



# Delivering the Best Start in Life strategy: Planning and data for local context

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The government's Early Years strategy for England 'Giving every child the best start in life', outlines Local Authority funding to ensure children are ready to start school at age 5. The use of data to understand local needs and what works is essential to deliver targeted investments. Here we set out guidance for Local Authorities to develop their data use, drawing on best practice.

## Overview

- **Local Authorities need to develop plans to meet the new targets set by the Department for Education to raise the number of children reaching a Good Level of Development by 2028, in line with the government's new strategy 'Giving every child the best start in life' (July 2025).**
- **We highlight key resources and best practice for Local Authorities to develop their contextual data.**
- **To select the best interventions for local need, Local Authorities need to engage critically with research.**
- **Local and national government need to collaborate to develop meaningful integrated data systems to place resources where they are most needed.**

Recent figures show that 34% of 5-year-olds in England are not at a Good Level of Development across 12 of the 17 Early Learning Goals (Department for Education, 2024). Furthermore, the disadvantage gap of children aged 5 continues to widen (from 4.6 months difference in 2023 to 4.7 months in 2024) (Education Policy Institute, 2025).

The government's new Early Years reform strategy aims to improve early childhood development and reduce this disadvantage gap by 'giving every child the best start in life' through Local Authority funding to invest in Best Start Family Hubs and Early Childhood Education and Care (Department for Education, 2025). However, for Local Authorities to invest this funding strategically, they will need to identify their local needs and find suitable interventions.



## Best Start funding

Following the recent expansion of entitlement to 30 hours of funded childcare from 9-months of age for working families, the Government's 'Giving every child the best start in life' strategy (shortened here to the 'Best Start' strategy), aims to ensure that all children are developmentally ready to start school at age 5. The plans include making sure that families can understand and access support through Best Start Family Hubs and that all eligible children are in Early Years settings which provide high-quality childcare.

The strategy recognises that the picture is complex and that an understanding of local contextual needs within each Local Authority is essential for impactful reform. This complexity arises through several factors including:

- diminishing services limiting the support and guidance that can be given to families by Local Authorities;
- disparities in high-quality flexible childcare provision that is influenced by the recruitment and retention of well-trained Early Years practitioners, especially in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (Hardy et al., 2023);
- childcare deserts, primarily in areas of high deprivation, particularly of flexible childcare providers (Ward, 2024).

As a first step, Local Authorities will therefore need to assess their own individual starting point from which to build a plan.

## Local Authority plans

Each Local Authority has been set preliminary targets by the Department for Education for the proportion of children, and proportion of disadvantaged children, that should be achieving a Good Level of Development by 2028. Alongside this, Local Authorities must submit their Best Start Plans for online publication by 31 March 2026. However, there is uncertainty around what these plans should look like and whether by the start of April 2026 Local Authorities should be exploring or implementing options. It will be challenging for Local Authorities to complete both a contextual needs assessment and an options assessment within this time.

Without clear guidance on how to formulate plans Local Authorities will be assessing their data, where there will inevitably be gaps, to answer questions such as:

- where are we lacking Early Childhood Education and Care settings, including flexible care such as childminders?
- what does high quality childcare look like and which settings offer this?
- what support do we currently offer to families and what is its impact?
- what further support do families need and how can we meet those needs?

Work by the Early Intervention Foundation (Lewing, Gross & Molly, 2022) across England and Wales gives insights on successful local systems planning. They emphasise the need for this planning to address the starting point for Local Authorities '*using population needs assessment, local system assessment, and analysis of other existing evidence and research*' (pg. 7). Local Authorities need to take the time to consider each of these elements in order to plan effectively.

## Local contextual needs

The Best Start strategy emphasises the importance of understanding contextual needs within each locality. Whilst the strategy gives no direction to Local Authorities on how to conduct their needs assessment, the Foundations What Works Centre have previously published a population needs assessment guide (Davie et al, 2024). This guide stresses the importance of triangulating different types of evidence, qualitative and quantitative, to gain a good overview of need, using proxy data where exact data is not available (Figure 1). Once needs are identified, Local Authorities should build on their understanding and continuously monitor the situation.

To make holistically informed decisions, Local Authorities need to be able to critically assess research evidence. The Education Endowment Foundations guide to using research evidence (EEF, 2024), can help with this critical assessment.

**Clear planning and understanding contextual needs and evidence takes time but the result is a clear direction for Local Authorities on where their efforts should focus.**

### Example: Mapping Early Years provision

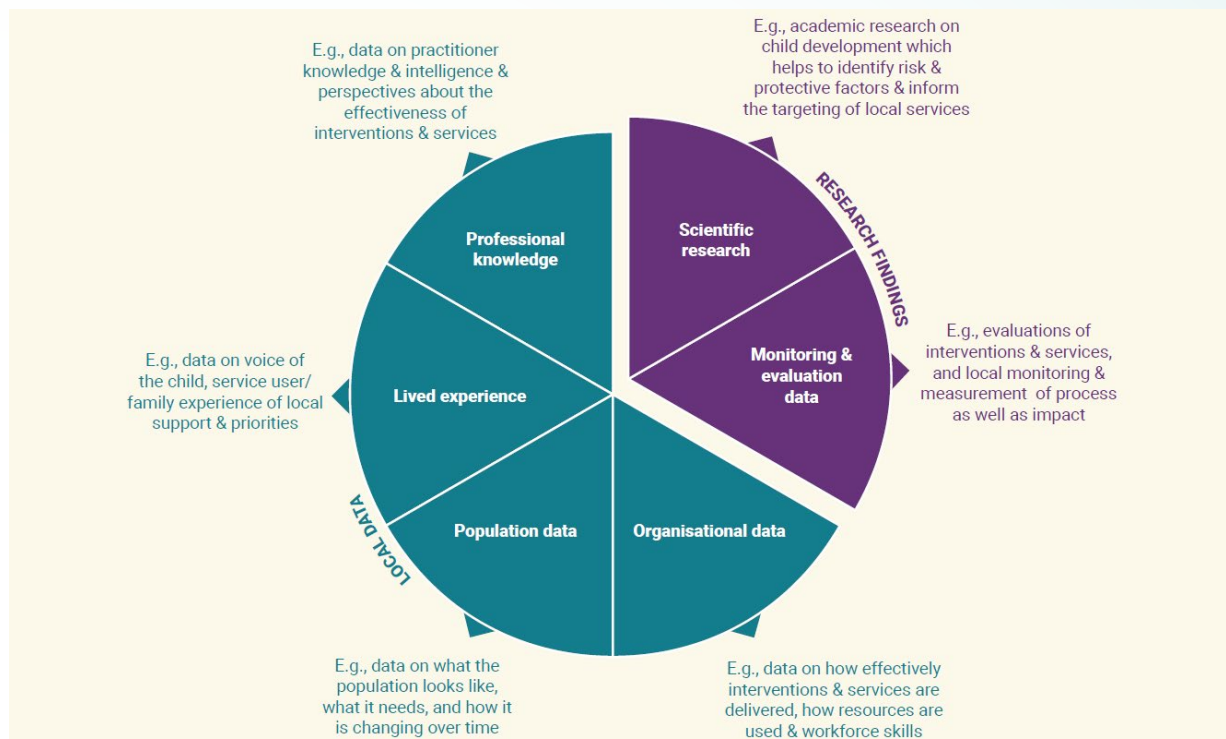
Population and organisational data, and scientific research, played a critical role in identifying policy levers in the West Yorkshire Early Childhood Education and Care system (Haines-Doran et al., 2025). Mapping was undertaken by the University of Leeds, in partnership with the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN), at the request of West Yorkshire Combined Authority. Research identified key areas in which the Combined Authority could take action, for example, identifying challenges such as workforce recruitment and retention issues and the need for more flexible childcare. This work resulted in the development of an Early Years workforce strategy to start tackling these issues.

### Example: Building knowledge

Bristol City Council were given funding to create Family Hubs through the Family Hubs and Start of Life Programme (DHSC & DfE, 2023). They draw on professional knowledge and lived experience from their projects to understand, for instance, how to develop accessible resources that met the cultural and literacy needs of local communities using a '**test and learn' approach (pdf)**.

**Figure 1.** Using and generating evidence - combining research findings and local data.

Taken from: Lewing, B., Gross, J., Molloy, D. (2022) **Leading and delivering early childhood services: 10 insights from 20 places across England and Wales** | Early Intervention Foundation, shared under **CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 UK**



## Assessing interventions

Critical thinking needs to be applied to claims made for evidence-based interventions. The government's Best Start strategy proposes offering families a menu of evidence-based parenting programmes, along with interventions like the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) in Reception year and Maths Champions in Early Years. The parenting programmes list is not published yet, however, Local Authorities can already consider existing learning when deciding which evidence-based interventions to implement.

High-quality childcare is generally agreed to include structural quality (inputs which can be measured and regulated such as staff retention and adult-child ratios) and process quality (children's day to day experiences such as the activities undertaken and adult-child interactions) (Education Policy Institute, 2024). The implementation of evidence-based interventions is key to improving process quality, however, just because an intervention has had a rigorous Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) it doesn't necessarily mean it will suit the needs of your community.

Evidence should be reviewed to consider its reliability (EEF, 2024), whether studies are applicable to a UK context, what programme elements lead to improvements in outcomes (Education Policy Institute, 2024), and whether programmes have impacts for all groups of children. NELI, for example,

has a good evidence-base for improving children's language skills, however, the evidence for children who speak English as an Additional Language is less strong due to this subgroup's small sample size in the evaluation.

## Integrated data

In the Best Start strategy, the government sets out a vision of a fully integrated system where data on children and families is shared within and across organisations. However, for Local Authorities the availability and usefulness of the data they currently have is a key issue, as is the lack of technical infrastructure to support data collection.

Comparative data can show where resources are best focused. For example, York City Council has looked at data across wards such as the number of children, number eligible for Free School Meals, and emerging communication and language skills, to build a city-wide picture. However, a lack of standard reporting means it is not possible to similarly benchmark regionally or nationally. For example, the Early Language Identification Measure is one of the only communication measures suitable for under 3-year olds, but it is not mandated for health visitors limiting reporting.

**To meet the government's integrated data vision more work is needed to develop technical infrastructure and mandating of measures in and across Local Authorities.**



## Recommendations

### For Local Authorities:

Local Authorities in England should take the following steps to improve their data use and inform strategic investment under the government's Best Start strategy:

- Take sufficient time to assess local needs and local learning on how to address those needs. We recommend using the 'Thinking about your local population needs' guide by the Foundations What Works Centre for Children & Families.
- Interrogate the research evidence so better decisions can be made when assessing local needs and selecting interventions to tackle those needs.
- Integrate evidence gathering and use at every step from initial scoping to evaluation of delivered investments, with consideration for how data gathering can be improved as part of this.
- Use different forms of evidence. While quantitative data is useful to assess a starting point and outcomes, professional knowledge and lived experiences are essential for development, monitoring and evaluation.

### For the Department for Education:

- Allow Local Authorities sufficient time to gather data and make informed decisions to yield better long-term results and as such, the government needs to clarify what is expected by the April 2026 deadline.
- Support Local Authorities to build the technical infrastructure required to gather and integrate data and mandate reporting of key measures which will, in the longer-term, mean Local Authorities can make better decisions about where resources are needed.

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## Further information

The following guides are recommended:

- To assess local contextual needs: **Foundations: Thinking about your local populations needs (pdf)**
- To assess research evidence: **Education Endowment Foundation: Using research evidence 2024**

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