Best Start: A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support

Executive Summary

CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES

November 2025

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The evidence is clear – when delivered well, integrated, place-based family support is transformative for the lives of children and their families. Yet, a quarter century after the launch of Sure Start, children and families often lack the support they need to thrive.

But the tide is changing. Recent policy decisions have been encouraging, placing children's life chances back at the forefront of Government priorities. The Government's *Best Start in Life Strategy* marks a pivotal opportunity to learn from the best of Sure Start and Family Hubs, and rebuilding a trusted, integrated system of family support. Much is at stake for children and families, and to deliver real change, ambitions must be clear, and sights set high on what can be achieved through Best Start Family Hubs.

Between 2024 and 2025, the Centre for Young Lives undertook research to provide key insights into the nature of family support provision today. Drawing on and learning from the best practice of the last 25 years, this report sets out what it will take to deliver family support and how it can bring about long-term systems change for family support and better outcomes for children and families.

What is the scale of children's centre and family hubs provision?

In part one of this research[1], published in April 2025, we set out the scale of the existing stock of family support and made the case for sufficient and sustainable funding to expand the offer of support for families. We revealed how in 2023/24, local authorities were spending less than a quarter on children's centres and family hubs compared to spending at the peak of Sure Start. That funding was precarious and at high risk, with just under half of local authorities reporting they were facing budget cuts for this financial year. The reduction in funding was responsible for both a reduction in the number of centres and the depth of provision offered by each. There are now an estimated total of 2,100 hubs and centres across England - from the 3,500 Sure Start children's centres at Sure Start's peak - and an average spend of £275,000 per hub - just over half of the average spend per hub under Sure Start in 2010.

While a recent announcement of £500m for Best Start Family Hubs from the Department for Education is welcome, this report reaffirms the need for sufficient, long-term funding to catalyse the transformation of family support through the delivery of new Hubs.

Funding from Government for Best Start Family Hubs should prioritise targeting those children and families with the highest need, and those who do not currently have access

[1] Centre for Young Lives (2025) Fresh Start for Sure Start: Part 1 – Building from the Foundations

to the early years support that they need. This is essential to ensuring that Best Start Family Hubs are delivering the biggest impact and contributing to the Government's milestone of 75% of children reaching a good level of development, or being 'school ready' at age five, by 2028. Targeting funding in this way will help to ensure that reaching the Government's milestone does not create a situation where those children who are close to achieving the milestone make up the 75%, while those much further away from reaching a good level of development are left to fall even further behind their peers by not receiving the support they need, when they need it.

In this report, a cross-analysis of the number of children not yet reaching a good level of development in a local authority, and so-called 'childcare deserts' - where there are more than three children for every early years place in an area - highlights the need for Government to target support to the areas which need the most support. Of the local authorities in the bottom tertile of good levels of development (areas with the lowest percentage of children reaching a good level of development), 76% are considered childcare deserts (39). This compares to 53% in the middle tertile (27), and 22% in the top tertile, areas with the highest percentage of children reaching a good level of development (11). We are asking Government to target support, through the rollout of Best Start Family Hubs, to the areas most in need to ensure they have the biggest impact.

What can Best Start Family Hubs learn from the best of Sure Start and Family Hubs?

In the context of the Best Start in Life strategy, this report sets out how Government investment can be delivered most effectively to support children and families through new Best Start Family Hubs to establish a new and ambitious vision for joined up family support.

Building on our findings from the past year, this report establishes six principles that we have identified, in partnership with local authorities and experts, as necessary in underpinning Best Start Family Hubs and the wider system of family support to ensure they deliver well for children and families.

We set out six principles identified to establish a clear vision for what children and families want and need from family support, and our recommendations to Government and local authorities to get there.

Principle 1: A single front door approach to support backed up by an Integrated Local System

Where children and families seeking help can access the support or information they need, regardless of where they go to ask for support.

Principle 2: Family support where the voices of children and families are heard

Best Start Family Hubs that work alongside and are shaped by families, providing support when and how it is needed, and embedding co-production into service design and delivery from the very start.

Principle 3: Family support that is embedded into communities

Family support that is visible, consistent, and long-term. Bringing together all family support, including remaining children's centres under a new Best Start Family Hubs brand which is for the long term and is known and trusted by families and communities.

Principle 4: Family support that is easy to reach

Ensuring easy access to support near to home so that children and families are getting the help they need, where and when they need it.

Principle 5: High-quality Family support in every community

A system of family support that delivers high-quality, evidence-based support for every child and family that needs it, no matter where they live.

Principle 6: Family support for children of all ages and their families

Support is available throughout childhood - from the first week to adolescence - so that trusted relationships are built and maintained as children grow up.

Recommendations for Government

Principle 1: A single front door approach to support, backed up by an Integrated Local System

- The Department for Education should establish and lead a cross-departmental plan for Best Start Family Hubs, co-signed by key departmental partners including Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This plan should be a running agenda item at the Opportunity Mission Board and supported by a cross-departmental team of senior officials and encourage the join up on national policies such as the Youth Strategy, Education White Paper on SEND reform, Neighbourhood Health under the 10 Year Plan, and Young Futures Hubs.
    - This should include a Family Hubs working group of senior civil servants from relevant Government departments.

    - The Test, Learn and Grow Programme should explore scalable and effective examples of best practice of a wide range of support for children and families to be delivered with and through Best Start Family Hubs.

- The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should publish one single and comprehensive, cross-departmental guidance document for Best Start Family Hubs, co-signed by key departmental partners including Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Guidance should:
    - Facilitate stronger data-sharing arrangements between Family Hubs and relevant statutory agencies and partners, through data-sharing pilots to understand what works well in ensuring smooth data-sharing, supported by the establishment of the Single Unique Identifier.
    - Facilitate strong join up between Family Hubs and local childcare providers. This should include co-location of Family Hubs and the government's new school-based nurseries, and guidance clarifying the role of Family Hubs in improving quality and establishing links with the childcare providers through training and guidance.
    - Set out guidance for delivering the Best Start offer for older children, teenagers and their families, including linking to new Young Futures Hubs.
    - Clarify the role of integrated mental health support for teenagers through Family Hubs and Young Futures Hubs.
- The Department for Education should launch a workforce leadership programme for Family Hubs and wider children's support staff, equipping local practice leaders with the tools and professional development to deliver strong leadership, systems change and innovation locally. The Department for Education should expand the role of the National Centre for Family Hubs to support local authorities in delivering Best Start Family Hubs, through delivering a unified national training programme for Family Hub staff, and the sharing of best practice both locally and nationally through Communities of Practice.

Principle 2: A Family support system where the voices of children and families are heard

- Learning from the benefits of co-production under Sure Start, guidance from Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should support local authorities to embed co-production into Best Start Family Hubs to ensure that the voices of children and families are heard, issuing guidance to local authorities on effective ways to embed co-production into service design.

This should be supported by the sharing of best practice and practice guides from the National Centre for Family Hubs.

Principle 3: Family support that is embedded into communities

- The Department for Education should develop a new and meaningful nationwide Best Start Family Hubs brand to replace Family Hubs and Sure Start branding with coordinated public awareness campaigns, to remove confusion and ensure families know what support is available to them, and where to access it.
- The Department for Education should consult on plans to establish a statutory basis for Best Start that brings all existing family support under one Best Start legislative framework, to remove confusion, set clear and consistent expectations on local authorities and ensure a clear and consistent pathway for families across the country. The legislation should ensure:
    - A legal definition of a Best Start Family Hub, which replaces previous Sure Start legislation and establishes clarity about the remit of hubs and centres.
    - Clear principles are set for Best Start Family Hubs and wider Family Support.
    - A duty is placed on local partners, including local authorities, health providers, and schools, to work together to support families through hubs.
    - The financial sustainability of Best Start Family Hubs is protected, through a duty to provide or commission support.
    - A duty is placed on local partners to report on key metrics relating to the provision of Best Start Family Hubs.

Principle 4: Family support that is easy to reach

- Guidance from Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should establish routine collection of need and gap analysis data and reach data for services delivered by and through Best Start Family Hubs. This would enable local authorities to better understand impact, target underserved communities and strengthen proactive outreach.

- The Department for Education should support the national rollout of community-facing 'navigator' roles to strengthen proactive outreach to families and connections across services. This should include co-producing a national role specification and training network for navigators with local authorities, families and the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.

Principle 5: High-quality family support services in every community

- The Department for Education should design and deliver a centrally mandated 'core offer' of service 0 – 19 to be delivered through Best Start Family Hubs.
- The Opportunity Mission board should establish a 'common outcomes framework for Opportunity', a cross-departmental common outcomes framework for babies, children and young people, with clear accountability across Government departments. Local authorities should develop area-specific outcomes frameworks in line with this, strengthening partnerships with local partners to deliver on key priorities.
- The Department for Education should support the delivery of evidence-based services with a focus on high quality implementation through a national database of evidence-based programmes to support local authorities, and support from regional authorities and the National Centre for Family Hubs to provide additional support.
- The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should provide guidance to local authorities and support where necessary to strengthen standardised data collection and effective monitoring of take-up, engagement and outcomes of service delivery to identify how many, and which families are accessing support, and the impact services are having.
- Government should match the need for family support and commit to long-term, ambitious, sustainable funding to build a national infrastructure of Best Start Family Hubs, including shoring up existing family support provision.
    - The Department of Health and Social Care should match the initial investment of £500m into Best Start Family Hubs through Start for Life, to boost investment to a total of at least £1bn over the next three years.
    - The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should scale up investment into joined up family support over the next decade to strengthen provision and embed Best Start Family Hubs into communities for the long-term. Part 1 of our research sets out a costed model that recommends an iterative approach to scale up funding to reach £2.2bn and 2m more children by the ninth year.
    - The Department for Education should consider innovative means to raise investment for Family Hubs. This should include establishing National Social Outcomes Partnerships pilots - government-backed agreements that fund services based on achieving measurable social outcomes rather than activities or inputs - for Best Start Family Hubs to unlock additional

investments. The Better Futures fund could also support these developments.

- The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education should provide a dedicated funding pot for provision for older children and teenagers as part of Best Start Family Hubs.

Principle 6: Family support that delivers a consistent offer for children of all ages and their families

- The Department for Education should support the delivery of an ambitious offer of support for children across the full 0-19 age range through setting clear standards and expectations in guidance for Best Start Family Hubs.

- The National Centre for Family Hubs should promote best practice in supporting children of all ages and their families through Hubs by providing resources and guides for tailoring your space and offer of activities and services to children of different ages based on examples of best practice.

Recommendations for local authorities

- New Best Start Local Plans should set out how the delivery of integrated local systems will be designed and delivered through Hubs. This should include:
    - Establishing formal arrangements to embed multi-agency decision making from the earliest possible stage of service design and delivery.
    - Developing area-specific common outcomes frameworks that reflect the needs and priorities of their communities and through that work to strengthen partnerships with other key stakeholders. Responsibility and accountability for these outcomes should sit with the Children and Young People's Board.
    - Identifying and clearly defining where responsibility and accountability for Family Hubs sits within the wider system.
    - Exploring effective ways to ensure multi-agency working is occurring.
    - Establishing a clearly defined, formal and strategic role for the VCSE sector in service design and delivery.

- New Best Start Local Plans should explore means of embedding parent and community voice into service design and delivery and include the voices of children and young people from the earliest stage. This can be delivered through strengthening the role of Parent Carer Panels and Advisory Board, and Parent Champions to feed in at a strategic level. Family Hubs should encourage parent-

led services through peer support, volunteering and training opportunities to parents and carers.

- Best Start Local Plans should establish a delivery plan for proactive outreach of services into communities. This should draw on existing community assets such as schools, community spaces and community networks, and factor in the role of the VCSE sector in reaching underserved communities.

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