



Westmorland & Furness Council



# Best Start in Life Conception to Five Ambition 2025-2028



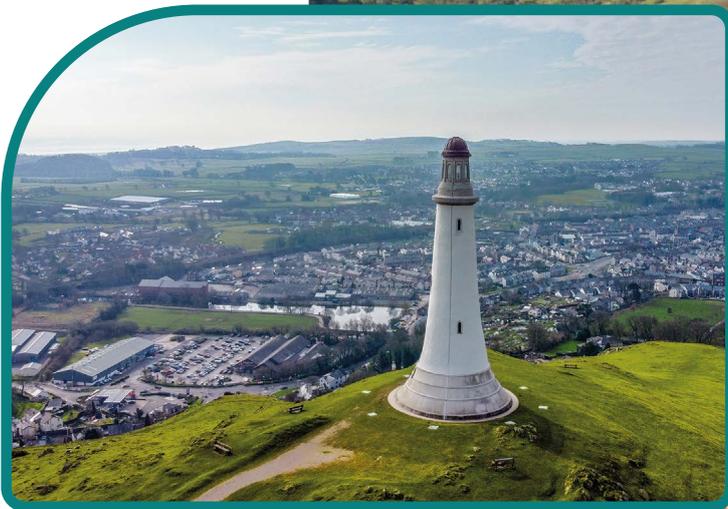
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# Our Ambition

"Our ambition is that every child in Westmorland and Furness has the best start in life to grow, thrive and to know they belong."



# Foreword

“Our ambition for every child in Westmorland and Furness is that they should have opportunities to live happy, healthy lives, safeguarded from harm in the place they call home and within their community. This strategy will help us achieve that, working in partnership with other organisations, schools, local communities, and, most importantly, parents and families. Research and experience tells us that the first 5 years of a child’s life are most important in helping them get established in life, with their relationships, understanding of themselves, and starting to enjoy learning.”



## **Councillor Janet Battye**

Cabinet member for Children’s Services, Education and Skills

“I am pleased to introduce our Best Start in Life Strategy, which sets out our shared commitment to giving every child the strongest possible foundation for lifelong health, learning and wellbeing.

The earliest years shape development, attachment, language and resilience. Acting early changes life chances and reduces inequality before gaps grow wider and harder to close. This strategy brings together maternity services, health visiting, early years, schools, Best Start Family Hubs, social care and the voluntary sector to provide earlier support and clearer pathways for families.

We will prioritise prevention, strengthen speech and language development, support perinatal mental health, promote school readiness and safeguard vulnerable children. Central to this is listening to families and working in partnership with them.

A strong start does not guarantee an easy life — but it makes resilience, aspiration and achievement far more likely. Together, we will ensure that in Westmorland and Furness, every child has the opportunity to thrive from the very start.”



## **Milorad Vasic**

Director of Children’s Services,

# Why is the best start in life a priority?

## Introduction

Our relationships, surroundings and experiences during the first and second 1001 days of our lives from conception to five years of age shape the adults we become and the society we create. Advances in brain science have shown that early childhood – pregnancy to five – has implications for our development that go far beyond our physical abilities. What we experience in our early years, from conception to the age of five, shapes the developing brain, which is why positive physical, emotional and cognitive development during this period is so crucial. It is a time when the building blocks are established, laying foundations that help provide greater resilience to deal with future adversity.

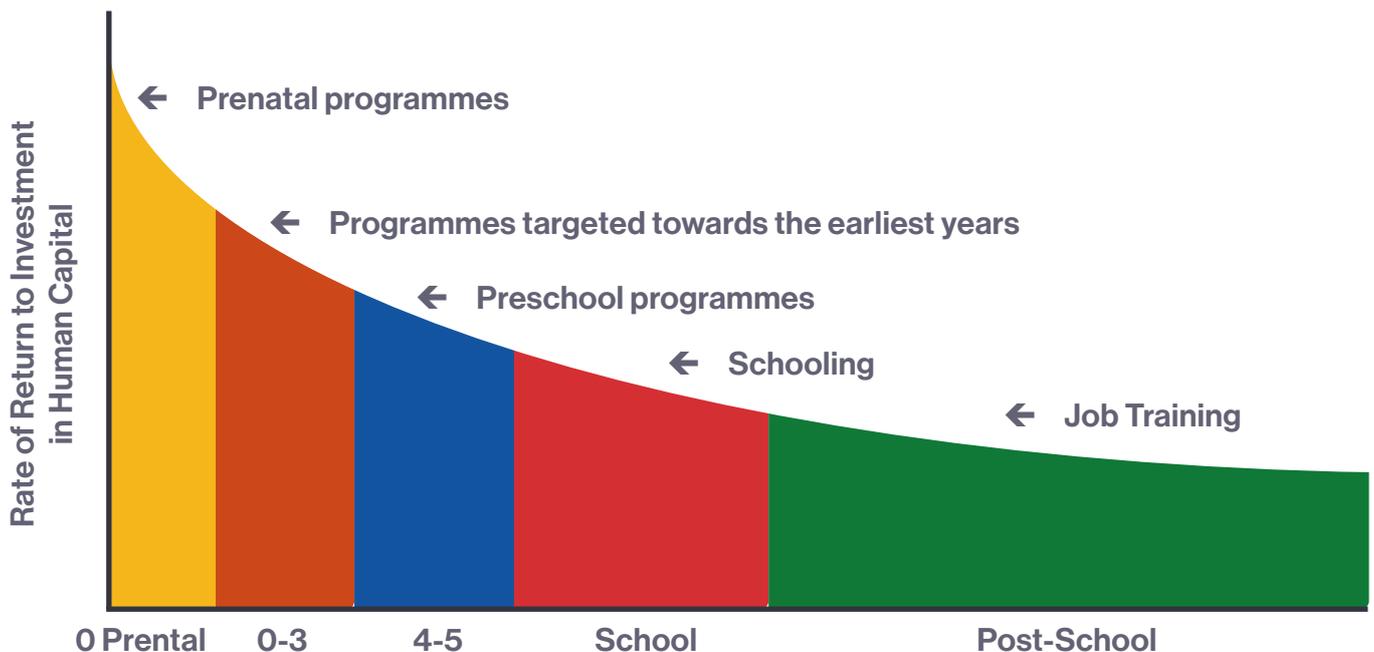
We know from research that the impact of early years lasts a lifetime. The relational interactions between child and carers from conception onwards has an important and long lasting impact on a child's cognitive, sensory and language development. The work we do across the whole partnership will support and ensure effective implementation and delivery of the outcomes for all children focusing where support is most needed and identified.

We know there are further challenges across all aspects of early years in particular areas of Westmorland and Furness and we know there are some inequalities in early years outcomes across some of the localities. We will build on existing work with local partnerships to ensure that the delivery of Best Start in Life is equitable, narrowing the gap between children. We aim to build on the work already in place through health, the family hub, settings and schools partnerships.

High quality early childhood represents one of the best investments we can make for the long-term health, wellbeing and happiness of our society and research tells us early years intervention makes economic, educational and social sense.

## Early Childhood Development is a Smart Investment

The earlier the investment, the greater the return.



Source: James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics

*"The early years are not simply about how we raise our children. They are about the society we will become."* The Princess of Wales (with reference to the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood

Embedded within the government's Best Start In Life mission the Childcare Act enables a framework for delivery through our legal requirements under these key areas:

- The early years outcomes duties requiring the provision of early years services and joint working between agencies to reduce inequalities, improve outcomes and narrow the gap.
- The sufficiency duties requiring Local Authorities to ensure sufficient early education and childcare for the early years entitlements from 9 months +, at two, three and four, and that they enable parents to take part in employment and employment-related activities (childcare for children aged 0-14, or 18 for children with a disability).
- The information duties requiring Local Authorities to ensure information for both childcare providers and families in order to meet the statutory childcare sufficiency duties.
- The delivery and development of Best Start Family Hubs is key to the successful implementation of the government's mission and opportunities for children and families, integral to WAF's ambition plan. The Best Start Family Hubs are the single point of access from pre-birth to 19 (25 for young people with disabilities), offering universal services for all, in order to reach families least advantaged and narrow the gap.

The first steps to putting the early years at the heart of how we deliver stronger outcomes for children, families and society is by positively shaping the environment a child is born into and develops within.

## **Our ambition**

Our Best Start Conception to Five Ambition for each child will be co-produced with partners, early years educators and families to ensure there is an integrated approach underpinned by the county values, equality and inclusivity.

Underlying the priorities and direction of our ambition will be a commitment to the Best Start in Life Strategy. The golden threads in Westmorland and Furness will connect and link together across our partnerships to ensure all children and families have access to high quality education, high quality and sufficient childcare, health services that effectively identify any emerging needs and support children from the earliest point in time. Our Best Start Family Hubs will engage and support the communities they are in providing accessible services that meet the needs of the children and families.

It is our aim to improve and have the very best outcomes for children at the end of their reception year. We will put children at the heart and center as we support them for the next key stage in their journey from birth to adulthood. We are committed to working with parents together to enable their children to be ready, willing and able to learn at home and as they start school, with schools ready to welcome these children with children who have strong foundations to do this.

In order to do this, we need to be creative, ambitious, test and explore what works for our families and children and use that learning in creating a positive culture that enables children to flourish whatever their starting point and background giving them equity of opportunity.



### Equality

The assumption is that **everyone benefits from the same support.**

This is equal treatment.



### Equity

**Everyone gets the support they need** (this is the concept of “affirmative action”), thus producing equity

It is important to acknowledge the development of a strong strategic ambition in Westmorland and Furness which underpins all aspects of Early Years, whilst also recognising the need to be increasingly bold and ambitious as we continue in our endeavours to improve outcomes for all children and young people.

We are pleased that recent redesign and recommissioning of the 0-19 Healthy Child Programme (now provided by Harrogate District Foundation Trust) and the development of the Best Start Family Hubs has given us the opportunity to bring together new partnerships in Westmorland and Furness. We now have clear strategic partners alongside SEND and early years schools and settings to support the development of our Early Years Ambition.

We are ambitious for all our children – we want to identify need early, to provide the right support at the right time for them to start well, to learn and develop well in excellent local settings, with the aim of our young children becoming confident, healthy and happy independent learners. Working with our partners we believe we are more effective when we work together through a more holistic approach across all sectors. Everyone in our early years system is committed to delivering these ambitions.

Aligning with the Department for Education's National Best Start in Life Strategy and the ambition that by 2028 at least 75% of children will reach a good level of development it is our belief that children in Westmorland and Furness not only receive the right support and services at the right time but that each and every child fulfils their potential.

Our ambition will play a key role in delivering the Government's national commitment to improve early child development and reduce inequalities at a local level. The National Best Start in Life strategy published in July 2025, aims to ensure a child's background doesn't determine their future success, so children develop well – learning to communicate, build relationships, manage their emotions, play and learn. More specifically it aims to:

- Enhance family services and early intervention through 'Best Start Family Hubs'.
- Provide affordable and accessible childcare.
- Deliver high quality early education.

Every child is unique and should be celebrated and recognised for who they are. Our role is to advocate for children and their families to ensure they play an active part in the decisions that affect their lives.

Co-production with families and wider partners will be key, reflecting the infancy of the local authority early years ambition, the developing Family Hubs and the newly commissioned 0-19 Healthy Child Programme. Governance structures will be further established to review and monitor that action plans underpinning our strategic ambition.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework sets out the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe based on evidence and research over many years.

All children deserve the care and support they need to have the best start in life. Children learn and develop at a faster rate from birth to five than at any other time in their lives, so their experiences in early years have a major impact on their future life chances. The early years of a child's life are when their brain develops the fastest. What happens during this time at home, in early education and in the community has long lasting impacts, sets the foundations for growth, learning, and emotional and physical development. A secure, safe and happy childhood is important in its own right. Good parenting and high-quality learning provide the foundation children need to fulfil their potential (with reference to the Early Years Statutory Framework September 2025).

Helping families in the early years can make a huge difference, recognising the crucial role parents play as their children's first educators. Parents need information and advice about child development to help their children to thrive. This includes access to pregnancy and early child health services, parenting support and baby classes, and good quality early education and childcare. Improving education and health go hand in hand – healthier children are better able to learn and children who achieve well in education go on to live healthier lives. The first 1001 days are critical times for children to bond with significant others, to form secure and healthy attachments and no matter a child's background remove any barriers or potential barriers to their success. Reference to DfE executive summary Best Start in Life.



To reach the target of 75% of children achieving a Good Level of Development by 2028 there is the clear expectation that schools are not responsible for delivering the governments mission alone. However, schools will need to play an active role with families, parents and children in reception to achieve this and with partners across health, Best Start Family Hubs and Family Help have access to extending and improving family services, supported by improved childcare and early education and improved quality.

In Westmorland and Furness we are building our ambition upon key pillars that identify milestones we aim to achieve. Underpinning each pillar are detailed service delivery plans that will be closely monitored and governed. Our plans are interdependent upon each other and our responsibility is to bring plans under one umbrella for Westmorland and Furness. Within all these strategies a wide range of services, including early years activities, parenting support, health advice, debt support and connections to other community services and specialists are key to the success.

## **Supporting our local authority to achieve a good level of development and build our Best Start Ambition:**

- Continued partnership with schools to support accuracy of assessment of the EYFS profile implemented.
- Improved data sets.
- Projects are in place to support the areas of learning in partnership with the Best Start Family Hubs, health and SEND through an explore, test and learn approach.
- Support through the Best Start Family Hub Early Years Team.
- Newly established 0-19 Healthy Child Programme, delivered by HDFT, with 5 additional contacts from health visitors and dedicated health promoting roles based on local need.
- Working with regional and national partners to increase uptake of 2-2.5 year check, which has realised month on month improvement and reaching uptake targets.
- Together Towards School (school readiness) will ensure consistency, understanding and clear expectations across all service areas for children and families.
- Trajectories of success implemented from birth upwards through all partners.
- Collaboration and co-production of plans across the early years will secure timely and early identification of need and support for all children who need it.
- The Early Years Ambition plan and Best Start in Life Plans will be the overarching conduit of service delivery.
- Development of clear pathways.

**[Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life strategy](#) and [Family Help Strategy](#).**



A series of check points, services and self-help for parents and carers of children from pre-birth to 5 years, e.g. including:

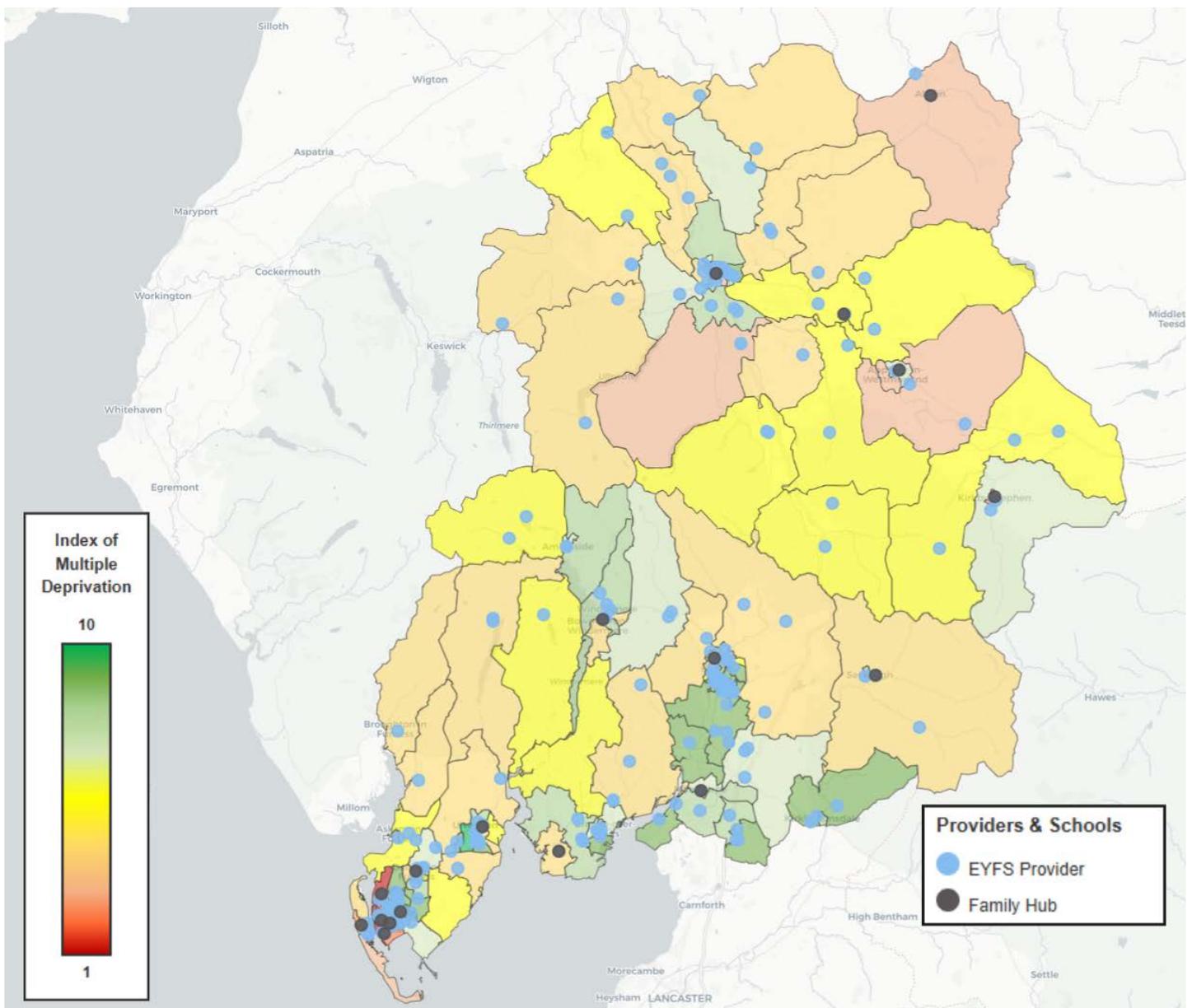
- **Health:** Midwifery, Health visiting, GPs and NHS dental treatment.
- **Information:** including advice and guidance through Best Start Family Hubs services and Family Information Service
- **Parental support:** Support groups for new parents (some delivered by the VCSFE), Parenting programmes and Home Learning Environment interventions.
- **Early Years & Child Care:** Support for take up of early years and childcare across all ages - diverse, quality, inclusive and sustainable early years and childcare sector offering 15 and 30 hours from 9 months – 16 years.
- **Community support:** A range of community-based partners delivering support and services for families e.g. in libraries and via VCFSE partners.
- Data collection and info sharing systems to support and track reach and engagement (and leading to additional support offers).
- An “introduction” to support families with more specialist support where needed - All optional for families - an information strategy is vital with a “sell” not “tell”.
- Strategic commissioning process guiding service delivery - grow, test and learn.
- Culture of working – moving from assessment and intervention to celebration and self help.
- Workforce development.
- Market facilitation with our early years and childcare sector.
- Creating pathways from pre-birth to five and beyond.
- Information services, digital delivery and re-thinking our toolbox.

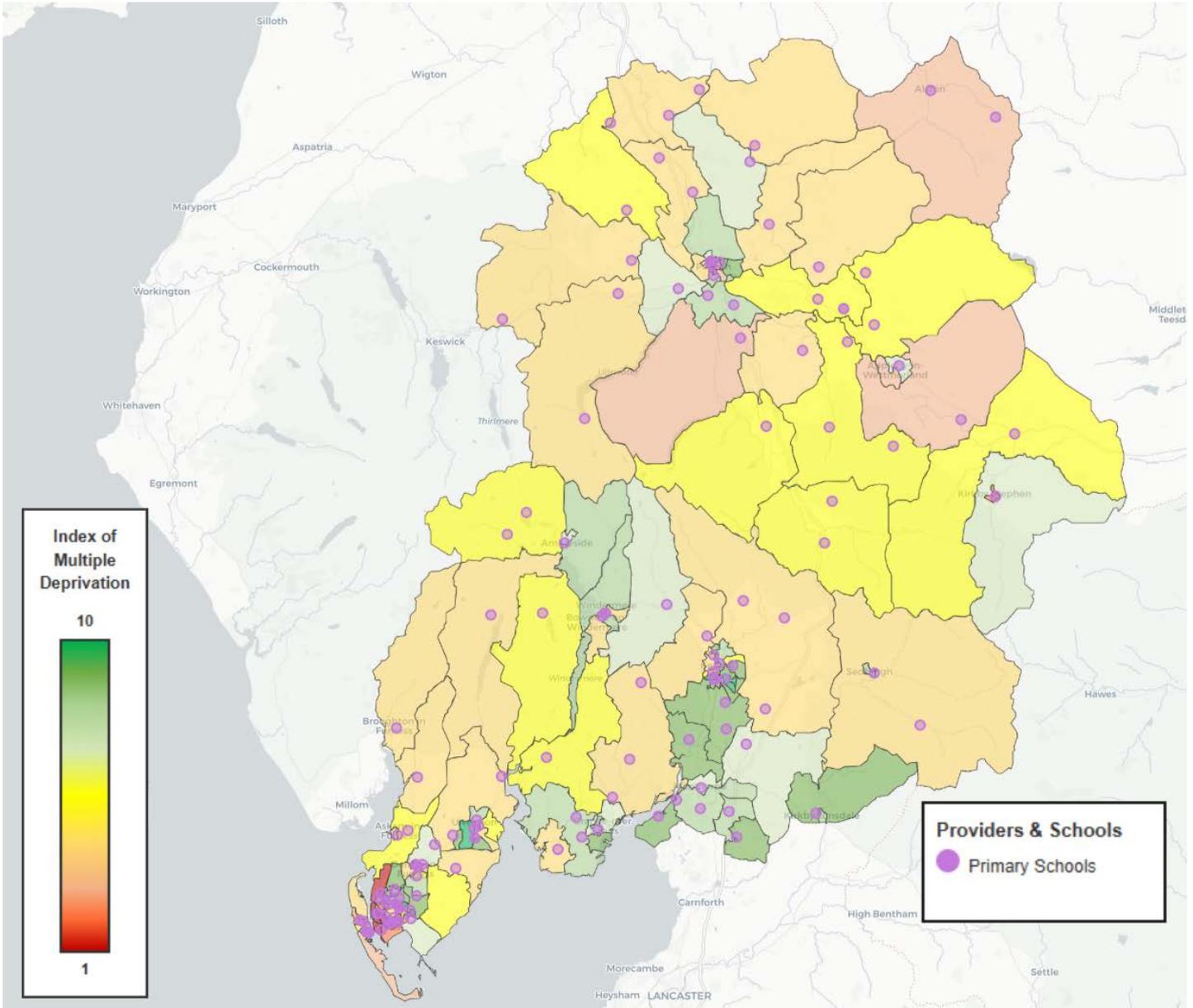


## Where are we now?

Distribution of Best Start Family Hubs and Early Years childcare providers in Westmorland and Furness with the Indices of Multiple Deprivation have been identified. Westmorland and Furness covers a significant geographical area, borders with four other local authorities, has two different health trusts and has areas that are highly populated and those rural areas that are sparsely populated.

In Westmorland and Furness, there are approximately **11,415** children aged 0-5, **13,163** aged 6-11, **14,520** aged 12- 17, and **4,188** aged 18-19, giving a total of **43,286** children and young people aged 0-19. In 2024/25, there were **30,578** children eligible for free school meals in Westmorland and Furness across all state-funded primary and secondary schools. The 2021 Census recorded **226,611** residents in Westmorland and Furness. 2.1% residents in Westmorland and Furness speak a language other than English as their main language at home.





# Our Early Years System: Best Start Family Hubs based in Barrow, South Lakes and Eden

Parent-Infant Relationships and Perinatal Mental Health Support

Debt and welfare advice

RPC

Infant Feeding



Youth Justice Support

Best Start Family Hubs - Key 24 Services

SEND

Mental Health Services



Health Visiting

Early Language and the home learning environment

Activities for children aged 0-5

Substance (alcohol/drug) misuse support

Westmorland & Furness Best Start Family Hub and Spokes

Parenting Support



Targeted Family Help



0-19 public health services



Midwifery

Support for separating and seperated parents

Youth Support

Delivery in Partnership

Nutrition and weight management

Birth Registrations



Finance Advice

Digital and Outreach

Oral health improvements



Stop smoking support



Housing Support

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and financial support (Tax-free Childcare, Universal Credit childcare)

# 1 in 100

1:100 provides a snapshot of outcomes for children and young people in Westmorland and Furness



## Hospital Admissions

2023/24

**198.3 per 1k**

Hospital Admissions  
in Under 5s  
+31.3% vs England

2023/24

**136.2 per 10k**

Injury admissions (unintentional and  
deliberate) (0-4)  
+33% vs England

2023/24

**88.5 per 1k**

Infant admissions under 14 days  
-0.2 vs England

2021/22 - 2023/24

**29.3 per 100k**

Admissions for dental decay (0-5)  
-194.2 vs England

## Health Services Mandated Contacts Data

2025/26

**82.5%**

Ante-natal  
% of eligible families reached  
before due date

2025/26

**93%**

New Birth Visits  
% of eligible families reached  
within 14 days

2025/26

**92%**

6-8 Week Reviews  
% completed in timescale

2025/26

**68%**

1-Year  
% completed in timescale

2025/26

**95%**

2-2½ Year Reviews  
% completed in timescale

The Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ's) are assessments carried out by the child's health visitor to evaluate and monitor a child's development and social and emotional development. They are also part of the 2-2½ year old review that health visitors complete. The 2-2½ year old review is a statutory assessment for any child attending a childminder, setting or school provision. The questionnaires and assessments help to identify a child's strengths and areas where they may need some support. Both the ASQ's and review in settings provides parents with the opportunities to talk about their child's development with health and early education professionals.

## 2-2.5 Reviews with ASQ -3

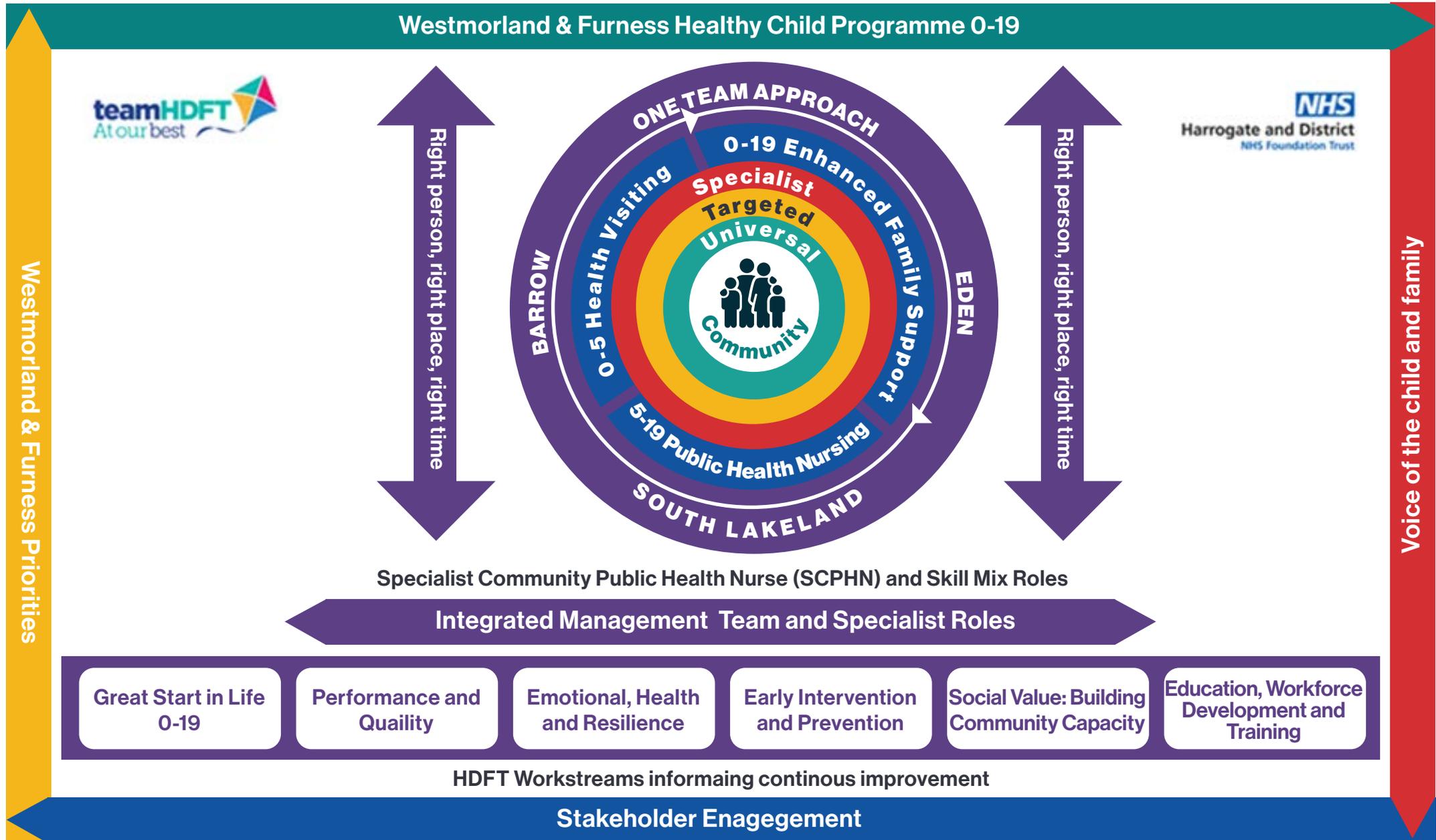
KPIs	YTD Q3 2025/26
% 2-2.5 year reviews with ASQ-3	98.2%

## ASQ-3 Measures

KPIs	YTD Q3 2025/26
% all above threshold	88.8%
% above in communication	91.3%
% above in gross motor	96.1%
% above in fine motor	96.2%
% above in problem solving	96.1%
% above in personal-social	95.4%



# Westmorland and Furness Healthy Child Programme 0-19



# Partnership Working: We are working with over 60 partners



# Early Years and Childcare

Parents/carers and family members



Early Years settings: nurseries, childminders, pre-schools and schools



Best Start Family Hubs

SEND partnership and services

Virtual school

Community Health Teams



Learning Improvement Service

Children's Therapy Teams

Professional development

Sufficiency of childcare



Early Years Foundation Stage Framework

Together towards School (school readiness)



School based nurseries programme



Wraparound programmes



# Learning

Children are born ready to learn, and the characteristics and quality of their early environments shape their development. Strong evidence shows that responsive, nurturing adults and supportive home learning environments with access to appropriate learning materials and activities play a critical role in children's development.

## Good Level of Development (GLD)

In 2024/25, **67.4% (1,262)** of all reception aged children assessed in Westmorland and Furness achieved a Good Level of Development in the Early Learning Goals in Personal Social and Emotional Development, Communication and Language, Physical development, Literacy and Mathematics. **39.9% (75)** of children eligible for free school meals achieved a Good Level of Development.



In Westmorland and Furness the percentage of children accessing 2 year old free entitlement for families in receipt of additional support is above national as is the percentage and number of children accessing their 3&4 year old free entitlement funding in either a childminder, nursery or school setting.



Consultation with families has informed the development of services within our Best Start Family Hubs and will continue to do so. Analysis of data and consultation with schools and settings has identified key area of learning to focus upon including reading and maths in line with other council priorities to improve outcomes at the end of reception.

Dedicated workshops were held in January 2026 to explore priorities and reoccurring themes identified with key partner stakeholders. Workshops will continue to be a part of the ambition planning with the developing Best Start Conception to Five Ambition Reference group.

## **Working together children and families in Westmorland and Furness will:**

- Be as healthy as possible and achieve good social and emotional wellbeing and mental health from conception through early childhood.
- Feel they belong, make and enjoy friendships, relationships and be a valued member of their community whether at home, setting or school.
- Be ready to explore each step on their learning journey through successful transitions at key points from birth to five.
- Be heard and receive the right support, the right services, at the right time in order to reach their full potential and remove barriers to success.
- Achieve a good level of development at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

## **We will know we are making a difference when:**

- All partners and families know what to expect from our different services.
- Services are available for children and families when they need them.
- Innovative practice informs and enhances services.
- A relational approach to outreach is embedded.
- Our digital offer is accessible and effective.
- Children and families have successful transitions from birth to the end of reception into their primary schooling.
- We share learning from different communities within Westmorland and Furness and use these as models of effective practice.
- All children are able to make progress across their early years through successful assessments, and any needs are identified and supported.
- Parent/carers well being and mental health supports the best start in life for their child and parent/carers are encouraged and supported to access services as early as possible.
- The home learning environment offers children opportunities to play, interact and develop their communication and language skills.
- The outcomes for children at the end of reception are in line with the expected outcomes for children nationally.

To secure the delivery of our ambition we will listen to the feedback from families about their babies and children.

Within our Best Start In Life Conception to Five Ambition we have the following golden threads within our pillars:

**The Government's National  
Best Start in Life Strategy**

**The Best Start Family Hubs**

**0-19 Growing Healthy**

**SEND and Inclusive Practice**

**Equity and Childhood  
Inequalities**

**Ecological awareness**

For each of the pillars and golden threads in the ambition plan is a named lead to oversee and report on the progress of their priority to our governance boards, through our steering groups and our reference group.

**We are at the beginning of our ambition and with all our partners we will provide the best start for children and families in Westmorland and Furness:**

*"Society is what happens when babies grow up"* – Sally Hogg, 1001 days campaign







## Translation Services

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