

**7 April 2026**

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**Family Hub and Best Start in Life plan**

**Ward(s):** All

**Portfolios:** Cllr Mark Statham  
Portfolio Holder

**1. Aim**

- 1.1 To provide Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an updated position statement on the Walsall Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme, marking the end of the first phase of delivery (2022–2025) and outlining the transition into the development of Walsall's Best Start in Life Plan.
- 1.2 The report provides assurance on progress, impact and sustainability, and sets out how Family Hubs will evolve into Best Start Family Hubs as part of national reform and local priorities.

**2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 Acknowledge the significant progress made in delivering Phase 1 of the Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme.
- 2.2 Note that Walsall is moving from programme establishment to impact and outcomes, with Family Hubs forming the delivery foundation for the Best Start in Life Plan.
- 2.3 Support the continued development of a whole-system, outcomes-based approach to improving early child development, parental wellbeing and school readiness beyond March 2026.

**3. Report detail – know**

**3.1 Context and End of Phase 1 Delivery**

In February 2023, Walsall was confirmed as one of 75 local authorities nationally to receive Family Hubs and Start for Life funding for a three-year programme (2022–2025), with a further year of funding confirmed for 2025/26.

The first phase of delivery focused on establishing accessible places, trusted relationships and strong partnerships, particularly for families with children aged 0–2 and those impacted by the Covid-19 period.

By the end of Phase 1, Walsall has fully delivered on all of the 248 national minimum and most of the go-further expectations.

### 3.2 What Has Been Developed – Family Hub Foundations

The first phase of delivery focused on establishing accessible places, trusted relationships and strong partnerships, particularly for families with children aged 0–2 and those impacted by the Covid19 period.

Family Hubs are welcoming, friendly places where all children and young people aged 0–19, (up to age 25 for those with additional needs), along with new and expectant families, can come for help, advice and support when they need it most. Our hubs are based in the heart of local communities, bringing services together so families have one trusted place to turn to and someone to talk to in a safe, supportive environment about things that may be worrying them.



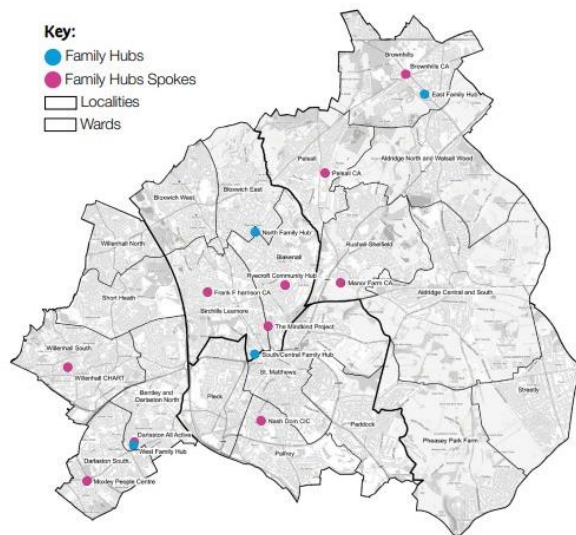
Family Hubs are about more than just buildings. Support is also offered across Walsall through a network of local spoke centres, helping us engage families closer to where they live and making support easier to access. In addition, the Family Hubs act as a one-stop shop, allowing families to access a wide range of services—from health and emotional wellbeing to parenting advice and practical assistance—all under one roof or through connected community spokes. This integrated approach ensures that families can easily find the help they need, when they need it, without having to navigate multiple agencies or locations. Alongside this, we offer a strong digital service, including the Walsall Family Hubs website<sup>1</sup>, where parents can find clear, up-to-date information all in one place. We have also commissioned digital apps that give parents access to 24/7 advice and guidance, whether they are becoming a new parent or looking for extra parenting support.

By March 2025, Walsall had established a strong and sustainable Family Hubs infrastructure:

#### Places and Access

Four integrated Family Hub buildings, offering warm, safe and welcoming co-located spaces, including clinical rooms, birth registration facilities and family support areas. A commissioned network of Voluntary Community Sector community spokes and community shops, extending the Family Hub offer into neighbourhoods and trusted local settings.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.walsallfamilyhubs.co.uk/>



## Family Hub Partnerships and Development of the Workforce

Our Family Hub network focuses on helping families with infant feeding, parenting, parent–infant relationships, learning at home, and emotional wellbeing during pregnancy and after birth. All partners work together with a shared aim of giving children and families the Best Start in Life.

We also provide targeted support within local communities, including peer support for parents and carers, extra help for children’s speech and language development, counselling to support parent–infant relationships, and a specialist midwife to support parents who have experienced birth trauma or loss. Professionals are supported with shared resources and guidance, so families receive consistent, high-quality support at the right time.

## Digital and Information

The Family Hubs website is a simple, one-stop place where families can find clear, up-to-date information about local services and support, available in over 100 languages. Parents and carers can access helpful resources such as the *Best Start for Life* and *Supporting Your Child’s Learning* guides, while professionals use shared tools to easily navigate and connect families to the right support.

## Support for Families

Walsall Family Hubs support families from pregnancy through the early years, helping parents feel confident, connected and supported every step of the way. The Family Hub Network offer friendly, evidence-based parenting support, both in groups and one-to-one, along with activities that support children’s development, play and wellbeing. Families can also access extra help while waiting for specialist services, receive free care packages when needed, and enjoy fun programmes that support children as they grow and get ready for school. A quarterly timetable makes it easy to see what’s on across Walsall, including baby massage, PEEP sessions, Tiny Rangers and family events, as well as clear information about learning pathways and how to get additional support if needed.

## Early Development, identification of needs and Infant Feeding

Family Hubs play an important role in spotting children’s needs early and providing the right support as soon as possible, helping every child get the best start in life. They

support children’s development in a joined-up way, including infant feeding, speech and language, and early learning, so families don’t have to wait until difficulties escalate.

Speech and Language Therapy capacity has increased, including regular drop-in sessions, which has helped reduce waiting times from up to 12 months to around 4 months, meaning children and families get help much sooner. Family Hub’s have achieved BFI Friendly accreditation (Level 1) and follow a clear infant feeding pathway, giving professionals confidence to offer consistent advice and support. Infant feeding support has also been strengthened through expanded peer-led support, delivered in partnership with voluntary and community sector organisations, alongside a growing network of over 50 Walsall Welcomes Breastfeeding Friendly venues across the borough. Together, this approach helps families feel supported early, listened to, and confident in accessing the right help at the right time.





**Community Voice and Volunteering**

An established Parent and Carer Panel plays a vital role in shaping Family Hub services, ensuring lived experience directly informs service design, delivery and ongoing improvement. Parents and carers have influenced a wide range of developments, including the creation of the Best Start in Life booklet, improvements to the Family Hubs website, and participation in audits of Family Hub provision. This has also included involvement in a recent regional peer-to-peer review of Family Hubs, helping to share learning and strengthen practice.

Alongside this, the Shaping My Tomorrow project and other approaches help us hear from families in different ways, including at events, through feedback forms, peer reviews and activities, ensuring a wide range of voices are listened to and valued. This commitment to listening and learning from families supports services to continually improve and better meet local needs.

This work is complemented by a redesigned WR4C Volunteer Service, providing a universal, community-based offer that strengthens engagement, builds connections and improves access to early help for families across Walsall.

Family Hubs has delivered measurable improvements across key areas:

 <p>Improved access to help and support at the earliest opportunity, parenting support and preventative services</p>	 <p>Reduced waiting times and improved parental confidence in supporting children’s communication</p>
 <p>Increased engagement through trusted community-based provision</p>	 <p>Positive qualitative feedback from families and professionals, highlighting trust, accessibility and relationship-based support</p>

**4. Implications for Joint Working arrangements:**

By the end of March Walsall will publish the Best Start in Life Plan (BSiL). It sets out how the partnership will improve outcomes for children from pre-birth to age five, building on the strong foundations established through the Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme (2022–2025).

The Plan responds to:

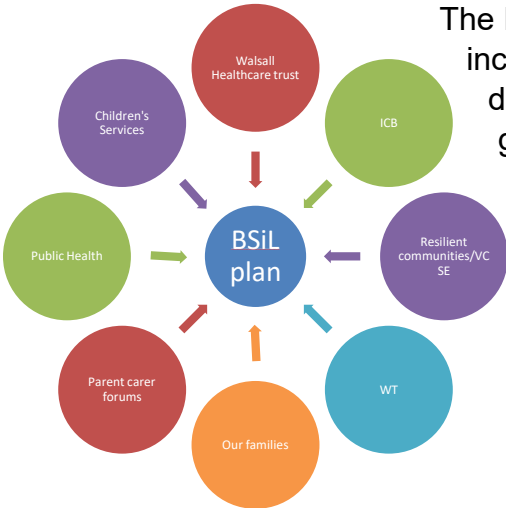
- National policy updates (DfE, September 2025), which expand Family Hubs into Best Start Family Hubs for all local authorities and place a renewed focus on child development and school readiness.
- The national ambition that 75% of children achieve a Good Level of Development (GLD) by 2028, with faster improvement for those furthest behind.
- Local evidence showing that while outcomes are improving, inequalities persist, particularly for children affected by poverty, SEND and speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

The Best Start in Life Plan aligns with **We Are Walsall 2040**, the Council Plan and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, positioning early childhood development as a critical driver of long-term health, wellbeing and life chances.

**4.1 How the Plan Is Being Developed**

The Best Start in Life Plan is being developed as a whole-system, partnership-owned plan, not a single-service strategy. Its development has been informed by:

- Learning from Phase 1 Family Hubs delivery, locally, regionally and nationally.
- A refreshed early years needs assessment and the “Where the Silence Is” work, identifying families and communities who are not consistently engaging with universal services.
- Lived experience from families, including insights from annual conversations with parents and carers as well as consultation through our parent carer panels.
- Practitioner consultation across health, early years, education, Family Hubs and the voluntary and community sector.
- National guidance and evidence, including emerging learning from the Future Minds report on early emotional wellbeing.



The Plan is being co-produced through partnership workshops including our parent and carer panels and strategic development sessions, with final sign-off through agreed governance routes, including the Health and Wellbeing Board.

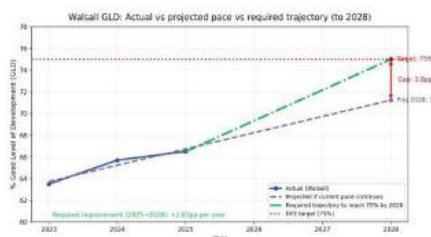
## 4.2 Key Drivers for Change

The Best Start in Life Plan is driven by a clear set of challenges and opportunities identified through data and system learning:

- GLD outcomes are improving but not fast enough to meet national and local ambitions, with significant gaps for children eligible for Free School Meals, boys, and some localities.

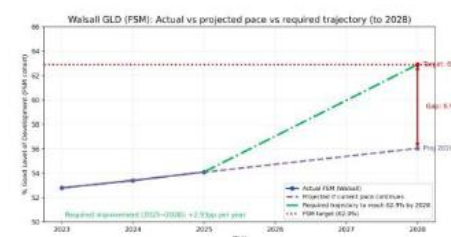
**Our 2028 milestone – if we continue to improve at the current rate....**

### 75% of all children



based on the current improvement trajectory, 71.2% of children would reach by 2028, leaving a 3.8% gap to our target.

### 62.9% of Children on FSM



based on the current improvement trajectory, 57% of children on FSM would reach by 2028, leaving a 6% gap to our target.

- Speech, language and communication needs are a key driver of later attainment gaps and are strongly linked to deprivation.
- Enhancing engagement with early education, health checks and Family Hub services presents an opportunity to ensure more children are identified and supported at an earlier stage.
- Families value trusted, local, relational support, but pathways are not always clear or consistent.
- Workforce capacity, variation in practice and fragmented data systems limit the impact of early intervention at scale.

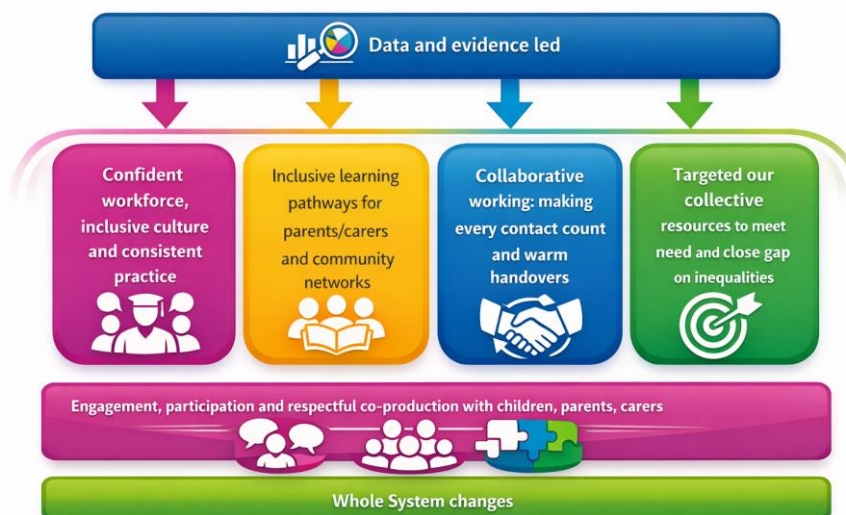
## 4.3 Our Walsall partnership ambition:

**Walsall will be a truly child friendly borough, where every baby, child and family is supported to thrive from pregnancy through early childhood and beyond. By acting as one system and investing early, we will ensure that all children are safe, healthy, confident and ready to learn, with inequalities reduced and life chances no longer determined by where a child grows up.**

## 4.4 Pillars of Success

To deliver this ambition, we will organise our partnership action through Walsall's Pillars to Success:

## Four delivery pillars



1. Confident workforce, inclusive culture and consistent practice – building a confident, skilled workforce with consistent understanding of child development, SEND and communication and language. Reduce variation across services through shared tools, pathways and expectations.
2. Inclusive learning pathways Parent and Carer Learning Pathways – providing clear, accessible and consistent guidance to help families support development at home.
3. Collaborative Working at Key Contact Points – strengthening joint working and warm handovers at critical moments such as developmental checks and transitions into early education and school.
4. Targeted collective Support and Resource Allocation – using data and locality insight to focus additional support where need and silence are greatest.

## Three cross-cutting pillars

- Data and Evidence-Led Practice – improving shared data, outcomes frameworks and feedback loops to track impact and inform decisions.
- Engagement, Participation and respectful Co-production – embedding lived experience and community voice in design, delivery and review.
- System Change – aligning governance, commissioning, pathways and infrastructure so families experience a joined-up system.

The Best Start in Life Plan represents the next phase of Walsall's early years transformation, signalling a comprehensive whole system change. This initiative builds directly on the success of Family Hubs, responds to national reform, and sets out a clear, evidence-led approach to improving child development, parental wellbeing and school readiness. Crucially, the Plan recognises that achieving these outcomes requires the active involvement of all partners—health, education, social care, voluntary sector, and community organisations—working collaboratively to deliver consistent, targeted and measurable early interventions for children and families across Walsall. Best Start Family Hubs will act as the delivery backbone for the Plan, ensuring integration and joint

responsibility among partners, so every child receives the support they need for the best start in life.

#### **4.4 Supporting a Good Level of Development in Walsall: Our Best Start in Life Plan Milestone**

As a critical milestone in the delivery of the Best Start in Life plan will be that by 2028 at least 74.7% of children overall in Walsall will reach a Good Level of Development at the end of reception and 62.9% of children eligible to Free school meals, demonstrating that the system is successfully enabling children to be ready to learn — with the fastest improvement for those currently furthest behind.

This represents an additional **294 children** needing to achieve a Good Level of Development to meet the overall target, and a further **84 children** to meet the Free School Meal target.

#### **4.4 Our Outcomes framework**

We are developing a outcomes framework which will measure six system-wide outcomes for children, all of which are directly relevant to the Health and Wellbeing Board's role in tackling inequalities and improving population health.

##### **1. Children experience strong early development, particularly in communication and language**

Children develop the core skills they need to be confident, curious and ready to learn, with a strong focus on:

- Communication and language
- Personal, social and emotional development
- Early identification of speech, language and communication needs

##### **2. Children are physically healthy and emotionally secure from pregnancy onwards**

Children benefit from strong early health, attachment and emotional wellbeing, reducing avoidable harm and escalation later.

Key areas include:

- Uptake of mandated health reviews (new birth, 6–8 weeks, 9–12 months, 2–2½ years)
- Breastfeeding initiation and continuation
- Immunisation uptake
- Healthy weight at Reception
- Early identification of perinatal and infant mental health needs

##### **3. Children are identified early and supported inclusively**

Children's additional needs are identified early and met through **strong universal inclusion**, rather than late escalation.

This includes:

- Earlier identification of SEND and emerging developmental needs
- Timely access to advice, support and graduated response
- Reduced numbers of children starting school with unidentified needs

#### **4. Parents and carers feel confident, supported and able to help their children thrive**

Families experience trusted, consistent support that strengthens the home learning environment and wellbeing.

Children benefit when parents:

- Feel confident supporting communication, play and early learning
- Are engaged with Family Hubs and community support
- Are less likely to miss key appointments (“Was Not Brought”)

#### **5. Children are ready to learn, with smoother transitions**

Children experience continuity of support from early years into Reception, with:

- Improved take-up of early education entitlements
- Better information sharing before school entry
- Reduced numbers of children starting school with unmet or unidentified needs

#### **6. Inequalities in early childhood outcomes are narrowing**

Improvement is fastest for children and communities currently furthest behind, particularly:

- Children affected by poverty (FSM)
- Children with SEND or emerging needs
- Children from communities with lower engagement in services
- Priority localities identified through data and insight

#### **4. *Financial information***

The Best Start in Life plan is being delivered with the support of a £1.9 million investment from the Department for Education (DfE) over a three-year period. This funding enables the implementation of Family Hubs and strengthens strategic leadership across the Best Start in Life plan. In addition, we are aligning prevention funding in relation to the Families First for Children and exploring opportunities presented by the SEND reform to further enhance support in the delivery of the plan.

We are also exploring opportunities to the 10-year health/neighbourhood plans aligned with Walsall Together.

#### **5. *Reducing Inequalities***

The BSiL plan is underpinned by a commitment to reducing inequalities and improving outcomes for all children our ambition sets out that “ By acting as one system and investing early, we will ensure that all children are safe, healthy, confident and ready to learn, with inequalities reduced and life chances no longer determined by where a child grows up”.

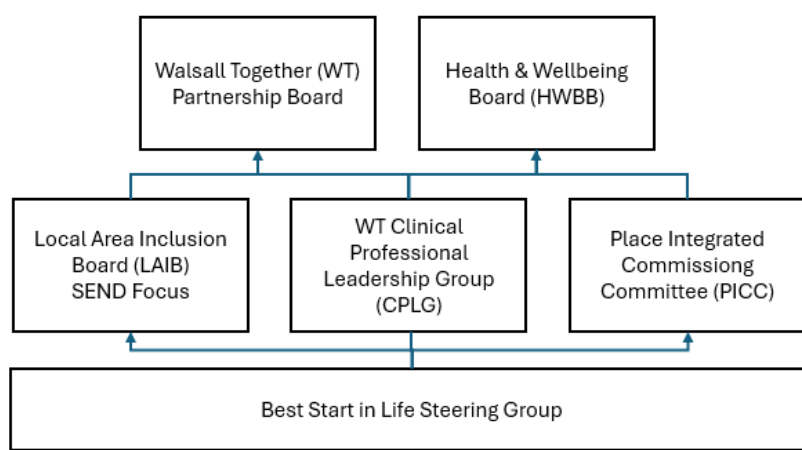
#### **6. *Review***

We have established a Best Start in Life Steering Group, which will be responsible for providing robust oversight and strategic support to the Best Start in Life plan. The Steering Group's key responsibilities include:

- Ensuring integrated, accessible services for families from conception to age 19 (and up to 25 for SEND)

- Focusing on reducing inequalities, improving child health, and supporting school readiness
- Delivering the Best Start for Life offer and contributing to the national target of 75% of 5-year-olds reaching a Good Level of Development (GLD) by 2028
- Aligning local implementation with national policy, funding requirements, and sustainability planning

The Steering Group will feed into key strategic groups, including the Local Area Inclusion Board (SEND focus), Walsall Together Board, Place-Based Integrated Commissioning Board, and Health and Wellbeing Board.



### Background papers

Appendix A - Best start in life – plan on a page

Appendix B best start in life plan

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