

# Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life in South Gloucestershire



# Foreword

## Message from leaders

**Every child deserves the best start in life. The earliest years, from pregnancy to starting school, are a time of rapid growth and change. The support children and families get during these years is crucial to shaping children's health, learning, wellbeing and future opportunities.**

In South Gloucestershire, we have listened carefully to what parents and carers have told us about their experiences. Many families value the services, support and community spaces that help them through early parenthood. At the same time, we know that some families face greater challenges and do not always find it easy to access the help they need.

This plan sets out our shared commitment to improving support for families and outcomes for young children. It has been developed with partners across health, education, the voluntary and community sector and the council. Together, we are focusing on the areas that will make the greatest difference in the early years.

With national and local investment, we will begin delivering improvements straight away while building the relationships and capacity needed for long term change.

We will be open about our progress so that families, communities and partners can see what is improving and where more needs to be done.

We would like to thank the families, practitioners and partners who have shared their time, insight and lived experience to shape this plan. Delivering the best start in life is a shared responsibility. Success depends on how well we work together across services and alongside our communities. We encourage everyone to consider the role they can play in supporting children and families in these crucial early years.



**CHRIS SIVERS**

Executive Director  
– Department for People



**COUNCILLOR SIMON JOHNSON**

Cabinet Member for Children  
and Young People

# Introduction

## The Best Start in Life

**Giving every child the best start in life means making sure every family has the support, relationships and opportunities they need to help their child grow, learn and thrive.**

During the early years, children's brains develop rapidly, laying the foundations for lifelong health, learning and wellbeing. Experiences of love, play, communication, safety and stability shape how children grow and the opportunities available to them later in life.

However, not all families begin with the same advantages. Factors such as poverty, poor parental mental health, insecure housing, discrimination and barriers to accessing services can affect early development. These challenges can make it harder for children to get the strong start they need.

A strong Best Start in Life approach focuses on ensuring all families have access to what they need, while reducing these unfair differences.

It means ensuring families can access the right support at the right time, particularly during pregnancy and the earliest years. It includes promoting positive parent-infant relationships, supporting healthy development, and helping families to create safe and stimulating homes.

Our priorities are to strengthen support for families, improve access to childcare, and invest in the early years workforce. We want families to be able to find help easily, in welcoming, local places, with clear information and joined-up support that works around them.

By increasing our focus on support in these crucial early years, we can help ensure that every child in South Gloucestershire has the foundations they need to be healthy, confident and able to thrive.



# Our Vision

**Our vision is that every child and young person in South Gloucestershire has the best start in life, grows up happy and healthy, and feels both supported and connected to the people and services that help keep them safe and help them reach their full potential.**

To make this happen, we want every family to have easy access to great early years support in their local community, starting from pregnancy. We will spot emerging needs as early as possible and offer help quickly, so families do not have to wait for problems to grow.

We will focus extra support where and when it's needed most, including for families experiencing more challenges for example, children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), families who speak English as an additional language and those living in rural or underserved areas where services can be harder to reach.

We are creating a stronger, more connected early years system. This includes developing **Best Start in Life Family Hubs** and outreach, bringing together health visiting, early years settings, childcare, community groups and family support so families can find help in welcoming, local places. We will make information clearer, reduce duplication and ensure families do not need to repeat their story.

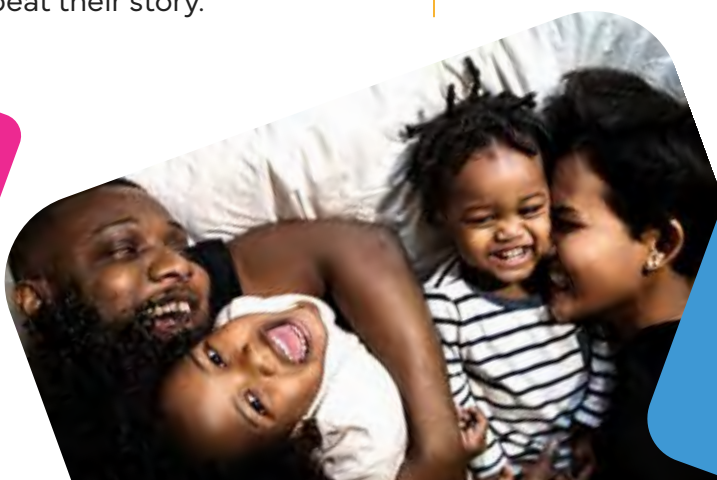
We want all children to arrive at school ready to build on strong previous learning across all aspects of the early years curriculum. We will strengthen support for key foundational aspects of learning such as physical development, early language, communication and social skills so that children develop the skills they need that will help them to progress.

We will work with providers to ensure families can access local **high-quality, affordable childcare** that meets their needs.

We will also improve pathways for children with SEND, making specialist advice and support easier to reach.

We are committed to reducing unfair differences in early development and health, so that every child, wherever they live and whatever their circumstances, has an equal chance to thrive. Families will be actively involved in shaping services, ensuring our offer reflects what local parents and carers say they need.

Together with partners across health, education, childcare, schools and the voluntary and community sector, we will build a joined-up early years system that supports families early, fairly and consistently.



# How we have developed this plan

**This plan has been developed in partnership with council service leads for children's social care, education, early years, learning and skills and public health - working with partners from health, education and voluntary sectors.**

It has been informed by engagement and survey work with families in our communities to ensure we are responding to their needs.

The plan sets out our starting point but will evolve over time in line with what our communities tell us they need, and to align with implementation of other national reform programmes.

This plan will be enacted through a delivery plan created in partnership with early years providers, schools, service providers, partners and families.



# Our Principles

We are committed to building a system in South Gloucestershire that is:

## **Rooted in relationships**

Strong, trusting relationships are at the heart of how we support children and families. We recognise that connection is the foundation for wellbeing and healthy development.

## **Flexible and easy to access**

Support is simple to find locally, online, or through outreach, and works for different family routines and circumstances.

## **Guided by early action**

We notice early signs that a child or family may need help and step in before worries grow.

## **Designed around inclusion**

Every family is welcome. We work to remove barriers for children with SEND, families with English as an additional language, and those in rural or underserved areas.

## **Consistent and connected**

Services work together so your experiences feel smooth and joined-up, wherever you go. We will join up our plans across the partnership so that they support our aims for working with families.

## **Shaped by local insight and family voice**

What families tell us matters. Feedback and lived experience guide how we develop.

## **Informed by evidence of need and outcomes driven**

Our detailed analysis of the local area, informed by the views of families, will be used to identify what support will make most difference to the local community and improve outcomes for children and their families.

## **Focused on reducing inequalities**

We want all children to have the same chance to thrive, and we will work to reduce unfair differences in early development and health.

## **Grounded in quality and evidence**

Our support is based on approaches that help children flourish: nurturing relationships, playful learning and strong home environments.

## **Delivered by a confident and supported workforce**

Families are supported by people who are trained, valued, and confident in what they do.

## **Strengthened through partnership**

We work closely with local and regional partners, early years settings, schools, health services, voluntary groups, and communities.

## **Innovate to improve**

We will build on successful practice across the council and use our learning to support work with families, for example, through our work on a SEND cluster-led model. We will trial new approaches using a 'test and learn' model and use this to inform our work with families.

# Our Ambitions

## Our Ambitions for Children and Young People

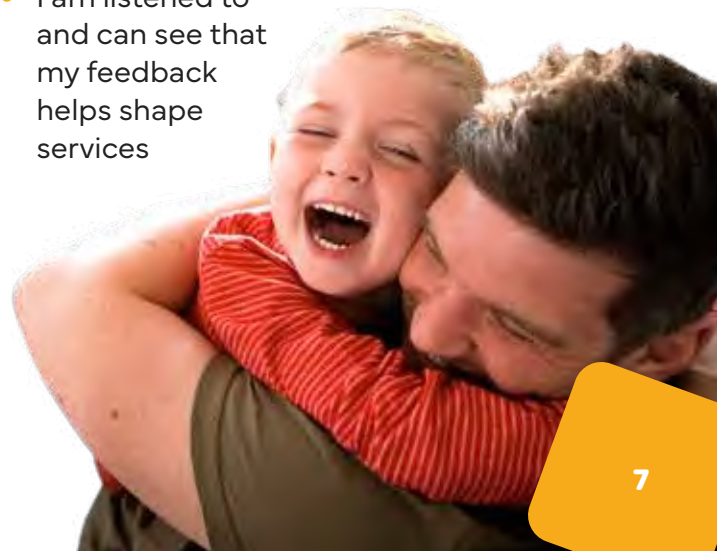
### Every child in South Gloucestershire will:

- Feel safe, cared for and able to grow with confidence
- Experience joyful play and rich early learning
- Make strong progress, with help where needed so no child is left behind
- Get help early if they need support with foundational skills such as speech, communication, physical, social and emotional development
- Have early learning and childcare experiences that meet their needs
- Feel included, welcomed and able to take part in their community
- Move smoothly from home to early years settings and into school
- Grow up happy, healthy and ready for their future

## Our Ambitions for Parents, Carers, and Families

### Every parent, carer, and family should be able to say:

- I can easily and locally find the information and support my family needs
- Support is offered early, without judgement or complicated processes
- People understand my family's background, language and circumstances
- If my child needs extra support with development, I know how to get it and I am supported along the way
- Professionals listen to my views and understand my challenges
- Childcare is locally available, high-quality and works for our family
- I feel confident in supporting my child's learning and development at home
- I am listened to and can see that my feedback helps shape services



## Our Ambitions for Professionals and Partners

**Every practitioner, volunteer, and partner organisation should be able to say:**

- I am part of a system which is committed to providing high-quality, universal support to all families.
- I understand how my work contributes to giving every child the best start in life
- I have access to training, support and tools that help me work confidently and consistently
- I work with a connected system where information flows effectively
- I can spot early signs of need and act quickly knowing I am part of a co-ordinated response
- I collaborate with colleagues across health, early years, education and the voluntary sector to provide whole family support
- I have access to data, insights and family feedback to guide my approach and improve outcomes.

# Where We Are

**In order to achieve our vision and ambitions, we need to understand where we are now in our communities. Information about the health and wellbeing and the development of children in South Gloucestershire, our current services and feedback from families have all helped shape our next steps.**



















# Our existing system








# Our Local Data








## Information about South Gloucestershire and its children.

<b>Population</b>	<b>306,332</b>
 Of which children are 0-18	<b>66,254</b>
 Of which children are 0-4	<b>15,981</b>
 Children (<16) in low-income households	<b>6,973</b>
 Children eligible for free school meals (FSM)	<b>6,623</b>
 Households with dependent children owed a duty of care under the homelessness reduction act	<b>365</b>
 South Gloucestershire areas rated in the most deprived 20% nationally against at least one domain of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.	<b>46</b>
 Households registered as being in housing need	<b>almost 2,000</b>
 New homes required by 2040 in South Gloucestershire to meet identified need.	<b>28,000</b>
 Of which will be affordable	<b>7,500</b>
 % of households affected by fuel poverty	<b>8.4%</b>
<b>Childcare provision and take up</b>	
 Number of private, voluntary and independent childcare providers	<b>123</b>
 Number of registered childminders	<b>124</b>
 Number of schools with reception classes	<b>91</b>
 Number of primary schools with nursery classes	<b>8</b>
 Number of children taking up a funded early years place	<b>8,175</b>
 Number of disadvantaged children taking up a funded early years place	<b>763</b>

### Health Information

	Maternal smoking at time of delivery	175
	Breastfeeding prevalence at 6-8 weeks	1,704
	Healthy weight (ages 4-5)	2,345
	MMRV vaccination at age 2	2,514
	Hospital admissions for tooth extraction due to dental decay in 0-5s	120

### Progress Information

	Children having 2-year review	2,734
	Number having an Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) as part of their 2 - 2 1/2 year review	2,640
	Number of children who had ASQ achieving a good level of development at 2 - 2 1/2 years	2,314
	Number of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD)	2,335
	Number of children eligible for FSM achieving GLD	137
	Number of children achieving GLD in communication and language	2,681
	Number of FSM children achieving GLD in communication and language	201



# What Families Say

*"Every health and education professional I have spoken to has been really helpful and informative"*

*"Many services provide valuable knowledge and support, which has been genuinely helpful in navigating family life and accessing the right resources"*

*"Breastfeeding services at the children's centre were invaluable to me with both of my children."*

*"Face to face support cannot be beaten in the early weeks and months, online resources useful 24/7."*

*"Better communication of what's going on. Sometimes I only find out about things if I see it advertised in the library."*

*"More full working day childcare provision, particularly those that offer the funded childcare without significant additional costs."*

*"More availability at weekends, working parents don't have everything worked out and still need support."*



## What Families Value

**Families told us that, for many, South Gloucestershire is a positive place to have a baby and raise a young child. They highlighted several key strengths:**

- Parks, green spaces and local facilities are highly valued for play, connection, and wellbeing.
- Midwives, maternity services and birth centres were praised for their care and support.
- Children's Centres, libraries, playgroups, and stay-and-play sessions are seen as friendly, welcoming, and beneficial for child development.
- Breastfeeding and infant feeding support, where accessed, is described as extremely helpful.
- Specialist support is appreciated by families who access it.

## What Families Tell Us They Need

**Families told us that it can be difficult to find and navigate support. This feedback highlights the changes that would make the biggest difference:**

- Being given clearer and earlier information about activities, services, entitlements and where to go for help, especially during pregnancy and the first months after birth.
- Having support that feels joined-up, so families don't have to repeat their story and don't receive conflicting advice.
- Having local, well-publicised places to go for activities, advice and practical support, including in rural or less connected areas.
- More flexible and accessible groups and activities, with options outside standard working hours for working parents.
- Better access to childcare, including more places in the areas that need them and clearer information about costs and funding.
- More emotional and mental wellbeing support for parents and carers, particularly at key moments like pregnancy, newborn stages and the two-year review.
- More opportunities to connect with other families, including peer support, parent networks and groups that feel welcoming for all family types, including dads.
- Support for cost of living, recognising the challenge of balancing work, childcare and household expenses.



# How We Will Improve

Bringing together what families have shared, what our data tells us, and what partners know makes the biggest difference in the early years and this gives us a clear set of priorities to guide our work.



These priorities also reflect the focus of the national Best Start in Life strategy, which emphasises early language, early identification of need, high-quality early education and strong local partnerships.

Our approach is locally-shaped and rooted in the lived experiences of families, whilst aligned with this national mission.

Work across these priorities will also help towards our national target of children achieving a Good Level of Development.

For South Gloucestershire these targets are:

- At least 80% of children will achieve a Good Level of Development (GLD) at the end of reception (up from 73.1% in 2024).
- At least 56% of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) will achieve a GLD (up from 49.1% in 2024).



## PRIORITY 1: Improving Support for Families

**Every family should feel supported, informed and confident from pregnancy through the early years. To make this happen, we will create a strong network of Best Start Family Hubs, strengthen support for relationships, play, communication and home learning and make it easier for families to get help early, before small worries become bigger ones. Families will have clearer pathways, more welcoming spaces, and support that fits real life.**

We will:

- Make Best Start Family Hubs the place families can go for information, activities and practical support, with outreach to rural and less connected areas.
- Strengthen early identification of need, especially through health visiting contacts and joined-up conversations between professionals.
- Expand parenting and home-learning support using evidence-based programmes (for example, PEEP Home Learning Together Programme, Early Talk Boost, Understanding Your Baby/Child).
- Improve access to support for mental and emotional wellbeing, offering clearer pathways and stronger partnerships with local services.
- Make it easier for families to get early advice about SEND, with drop-ins, clearer routes into specialist support and more SEND expertise in Family Hubs.
- Provide activities and groups that are flexible and accessible, including options outside typical working hours.
- Strengthen local information and advice, making it clearer, easier to find and available in multiple formats and languages.

How will we know we've made a difference?

- More families accessing Family Hubs and outreach support, including in rural and underserved areas.
- Families tell us support is easier to find and is available when they need it.
- More parents report feeling more confident about being able to support their children's development.
- More families receive timely SEND support.
- Families report positive and supportive experiences with health visiting, especially at pregnancy, newborn and two-year review points.
- Data shows earlier identification of developmental needs (for example, improved uptake and outcomes of the 2-2½ Ages & Stages Questionnaires (ASQ)).
- Families report feeling less isolated, with more opportunities to connect locally.

## Priority 2: Improving Access to Childcare

**Every family should be able to find childcare that works for them, that is affordable, high-quality and close to where they need it. We will increase childcare places in the areas that need them most, help families understand and access their childcare entitlements and strengthen the link between childcare, early education and wider family support. No family should miss out because of geography, cost or complexity.**

We will:

- Work with early years providers and schools to expand childcare places, especially in the wards identified as needing more provision.
- Support the growth of breakfast clubs, school-based nurseries and wrap-around care where places are needed.
- Make information on funded childcare entitlements clearer and easier to navigate.
- Strengthen our early years outreach to help families understand and access childcare places and funding they are eligible for.
- Help providers follow national charging guidance, so families understand costs and can make informed choices.
- Use local data to plan for population growth and new housing developments, to ensure childcare provision keeps pace with demand.
- Offer targeted support to providers so they can include children with SEND confidently.

How will we know we've made a difference?

- More families take up funded childcare entitlements, including the early learning for two-year-olds offer.
- More early years and childcare places exist in the communities where demand is needed.
- Families report that finding childcare feels easier and more transparent, with fewer barriers caused by cost or availability.
- Childcare sufficiency data shows a reduction in shortages, particularly for children under two.
- More children with SEND access childcare, and fewer families report difficulties around inclusion or part-time placements.

### Communities where more childcare places are needed:

Doddington

Pilning and Severn Beach

Winterbourne

Emersons Green

Stoke Gifford

Woodstock

Longwell Green

Thornbury

Yate North

### Priority 3: Improving Quality and Supporting the Early Years Workforce

Every child deserves playful, stimulating, high-quality learning experiences, and every family deserves support from skilled, confident professionals. We will strengthen early years quality by focusing on improving key aspects of learning and providing more support to help providers to meet children’s needs. Practitioners will receive training, tools and support to make sure children who need extra help get it early, consistently and well.

We will:

- Strengthen training for early years practitioners and school staff on key foundational aspects of learning such as communication and language, SEND, physical development and personal, social and emotional development.
- Build stronger links between early years settings and schools, sharing expertise and supporting smooth transitions.
- Target support to settings serving more disadvantaged children or those with lower early learning outcomes.
- Expand SEND expertise across Family Hubs and settings, ensuring early identification and timely specialist advice.
- Support settings to create enriching and inclusive environments.
- Work with partners to improve workforce recruitment and retention, supporting career pathways into early years.
- Provide a consistent offer of evidence-based early learning support across the first five years.
- Work to improve access, up-take, and quality of the 2–2½ year reviews.
- Provide training and mentorship to early years providers on implementing the ‘Five to Thrive’ programme, which equips practitioners, children, and their families with strategies for fostering secure attachments, promoting self-regulation and resilience, and incorporating trauma-informed practices.



How will we know we've made a difference?

- More children meet expected levels in communication and language, social and emotional development and physical development (tracked through ASQ, Early Years Foundation Stage Profile and local data).
- A growing number of children achieve a Good Level of Development (GLD) at age five.
- More settings are judged to be high-quality and there is high participation in training and professional development.
- Early years settings report greater confidence in supporting children with SEND, and fewer children require part-time placements due to unmet need.
- Early years providers and schools report smoother transitions from early years into reception, especially for children with additional needs.
- Families say that the support they receive from early years staff feels consistent, high-quality and connected.
- The early years workforce reports higher confidence, clearer expectations and stronger collaboration across services.



# What You Will See Next

**We're taking a phased approach to building the Best Start in Life offer so families can start benefiting straight away while we continue to grow what's available. With the help of the Best Start in Life National Delivery Grant - designed to support Family Hub development, outreach - workforce training and data improvements, here is what you can expect to see over the coming months and years.**

## **A new Best Start Family Hub in Patchway**

Patchway will be our first full Family Hub, expanding on the successful 'test and learn' sessions already running there. Families will see more baby groups, early years SEND drop-ins, antenatal support, stay-and-play sessions, infant-feeding support, parent programmes and advice sessions delivered by a range of partners and professionals. Additions to the offer will be an occupational therapy group, advice to parents on accessing childcare entitlements and debt and welfare advice.

## **Delivery of More Parenting and Home Learning Programmes**

We will deliver evidence-based parenting and home-learning environment programmes to supplement the support that is already available. These will be targeted towards families with children age three to four and linked to every Family Hub roll out.

## **Additional Best Start Family Hubs opening through 2026**

Following successful implementation in Patchway, we'll open two more main Family Hubs so that families have more local places to go for activities, advice and support. These hubs will work closely with health, early years settings, childcare providers, schools and community organisations.

## **Children's Centres becoming 'spokes'**

In addition to the three main hubs, Children's Centres will continue offering services and will be developed as 'spokes' that extend the reach of the Family Hub offer. This means families will still have access to trusted local spaces while more services are added over time.

## **Outreach in rural areas and new communities**

Not every family lives close to a hub, so outreach will be a key part of the offer. You'll see more groups and support sessions running in community venues, libraries, village halls and other familiar spaces, helping families in rural or less well-connected areas access support without having to travel far.

### **A broader range of support in each local area**

As the offer grows, families will see more services available in one place, such as speech and language support, SEND advice, parent programmes, wellbeing support, employment and financial advice and early learning activities. More partners will work side-by-side in Family Hub spaces so families can get what they need without navigating multiple services.

### **A clearer, more connected, early support system**

Behind the scenes, services are working together to make sure information is shared safely and families don't have to repeat their story. As hubs develop, families will experience clearer pathways, smoother handovers between services and a more joined-up approach to early help.

### **An expanding offer of support**

This is a long-term plan. We'll keep adding new groups, activities and services as we learn from families, partners and local data. We'll continue strengthening areas like early communication support, perinatal wellbeing, SEND pathways, childcare access and the home-learning offer so families see improvements year after year.





# Holding Ourselves Accountable

**The strategy will be supported by a delivery plan and impact and outcomes framework that will be continuously reviewed to achieve the Best Start in Life for all children in South Gloucestershire.**

To make sure we stay on track, we will use our governance arrangements to monitor indicators about:

- child development and early learning
- early identification of need and access to support
- child and family health and wellbeing and experience
- take up of early education, childcare and parenting support
- take up of parenting programmes
- child health and early years outcomes
- family feedback and satisfaction

We will track our progress against GLD and FSM targets.

In South Gloucestershire, we are working towards ambitious but achievable goals for 2028:

- At least 80% of children will achieve a Good Level of Development (GLD) at the end of reception (up from 73.1% in 2024).
- At least 56% of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) will achieve a GLD (up from 49.1% in 2024).

These targets guide our work but do not limit the broader ambitions of this strategy.

Monitoring will also be aligned to the new [Local Outcomes Framework - GOV.UK](#). Detailed targets and measures including GLD, ASQ coverage, health indicators, childcare sufficiency, and workforce measures will sit in the Delivery Plan.

# A partnership approach to our plan

In South Gloucestershire we have a long and strong history of working in partnership to safeguard children and young people and improve their outcomes. Delivery of this new Best Start in Life Plan will be a core workstream within **South Gloucestershire Children's Partnership**. This has long included a Best Start in Life workstream focusing on ensuring all children have the best educational start in life.

South Gloucestershire's **Health and Wellbeing Board** also recognises children and young people as a priority. Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board has identified children and young people as a focus for strategic commissioning and our developing plans for **Neighbourhood Health and Wellbeing** include a focus on children and young people and their families.

We will be accountable for our progress through our governance structures and ultimately to the South Gloucestershire Children's Partnership.

As partners we will:

## **Use shared data across services**

We will strengthen data sharing across health visiting, Best Start Family Hubs, early years settings and schools to help identify needs earlier and plan support more effectively.

## **Listen to families and practitioners**

We will continue to gather feedback through surveys, networks and community engagement, making sure what families tell us leads to real changes.

## **Report progress transparently**

We will publish updates so that families, partners and communities can see how the system is improving.

## **Adapt and improve**

This plan will evolve. As our communities grow and needs change, we will adapt and refine our approach based on what works best for families.



# Part of a bigger picture

This plan sits within a wider national and local context and links to other strategies and plans.

## NATIONAL POLICY

- National Youth Strategy
- Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill
- Best Start in Life Policy July 2025
- [Fit for the future: 10 Year Health Plan for England](#)
- Our Children, Our Future: Tackling Child Poverty
- SEND Reforms

## OVERARCHING LOCAL STRATEGIES

- South Gloucestershire Council Plan 2024-28
- South Gloucestershire Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2025-29
- Children's Partnership Business Plan
- South Gloucestershire Neighbourhood Health and Wellbeing Plan (in development)
- West of England [Child Poverty Action Plan](#)

## LOCAL DELIVERY PARTNERSHIPS

- South Gloucestershire Children's Partnership
- South Gloucestershire Health & Wellbeing Board
- SEND Clusters
- Early Years Working Group
- Families First Partnership
- Children and Young People's Mental Health Partnership
- Infant Feeding





# KEY



Best Start Family Hubs



Children's Centres

