



**Redcar & Cleveland**

# **BEST START IN LIFE STRATEGY**

2026-2031



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## Foreword

We are proud to present our **Best Start Strategy 2026–2031**. The earliest years of a child’s life shape who children become, how they learn, and the futures they will go on to create. When we invest in these formative years, we not only support individual children to thrive, but we strengthen families and communities for generations to come.

Our ambition is simple: **we want every child to have their best life and the opportunity to grow, learn and flourish.**

This strategy sets out our shared aspirations for all children to grow, flourish and reach their full potential. We know that children thrive when they are nurtured by empowered, connected families and supported by strong, welcoming communities. This reflects a belief at the heart of our work; *it takes a village to raise a child.*

Achieving this vision is something none of us can do alone. It requires all of us to work together, listening to one another and acting with a shared purpose. When we do this, we create the conditions in which every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Together, we can give every child the very best start in life.

NB Throughout this strategy we have used the word ‘parent’ to represent parents, carers, and guardians of children.

# Our Bold Vision

Our vision is to give every child the best possible start in life, from pregnancy and throughout the early years, by building a sustainable, integrated early years partnership that wraps seamlessly around parents and communities.

Through empowered families and collaborative early years working we will shape environments where every child thrives and is valued, happy, healthy and ready to learn.

*'Most problems cannot be solved by one person or one organisation. They require expertise, ideas and support from multiple stakeholders.'*

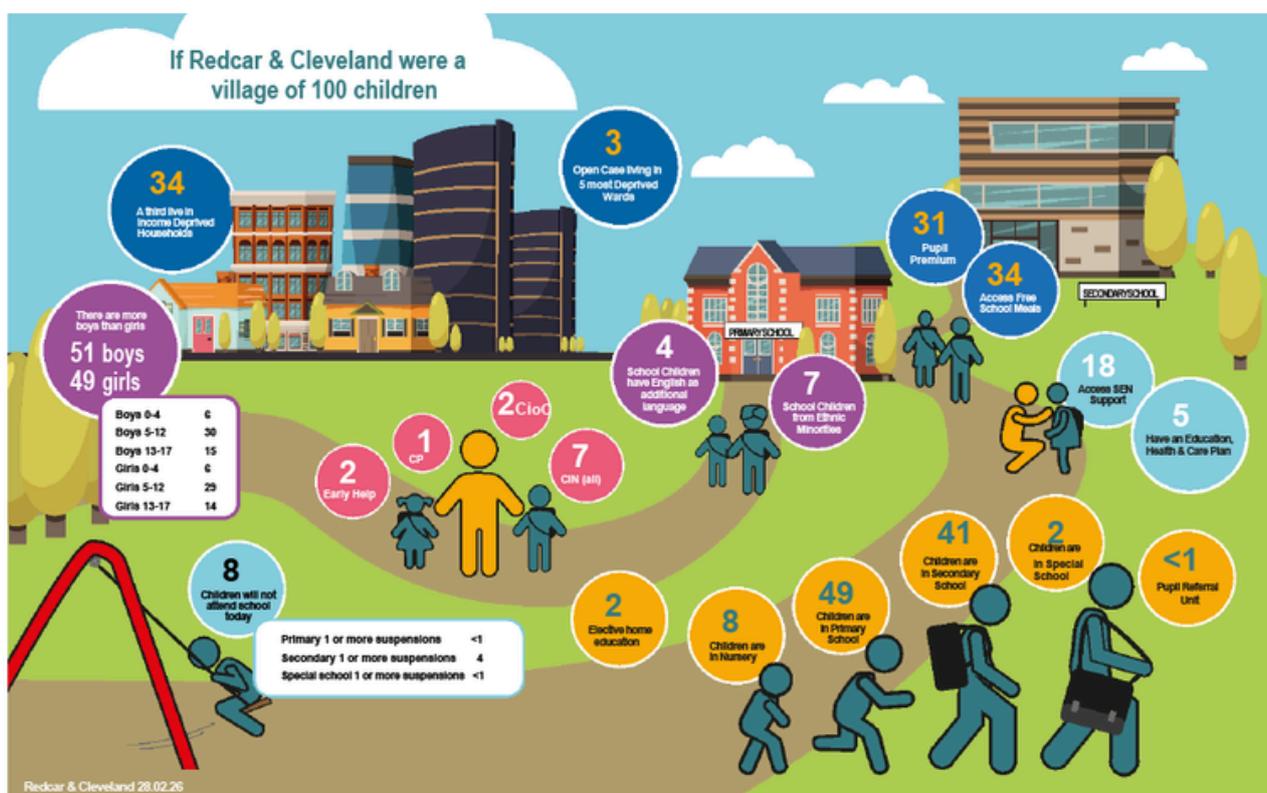
*The Kings Fund – "The Practice of Collaborative Leadership"*



# Why this matters

This Best Start in Life Strategy has been drawn up with partners across the early years sector and builds on the solid foundations of the Redcar and Cleveland School Readiness strategy and of the family hubs transformation programme. The reality is that in Redcar and Cleveland, despite significant effort from many workers, teams and agencies, too many children still do not achieve a good level of development at age 5. This means that too many children are not well prepared with the foundations they need to grow into happy and successful adolescents and then on into adulthood.

We know that babies and children need safe, loving families in warm homes where there is enough to eat, opportunities for play and exploration and where learning in and beyond the home is valued. The latest research tells us about the importance of a child's first five years and its affect on their lifelong chances of healthy development and emotional wellbeing. There are still too many inequalities in Redcar and Cleveland. Many more children live in poverty than the national average and our data shows us that children from the poorer areas are less likely to reach a Good Level of Development at age 5. We also know that vulnerable children are not always attending the early years childcare places that they are entitled to and that the places we have are not always in the most suitable location for families.





We also know that, despite the best efforts of all partners, we are not yet joining up our services and support as effectively as we might, and we know that we are not yet supporting every family and every child with the building blocks that they need to be successful. We know that we need to find ways to listen to the voices of more families and to shape the services more effectively around what we hear.

In seeking to meet the needs of our children and families we are rooting our work in evidence-based practice and in a clear legal framework that successive governments have created. Guided by legislation such as The Childcare Act, The Child and Families Act, The Child Poverty Act and The Equalities Act, and by national policies including Best Start Healthy Babies and Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life we are to able secure our improvements as part of a wider, national drive to secure reform.

The aim of our plan is, therefore, to continue to draw the wider early years sector together into an integrated system with a common purpose, common values and underpinned by a common language so that outcomes for all children, but especially the most disadvantaged, improve, as shown by GLD age 5.

# Giving every child in Redcar and Cleveland the Best Start in Life

Our strategy will focus on better support for families, more accessible early education and childcare and improved quality in early years provision. It will focus on the key themes that we have identified and that will have the most impact on outcomes for our children. These themes include:

- Improving perinatal and parental mental health
- Healthy babies and positive parent-infant relationships
- Parenting support
- Improving the home learning environment
- Supporting speech, language and communication needs
- The importance of play
- Quality of early years education
- Sufficiency and take up of childcare
- Early identification and support for additional needs

The integrated early years partnership seeks to deliver improvement in these areas by adhering to the following principles:

- Seamless services at universal, targeted or specialist level
- Services designed with our communities
- Families at the heart of our work
- Sustainable local services based around the places where families feel most comfortable
- Workforce development for professionals, volunteers and peers

All children matter, but we particularly hope to improve outcomes for those children living in poverty, for those whose parents find the system unwelcoming and for those children with SEND whose needs are not currently well identified or met across the system.





## We will know we've been successful because:

- GLD outcomes improve – across all seven areas of learning so that:

- The proportion of children in Redcar and Cleveland achieving a good level of development at the end of the 2027/2028 academic year is at least 75.9%

- Disadvantaged children (those eligible for free school meals) achieving a good level of development at the end of the 2027/28 academic year is at least 62.6%

- Improved take up and attendance of high quality early childcare places and the wider support offer.
- There is consistent and child-centred data and information sharing, so that all professionals are clear about the needs of children and cohorts regardless of setting.
- Parents understand the importance of their role and how they can support their children to be ready for school.
- Parents know what is happening and why at every stage of their child's journey.
- Parents know what guidance and support is available in their community and are happy with their child's journey from birth to school.
- Children settle well into each phase of their educational journey.

# What do we already know?

Our Best Start Strategy is building on work we have already started as well as on the voices we have heard so far.

In April 2023 we committed to join up and enhance services delivered through transformed family hubs in our local communities, as part of our wider early help strategy and in October 2024 we launched our school readiness strategy. These activities have laid strong foundations for our Best Start in Life plan and are already delivering a range of transformational projects. We have a wide range of services in and from our Best Start Family Hubs and have started to draw services together through the rollout of projects such as the introduction of WellComm, Early Talk Boost, Early Words Together at 3, and Togetherness Parenting Programmes. We have a number of key partners, including Public Health South Tees and Thrive at Five, who are supporting us in finding innovative solutions to the challenges faced by our youngest children in our most deprived wards.

And we have heard from parents and professionals in a variety of ways – from insight work, questionnaires and surveys to parent/carer forums and stakeholder events. They have told us that we have a lot of services available, that we do a lot well; but there is still more to do.

We have summarised the main findings from this feedback below:

- Relationships matter above all else, and parents told us that friends and relatives are a major support, helping to reduce stress, reducing anxiety and giving practical support in the first 1001 days. However, a significant number of families and parents lack a strong support network. A quarter of our parents are single parents and one in ten do not have a partner or family member locally that they can access for support.
- Most parents have excellent support from midwives and health visitors, but when they are worried, they need speedier advice from trusted health professionals.

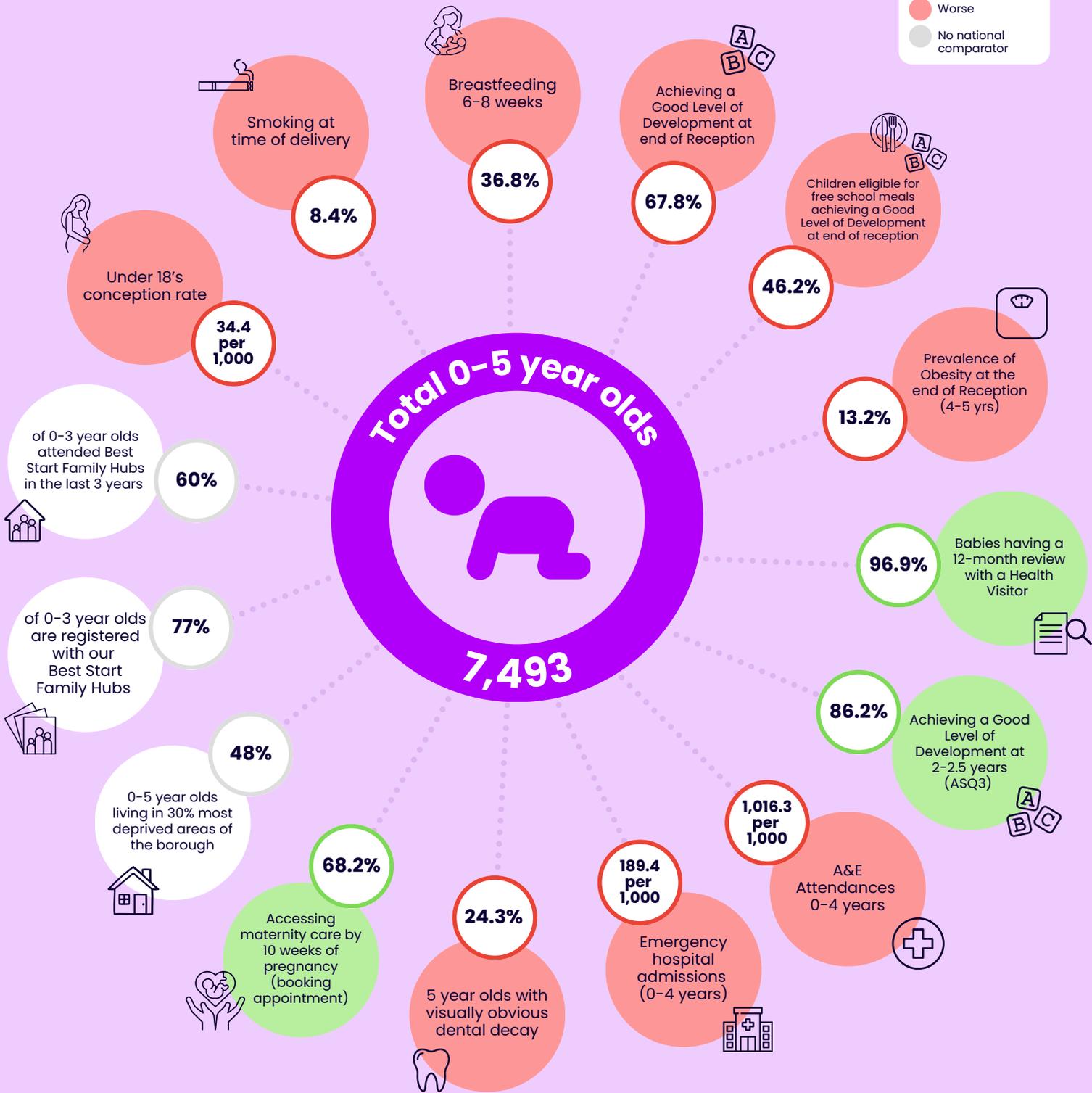
- Parents appreciate the support received in family hubs but there are still too many families who do not access any support. We have heard that transport in rural areas, limited flexible timings for working parents, and anxiety about attending groups independently reduce engagement for some families.
- Parents already accessing Family Hubs feel confident knowing where to get help in the earliest days and report good information and excellent support for pregnancy and baby development, but there are gaps in information and support, particularly as children reach toddlerhood and beyond.
- Parents say digital information is useful, but face to face is preferred and not everyone knows what support is available and where it is available.
- Fear of being judged as a 'bad mother' may sometimes stop parents asking for support.
- Most parents did not know that the first 2 years are the most important stage in a child's development and whilst they recognised the importance of play and interaction, their understanding of baby brain development is hazy and more information is needed for parents.
- Children with SEND needs are identified early but they do not always fully access the childcare and services available to them
- We hear some voices but not all. This includes those of parents, professionals and other partners

This is the time to build a stronger and more coherent early years community. We have an opportunity to work differently and reach more children and families through a shared commitment to building new relationships, developing new ways of working and better sharing of spaces, knowledge and time. And we will, of course, continue to listen to local families to ensure their voices shape and influence the best start services available.

# Where are we now?

How we compare to the National Average:

- Better
- Worse
- No national comparator

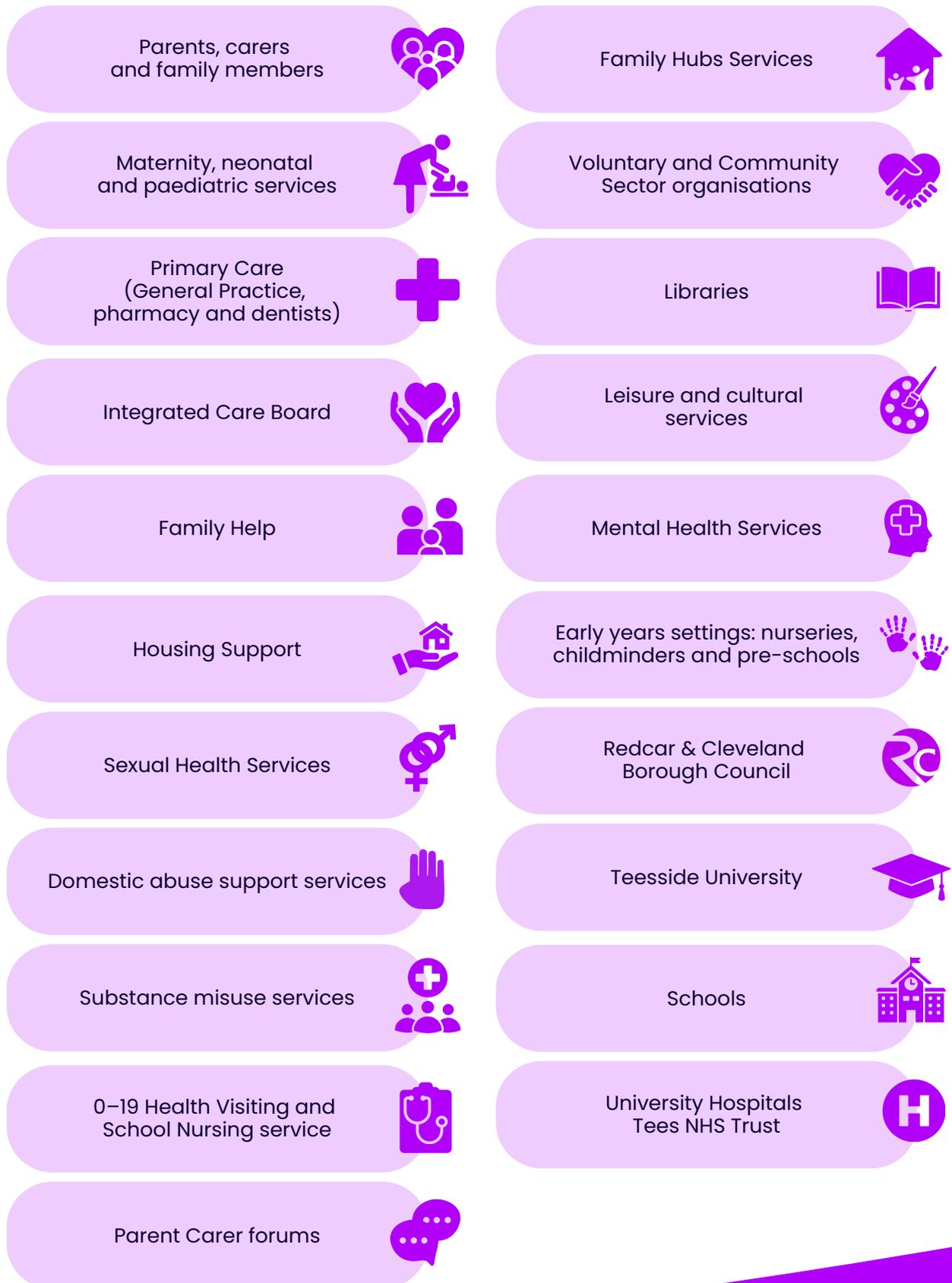


**Percentage that benefit from funded early years education**

% of eligible disadvantaged 2 year olds	% of eligible 3 year olds	% of eligible 4 year olds
<b>71.3%</b> compared to England 65%	<b>98%</b> compared to England 90%	<b>93.7%</b> compared to England 95%

# Our Best Start System

Our Best Start system is made up of parents, carers and all those who have a role in supporting families in Redcar & Cleveland, including public, voluntary and independent providers.



# Priority 1



## The first 1001 days: Healthy Babies and Early Connections

Becoming a parent is a huge change in a person's life and we want to be there to offer connection, reassurance and a helping hand as and when it's needed. Confidence and parenting skills are shaped by our own earliest experiences and by the circumstances we live in. We will help parents get ready for parenthood and will support them and their baby's health, through pregnancy and in the earliest days, by offering information, support and joined up services that are easy to access and understand.

Together we will:

- Help parents be ready for parenthood, and support them to build healthy relationships.
- Promote and support the early parent-infant relationship, especially the importance of bonding and attachment.
- Support parents and parents-to-be with infant feeding choices and to understand the importance of childhood immunisations, perinatal wellbeing and where to seek help if they need it.



# Priority 2



## Confident parents

We want all families to have easy access to the very best family support at the time and in the place where they need it most. We want to reduce isolation and help parents feel confident as they embark on their journey through parenthood. We know that providing seamless, early support is a shared responsibility and we will work better together to ensure that our families, especially the most vulnerable, can access the support and information they need in a consistent, accessible and joined-up way.

Together we will:

- Develop our Best Start Family Hubs offer and network of support, with greater outreach into more isolated communities, to make sure no one misses out.
- Widen access to a range of parenting programmes especially for the most vulnerable parents.
- Ensure that fathers and partners are supported and valued.
- Help parents to understand how to help their child to be happy, healthy and ready to learn, by making sure they get the right information at the right time.
- Support families in understanding healthy eating, the importance of exercise and in making other healthy choices.





## Priority 3

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### Early interactions: Playing, talking, learning

Education starts long before the first day at primary school. Children will succeed through the love, curiosity and experiences they share every day, with their families and with their early caregivers. These early interactions and opportunities lay the foundation for social and emotional wellbeing as well as for the early language skills that form the bedrock of all future learning.

Together we will:

- Support positive parent-infant relationships so that parents feel able to be 'their child's first teacher'.
- Promote play in the home, in the community and in early years settings.
- Have a focus on deepening understanding of speech, language and communication and ensuring early identification and support where needed.

# Priority 4



## Sufficiency and quality of early years provision

High quality early education and childcare boosts children's life chances. We aim to increase the availability of places and to work with schools, nursery providers and childminders to ensure that every child receives the very best provision every day. We also know that there are barriers to some children taking up and/or attending their places and so we will work collectively to understand these barriers and to offer solutions to overcome them. We commit to making the system easier to navigate by ensuring that we give parents clear and consistent information about what is available and how they can take up their full entitlement.

Together we will:

- Increase availability, take up of, and attendance at, funded childcare places.
- Develop a more inclusive offer for children with SEND.
- Work with Early Years providers to ensure all children receive the very best provision.



# Priority 5

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## Better information: better outcomes

As a system we are rich in data. However, we do not always share or use the data well enough to inform our decisions. We will strengthen information sharing processes across all services, to better understand local needs, so there are no missed opportunities to support our babies, children and families at the earliest opportunity. We will also develop an early years' dashboard that is accessible to all the services working with families and will use it to review how well we are doing. We will also ensure that we use creative digital solutions to improve the quality and range of information available to parents and families.

Together we will:

- Strengthen information sharing processes across the early years system.
- Use data to inform our understanding of local needs and of the impact of our services.
- Improve access to and availability of high-quality digital information.



# How we'll deliver the strategy

To be successful we need to focus on delivering the right things at the right time for and with families. However, we also need to act in the right way and with integrity to our common purpose and vision if we are to collectively change lives and improve outcomes for children.

Over the previous pages, we identified the key themes (the right things) that our workstreams will sit under. But we also know that it is important to identify how we will do them. We know that we need to hear and understand the perspectives that our parents, families and colleagues have.

*'Working with a variety of different perspectives is challenging...but if people appreciate the differences and are willing to learn from them, new, more valuable insights may be generated.'*

*The Kings Fund – "The Practice of Collaborative Leadership"*

So, as an Early Years Partnership for Redcar and Cleveland we will:

- Listen to the voices of our communities
- Build trust and put relationships first
- Communicate and collaborate effectively
- Take a trauma informed approach
- Seek to understand different perspectives
- Seek sustainable solutions
- Improve inclusion through recognising and removing the barriers that many families face



# We also commit to:

## **Keeping inclusion at the heart of each priority**

We will make sure that meeting the needs of children with SEND is a core focus of every workstream.

## **Understanding that place matters**

We will focus on meeting needs in the heart of each community. We will be innovative in how we ensure communities get the services they need.

## **Using data wisely**

We need to improve information sharing between people and services so that families and children benefit from a more seamless offer.

## **Being open to change**

We will underpin our work with evidence and will be prepared to change what we do in response to this. Workforce development is a central part of every workstream.

## **Working better with a wider range of partners**

We will work closely with health colleagues as the NHS 10-year plan is implemented. We also commit to fully integrating the community and voluntary sector as Best Start partners as part of our Best Start Family Hubs Network.

## **Being open to challenge**

Parents know their children best and we want to hear what parents say and accept when we might not be getting it right. We will listen, reflect and learn.

For each workstream in the 5 priority areas we will identify co-leaders from different service areas to lead on delivery of the plan. With them, a multiagency operational group will work closely to ensure that plans are well delivered. The leaders will ensure that the cross-cutting themes and principles remain at the centre.

We will evaluate the success of plans using a range of data:

- **User data** – who are we reaching and where?
- **Engagement data** – we will measure how many people a project has reached
- **Feedback data** – we will listen to the voices of families to understand their experience and whether the work we did made a difference. We will seek the voices of children whenever possible
- **Outcomes data** – are we making short term changes? We will report on any clear benefits that are now in place.
- **Impact data** – What is the long-term measurable difference we are making? Ultimately, are more children reaching a good level of development at age 5?

We will present our data and our evaluations in our early years data dashboards and in regular reports to the early years' partnership and our key governance routes.



# Governance

The Early Years Partnership consists of representatives from the following organisations:

- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
  - Family Hubs
  - Education
  - Health Visiting and School Nursing Service (0-19)
  - Libraries
  - Leisure and neighbourhood services
- University Hospitals Tees NHS Trust
  - Maternity services
  - Community Midwifery
  - Speech and Language Therapy
- Teesside University
- Public Health South Tees
- Enhance Redcar/VCS
- Thrive at Five
- Early Years providers
- Schools
- SEND Parent Carer Forum (SEND Family Voice)
- Parent Carer Panel (Hub Heroes)

Representatives commit to engaging with the agreed priorities and workstreams and to committing staff to be fully involved wherever relevant. The partnership meets 6 times a year to plan, share, review and evaluate the impact of our work together.

We understand that our work fits in with other strategies and initiatives. At all times we will endeavour to ensure these complement each other so that families and children receive a seamless, smooth service wherever they are and whatever it is that they need to be successful and happy.

As a partnership we report directly to the Children and Young People's Wellbeing board.

**To find out more about local activities  
and events for children aged 0-5,  
please visit the Family Hubs website**

