly below national average to achieving ambitious growth by 2030 — especially for FSM, EAL, and boys, and closing the wide school-level variation. Locally, children's outcomes at 2–2.5 are **well above national** — but this strength isn't translating into GLD at age 5, especially for disadvantaged groups. This indicates a **drop-off between ages 3–5**.

Evidence shows that the most powerful drivers of early childhood development are parenting confidence and the quality of the home learning environment. Everyday interactions between parents and children, such as talking, playing, reading and responding warmly, shape language development, social skills and school readiness.

Best Start Family Hubs provide an opportunity to organise local support, so families experience one coherent system rather than multiple disconnected services.

We want every child to be ready for school, so we are making health and wellbeing a big part of early years support. Our plan is to give families good early education, regular developmental checks, and joined-up support. By working together across health, education and social care, we can identify needs early and give children the support they require. Through inclusive practice and working with communities, we aim to reduce inequalities and promote emotional resilience, physical health, and communication skills for all children, helping them build a strong basis for lifelong learning, health, and happiness.

The Best Start approach within Best Start Family Hubs will offer holistic support before needs become complex or costly. Through a focus on SEND, we will ensure this includes identifying issues such as speech and language delays earlier, before starting school, reducing escalations that require high needs SEND interventions. It will bring greater integration between services, including health and early years, so children do not fall between services.

Each Best Start Family Hub will include a dedicated SEND practitioner that will give families direct access to specialist advice and support earlier recognition of developmental needs and smoother preparation for education transitions. This onsite support will further support work towards Good Levels of Development for all our children and improve school readiness. In ensuring SEND practitioners are available, early and fair support will be in place for all.

Enhancing the home learning environment focuses on daily, high-quality interactions such as talking, playing and reading. Key elements include fostering secure attachments, consistent routines, and engaging in back-and-forth communication to build language skills. Simple everyday activities like singing, reading and exploring create strong foundational brain connections.

Parents are children's first and most influential teachers. Parenting is built through everyday moments:

- Talking during daily routines
- Sharing stories
- Playing together
- Responding warmly
- Encouraging curiosity

These interactions form the Home Learning Environment (HLE). Research consistently shows that the quality of these everyday experiences strongly predicts early development. When parents feel confident and supported:

- Developmental interactions increase
- Children's language and social skills strengthen
- School readiness improves

When parenting confidence increases, engagement with services increases. When engagement increases, the home learning environment strengthens. When the home learning environment strengthens, children's language and development improve.

Families rarely say they need more services. What they need is:

- Clarity about where to go
- Support that feels welcoming
- Consistent messages about child development
- Services that talk to each other

Families should not need insider knowledge to find support. A clear, trusted digital front door reduces confusion, improves access and ensures families receive the right help at the right time. A coherent digital offer aligns with Cheshire West & Chester Council's customer experience and digital transformation commitments, enabling clarity, consistency and equitable access for every family. A digital hub will help to remove frustrations for families in trying to locate information across different websites, bringing it to one place that can be accessed more easily from anywhere, complementing services available in buildings. This can be particularly important for families who are harder to reach for a range of reasons, including geography, work patterns or stigmas, to find the support they need quickly and privately.

At the same time, practitioners can also face challenges where information is separate and inconsistent and so a single online platform to support Cheshire West's Best Start Family Hubs will make it easier for professionals to connect families to local services.

The Cheshire West and Chester digital front door and booking system will improve visibility and routes into services, providing easily accessible online information and capacity for parents and carers to book services within and around our Best Start Family Hubs. The digital hub will enhance digital engagement, expand the use of online referrals and virtual support, and build staff capability through new digital tools. It will also improve multiagency coordination by creating a clearer, more consistent route into support.

Key Actions

1. Raise Good Level of Development (GLD) outcomes and reduce inequalities while improving Health outcomes

Actions

Targeted Support for Lower-Performing Groups

- Develop a **structured early language pathway** focussing on the groups who face the most barriers such as Free School Meals (FSM) boys and Education as an Additional Language (EAL) children (data shows communication is the weakest ASQ-3 (Ages and Stage Questionnaire) area, even though still above national) (Early Years Foundation Stage Profile and Communication and Language (EYFSP C&L) is in line with national)
- Fund enhanced **EAL early years practitioner training** focusing on dual-language development strategies.

- **Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)** - Through targeted projects, training and support, work with early years providers and schools to ensure quality interactions and approaches that are focused on unique child, embedding strategies that ensure positive outcomes for all children and specifically boys in PSED and early literacy.
- Analyse local and national GLD data to **pinpoint underperforming groups** (FSM, EAL, boys, SEND).
- **Increase take-up of 2-year-old early education entitlement (EL2)** by strengthening outreach, increasing Integrated Reviews, and delivering targeted engagement with families who are not currently accessing their entitlement.

Reduce School and early years provider variation

- Create a **peer-led improvement programme** pairing highest- and lowest-performing schools.
- Introduce **termly moderation networks** to ensure assessment consistency, particularly in schools below 60% GLD.
- Strengthen sufficiency and accessibility and ensure sustainability of placements, including SEND-accessible childcare.

Improve FSM GLD

- Mandate **“FSM spotlight”** plans in early years providers tracking progress from nursery through Reception.

Infant Feeding

- Expand breastfeeding peer support in high deprivation areas.
- Partner with maternity services to promote **Baby Friendly Initiative** standards across early years providers.
- Offer targeted prenatal breastfeeding support and offer an evidence based introduction to solid food support to families.

Reduce Emergency Admissions

- Develop a **“Safer Babies & Toddlers”** public health campaign focused on:
 - Accident prevention
 - Recognising early signs of illness
 - Safe sleep
- Strengthen links between midwives, health visitors and nurseries for earlier identification of vulnerable families within Best Start Family Hubs.

Prematurity

- Integrate neonatal support follow-up with early years providers.
- Offer specialist training for early years staff on supporting pre-term children’s development.
- Develop a plan to jointly commission perinatal mental health and emotional wellbeing support

Oral Health

- Support, promote, deliver good oral health in children and through our early years' providers and EYFS in schools, for example through supervised toothbrushing and the provision of toothbrushes and toothpaste.
- Promoting good oral health and awareness through public communication campaigns.
- Deliver school-based initiatives to reduce sugar consumption by the upskill of early years staff in the importance of milk or water only up to the age of 5 (Kind to Teeth Training).

2. Strengthen early identification & SEND support and Pathways

Actions

Clear referral routes

- Establish clear referral routes to wider community health, education and wellbeing support for those identified during early detection screenings.

Strengthen Early Intervention

- Pilot an **Early SEND Triage Hub** for 0–4s, preventing unnecessary EHCP requests.
- Provide consistent training on the *graduated approach* for early years providers.
- Lead Integrated Reviews and multi-agency meetings to identify needs early
- Develop and implement a clear pathway for Section 23 (Early Health) notifications to ensure timely follow-up, appropriate support, and improved planning for the sufficiency of funded SEND places.
- Review and strengthen the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Inclusion Fund (SENDIF) process to ensure timely access to support and funding pre-EHCP, with clear and consistent pathways between Early Years Specialist Teaching Service (EYSTS), SENDIF and EHCP processes for both setting-wide and individual child support.

Upskill Providers

- Roll out training on:
 - Autism in the early years
 - Trauma informed practice
 - Speech, language & communication needs (SLCN)
 - Problem solving approaches to conflict resolution as a support for reframing behaviour
 - Leuven scales of wellbeing and involvement
 - Physical development and its impact on early writing and wellbeing
 - Child development and being a partner in play
 - Making Every Contact Count
- Support early years providers and schools to use child-level tracking and early identification systems.
- Ensure each early years provider and school has a trained **SEN Champion**.

3. Enhance Home Learning Environment (HLE) and Family Support

Actions

Family Support

- Expand parenting programmes proven to impact early learning (e.g., PEEP, Incredible Years, REAL) to support better understanding of the importance of routines, toileting, early literacy and communication & language.
- Prioritise families of boys, FSM children, and EAL families.
- Deploy **Family Support Workers or Home Learning Environment (HLE) practitioners** in high FSM areas.
- Expand targeted HLE initiatives (e.g. Bookstart+, home learning packs, parent-child interaction programmes).
- Ensure families know post-age-5 referral and support routes (parenting, behaviour, communication).

Home Learning & Communication

- Develop a borough wide “**Talk Cheshire West**” campaign.
- Provide simple, high-impact HLE resources for families in the bottom 20% IMD areas.
- Train partners (GPs, libraries, early years providers) in how to engage and support parents in having positive interactions with children that provide lots of opportunities to develop language.
- Provide accessible resources for EAL families.
- Improve family engagement practices through stay and play, shared reading and home learning initiatives.

4. Strengthen Parenting Confidence

Actions

- Strengthen parenting confidence through the delivery of evidence-based parenting programmes, peer support networks, and increased promotion of play, talk and reading within Early Help and partner providers.
- Strengthen home to school connections by supporting parents with workshops on school readiness, routines, communication, behaviour and confidence-building prior to school entry.
- Target families facing access and engagement barriers – families experiencing homelessness, affordability, childcare access or transport, families with low engagement, attendance or socially isolated.
- Expand access to targeted and universal parenting support offers through community partners, parent panels, Best Start Family Hubs and Early Years providers.
- Increase visibility and uptake of play and learn opportunities across Best Start Family Hubs, libraries, and community venues, with a focus on the Home Learning Environment.
- Build a parent champion/peer mentor network to support other families, with specific attention to reducing stigma and encouraging early engagement.

- Integrate consistent messaging around responsive parenting, attachment, communication and early learning into all Early Help contact points and Best Start Family Hubs.

5. Making the system visible and easy to navigate through improved digital access

Actions

- Launch a digital Best Start Family Hub for Cheshire West and Chester in 2026 to enable 24/7 access for parents and carers to online information.
- Ensure a single, easily accessible entry point online that is visible and easy to navigate with consistent branding to support finding information, registering and accessing support.
- Provide a platform for all partner agencies to list their course offers, dates and availability.
- Simplify referral pathways and support online booking onto courses, events, parenting programmes and Home Learning Environment activities.
- Utilise data, analytics and feedback to understand needs, improve services, monitor engagement and to inform targeting and outreach work.
- Prioritise digital inclusion through a focus on accessibility, particularly for disadvantaged families, assisted support, easy-to-read formats to ensure equity of access and offline alternatives where appropriate.
- Co-produce digital solutions with families and the wider workforce where appropriate.
- Develop and embed clear age staged parenting prompts within the Digital Best Start Family Hub, ensuring the content is accessible, practical and linked to local Early Help pathways.

5. Current Performance and Targets

Good Level of Development

Our target is that by 2028, 75.5% of children - and 52.5% of children accessing Free School Meals - reach a Good Level of Development. This equates to 280 (and an additional 33 children eligible for Free School Meals) more children than today.

Looking further ahead to 2030, our target is that 81.2% of children - and 54.1% of children accessing Free School Meals - reach a Good Level of Development. This equates to 488 more children than today (40 children more for FSM).

Achieving this improvement requires more than individual programmes or isolated services. It requires a coordinated system of support for families, early years providers and schools, focused on strengthening parenting confidence, improving the home learning environment, ensuring consistent understanding of child development and ensuring families can easily access support when they need it.

Best Start Family Hubs provide the opportunity to organise local services around this goal, creating a clearer, more integrated system that supports families from pre-pregnancy through the early years and beyond.

Current Performance

- In 2024/25 Cheshire West performed 0.6 percentage points lower than the national average. The range between our highest and lowest performing schools is significant (60.9 percentage points) with the highest achieving 100% and lowest 39.1%.
- There is not one pupil group achieving a higher GLD than national average in Cheshire West. Those on Free School meals and those with English as an additional language (EAL), perform 5-6 percentage points lower than National Average.
- Girls achieve closer to the national average than boys.
- Those on SEN Support are closer to the national average than any other SEND Group.

The following data taken from the NESTA Best Start in Life Data profiles highlights outcomes for children within Cheshire West & Chester. Combined with our local knowledge, this data will support our plan to ensure children in Cheshire West & Chester have every opportunity to receive the best start in life.

Learning

Children are born ready to learn, and the characteristics and quality of their early environments shape their development. Strong evidence shows that responsive, nurturing adults and supportive home learning environments with access to appropriate learning materials and activities play a critical role in children's development.

Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3)

- 89.1% of children in Cheshire West and Chester received their ASQ-3 assessment as part of the Healthy Child Programme or integrated review when they were 2-2.5 years old.
- At this assessment, 86.3% of children in Cheshire West and Chester were at or above the expected level in all five areas of development (communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social skills). This is 4.9% above the national average (81.4%):
 - 97.3% of children were at the expected level for fine motor skills. 3.6% higher than national average.
 - 96.1% of children were at the expected level for problem solving. 3.2% higher than national average.
 - 95.5% of children were at the expected level for gross motor skills. 1.9% higher than national average.
 - 95.5% of children were at the expected level for personal social skills. 3.2% higher than national average.
 - 91.5% of children were at the expected level for communication. 4.0% higher than national average.

Early Childhood and Care Entitlements

- Whilst there have been some slight reductions since 2018 (From 100% to 98% in 2025), for all children aged 2-4, Cheshire West & Chester has a higher-than-average rate of children taking up their free education and care entitlements. Nationally this reduction has been greater (from 97.2% in 2018 to 93.15 in 2025).
- In 2025, the take up rates of this entitlement was:
 - Two-year-old entitlement – 80.8% Cheshire West & Chester, 65.2% national average.
 - Three-year-old entitlement – 98.1% Cheshire West & Chester, 90.6% national average.
 - Four-year-old entitlement – 98.1% Cheshire West & Chester, 95.6% national average.

Education, Health & Care Plans

- There has been considerable growth in the volume of requests received for Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs) since 2020. In 2024, published data indicated 1,066 requests for an EHCP assessment, a 114% increase compared to 2019 (498 requests).
- 652 assessments were completed in 2024, growth compared to 480 in 2022 (earliest comparator point).
- Within Cheshire West & Chester there has been a significant reduction in the % of new plans that are issues within 20 weeks. The local area performs lower than national average. In 2019, 88.7% of EHCPs in Cheshire West & Chester were issues within 20 weeks, in 2024 this was 15.8%. Nationally there has been a reduction but not so significant, from 60.4% to 46.4%.

Health

Children's early health outcomes are strong predictors of their later health and wellbeing, and data on uptake of health services can be a proxy for access to appropriate healthcare and support. We also know that health outcomes in England show large social inequalities, with children from more deprived backgrounds being less likely to have good health in their earliest years. The following data outlines what children's health and physical development looks like for Cheshire West & Chester.

The data shows strong vaccination and healthy weight outcomes, but there are concerns around early health outcomes in terms of breastfeeding initiation and continuation, premature births and emergency hospital admissions for 0–4-year-olds.

Breastmilk gives babies all the energy and nutrients they need in their first months of life and helps protect them from many common childhood illnesses. Babies who are only fed breast milk are less likely to experience obesity in childhood, and mothers who breastfeed are less likely to develop obesity, type 2 diabetes, or certain cancers like breast and ovarian cancer. Many things can prevent mothers who choose to breastfeed from starting or continuing for as long as they planned. These include physical challenges, emotional struggles and social pressures. In Cheshire West and Chester work is underway with partners to create an action

plan that provides more support to families who wish to breastfeed and to normalise breastfeeding to support future families to consider breastfeeding.

Vaccines save lives and keep people healthy. After clean water, they are the best way to prevent disease. Thanks to vaccines, many diseases that used to be common are now rare, and millions of people are protected from serious illness and death every year. Cheshire West and Chester usually have high vaccination rates, but recently fewer people have been getting some vaccines.

In Cheshire West and Chester, the NHS is working with local partners to improve mental health support for women, children, and young people. For new and expectant mums, services offer care from pregnancy up to two years after birth, helping families manage mental health early.

Tooth decay can mostly be prevented but remains three times more common among children living in the most deprived areas. Even though oral health is improving in England, a 2019 survey showed that almost a quarter of five-year-olds had tooth decay.

Health Outcomes (2024-25)

- In Cheshire West & Chester, 76.2% of children aged 4-5 were a healthy weight. This is positively 1.3% higher than the national average.
- 93.3% of children aged 2 in Cheshire West & Chester had received their MMR vaccination. Positively 4.4% higher than the national average. However, for children aged 5 only 90.5% had taken up their 2nd dose of the vaccine. Still remaining 6.8% higher than the national average.
- Within Cheshire West 50.4% of babies were still being breastfed at their 6-8 weeks check, this is 5.2% lower than national average.
- In 2020-22, 79.4 births out of every 1,000 were premature births (less than 37 weeks' gestation). This is higher than the national average (77 per 1000).
- In 2023/24, 25.8% of children aged 5 were experiencing dental decay.

Hospital admissions (2023-24)

- In Cheshire West & Chester, for every 1,000 children aged 0-4, 232.3 were subject to an emergency hospital admission. This is higher than the national average (167 per 1000).
- In every 10,000, 114.1 children aged 0-4 were admitted to hospital with unintentional or deliberate injuries. This is higher than national average (125.1 per 10,000).
- As a rate per 1,000, 143.4 babies under 14 days old were admitted to hospital, higher than the national rate of 88.7 children per 1,000.
- 93.6 0–5-year-olds in every 100,000 were admitted to hospital due to dental decay, significantly lower than nationally (223.6 per 100,000).

Health Services (2024-25)

- In Cheshire West & Chester, access to birth visits and health visiting reviews are better than national average across all reviews:

- Birth visits within 14 days: Cheshire West & Chester 91.9%, 6.7% higher than national average.
- 6–8-week review: Cheshire West & Chester 89.6%, 4.5% higher than national average.
- 12-month review: Cheshire West & Chester 91.9%, 3.6% higher than national average.
- 2-2.5year old review: 93.6%, 12.7% higher than national average.

Healthy Start uptake

- The NHS Healthy Start scheme helps families and pregnant people on low incomes to get healthy food, milk and vitamins. 1,630 people were on the digital scheme in July 2025. There has been a steady but slow decline from a peak in May 2024 of 1,798).

Children In Need

Cheshire West & Chester has seen a reduction of children (aged 0-4) subject to statutory social care plans in the last 2 years.

In 2024/25, 770 children aged 0-4 were subject to a Children's Social Care (CSC) referral, a 9% reduction compared to 2023/24 (846). Compared to children's referrals overall (all ages), this reduction is significant, with all referrals reducing by 1% compared to the previous year. Nationally there has been an overall increase in referrals to Children's Social Care.

At 31st March 2025, 424 children were open Children in Need (CIN) of which 96 were subject to a child protection plan, and 83 were looked after children (CIC). Child protection has seen a 14% reduction compared to March 2024 (111 plans), whilst overall CIN and CIC has reduced by 18%.

Nationally and within Cheshire West & Chester's statistical neighbours, overall, for all children in need (all ages), there has been a reduction in Children in Need, Looked After Children and Child Protection plans in the last 2 years. Conversely for CIN and Child Protection, reductions have not been seen within the wider North West authorities.

Early Support

In 2024/25, 1,571 children opened to an Early Help assessment, known locally as Team Around the Family (TAF), of these 23.3% (366) were children aged 0-4. This is comparable to 2023/24 370 children.

At the end of March 2025, 195 children aged 0-4 were open to a TAF plan following the assessment, 20% of all TAF plans open for children. There is significant growth in the volume of 0–4-year-olds open compared to March 2024 (137 children)

Of the 195 children open, 44 were being supported by a lead worker from targeted early help services within the local authority, 151 were being supported by a lead worker from partner agencies including schools, health providers, and voluntary & community sector.

Proposed Performance Indicators

GLD and Attainment

- GLD overall, FSM, EAL, boys, SEN groups
- Range between highest/lowest schools
- Communication & language early outcomes (ASQ, EYFSP C&L)
- Early writing and mathematics (ASQ, EYFSP Literacy and Mathematics)

Early Intervention & SEND

- EHCP timeliness
- SEN Support outcomes
- Volume of early years EHCP requests

Health

- Increase breastfeeding rates
- Reduce emergency admissions 0–4
- MMR uptake
- Healthy Start signups
- Improved attachment scores
- Maternal wellbeing rates

Early Support

- Number of 0–4s in TAF
- Completion rate of parenting programmes
- Home Learning Environment survey results

6. Accountability and governance

We are developing our overarching strategic Children and Young People Plan. One of the 4 priority areas will be **Best Start** (Early Support - Universal services and community based early help). Its aim will be to give every child the best start in life through prevention and early intervention. The Children and Young People's Plan is a partnership plan monitored and overseen by the West Cheshire Children's Trust, which reports to the Health and Wellbeing Board. The Trust will monitor and evaluate the progress and impact of the plan against priority areas for each year of its life. We will review and expand our current governance and accountability arrangements to ensure the high-quality delivery of our Best Start in Life local plan, with a focus on multi-agency ownership, co-ordination, and shared responsibility and improvement.

Priority actions:

- Establish a Best Start Board (replacing the current Prevention Strategy Group) with overall responsibility for delivery of this Plan and clear links to the overarching West Cheshire Children's Trust, and including the SEND Strategic Partnership Board, Corporate Parenting Board and links to other relevant local strategies for example neighbourhood health.
- Ensure clear links between the Board and operational delivery managers.

Measures of progress:

- Defined roles and responsibilities for all partners in new Terms of Reference.
- Meetings held as planned with summaries shared quickly to all, including with the public, showing clear timeline of progress being made.
- Clear evidence of multi-agency involvement in governance (attendance, contributions), with parent voice formally embedded in governance.

7. Next Steps and Action Plan

Based on the current performance and targets highlighted in section 1 and priorities highlighted in the Plan a comprehensive Action Plan will be developed on how we aim to achieve the targets and outcomes set out. This will be developed, monitored and reviewed by the newly created Best Start Board (replacing the current Prevention Strategy Group) and regular reports and updates on progress provided to the West Cheshire Children's Trust and Health and Wellbeing Board

Glossary

ASQ- 3	Ages and Stages Questionnaire
CIC	Children In Care (Looked After Children)
CIN	Children In Need
CP	Child Protection
CSC	Children's Social Care
CWAC	Cheshire West and Chester Borough Council
DfE	Department for Education
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYFSP C&L	Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Communication and Language
EYSTS	Early Years Teachers Status
FFP	Families First Partnership
FSM	Free School Meals
GLD	Good Level of Development
IDACI Index	Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index
IMD	Indices of Multiple Deprivation
LSOAs	Lower Super Output Areas
MMR	Measles, Mumps and Rubella vaccination
NHS	National Health Service
PSED	Personal, Social and Emotional Development
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENDIF	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Inclusion Fund
SLCN	Speech Language and Communication Need
TAF	Team Around the Family
VCFSE	Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise Sector

Accessing Cheshire West and Chester Council information and services

Council information is also available in audio, Braille, large print or other formats. If you would like information in another format or language, including British Sign Language, please email us at: [**equalities@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk**](mailto:equalities@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk)

You can also telephone: **0300 123 8 123**
or textphone: **18001 0300 123 8 123**
website: [**www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk**](http://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk)