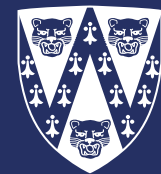




**BEST
START
IN LIFE**

Shropshire Best Start in Life Plan 2026



Shropshire
Council



Contents

1. Introduction & Vision
2. Local Needs Analysis
3. Our Values and Principles
4. Priority Outcomes
 - 4.1 Outcome 1 – Empowering families
 - 4.2 Outcome 2 – Strengthened partnership working
 - 4.3 Outcome 3 – Increased support for Early Years settings
5. Scaling and Innovation
6. System Enablers
7. Governance and Structure

1. Our Vision:

'Every child thrives in a safe, supportive home where families feel empowered and are able to work seamlessly with their communities and services to improve their lives'

Introduction

The early years are a critical period that shape a child's life. At Shropshire Council, we are committed to ensuring every child has the strongest possible foundation so they are able to live their best life. When families are well supported and children flourish from the outset, the benefits extend across schools, communities, and future generations.

An indicator of how well children are progressing in the Early Years is a measure that is undertaken in reception class called the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS.)

In 2024/25, 68% of children in Shropshire achieved a Good Level of Development (GLD) this is below the national average. Outcomes for children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) remain a significant concern, with only 43.7% achieving GLD.

Our plan aims to increase

- The overall number of children achieving a Good Level of Development to 77%.
- The number of children eligible for FSM achieving the GLD to 56.1%.

This means that an extra 245 children will reach this pivotal milestone.

This Best Start in Life Plan sets out the actions we will take as a partnership. It outlines how we will work collaboratively across early years settings, health, education, and community partners to ensure high quality, accessible support for families particularly those who are most likely to face challenges reaching these goals.



2. Local Needs Analysis

A clear understanding of Shropshire's children provides the foundation for targeted action and effective service planning. Shropshire is a large, rural county, with families dispersed across wide geographical areas. This creates additional challenges around accessibility, isolation, and equitable delivery of early years support.

Shropshire is home to **17,458 children aged 0–5**, with a total of **64,960 children and young people aged 0–19** across the county. This population is unevenly distributed, with the local Early Years Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA) identifying notable variation in where 0–4-year-olds live and how needs differ across localities.

The 2021 Census recorded **323,642** residents in Shropshire. **2.6%** residents in Shropshire speak a language other than English as their main language at home.

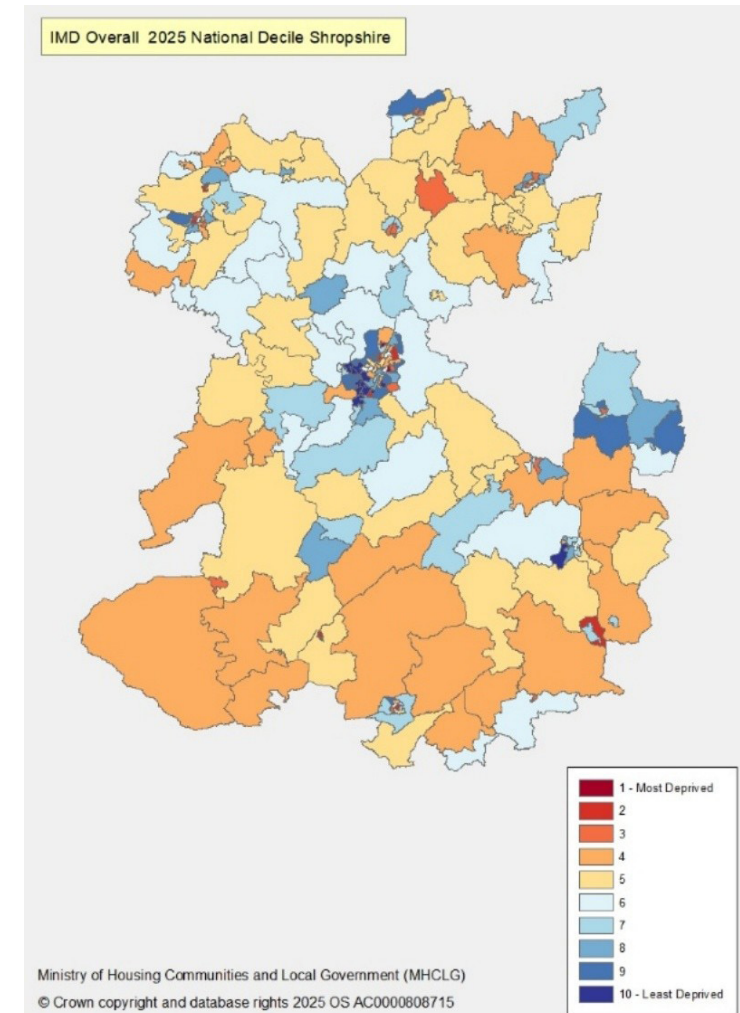
Key Local Insights

Local population and need

- Shropshire became slightly more deprived between 2015 and 2025 but is still less deprived than 52% of local authorities in England
- Average deprivation score rose to 17.6 (17.2 in 2019 and 16.7 in 2015).
- 154th most deprived LA (out of 296).
- In 2024/25, there were **39,462** children eligible for free school meals in Shropshire across all state-funded primary and secondary schools.
- In 2025, **26.2% (268)** of homeless households had dependent children, including **184** single-parent households.
- Shropshire's rural population are particularly deprived according to the Barriers to Services domain- meaning that Shropshire has greater levels of challenges in accessing key services.

Deprivation (IMD 2025)

- Darker shaded areas of the map represent the most deprived areas within Shropshire.
- **11** Shropshire LSOAs in **20%** most deprived areas of England.
- **5.5%** of all Shropshire's residents live in these areas.
- **15% live** in the least deprived **20%** of the country.



Education

- The **Integrated 2 Year Review** is a critical milestone for identifying developmental needs early. In 2024/25, **76.5% of Shropshire children accessed their Integrated Review**, which is **4.3% below the national average**.
- At the **2 to 2.5 year health review**, **65.6%** of children in Shropshire were at or above the expected level in all five areas of development (communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social skills). This is **15.8% below** the national average of **81.4%**.
- **Good Level of Development for all children:** 68%, slightly below national (68.3%) and statistical neighbours (69.2%). Across the EYFSP areas of learning, several areas children in Shropshire perform above average. This includes
 - **Expressive arts and design**, children in **Shropshire achieve 88.8%** compared to **85.1% nationally**.
 - **Physical development**, children in **Shropshire achieve 86.2%** compared to **84.7% nationally**.
 - **Mathematics**, children in **Shropshire achieve 80%** compared to **77.6% nationally**.
 - **Communication and language**, children in **Shropshire achieve 80.8%** compared to nationally 79.5% although there is a recognition this is a target area.
- **Free School Meal learners:** 43.7%, well below national (51.4%) and the West Midlands (53.6%); this remains a key area for targeted support.
- **Gender gap:** Girls (75.6%) continue to outperform boys (61.3%), reflecting national trends.
- **Children with EAL:** 57.8%, lower than national levels (64.9%).
- **Term of birth effect:** Autumn born children significantly outperform summer born children (75.4% vs 58.1%).

SEND

- In the **2024/25 academic year, 7,150** pupils in Shropshire were identified as having Special Educational Needs. Of these, **Social, Emotional and Mental Health** is the most common primary need (1,567 pupils).
- **Good level of development in early years:** SEND pupils achieving expected level of development at the end of reception (2023-24) at **22% and rising**, similar to regionally and nationally.
- This rate is higher among **SEN support at 31%** (rising trend and above comparators) and lower at 4% among pupils on an EHCP (falling trend), but **higher than region and England**.

Health

Shropshire has recognised the challenges of delivering services across a widely dispersed rural population. In response, open-access health visitor clinics have been established in targeted areas to make it easier for families to seek support. This approach has contributed positively to health outcomes for Shropshire's 0–5 population.

- **75% of children aged 4-5** are in the healthy weight bracket, this is **0.1% above national average**.
- **94.2% of children aged 2** have had their MMR vaccination, this is **5.3% above national average**.
- **90.3% of children** have had their MMR vaccination- 2nd dose, this is **6.6% above national average**.

The local needs analysis clearly demonstrates that children eligible for Free School Meals face the greatest barriers to achieving a Good Level of Development, reinforcing the need for a sharper, system-wide focus on early intervention and prevention.

This intelligence will directly inform how we allocate resources—particularly in determining the most effective and equitable locations for Best Start in Life Family Hubs. Placing hubs in areas of highest need will ensure they act as meaningful access points for early help, strengthen place-based delivery, and create the conditions for improving outcomes at scale across Shropshire.

Our Values

Our shared values and principles provide the foundation for how we work together to deliver the Best Start in Life plan. They set the tone for our partnership, guiding our decisions, behaviours, and the way we support children and families. By grounding our approach in these commitments, we ensure a consistent, child-centred, and collaborative system across Shropshire.

- Child-centred.
- Inclusive and respectful.
- Collaborative and relational.
- Empowering.
- Impactful and Agile.

Our Principles

- Our decisions start with what is best for the child.
- Our services and support adapt to meet children's needs quickly.
- All families are welcomed and treated with dignity.
- Our services are designed with children and families in mind.
- We invest in building strong relationships built on trust.
- Multi-agency working is non-negotiable, we learn from each other and challenge constructively.
- Information is shared openly across agencies.
- Families have a voice in shaping support.
- Professionals are trusted and valued to make decisions.
- We focus on actions that make a measurable difference.

Our Outcomes

Our key outcomes have been shaped through a comprehensive needs analysis developed collaboratively with partners. This shared understanding of local strengths and challenges has enabled us to prioritise the actions that will make the greatest difference for children and families through the Best Start in Life plan.

Outcome 1: Families are empowered to support their children's early development

Key Objectives:

- Most families are skilled and able to meet their child's early development needs, to support them we will provide timely and accessible information, advice and guidance.
- We will work with communities to empower local resilient community action and peer support that supports children's early development.
- Where families need extra help we will
 - Ensure Best Start in Life Family Hubs are located in the areas of highest need.
 - Ensure these hubs offer accessible support from a range of partners.
 - Offer Parenting and Home Learning Environment (HLE) programmes meet the needs of the community and are consistently adapted to do so.
 - Provide outreach support is focused and effective in reaching families who need extra help.

Priority Actions:

- Prioritise delivery for families in areas identified through EYPP to Early Years Pupil Premium, Good level of development and deprivation data.
- Work collaboratively with communities, families and the voluntary sector to understand and coproduce support for families.
- Commission HLE programmes such as Early Talk Boost, Peep, and Early Words Together, with a strong emphasis on developing early communication skills.
- Adopt inclusive and targeted engagement approaches to ensure fathers and male carers feel engaged.
- Implement check in data systems for everyone entering the BSIL family hub to identify if the support is reaching targeted families.
- Collaborate with local partners, including volunteer led committees, to develop outreach support for communities where it is most needed.
- Establish SEND professionals within Best Start in Life family hubs, to ensure families are supported and empowered to access the right support for their child with additional needs.

Measures of Progress

- Disadvantaged communities feel better supported at an earlier stage.
- More families from disadvantaged and underserved communities access Best Start in Life services through targeted outreach and increased availability of Family Hubs.
- Fewer children enter care or require Child in Need or Child Protection Plans as a result of earlier preventative support.
- Children's additional needs are identified more accurately, with improved access to inclusive support that strengthens school readiness and learning outcomes.
- There is a reduction in inappropriate or delayed referrals for SEND or Education, Health and Care Plans due to increased awareness and clearer pathways.
- Staff have stronger knowledge and understanding of SEND, enabling them to support families more effectively and connect them to the right services.
- More children from the most disadvantaged communities achieve a Good Level of Development.

Outcome 2: Strengthened partnership working to ensure families access the right support at the right time.

Key Objectives

- Develop Multi-Disciplinary Teams who are skilled at meeting the needs of children in the earliest needs.
- Implement timely and effective Family Help within the earliest years to ensure that needs are identified early and addressed.
- Review and strengthen antenatal support to improve access for all families.
- Build a shared ambition to improve GLD outcomes by working collaboratively with partners
- Align Best Start in life delivery with wider transformation and change to ensure a whole system approach.
- Utilise the support of multi-disciplinary teams within the Family Hubs to provide consistent, ongoing support for families stepping down from Early Help.
- Through multi-disciplinary teams, children with SEND are supported to access wider services efficiently and quickly to support early identification.

Priority Actions

- Ensure that children identified with developmental delays at the two-year integrated review receive timely support to help them make progress.
- Improve data sharing systems with early years settings so children accessing outreach support are clearly identified to key partners to continue ongoing support for their development.
- Create consistent, shared messaging between health, education, and early help partners around school readiness, with a focus on independence, routines, resilience, and physical development.
- Strengthen collaboration with the voluntary sector to enhance support for families within local communities
- Promote oral hygiene and raise awareness of its links to early communication development.
- Review current digital support and develop the use of [delivery.gov](https://www.delivery.gov.uk/) to share key messaging from key partners to families supporting child development.

Measure of Progress:

- More parents and caregivers—especially those from disadvantaged communities—can find, understand, and access timely support from conception.
- A wider range of communities are engaging in Home Learning Environment (HLE) or parenting groups through strengthened partnership working with the voluntary sector.
- Professionals supporting families from pregnancy to age two can identify needs early and provide support that strengthens parent-carer relationships and improves perinatal mental health, preventing concerns from escalating into statutory intervention.
- Vulnerable families receive earlier support, helping to prevent family breakdown, reduce the number of children entering care, and decrease Child in Need or Child Protection involvement.
- Parents and caregivers report improved confidence and wellbeing.
- Increase in uptake of 24U entitlement for children who qualify, due to effective partnership signposting.

Outcome 3: Children benefit from high-quality, inclusive EY provision and are supported to take up all their early education entitlements to strengthen their early development.

Key Objectives

- Ensure all Early Years settings understand the important role they play in contributing to a child's Good Level of Development.
- Strengthen the workforce knowledge and understanding, so that they have the skills, confidence and ability to deliver high impact interventions and support.
- Increase access to training in communication and language—identified as a key local area of need.
- Maximise outcomes for children with SEND and those eligible for Free school meals.
- Embed a consistent, system wide approach for children transitioning into Reception.
- Develop communication strategy to promote take up of Early Years entitlements.

Priority Actions

- Develop and deliver targeted communication and language workforce training, informed by GLD data and focused on areas of highest need.
- Work collaboratively with wider partners—including health, libraries, and parenting teams—to ensure consistent communication and language messaging is shared with families.
- Review and refine the workforce development offer to ensure it is clearly aligned with supporting Early Years settings to improve the GLD.
- Review take up of entitlements in our most disadvantaged areas including the 24U funding to map out a communication strategy to increase take up.
- Establish SEND champion settings to model and share effective practice with other local settings.
- Establish a shared, system-wide definition of 'school readiness' and integrate this into a coordinated package of support that strengthens transition practice across all Early Years settings.
- Review and expand the digital local inclusion support offer so settings and families can easily access high quality resources to support their child's development.
- Strengthen support for Early Years settings to secure, align, and effectively deploy funding—particularly EYPP and SEND funding—to drive improved outcomes for priority groups.

Measuring Progress

- Increased take up of funded entitlements so all children can access high quality provision.
- Increase in appropriate referrals and timely support for children identified with development delays.
- Reduction in children deferring statutory education or accessing Reception on a part-time timetable.
- Increase in children making significant progress in communication and language through the use of Early TalkBoost and Early communication screening tools.
- Increase in the number of children achieving the GLD.
- High-quality early years provision is demonstrated through strong Ofsted inspection outcomes.
- Shropshire offers sustainable, high-quality childcare that improves children's outcomes and supports progress toward GLD targets.
- The Early Years Team training offer receives positive feedback and strengthens the skills and confidence of staff across settings.
- Consistently strong attendance at the forum reflects its value to the early years workforce.
- There is increased and a shared understanding of the GLD criteria and greater consistency in how it is applied across all settings including childminders.

Scaling and Innovation

We are committed to ensuring our approach delivers the best possible outcomes for families. A key element of this plan is the ongoing review of local data to identify priorities and maximise the impact of support. Strengthening partnership working remains essential so that we can consistently collaborate and develop an approach that meets the needs of our communities.

To ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of our actions, we will:

- Invest in workforce development so that more families can access targeted support through high-quality HLE programmes.
- Learn from good practice within the Best Start in Life Family Hubs to shape and expand outreach support across wider communities.
- Consistently reflect on data and impact measures to respond quickly to challenges, remove barriers, and share success stories.
- Work closely with parent/carer representatives and wider partners to maintain a shared and aligned vision.

System Enablers

Delivering the Best Start in Life (BSIL) Plan requires a set of strong system enablers that create the conditions for effective, high-quality early years support. These enablers ensure that families, practitioners, and partners benefit from a coordinated and resilient system that can respond to local needs and drive sustained improvement.

1. Places

Family Hubs are central to our delivery model. They act as trusted, accessible points of support for families, connecting them to a wide range of universal and targeted services.

Family Hubs enable the system by:

- Providing clear, coordinated pathways into support from pregnancy to school entry.
- Offering a consistent home for evidence-informed programmes, outreach, and early intervention.
- Bringing together multi-agency partners to work collaboratively around family needs.
- Ensuring families experience a “no wrong door” approach to accessing help.

Family Hubs strengthen the system by increasing visibility, reducing duplication, and improving accessibility for those who need support most.

2. Workforce

A skilled, confident, and well-supported workforce is essential for delivering high-quality early years provision and improving GLD outcomes.

Our system is enabled by:

- Robust access to professional development across Early Years settings, Family Hubs, and wider partners.
- Specialist training in communication and language, SEND, child development, and family engagement.
- A strong focus on reflective practice, coaching, and peer-to-peer learning.
- Clear pathways for practitioners to access advice, guidance, and inclusion support.

By investing in capacity and capability, we create a sustainable workforce that delivers consistently high standards across all areas of Early Years provision.

3. Family Voice

Families are central to improving children's outcomes. Meaningful engagement ensures support is relevant, responsive, and grounded in lived experience.

This is supported through:

- Co-production with parents and caregivers in shaping services, priorities, and decision-making.
- Trusted-relationship models within Family Hubs that encourage participation and sustained engagement.
- Accessible communication that empowers parents as their child's first educators.
- Approaches that recognise and respond to the diverse needs of families, including fathers, male carers, and families who may be less likely to access support.

Strong family engagement ensures the system is shaped by the voices and strengths of the communities it serves.

4. Building on Local Strengths and Community Assets

Shropshire's early years system is strengthened by the rich network of local organisations, settings, volunteers, and community groups that support families.

Our approach builds on these strengths by:

- Harnessing the expertise of local Early Years settings, the voluntary sector, libraries, and community-led groups.
- Celebrating and sharing effective practice across the county.
- Supporting local innovation and community-led outreach where it has the greatest impact.
- Ensuring interventions and support reflect local context, assets, and community identity.

By building on what works well locally, we support a resilient early years system rooted in the strengths of Shropshire's communities.

5. Commissioning for Quality and Impact

Effective commissioning is central to ensuring that families receive high-quality, equitable support across Shropshire. By aligning commissioning decisions with local needs, evidence, and the priorities of the Best Start in Life Plan, we can secure services that deliver the greatest impact on children's early development.

This includes

- commissioning evidence-informed programmes, strengthening provider capability, and ensuring resources are directed to areas of highest need.
- A coordinated commissioning approach supports system cohesion, reduces duplication, and ensures partners have access to the right provision at the right time to improve outcomes for families.

Governance Structure

1. Strategic Ownership, Sponsorship and Funding

- The Director for Children's Services within the Council holds overarching accountability for delivering the plan and ensuring alignment with wider partnership priorities, including the Families First Partnership (FFP) and Neighbourhood Plan.
- Senior leaders across health, education, and early help services act as programme sponsors, championing the approach and supporting consistent system-wide coordination.
- Funding streams are identified, aligned, and monitored to ensure resources are deployed effectively and equitably, with a clear focus on areas of highest need.

2. Performance Management Approach

- A structured performance management framework will monitor progress against agreed outcomes, priority actions, and measures of success through a monthly community and family hub working group, identifying risks and solutions to challenges. This will report directly to the Ambitions board.
- Local, regional, and national data will be reviewed regularly to track trends, identify emerging needs, and inform targeted intervention.
- Insights and performance updates will be shared across the partnership to maintain a shared understanding of impact, strengths, and areas requiring improvement.

3. Resource Allocation

- Financial, workforce, and operational resources will be allocated based on need, evidence, and strategic priorities outlined within the plan.
- Transparent decision-making processes will ensure partners understand how resource decisions are made, supporting fairness, accountability, and efficient use of capacity.

4. Risk, Assumptions and Mitigations

- Key risks to delivery will be routinely reviewed through the governance structure.
- Mitigation strategies will be developed collaboratively, ensuring risks are identified early and managed effectively to maintain delivery momentum.

5. Continuous Reflection and Improvement

- Quarterly reviews of the Best Start in Life Plan through the Ambitions Board will assess progress, celebrate successes, and update priorities in response to data, feedback, and emerging need.
- Learning from local best practice, national policy developments, and sector guidance will inform continuous improvement.
- Ongoing feedback loops with Early Years settings, health services, voluntary and community partners, and families will ensure the plan remains responsive, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience.

Conclusion

The Shropshire Best Start in Life Plan sets out a clear, ambitious, and collaborative approach to improving outcomes for children and families across the county. Grounded in a strong understanding of local need and shaped by shared values and principles that place children and families at the heart of decision making, the plan outlines targeted actions that strengthen early development, partnership working, and the quality and accessibility of early years provision. Through coordinated delivery, strong system enablers, and a commitment to continuous reflection and improvement, partners across Shropshire will work together to ensure every child is supported to thrive, helping to achieve meaningful and lasting change for communities now and in the future.