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| Meeting: | Executive |
| Meeting date: | 3 March 2026 |
| Report of: | Martin Kelly, Corporate Director of Children and Education Peter Roderick, Director of Public Health |
| Portfolio of: | Councillor Webb, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education Councillor Lucy Steels-Walshaw, Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Social Care |

Decision Report: Best Start in Life (BSiL) Local Plan

Subject of Report

1. York is a city of significant advantages yet it also has marked inequalities that affect children from their earliest years. While most children thrive, those experiencing vulnerability or hardship do not, and the gap in outcomes is one of the widest in the country by age five. A recent analysis of 12,000 York children over seven years shows that inequalities in development are already identifiable by a child's first birthday and statistically significant by age two. Although existing educational data shows the gap widening as children grow older, this local evidence makes clear that the roots of inequality emerge much earlier.
2. By the time a child begins school, around 90% of their brain development has already taken place. The period from conception to age five is therefore a decisive window in which the foundations for learning, emotional resilience, physical health and long-term wellbeing are laid. These early years shape the architecture of the brain and influence outcomes across the life course.
3. Children's development is not determined by biology alone. Their earliest experiences — the quality of relationships, the stability and safety of their environment, the stress levels around them,

and the support available to their families — all have a profound and lasting impact. When these conditions are positive, children build strong foundations that endure. When they are not, the effects can persist into adulthood, influencing educational attainment, health, employment, and the likelihood of requiring support from public services.

4. The early years are therefore not only a period of vulnerability but also one of extraordinary opportunity. Evidence consistently demonstrates that investment at this stage yields the greatest return — improving outcomes for children and families while reducing future demand on high- cost services. Early support is not a peripheral consideration; it is central to long- term system sustainability and to the city’s wider social and economic ambitions.
5. This report seeks approval for the strategic approach to York’s local Best Start in Life (BSiL) plan, which focuses on early childhood development and reducing inequalities, with the aim of increasing the proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of Reception year. The plan sets out how York will meet the statutory targets for 2028 established by the UK Government.
6. Publication of a local Best Start in Life plan is a statutory requirement under the Government’s Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life strategy, which identifies three core areas of focus:
 - Better support for families, with a particular emphasis on parenting and the Home Learning Environment
 - More accessible early education and childcare
 - Improving quality in the early years, including Reception
7. In addition, every local area must designate at least one Best Start Family Hub.
8. The proposed approach brings together multiple strands of work — including Neighbourhood Health, Family First reforms, and SEND improvement — into a coherent strategy for the first five years of life. It depends upon a full partnership approach with families being effectively supported across health, children’s services, education and the community and voluntary services

9. The report also seeks delegated authority for the Executive Member for Children and Education to approve the final version of the local plan.
10. Finally, the report requests approval to pursue an enhanced ambition: positioning York as a Centre of Excellence for early childhood development starting from September 2026, working in partnership with Ebor Multi- Academy Trust, the University of York, York St John University, the voluntary and community sector, and — where appropriate — private sector partners. This ambition would run alongside the statutory BSiL requirements and would place particular emphasis on the conception- to- age- two period (the first 1001 days)
11. Timely approval is essential to meet statutory expectations, address persistent inequalities, and ensure partners can align resources and activity around a shared approach.

Benefits and Challenges

Benefits:

12. The proposed approach enables York to meet national expectations while advancing the ambitions set out in the Council Plan, the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and the Children and Young People's Plan. By strengthening prevention and early intervention, the plan is expected to reduce long- term demand on high- cost services, including social care, SEND provision and health interventions.
13. A coordinated early- years strategy will help address the stark inequalities in child development, health and school readiness that exist across the city. It will also strengthen multi- agency collaboration across health, education, early years providers, and the voluntary and community sector, creating a more coherent and accessible system for families.
14. Pursuing a Centre of Excellence ambition would position York as a leader in early- years innovation, increasing opportunities for external investment, research partnerships and national recognition. Ultimately, the approach represents a long- term investment in the wellbeing and prosperity of York's communities.

Challenges and Risks:

15. Delivering a whole-system early-years strategy requires strong and consistent engagement from partners. Without clear governance and shared outcomes, there is a risk of fragmentation.
16. Financial pressures across the system also present challenges, although these will be mitigated through phased implementation, use of Government BSiL funding, and pursuit of external investment.
17. Tight timescales for publication of the plan risk delays if decision-making is not streamlined. Delegated authority will help ensure timely progress.

Policy Basis for Decision

18. The Childcare Act 2006 places statutory duties on local authorities across three key areas: early years outcomes, sufficiency of childcare, and provision of information to families and providers. The proposed plan directly supports delivery of these duties, which have been the subject of legal challenge nationally when not met.
19. The approach directly contributes to the Council Plan vision to establish the conditions of a healthier, fairer, more accessible, place with many of the development opportunities taking place now, through The Local Plan and York Central development, being completed ready for the homes and jobs of today's early years cohort. the national Best Start in Life strategy; the City of York Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy; the Children and Young People's Plan; and the Humber and North Yorkshire Integrated Care Board's strategy for children and young people. It complements existing initiatives such as York Hungry Minds, The Place, and Poverty Proofing.

Financial Strategy Implications

20. The Government has allocated funding to the City of York Council to support delivery of the Best Start in Life programme, as set out below. This table shows how Government funding over a three year settlement is directed towards the first of the three strands of the local plan 'Better Support for Families' through allocation of

funds for Best Start Family Hubs, Parenting Support and support for the Home Learning Environment.

| Strand | % | 2026 – 27 Allocation | 2027 – 28 Allocation | 2028 – 29 Allocation |
|---|-----|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Best Start Family Hubs Delivery grant – programme | 50% | £340,300 | £278,300 | £285,800 |
| Best Start Family Hubs delivery programme – capital | 12% | £68,100 | £69,400 | £70,800 |
| Parenting support | 17% | £97,600 | £98,900 | £103,200 |
| Home learning environment support | 22% | £127,700 | £129,300 | £135,000 |
| Total | | £633,700 | £575,900 | £594,700 |

21. Delivery of the programme will be funded through these allocations and existing earlyyears, family support and public health budgets. No additional council funding is requested. Over time, improved earlyyears outcomes are expected to reduce demand for highcost services, although these savings have not yet been built into future budgets. A phased approach will support cost control and prioritisation of highimpact activity, and opportunities for external funding will be actively pursued.
22. No additional funding has been awarded for strands two and three and whilst 75 local authorities have been awarded additional funding the ‘Start for Life services’ (infant feeding; perinatal mental health; and parent-infant relationships) York has not received this additional funding. Government is also directing local authorities to spend this allocation on support for children and families who will be turning 5 up to 2028, in order to meet the statutory target.

23. For the ambitions around the Centre of Excellence we would look to secure additional investment into this work through a variety of approaches. Philanthropic donations would be sought to raise significant additional resources, as has been achieved through the Local Authority's Hungry Minds approach and the University of York's funding for 'The Place'. Through partnerships with the universities we would seek to unlock research and development grant funding which has already been achieved through the Raise Yor Research Network. Finally, organisations with specific interests in early childhood development remain keen to work in partnership with ambitious and innovative local areas.

Recommendation and Reasons

24. In order to enable the timely development of an ambitious local Best Start Plan and wider ambitions, it is recommended that the Executive:
25. **Endorse the strategic Best Start in Life approach**, focused on reducing inequalities and improving early childhood outcomes in order to meet the Government's statutory targets for the proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development by age five.
26. **Approve delegated authority** to the Executive Member for Children and Education to sign off the final local Best Start in Life plan.
27. **Agree the ambition to position York as a Centre of Excellence** for early childhood development, working with Ebor Multi Academy Trust, the University of York, York St John University, and other partners, including the voluntary and community sector and — where appropriate — private sector investors. This ambition will include a particular focus on the first 1001 days.
28. These recommendations support statutory compliance, strengthen system leadership, and enable York to take a more ambitious and evidence driven approach to improving early childhood outcomes.

Background

29. Investing in the early years is one of the most evidence based and cost effective actions a local area can take. When children and families are well supported from pregnancy to age five — as set out in the Government’s *Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life* strategy — communities become healthier, future pressure on services is reduced, and longterm social and economic outcomes improve. Research from Marmot (2010, 2020) and others demonstrates that early childhood experiences shape lifelong health, wellbeing and opportunity. Early investment also helps close the developmental gaps that emerge in the first years of life and drive longterm inequalities. As Sally Hogg of the 1001 Days Movement has said, “Society is what happens when babies grow up.”
30. The Childcare Act 2006 places statutory duties on local authorities across three key areas, all of which this work will support. These include duties to provide early years services and work jointly to reduce inequalities; duties to ensure sufficient early education and childcare; and duties to provide adequate information to families and providers. These duties are well established in legislation, and several councils nationally have faced legal challenge where they have not been met.
31. Under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, local authorities also hold statutory public health responsibilities for children aged 0–5 (and up to 19), including delivery of the Healthy Child Service. This is the only universal service that offers mandated contacts to every family between birth and age five, making it a critical component of the Best Start in Life approach.
32. The Government has set statutory targets for the City of York to be achieved by the end of the 2027/28 academic year. These require that:
 - At least **79%** of children achieve a **Good Level of Development (GLD)** at the end of Reception
 - At least **58.1%** of children eligible for Free School Meals achieve a GLD
33. The GLD measure is based on statutory teacher assessments across five domains: Physical Development;

Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Communication and Language; Literacy; and Mathematics. It is a binary judgement across 12 aspects, with no adjustment for age, despite the significant developmental variation between children who have just turned five and those approaching six.

34. Although the Government's targets focus on children currently aged two to four, the evidence base strongly supports intervention from conception to age two — the first 1001 days — as the period of greatest developmental sensitivity. Seventyfive local authorities receive additional funding for "Start for Life" services focused on this period; York is not among them, making a coherent local strategy even more important.
35. The Best Start in Life plan will deliver action that supports the ambitions of several existing local strategies. The Council Plan identifies the proportion of children achieving a GLD as a key performance indicator. The Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy identifies "York's children have the best possible start in life" as one of its four priority areas. The Children and Young People's Plan also includes Best Start in Life as a core priority. The Integrated Care Board strategy emphasises safe, healthy and thriving children and young people, and the York Health and Care Partnership workplan commits to improving outcomes through prevention, early help and identification of need.
36. The Best Start in Life plan is not an additional strategy but a mechanism to mobilise and coordinate action across these existing commitments working in partnership with families and the many parts of the system that support early childhood development including health services, children's services and the community and voluntary sectors.
37. York's data shows persistent inequalities in early childhood outcomes, including health, speech and language development, and school readiness. These inequalities are evident by age two and widen over time. Multiple partners deliver prevention, early intervention and family support, but services are fragmented and lack an overarching strategic framework. The local authority has a critical role in leading a joined up, evidence based approach to improve outcomes and reduce inequalities from the earliest stages of life.
38. In line with the Government strategy, the local plan will focus on:

- Better support for families
 - More accessible early education and childcare
 - Improving quality in the early years, including Reception
39. Working together across these three areas will give York a far greater chance of improving outcomes by age five than isolated activity.
40. The Government places particular emphasis on parenting and the Home Learning Environment, reflected in the funding allocations for Family Hubs. The Department for Education expects local plans to:
- Set a bold vision for improving child development and health outcomes
 - Identify local needs and address gaps in provision
 - Demonstrate how delivery will be coordinated, tracked and adapted
41. Use test and learn approaches to drive innovation
42. The plan will be built around four core pillars:
- **Proportionate universalism** — ensuring universal access while targeting additional support where it is most needed
 - **Prevention and early intervention** — acting early to improve outcomes and reduce longterm costs
 - **Evidencebased practice and coproduction** — combining research evidence with the expertise of families and practitioners
 - **Greater system integration** — reducing fragmentation and strengthening collaboration
43. The initial plan will cover three years, in line with Government requirements, and will be published by 31 March 2026. This first version will be highlevel due to tight timescales but will evolve over time as learning emerges.
44. To achieve York’s wider ambitions, a longerterm plan will also be developed. This will go beyond minimum Government

expectations and explore the potential to position York as a **Centre of Excellence for early childhood development**. This would involve partnership with the University of York, York St John University and Ebor MultiAcademy Trust to test innovative practice, evaluate impact rigorously — including longitudinally — and build on York’s strengths in highquality implementation.

45. A Centre of Excellence would include:

- A **Targeted Child Development Centre**, offering universal and targeted early years provision, specialist support, parenting programmes and family outreach
- A **Training and Innovation Hub**, supporting workforce development, developing new programmes, and disseminating learning across the system
- A **Research Observatory**, conducting longitudinal studies, rapid impact assessments and implementation research

46. Partnership with Ebor MultiAcademy Trust offers opportunities to draw on their earlyyears expertise and utilise available space for colocation of professionals — an evidencebased approach to improving earlyyears systems. Collaboration with the universities builds on the success of the Raise York Research Network, which has already delivered research with direct benefits for families and attracted additional investment.

47. The child development centre will focus on closing the gap in outcomes in the early years through a multi-disciplinary approach to delivering targeted interventions to address the impact of developmental delay. Research shows that closing these developmental gaps early will have the greatest impact on life-time outcomes across education, health and care. The focus on addressing these health and education inequality gaps will be used as a focus for attracting philanthropic support and investment and would help to build community capacity to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty in the city.

48. The development of York as a centre of excellence would also build on existing local evidence based good practice including the Early Talk for York programme and the Family Seeing approach in social care. In particular, the role of Family Seeing in creating the scaffolding around children by harnessing family support networks to enhance evidenced based interventions.

Consultation Analysis

49. Extensive engagement has taken place with partners across health, education, early years, and the voluntary and community sector. This engagement consistently highlights the need for a more coordinated and accessible early years system, with families reporting challenges around navigating services, accessing support and overcoming isolation.
50. The Raise York Family Hubs programme has been coproduced with families, generating outcomes that align closely with the ambitions of the Best Start in Life plan. Families have emphasised the importance of reducing isolation, increasing confidence, building social networks, and having clear information about where to access support. Learning from coproduction work in other areas, such as SEND Central, is also directly relevant. Co-production will be at the heart of the development and delivery of the Best Start in Life plan ensuring that as the plan is developed families are involved in service design and delivery inclusive and accessible to all and is grounded in what works for families in York.
51. Partners including Ebor MultiAcademy Trust, the University of York and York St John University have expressed strong support for a collaborative approach and for exploring the potential to position York as a Centre of Excellence.
52. Internal council teams have contributed to the development of the proposals, ensuring alignment with existing programmes and priorities.
53. All of this feedback is being used to directly shape the priorities and design of the Best Start in Life local plan.

Options Analysis and Evidential Basis

54. **Option 1: Approve the proposed BSiL approach, delegated sign off and Centre of Excellence ambition (recommended)**
55. This option enables timely and strategic action to reduce inequalities, strengthens system leadership, and positions York to

innovate and attract investment. It aligns with statutory duties and local priorities.

56. Option 2: Approve the BSiL approach and delegated signoff but defer the Centre of Excellence ambition

57. This option focuses on core statutory delivery and reduces complexity in the short term. However, it misses the opportunity to lead innovation and secure external investment at a time when early childhood development is a national priority.

58. Option 3: Do not approve the BSiL strategy or delegated authority

59. This option avoids new arrangements but would make meeting statutory expectations extremely difficult, perpetuate fragmented service delivery, and risk widening inequalities.

60. **Evidential basis:** York's data demonstrates the urgency of addressing early years inequalities. National and international evidence shows that early investment delivers the greatest longterm impact. Consultation feedback indicates strong support for a coherent, ambitious local approach. Early Talk for York provides a proven local example of successful implementation. The recommended option gives the greatest chance to success both in terms of meeting the government expectations as well as giving the children of York the very best start in life.

Organisational Impact and Implications

61. **Financial:** All of the activity proposed in the report will be funded from the additional government grants set out in the table in paragraph 23 and existing early years, family support and public health budgets. No additional council funding is being requested.

62. As a result of the Best Start in Life programme there is an expectation of improved control of future years revenue costs through reduced demand for social care, SEND and health services, although savings to future years budgets have not yet been assumed.

63. **Legal:** Any and all services and/or supplies required to deliver the priorities set out within this report must be procured under a compliant, open, transparent, and fair process in accordance with the council's Contract Procedure Rules and where applicable, the

Procurement Act 2023 (see Procurement below). Any and all such contracts must be drafted with the advice of the Legal Services team and in line with the council's Contract Procedure Rules.

64. **Procurement:** Whilst there are no direct procurement implications in the report itself, procurement will be a main tool used to deliver some of the upcoming priorities set out by Government to commission family support programmes. All services must be procured via a compliant, open, transparent, and fair process in accordance with the council's Contract Procedure Rules and where applicable, the Procurement Act 2023. Further advice regarding the procurement process and development of procurement strategies must be sought from the Commercial Procurement team.

65. **Data Protection and Privacy** The data protection impact assessment (DPIAs) screening questions have been completed for the recommendations and options in this report and as there is no personal, special categories or criminal offence data being processed to set these out, there is no requirement to complete a DPIA for those. However, work is underway and will continue on the DPIA for delivering the Government's 'Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life' strategy at a local level.

66. **Human Resources**
No immediate workforce implications can be identified at this stage. As proposed work is taken forward, further consideration will be undertaken to support any resourcing and learning and development requirements in accordance with the relevant policy and procedures.

67. **Communications**
A coordinated communications plan will be required to ensure consistent internal and external messaging.
Clear communication will support community awareness, partner engagement and the reputation of the council as an early-years leader.

68. **Health and Wellbeing**
The proposal positively impacts population health through strengthened primary prevention, early intervention and targeted support for families experiencing the greatest inequalities. The proposed plan will ensure a greater focus on one of the big four

communities in the Health and Wellbeing Strategy to ensure York's children have the Best Start in Life.

69. Equalities and Human Rights

The equalities impacts are assessed within the EIA in the Annex. The action plan will be monitored upon implementation

70. Environment and Climate Action

No direct environmental implications.

Place-based service delivery and community access improvements may support reduced and active travel and more sustainable local provision.

71. Economy

Improved early childhood outcomes contribute to long-term economic resilience and workforce readiness.

Centre of excellence status may generate opportunities for inward investment, research partnerships and innovation activity within the local area.

73. Affordability

The EIA covers the affordability element well for residents:

The proposal is expected to have a significant positive impact by improving access to early years support, reducing isolation, and addressing inequalities that disproportionately affect families experiencing poverty.

Risks and Mitigations

74. Risk: Fragmented partner engagement

Mitigation: Raise York Board has been established as the governance structure with a plan to determine defined roles, shared outcomes. There will be regular multi-agency forums to foster collaboration and ownership.

75. Risk: Insufficient resources or funding to deliver enhanced ambitions

Mitigation: Adopt a phased implementation approach prioritising high-impact activities; actively pursue external funding, grants, and partnership opportunities to supplement existing budgets.

- 76. Risk: Delays in delivery due to lack of delegated decision-making authority**
 Mitigation: Seek approval for delegated authority to the Executive Member for Children and Education for final plan sign off to enable timely plan finalisation and adaptive decision-making.
- 77. Risk: Potential data-sharing and privacy concerns as collaboration increases**
 Mitigation: Conduct Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs) and ensure robust information governance frameworks are in place and adhered to.
- 78. Risk: Challenges in demonstrating impact and managing expectations**
 Mitigation: Develop a clear outcomes framework with measurable indicators, regular monitoring, and transparent reporting to partners and stakeholders.
- 79. Risk: Equalities issues if vulnerable groups are not effectively reached**
 Mitigation: Undertake a comprehensive Equalities Impact Assessment to inform targeted interventions and continuous review to ensure inclusive access. Coproduction using inclusive approaches to ensure involvement of vulnerable groups.

Wards Impacted

80. All wards would be impacted as this is a city-wide approach

Contact details

For further information please contact the authors of this Decision Report.

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Background papers

None.

Annexes

Annex A: Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)