



Lambeth Best Start in Life Strategy 2026-2029

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Lambeth Best Start in Life Strategy 2026-2029

1. Introduction

Lambeth's Best Start in Life Strategy outlines our vision and ambition for babies, young children and families in Lambeth. The strategy outlines the critical role of the early years of childhood in shaping children's future life chances, and the opportunities that are presented to reduce inequalities and strengthen outcomes for Lambeth children now and in the future through our 'Best Start in Life' offer.

This is in line with national Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life policy, and with local priorities as encapsulated in Lambeth 2030, Our Borough, Our Future and Lambeth Together Health and Care Plan. Our strategy is an iterative document, and we will continue to develop our Best Start work with our partners and communities over coming months. Information is included as follows:

- Best Start Lambeth: our vision and our approach
- The case for change
- How does our Best Start Strategy align with our borough priorities?
- About our borough and our children
- Our current Best Start in Life offer and our plans to develop this in 2026-2029
- Our aims, objectives and the outcomes we will work towards

2. Best Start Lambeth: our vision and our approach

Our vision is for **Lambeth to be the best place for babies and young children to be born, to live and to grow, providing a secure, happy and healthy foundation for future development, lifelong learning and opportunity.**

We will work as Lambeth Together with our statutory and voluntary sector partners, communities and families to continue to develop our early years system, building on the legacy of the Lambeth Early Action partnership (LEAP) A Better Start programme and on our sustained commitment to and investment in our network of Better Start Children's Centres and associated Best Start in Life services. This places us in good stead to develop our new Best Start Family Hubs and to further integrate the health, care and early learning support we offer to parents and parents to be, babies, young children and families antenatally and in early childhood.

We are proud of our diverse and thriving early years childcare settings and sector, and of the vital role early childhood education plays in supporting our vision. We will continue to support our providers and partners in their drive to improve quality and strengthen outcomes for young children in readiness for school.

As a borough of Equity and Justice, we will seek to provide the right and proportionate support at the right time to all our children and families, striving to reduce inequalities and the impact of poverty and systemic racism on children's life chances.

3. The case for change

In Lambeth, we are proud of and invest in our early years' services for babies, young children and families within the resources we have available. This legacy has enabled us to develop and retain a strong network of Sure Start (Better Start) Children's Centres; to successfully deliver our LEAP programme; and to continually improve the standard and availability of early years childcare in the borough. Our hospital trusts provide world leading maternity and health care.

Evidence shows us that that the earliest years of a child's life are the most critical for shaping lifelong development, wellbeing and opportunity. Brain development is fastest from birth to age five, and the quality of relationships, early learning experiences and health in this period has a profound effect on outcomes throughout childhood and into adulthood.

School readiness reflects a child's early language development, social and emotional wellbeing, physical health and early learning. Children who begin school with strong foundations are more likely to achieve expected standards later in their education, experience better mental health, and require fewer statutory or specialist interventions. We know that many children in Lambeth already have excellent opportunities to learn, to grow and to thrive, and many of our children are happy, healthy and ready to learn when they start school.

However, we also recognise that systemic inequalities exist in our borough and that these can limit the opportunities for some of our children and mean that in the earliest and most formative years, they are disproportionately disadvantaged compared to their peers.

This disproportionality is evident in our data. While Good Level of Development (GLD) outcomes remain slightly above national levels, there are persistent gaps affecting children from more deprived households, boys, and particular ethnic groups. Early years providers and health partners continue to identify high levels of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), alongside growing numbers of children with emerging SEND before school entry, and we still have some children starting reception with unidentified needs and too little experience of early years services.

Some of our most vulnerable children and those being supported by the local authority as children in need or with a child protection plan are not routinely using our children's centre services and are also least likely to take up their free childcare entitlement.

We know from our data that we have the opportunity and resources to achieve positive change and to narrow the gaps that impact on the life chances of children before they even start school. Where parents and carers are supported in the perinatal period and in the transition to parenthood through evidence based and relational approaches that empower them in their role as parents, and where children go to stay and play sessions, become 'Natural Thinkers' and take up their full early years entitlement at a setting that is good or better, their outcomes and opportunities improve.

Through our Best Start in Life Strategy, we will seek to further join up our services, identify emerging needs and barriers to opportunity at the earliest possible stage, improve access to early help and support for those who need it most. In doing so, we will aim to create lasting change for individuals, families and communities.

4. How does our Best Start in Life Strategy reflect our borough priorities?

Lambeth 2030 - Our Future, Our Lambeth outlines our borough wide commitments. We have considered how these commitments align to our Best Start in Life vision and ambition.

We get the basics right and deliver great public services that fit what people need. *We take a one borough approach to deliver our services consistently and well.*

Our Best Start in Life Strategy and approach will enable us to deliver consistent and high-quality services focused built upon a suite of evidence-based interventions implemented and delivered at scale. We will provide workforce training and development to support this and be responsive and innovative in continually flexing and developing our offer to meet local need.

People have a say and stake in the decisions that matter. *We will be a listening and open borough that recognises and values our community voices.*

Our commitment to working with our families and our communities is evident in many of our current approaches, and we will continue to develop and embed these. Use of the Family Partnership Model across many of our early years services provides a framework for us to work in true partnership with families as they explore their needs, identify their goals and the steps they will take to achieve them, with our staff serving as active helpers in this process.

Through our Parent Champions programme and Parent Carer Panels, we listen to, hear and act upon the views of our parents and young children as we shape services, and we will continue to develop and scale up these initiatives as we go forward, ensuring full community representation.

We work together in partnership, to harness what makes Lambeth special. *We will collaborate with our people and partners to innovate and implement together.*

Lambeth Together is our health and care partnership and the overarching mechanism by which we work together as a system. As we move forwards in our work to develop our Families First partnerships, our Integrated Neighbourhood Teams and our Best Start Family Hubs and approach, we will do this as Lambeth Together.

We are accessible, transparent and we stand up to challenges. *We will focus on what our residents want and be honest about what we can and can't do, whilst being courageous to take bold action.*

We know that we are operating in a period of considerable financial challenge, and that availability of funding and resources may limit some of what we might like to do. We are committed to making the most of the resources that we do have by working together with our partners and by focusing those resources on areas where there is the greatest need and the greatest opportunity to make a sustained difference for children and families.

Alongside our commitments and ways of working, our borough plan outlines four key ambitions. Of most relevance to our Best Start in Life Strategy are the ambitions to **Make Lambeth a Place We Can All Call Home** and to become **A Borough of Equity and Justice**.

Our Health, Our Lambeth Together Health and Care Plan 2023-28 sets out how health and care services in Lambeth will work together to improve health and wellbeing outcomes over the next five years. Like Lambeth 2030, the plan takes an all-age approach, with some key outcomes of more immediate direct relevance to our Best Start in Life Strategy. These key outcomes all apply across age groups and to 'people' but for the purposes of this plan, we have replaced 'people' with 'babies, young children and care givers.'

- Babies, young children and care givers maintain positive behaviours that keep them healthy
- Babies, young children and care givers connected to communities that enable them to maintain good health
- Babies and young children are immunised against vaccine preventable diseases
- Babies, young children and care givers have healthy mental and emotional well being
- Babies, young children and carer givers have access to joined up and holistic health and care delivered in their neighbourhoods
- Care givers know where to go to get the right help at the right time, in the right place for their needs and those of their babies and young children
- Women have positive experiences of maternal healthcare and there are no disproportionate maternal mortality rates among women

Lambeth's Education and Learning Strategy (2024- 2030) sets out a borough-wide vision for "*excellent and inclusive education for all learners, from birth to adulthood*" and is underpinned by four pillars:

- All children in Lambeth are safe and healthy
- All children start their learning experiences at the earliest opportunity
- All children have access to excellent, high-performing and inclusive educational settings
- All children have the opportunities, qualifications, skills and attributes to live independent and successful lives and contribute positively to their communities

Priorities identified in the strategy and of most relevance here are those relating to: high performing schools and early years settings; early and best start to educations; inclusive education for those with special educational needs; good attendance and safe environments; and removing educational inequality and disadvantage in attainment.

Lambeth is currently working to our **SEND and Alternative Provision Strategy 2025-2030**. Our Best Start in Life Strategy supports ambitions outlined in this strategy to strengthen earlier identification of needs, promote inclusive practice across all schools and settings, including our health care settings, and improve transitions. The strategy values the voices and experiences of children and families.

5. About our borough and our children

About Lambeth

Lambeth is a diverse and densely populated Inner London borough, with an estimated 2022 resident population of 332,250. It is the 7th most densely populated London borough (excluding the City of London), the population density in Lambeth is more than double the London average and nearly 32 times higher than the England average.

The Borough is characterised by high levels of diversity and mobility. Around 70% of residents live in the 40% most deprived areas in England. Among those living in the most deprived neighbourhoods, one-third are from Black communities, and two in five children live in income poverty after housing costs. Overall, 60% of Lambeth's population identifies with an ethnic group other than White British, and approximately 150 languages are spoken by families across the borough.

Lambeth's population profile is characterised by a relatively young age structure overall, but with a declining number of young children, including those in the under-five cohort. Despite population growth in England overall - including a 5% increase in children aged under 15 between 2011 and 2021, Lambeth has experienced more families with young children leaving the borough than moving

in, contributing to an 11.8% decrease in residents aged 15 and under. This trend is driven by a falling birth rate and outward migration of families, both of which have implications for early years services, health provision, and education planning. In contrast, the number of people aged 15 and over has increased during the same period.

Although under five specific ethnicity data is not separately published, Lambeth's overall early-years population reflects the borough's significant diversity. Among children and young people aged under 20, 74% are from Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic group and 35% identify as Black, including 18% Black African, 10% Black Caribbean, and 7% Black Other. Given the high proportion of children aged under nine within this broader group, the under-five population is likely to reflect similarly high ethnic diversity, requiring culturally and linguistically responsive early-years services. Lambeth's 150+ languages spoken across the population, as reported in wider borough profiles, underscore these service needs.

Our children's school readiness

In 2024/25, out of 1661 children assessed, 70.1% of children achieved a **Good Level of Development** (GLD) at the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), which is 1.8% above the national average at 68.3% and slightly lower to London average at 70.7%. 59.1% (353) children eligible for **Free School Meals** achieved the GLD in Lambeth, compared to 51.2% nationally. The summary of key learnings is as follows:

- Lambeth was above national figures for Literacy and Mathematics, but below London.
- Girls in Lambeth achieved results above boys in all areas of the EYFSP.
- Children not eligible to free school meals achieved higher results in all areas of the EYFSP than those children eligible.
- English only speaking pupils achieved higher results in all areas than children with EAL.
- Autumn born children continue to have higher scores at EYFSP.
- Deprivation is a major factor in EYFSP outcomes, with 57% of children at EYFSP living in the 10 to 30% most deprived areas

For Lambeth to reach our overall GLD target of 77.2% by 2028 based on the current population, an additional 168 children would need to reach GLD. When looking at the FSM cohort, to reach the free school meals GLD target of 68% by 2028, an additional 52 children eligible for free school meals would need to reach GLD. Our GLD improvement plan sits alongside this the Best Start in Life Strategy and provides the necessary data to enable us to progress with improving our outcomes by 2028.

Early years childcare and entitlements

Lambeth's take up of early childhood education and care entitlement uptake remains below the national averages. The 2025 data shows that 57.5% (407) of eligible two-year-olds took up the offer, compared to 65.2% nationally.

Healthy Child Programme

Lambeth has a strong infrastructure, that benefits from joined up delivery, accessible early years settings and integration between health visiting, maternity, early education, and family support. Lambeth's Q1 and Q2 outcomes for the mandatory elements of the Healthy Child Programme are as follows:

- New birth visit: 99.3% carried out, 90.7% achieved on time
- Health review at six to eight weeks: 97% carried out, 86.6% achieved on time
- Health review at 15 months: 91.8% carried out, 90.8% achieved on time
- Health review at 30 months: 83.9% carried out, 80.1% achieved on time
- ASQ3: 92.7% carried out, 85.8% achieved on time

In 2024/25, at the 2 to 2.5-year health review, 70.6% of children in Lambeth 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 10.8% below the national average of 81.4%. 86.7% of children in Lambeth received the **ASQ-3** as part of the Healthy Child Programme or integrated review, however, the issue of low coverage of 2 to 2½ year reviews was raised by the DHSC on Lambeth's data set and is one of the focuses to improve. Although children in Lambeth (89%) outperform national averages by 1.5% on the Communication domain, all other domains are behind national averages:

- 89.8% children in Lambeth achieve expected levels in gross motor skill development, compared to 93.5% nationally
- 88.9% Lambeth children achieve expected levels in fine motor skill development, compared to 93.7 children nationally
- 90.5% achieve expected levels in problem solving skill development, compared to 92.9% nationally
- And 87.5% achieve expected levels in personal-social skill development, compared to 91.7% nationally.

The end of programme evaluation of the LEAP programme showed that children who engaged in early-years services were 40% more likely to reach expected developmental levels at age 2.5 than peers and the communication and language outcomes showed even stronger gains (+70%).

In Lambeth, 75.9% of children in Reception are of a **healthy weight**, which is in line with England average. However, as with other indicators, the underlying data reflects the inequality within our borough, with core groups of children more likely than their peers to be overweight. A targeted approach to supporting early years nutrition, promoting healthy lifestyles, and ensuring that young children have access to environments that encourage active play is needed to reduce these inequalities.

Childhood vaccination uptake in Lambeth remains below national levels and continues to be an area requiring sustained intervention:

- MMR uptake at age 2 is 80% in Lambeth, which is 8.9 percentage points lower than the national average.
- MMR uptake at age 5 is 72% in Lambeth, widening the gap to 11.6 percentage points below the national average.

This increasing gap between local and national vaccination rates has been a long-term trend, indicating persistent challenges in vaccine confidence, access, and engagement among families. Lambeth continues to prioritise communications, outreach, and partnership-led delivery to promote vaccination uptake. This includes coordinated work across health services, public health teams, children's centres, and the voluntary and community sector to improve awareness, address concerns, and make vaccinations more accessible for all families with young children.

Breastfeeding is one of the most effective public health interventions for improving infant health, maternal wellbeing, and long-term developmental outcomes. Lambeth's breastfeeding rates continue to be higher compared to national averages for both the breastfeeding initiation and prevalence at six to eight weeks. In Q1 and Q2 2025/26, 87% of new mothers initiated breastfeeding and 68.5% sustained breastfeeding at six to eight weeks. However, Lambeth's Infant Feeding Joint Area Needs Assessment and the South East London ICB Infant Feeding Strategy both identify significant inequalities in breastfeeding rates. Women from Black ethnic groups, younger mothers, and those experiencing deprivation are less likely to initiate and sustain breastfeeding without additional support.

Our children's safety and wellbeing

A key priority is to ensure that children are protected from harm and have safe, stable environments in which they can grow, learn, and thrive. This outcome area focuses on preventing risks to children's physical and emotional wellbeing and ensuring that families receive the right support at the right time. As of February 2026, Lambeth recorded 513 Children in Need (CIN), 272 children subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPP) and 350 Children Looked After (CLA), and numbers are broadly comparable to other London local authorities. Of these, 86 CIN (16.8%), 72 CPP (26.5%), and 54 CLA (15.4%) were under the age of five. The relatively higher under-five share within CPP suggests safeguarding concerns are concentrated in the early years, with implications for the capacity of health visiting, midwifery, early help and multi-agency safeguarding practice. These figures are a point-in-time snapshot and not directly comparable to annual DfE returns.

Use of our Best Start Family Hubs (Better Start Children's Centres)

Over the last 12 months to February 2026, 8170 children and over 10,000 parents accessed and received support from our Best Start Family Hubs. The demographic profile of children accessing services in our Best Start Family Hubs is largely representative of our local communities. 24% of children specify

themselves as White British, 24.5% are from Black backgrounds, 9% are White other and 16.5% from mixed heritage. Nearly 13% are yet to have their ethnicity recorded.

Recorded data indicates that children that access children's centres speak 83 different languages and adults 109 different languages in addition to English.

42% of all users live in the 30% most deprived areas in England.

Nearly 60% of child users were aged under two at the time of their last contact and 26% were aged two. We see a natural decline in numbers accessing services beyond the age of two as children will benefit from free childcare entitlements and attend childcare provision.

In February 2026, our Better Start team supported 227 families across the borough, providing accessible and coordinated early intervention support to parents and carers with emerging or multiple needs. The service receives around 50 new referrals each month, reflecting both high demand and strong partnership working across early years, health, community and voluntary sector services. Families also ask for help directly and in addition to a professional referral process.

The work of our Better Start workers is grounded in the Family Partnership Model, a relational and strengths-based framework that underpins all direct work with families. Through this approach, practitioners build trusting relationships, work collaboratively with parents, and ensure that support is tailored, empowering and focused on building capacity within the family. This enables families to address concerns early, strengthen parenting confidence, and prevent issues from escalating to more intensive or statutory services.

Family Voice

Lambeth conducts an annual parent satisfaction survey to understand families' experiences of services delivered through our network of Best Start Family Hubs and children's centres. The survey consistently achieves strong engagement, and in 2025 we received 920 responses, representing one of our highest returns to date. Families continue to report very high satisfaction with the support offered, with 98% of respondents saying they are either very satisfied or satisfied with the services they receive. Satisfaction levels remain consistently strong across key service areas, including early learning, health and wellbeing support, and wider range of activities.

The most frequently praised aspects of the children's centre offer are staff and the environment. Staff are described as friendly, supportive, knowledgeable and welcoming, with many families naming individual practitioners and highlighting their kindness and practical help. Children's centre environments are viewed as safe, clean and well-resourced, providing vital spaces for play and connection, particularly important for families with limited access to outdoor space.

The demographic profile of the survey reflects Lambeth's diverse ethnic communities. 67% of respondents were parents or carers of a child aged two or under and 13% reported having children with SEND or long-term health conditions, giving us valuable insight into the experiences of families with additional needs.

These findings demonstrate the high value families place on accessible, inclusive and relationship-based support delivered through children's centres.

6. Our current Best Start in Life offer and our plans to develop this in the period 2026-29

Lambeth's early years system benefits from a developed and strong infrastructure, with well-established Better Start Children's Centres and Family Hubs, and a comprehensive offer of support services. Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP) has played a major role in strengthening Lambeth's early years system and supported improvements in integrated evidence-based delivery between maternity, health visiting, early education and community-based services.

This section of our strategy outlines the different parts of our Best Start in Life offer, and some of the key priority areas we have identified to further develop and strengthen these services as part of an integrated offer.

6.1 Lambeth's Early Years Childcare

Lambeth's early years system is characterised by a set of strong and interlocking features that create the foundations for high-quality, equitable early childhood outcomes:

- A strong statutory and policy context that provides a consistent framework for integrated service delivery, ensuring partners work towards shared early years outcomes.
- A diverse and largely high-quality childcare market consisting of maintained, private, voluntary and independent provision that offers parents' choice and flexibility.
- Expanded early education entitlements for babies and young children; enabling more young children to benefit from high-quality early learning earlier in life - an important contributor to narrowing development gaps and improving school readiness.
- Targeted investment in SEND inclusion that prioritises early identification and intervention for children with emerging or complex needs and ensures that children with SEND receive timely, responsive support that removes barriers to development and learning.
- Robust workforce development with focus on evidence-based approaches

- Strengthened safeguarding and family support infrastructure, enabling services to work together to identify concerns early, provide coordinated support, and reduce risk.

This provides a solid platform for delivering Lambeth's ambition for every child to have the Best Start in Life, with equitable access to high-quality care, early education, and timely support, ensuring that all children, particularly those facing disadvantage, are supported to thrive, develop well, and enter school confident and ready to learn.

Priority actions

Strengthen Early Years Sufficiency and Reduce Inequalities

- We will conduct local-level sufficiency mapping to understand gaps, especially for disadvantaged families, SEND children and under-twos.
- We will support early years providers with sustainability, business support and workforce recruitment/retention challenges.
- We will encourage flexible models: childminder agencies, shared staffing, wraparound for nursery-aged children, and provision aligned with working families' needs.
- We will strengthen cultural competence and inclusion across all settings to address Lambeth's diverse community needs.

Strengthen Quality and Consistency Across Early Years Provision

- We will expand targeted quality improvement support for PVI settings, childminders and maintained nurseries.
- We will use local data (EYFSP outcomes, SEND patterns, sufficiency data, the two-year-old progress check, to prioritise settings most in need.
- We will promote evidence-based pedagogy—early communication, social-emotional development, outdoor learning, and enabling environments.
- We will develop a continuous professional development (CPD) offer aligned to the Best Start in Life workforce strategy.

Increase Accessibility and Participation in Early Years Services

- We will increase take-up of 2-year-old and 3/4-year-old childcare entitlements.
- We will ensure cultural and linguistic diversity is reflected and celebrated in practice, ensuring all families feel welcome.

6.2 Better Start Children's Centres

Better Start Children's Centres, part of our Best Start Family Hub model, are organised into six geographical areas. They are a core component of the borough's integrated offer, designed to give the best start in life for children and families from conception to school entry. This integrated model brings together a range of universal and targeted services, including:

- Community Maternity Services, providing ante and postnatal support

- Access to services to support health and wellbeing, such as health visiting, community dietetics and nutrition support, Speech and Language Therapy, breastfeeding and infant feeding support
- Early years child development, offering a rich programme of activities, groups and play-based learning sessions that build children's early communication, physical development, social skills and readiness for school.
- Better Start Early Help delivering accessible, coordinated early support to families presenting with emerging or multiple needs.
- Parenting support, with a comprehensive pathway of evidence-based programmes tailored for different ages and stages, from pregnancy through to young adulthood.
- Targeted family support, delivered via commissioned providers and voluntary and community sector partners, including specialist interventions, adult and family learning, and services for families with additional vulnerabilities or specific community needs.

Better Start Children's Centres provide a trusted, local environment where families can build strong, consistent relationships with practitioners. This relationship-based approach, underpinned by the Family Partnership Model, is central to improving outcomes for young children. By working collaboratively with parents, practitioners support child development, enhance parental confidence and wellbeing, and ensure families access early, effective help before needs escalate. Together, these centres form a critical part of Lambeth's ambition to ensure every child has the Best Start in Life.

Priority actions

- We will develop our network of Better Start Children's Centre as Best Start Family Hubs
- We will implement Best Start Family Hub branding across Better Start Children's Centres sites in line with national guidance, ensuring that families with young children have a clear understanding of the range of services and support available
- We will review our current children's centre estate, ensuring that we make the best possible use of our buildings as Best Start Family Hubs
- We will embed Family Help for families with young children within the Best Start family Hub network, ensuring that families in need of additional support are able to access that support easily and in their local area. This will be a part of our wider work to implement Families First partnership proposals in Lambeth.
- We will identify further opportunities for integration of services within the Best Start Family Hub model to provide a local and accessible 'one stop shop' for young children and their families

6.3 Our Best Start In Life services

In this section, we talk about the part of our Best Start in Life offer for which we receive government funding to develop specific services. These services are to support: Infant Feeding; Perinatal Mental Health and Parent Infant Relationships; Parenting; and the Home Learning Environment.

Our offer here is well established and has been informed and underpinned by the work of the Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP). LEAP's decade of innovation, codesign with families, and rigorous evaluation has provided the foundation for many of the Best Start in Life pathways now embedded across the borough, ensuring that support for babies, young children and their families is both high quality and rooted in evidence about what works.

6.3.1 Infant Feeding

Lambeth's Infant Feeding Pathway operates a clearly defined, tiered model of support to ensure that all families receive the right help at the right time. The pathway includes universal, targeted, and specialist provision, delivered through integrated partnership.

Our **Universal service** is delivered by trained Breastfeeding Peer Supporters, who act as the first point of contact for all new and expectant mothers. Their role includes:

- Co-facilitating breastfeeding drop-in groups
- Providing one-to-one support in Children's Centres, in families' homes, or online
- Offering antenatal support, including colostrum harvesting guidance and preparing for breastfeeding
- Promoting early relationship building and responsive feeding
- Ensuring families receive consistent, practical advice at the earliest stages

This universal tier ensures that all families can access timely, community-based feeding support and feel confident in the early days of their feeding journey.

Families requiring more tailored support are offered a **Targeted service** delivered by Infant Feeding Community Staff Nurses. These practitioners are paediatric-trained, experienced nurses with a strong public health nursing background. Their responsibilities include:

- Antenatal support for families with a history of feeding difficulties or where a baby is expected to require neonatal intensive care (NICU)
- Joint delivery of breastfeeding support groups
- Providing one-to-one targeted infant feeding support, including for babies with complex medical conditions, babies presenting with faltering growth or ongoing breastfeeding support beyond the initial postnatal period
- Managing and overseeing the Breastfeeding Pump Loan and Emergency Infant Formula scheme

This tier ensures that families experiencing additional challenges receive skilled, proactive support to sustain safe, healthy infant feeding.

For families with the most complex needs, the **Specialist Pathway** is delivered by Infant Feeding Midwives, funded through the Public Health Grant. These midwives provide:

- Advanced clinical assessment and support for complex infant feeding issues
- Specialist intervention for mothers experiencing significant lactation challenges
- Support for babies with highly complex medical needs or multiple risk factors
- Close professional liaison with maternity, paediatrics, neonatal units and community teams

Their expertise ensures that families with complex feeding needs receive specialist, evidence-informed care to optimise feeding outcomes and infant wellbeing.

Priority actions:

- We will review our peer support offer to ensure that women who data shows us are least likely to initiate and sustain breastfeeding receive the support they need to do so.

6.3.2 Parent Infant Relationships

The **Parent and Infant Relationship Service (PAIRS)** is Lambeth's specialist infant mental health service, delivered by South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLAM). PAIRS supports expectant parents and families with babies and young children, who are experiencing difficulties in the early parent infant relationship, aiming to strengthen the emotional bond between parents and their babies, promote secure early relationships, and reduce the risk of later social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. PAIRS offers:

- Specialist parent-infant psychotherapy and one to one interventions
- Together Time therapeutic groups for babies three to eight months designed to strengthen early relationships, build parental confidence and support babies social and emotional development
- Workforce development: reflective supervision for parenting delivery and wider system consultation and advice for early years workforce

LEAP programme end evaluation showed that PAIRS interventions improve parent-infant bonding, enhance parental confidence and emotional wellbeing, strengthen early identification and response across the workforce and the service successfully reaches diverse families experiencing multiple disadvantages.

Lambeth families with children aged over five months are offered access to the **Circle of Security Parenting (COSP)** programme—an attachment-based, evidence-informed intervention designed to strengthen the parent-child relationship and promote secure attachment. COSP is a structured, video-guided programme that helps parents understand their child's emotional and relational needs through the 'Circle of Security' model, enabling them to better recognise children's cues, respond sensitively, and enhance their emotional availability. The programme supports parents to develop reflective capacity, build secure

attachment patterns, and foster healthier long-term developmental outcomes for their children.

Priority actions:

- We will continue to deliver the core PAIRS offer, and through our Families First Partnership work will increase take up of the therapeutic interventions provided by babies and care givers who would most benefit
- We will increase workforce capacity and understanding of parent infant relationships and the long-term impact these have on child development and outcomes and continue to develop the skills of our early years workforce to co-facilitate Together Time groups in Best Start Family Hubs.

6.3.3 Perinatal Mental Health

Under the Best Start in Life programme, Lambeth has developed a comprehensive **Perinatal and Parental Mental Health** (PNMH) pathway, designed to ensure early identification and support for parents' emotional wellbeing during pregnancy and the first two years of a child's life. Informed by the findings of the Mental Health JSNA 2024, the pathway sets out a whole-family, multi-agency system for identifying, assessing and responding to perinatal mental health needs from pre-conception through pregnancy to 24 months post-birth. Central to the pathway is a strong emphasis on culturally competent practice, timely intervention, and strengthening the parent-infant relationship—recognising the profound impact that early relational health has on long-term outcomes.

The pathway is structured across three graduated levels of need, each mapped to the relevant services within Lambeth's early years and health system:

A. Green Pathway – Universal Support (no identified concerns): Families are supported through Best Start Family Hubs and Children's Centres, universal midwifery and health visiting contacts, and access to high-quality parenting programmes, community support, and early years activities that promote parental wellbeing and early bonding.

B. Blue Pathway – Targeted Support (mild to moderate concerns): Families with emerging mental health or relational concerns can access targeted interventions including the Parent and Infant Relationship Service (PAIRS), Lambeth Talking Therapies, Helix (support following perinatal loss and trauma), Breathe Melodies for Mums therapeutic singing programme, and targeted support through Best Start Family Hubs and Better Start services.

C. Purple Pathway – Specialist Support (severe or complex mental illness): For parents experiencing severe or enduring mental health difficulties, the pathway sets out referral routes into specialist provision, including the Lambeth Perinatal Mental Health Team, the Mother and Baby Unit, specialist psychological therapies, and crisis mental health support.

Overall, the pathway provides practitioners across maternity, health visiting, early years, primary care and the voluntary sector with a clear framework for

recognising need early, understanding local service options, and ensuring families are supported before difficulties escalate into more complex or costly interventions. It also supports improved coordination and more consistent practice across the system, contributing to Lambeth's ambition to give every child the Best Start in Life.

Priority actions:

- We will embed our Perinatal Mental Health Pathway through a tailored workforce programme, equipping our workforce to be curious about parental mental health and wellbeing, start the conversation, and help families to access the right support at an early stage.
- We will review our perinatal mental health offer and commission additional support for mild to moderate mental health difficulties where gaps are identified.

6.3.4 Parenting

Lambeth's Parenting Support Service delivers a comprehensive, evidence-based pathway of programmes and interventions that supports parents from pregnancy through adolescence. This offer plays a central role in delivering Lambeth's ambition for every child to have the Best Start in Life, by equipping parents with the knowledge, confidence, and relationships they need to support healthy child development.

At a community level, the parenting offer is built on the principle that parents thrive when they learn together, build connections, and draw on the strengths of their local neighbourhoods. Evidence consistently shows that high-quality, group-based parenting programmes contribute to strengthened parenting capacity, improved parent-child relationships, reduced safeguarding risks, earlier identification of need, enhanced parental wellbeing and better long-term outcomes across health, education and social care systems. Lambeth's commitment to early intervention, integrated care, and community-based delivery is reflected in the breadth and accessibility of its parenting offer, particularly for families facing adversity.

Our parenting offer by age and stage consists of:

- Antenatal programmes: Baby Steps and Baby Chat
- Parents with Children aged under one: Together Time and Circle of Security Parenting (COSP)
- Parents with children aged under five: COSP, Being a Parent (EPEC) and Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (SFSC)
- Parents with primary school aged children: Being a Parent (EPEC), SFSC and Stronger Relationships
- Parents with children aged 11–18 years: Living with Teenagers (EPEC), SFSC and Stronger Relationships

- Parents with children with SEND: Being a Parent Autism, Being a Parent ADHD, Early Bird, Early Bird Plus, Teen Life and Positive Behaviour Support to provide an early intervention offer for parents of children on the neurodevelopmental pathway

Priority actions:

- We will increase the delivery of Baby Chat as our core antenatal offer, while maintaining a targeted offer of Baby Steps for those parents to be who would most benefit from a more intensive offer of support in the transition to parenthood
- We strengthen the help and support provided to parents before, during and after parenting interventions so that they are best equipped to fully implement their learning within their family life

6.3.5 Home Learning Environment

We recognise that what parents do with children in the home - talking, reading, singing, playing and exploring, has a greater influence on early development than family income or background. That's why improving support for home learning is a key part of our Best Start in Life offer. Our goal is simple: to give every child in Lambeth the best possible start, so they can thrive, grow in confidence and be ready to achieve a good level of development by the time they start school.

Our Best Start Family Hubs and children's centres offer a warm and welcoming place for families, providing a universal and targeted programme of activities that support parents to build strong early learning habits. This includes stay-and-play sessions, groups that support early communication and language, and a range of evidence-based activities that empower parents to understand and nurture their child's development.

A key part of this offer is **Making it REAL** (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy), delivered by trained early years practitioners in children's centres. Originally established through the Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP), Making it REAL is a high-impact, evidence-based home-learning programme shown to significantly improve early literacy outcomes, strengthen parental knowledge and confidence, and enhance the home learning environment—especially for families living in the most disadvantaged areas. Practitioners use the ORIM framework: Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Model, to give parents practical ideas they can use every day, such as sharing books, spotting letters and numbers around the home, and encouraging early mark-making.

By focusing on the foundations of early literacy and communication, Making it REAL and Lambeth's wider home-learning offer contribute directly to our ambition for every child to have the Best Start in Life through stronger relationships, richer learning experiences at home, and improved long-term outcomes.

All children under the age of five in Lambeth can be registered to receive a free, high-quality, age-appropriate book every month through **Dolly Parton's Imagination Library**. Each book arrives directly to the family's home, helping to spark a lifelong love of reading and learning. As Dolly Parton describes it, the programme helps plant "the seeds of dreams" by giving every child access to books from the earliest stages of life.

Sharing books from birth is one of the most powerful ways families can support their child's learning. Recent global evaluations show that children who receive as few as ten books from the Imagination Library benefit from improved early literacy skills, enhanced vocabulary and language development, stronger phonological awareness. There is a more frequent book-sharing between parents and children; and better parent to child engagement during reading.

These outcomes make a significant contribution to the home learning environment, helping children develop curiosity, imagination and early communication skills, key foundations for achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of reception.

The Imagination Library strengthens and complements Lambeth's wider Best Start in Life offer by reducing inequalities in early learning, ensuring every child has access to books, regardless of their background and encouraging daily opportunities for talking, reading and bonding.

By investing in early literacy at home, Lambeth is helping children develop the skills and confidence they need to thrive in their early years and beyond.

Priority actions:

- We will seek to increase our universal offer of support for the home learning environment by providing a new digital offer alongside our existing services
- We will continue to promote the Dolly Parton Imagination Library to all families with babies and young children, recognising and celebrating the value of books in the home
- We will build utilise the opportunity presented through the Dolly Parton scheme to encourage all families to become active users of Lambeth Libraries, making every contact count

6.4 The Families Information Service and Parent Champions

Across Lambeth's early years system, two key strands provide cross-cutting support that strengthen access, engagement and equity for families: the Family Information Service (FIS) and the Parent Champions programme.

The Family Information Service acts as a central gateway for families, offering free, impartial information on childcare, early childcare entitlements, Family Hubs/children's centres and wider community services. FIS helps families

navigate the system, understand their entitlements, and access the right support at the right time. This aims to reduce barriers, increase take-up of childcare and free childcare entitlements and ensure families are well-informed about local services, funding options and eligibility.

Lambeth's Parent Champions are trained volunteers who use their lived experience to reach families that services may not otherwise engage. They share trusted information, encourage attendance at local activities, and help parents build confidence in accessing support. Parent Champions strengthen peer-to-peer engagement, support families to connect with children's centres and Best Start Family Hubs and play an important role in reducing inequalities through improved awareness and uptake of early years services. Parent Champions are key in coordinating our Parent Carer panels.

Priority actions:

- We will look at opportunities to further integrate these services to ensure that families have easy access to information on the services available to them from a trusted worker or peer; and are supported to use those services in their local area.

6.5 Delivery of the Healthy Child Programme

The Healthy Child Programme in Lambeth is delivered by Evelina London, part of Guys and St Thomas's NHS Foundation Trust. A highly skilled Health Visiting workforce deliver an evidence based and proportionate level of service to meet the individual needs of young children and families, with services delivered according to the four tiers of community health promotion; the universal offer of mandated contacts and reviews; and additional tailored support at both targeted and specialist levels. Support is provided under the six high-impact areas of:

- Transition to parenthood
- Maternal and family mental health
- Breastfeeding
- Healthy Weight and nutrition
- Healthy literacy, managing minor illnesses and reducing accidents
- Healthy, well and ready to learn

The partnership between the Health Visiting service and Best Start Family Hubs (Better Start Children's Centres) is strong, and supports a coordinated, multi - agency approach with the child and the family in the centre. There is a common and shared understanding of roles and responsibilities, and a shared framework through the Family Partnership model.

The service is currently undergoing a process of redesign to maximise use of resources and provide a coordinated 0-19 offer, while retaining an early years focus. The service is key to the development and delivery of our Best Start in Life strategy, to Best Start Family Hubs and to our developing Families First Partnership work.

7. Our aims, objectives and the outcomes we will work towards

Give every baby and young child the healthiest start from conception

Families receive high quality, coordinated and timely support throughout pregnancy and the postnatal period, ensuring that babies, young children and parents are supported in their earliest years.

Objectives:

- Improve and strengthen early identification of parental and infant physical and mental health through integrated maternity, health visiting, parental mental health and early help pathways.
- Ensure smooth and consistent handover and transitions from maternity to health visiting, early years services and Best Start Family Hubs.
- Increase access to universal and targeted, evidence-based antenatal and postnatal programmes, ensuring support is available early and tailored to family needs.

Measurable outcomes:

- Improved parental mental health and measurable reduction in perinatal inequalities (self-reported).
- Higher breastfeeding initiation and continuation rates, supporting maternal and infant health and attachment.
- Seamless early intervention support for families before and after birth, reducing escalation of need and strengthening long term developmental outcomes (self-reported and Good level of development)

Ensure babies and young children experience secure attachment and responsive parenting

Secure attachment and responsive parenting are foundational to a child's development, wellbeing and experience of nurturing, safe and stable early relationships. Lambeth delivers a comprehensive suite of evidence-informed parenting programmes designed to strengthen early relationships, promote secure attachment and build parental confidence from pregnancy through the early years.

Objectives:

- Expand access to evidence-based parenting programmes antenatally and postnatally, ensuring that all parents attending receive the support they need before, during and after a programme to fully implement their learning in their everyday family lives
- Antenatally, focus on early bonding, emotional preparation for parenthood and understanding of baby development

- Support parents to build parental confidence, understand children's emotional needs, strengthen bonding and responsive interaction skills

Measurable outcomes:

- Stronger attachment and bonding in the first 1001 days (evidence-based outcome measurement tools).
- Reduced parental stress and improved confidence (evidence-based outcome measurement tools).
- Improved child emotional regulation, social development and early mental health, laying the foundation for long-term wellbeing (evidence-based outcome measurement tools).

Improve early language and communication development

Speech, language and communication skills are the strongest predictors of later attainment and a key driver of the inequalities in children's readiness for school.

Objectives:

- Increase the use of the WellComm tool for early identification and support of speech, language and communication needs across early years settings, Family Hubs and community partners, ensuring timely signposting and referrals for additional support
- Promote language-rich home learning environments through universal and targeted approaches
- Promote increased sign up of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library for all under fives living in the Borough
- The Early Years Quality Improvement Team (QIT) offers general and bespoke training to build practitioner skills, in areas directly relevant to early language such as communication-rich environments, interactions, and quality teaching practices. The training offer also provides continuous professional development (CPD) that strengthens practitioner knowledge, reflective practice, and early identification of language needs.

Measurable outcomes:

- Increased proportion of children achieving communication-related Early Learning Goals and narrowed speech and language need-related inequalities (as measured through the Early Years Foundations Stage profile).
- Improved early communication and vocabulary skills (as measured through the Early Years Foundations Stage profile).
- Reduced number of referrals for late or specialist intervention.

Build a high-quality, inclusive and accessible early years childcare provision.

Building a high-quality, inclusive and accessible early years childcare provision is essential to giving every child the best possible start in life. We will create environments where all children can thrive, regardless of their background, ability or circumstance.

Objectives:

- Support the early years workforce with continuous development programme, peer learning and shared quality standards; with targeted support for settings most in need
- Expand affordable, flexible and culturally relevant childcare options.
- Improve access and inclusion for disadvantaged families, children aged under two and children with SEND, emerging needs or complex vulnerabilities.
- Strengthen smooth transitions between home, childcare, nursery and school.
- Strengthen cultural competence and inclusion across all settings to address Lambeth's diverse community needs.
- Increase the take up of two-year-old and three and four year-old free and disadvantaged childcare entitlements.

Measurable outcomes:

- Higher proportion of early years settings achieving the 'expected standard' and above as measured by Ofsted.
- Increased childcare uptake, especially among disadvantaged families.
- More inclusive early years environments with timely SEN support (parental feedback).
- Improved rates of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD).
- Strong leadership and consistently high-quality pedagogy across all providers.
- Workforce skilled in communication and language, early identification, inclusion and wellbeing.

Overall outcome - A Lambeth where:

- More children reach a Good Level of Development at the end of reception, and the disadvantage gap is narrowed significantly and in line with national targets by 2028
- Fewer children need late or specialist intervention
- Child health outcomes improve across physical, emotional and social domains.
- Families experience support that is easy to access, culturally relevant and non-stigmatising.
- The early years system functions as one integrated partnership, delivering impact at scale.

8. Governance and accountability

The Best Start in Life Strategy Oversight Group provides strategic oversight of the Best Start in Life programme and sits within the wider Children and Young People's partnership governance framework. The group reports directly to the Children and Young People Alliance Board and, through the Neighbourhood Operational Delivery Group, maintains strong links with key transformation programmes, including the Families First Partnership Programme, Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs) and the SEND Reform Programme.

This governance arrangement supports integrated planning, accountability and service delivery across the partnership, ensuring that Best Start in Life priorities are embedded within wider system transformation and neighbourhood-based approaches to improving outcomes for children, young people and families.

Delivery of the **Best Start in Life Strategy Oversight Group** is supported through five multi-agency workstreams, each responsible for overseeing delivery of key priorities and outcomes.

a) Parenting, Parental Mental Health and Parent-Infant Relationships

- Oversight of the Best Start Family Hub and Healthy Babies programme deliverables relating to parenting, parental mental health and parent-infant relationships.
- Implementation of the parental mental health pathway and associated workforce development across the partnership.
- Oversight of the early years parenting offer, including full implementation of Baby Chat.
- Commissioning and development of additional interventions to support parents experiencing mild to moderate mental health challenges during the transition to parenthood.

b) Infant Feeding and Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) Accreditation

- Oversight of Best Start Family Hub and Healthy Babies programme deliverables relating to infant feeding.
- Delivery of UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative reaccreditation and associated action plan.
- Review and redesign of infant feeding pathways.
- Monitoring delivery of the infant feeding offer against the Infant Feeding Strategy and needs assessment.
- Oversight of infant feeding elements within Public Health Nursing transformation.

c) Child Development and School Readiness

- Oversight and delivery of the relevant priorities within the Best Start in Life Strategy.
- Delivery of Best Start Family Hub and Healthy Babies programme priorities relating to the Home Learning Environment.
- Oversight of Best Start Family Hub programme priorities relating to the role of the Best Start in Life Inclusion practitioner and alignment with SEND Reforms and a move towards a more inclusive mainstream offer.

- Early years quality improvement, childcare sufficiency and uptake of funded childcare entitlements.
- Oversight of the Targeted Nursery Programme (Experts at Hand) and its alignment with SEND reforms.
- Early years SEND support, including targeted provision for children with complex needs and autism.

d) Public health nursing redesign

- Implementation and oversight of public health nursing 0-19 redesign
- Delivery of the Healthy Child Programme
- Integrated delivery model with Best Start Family Hubs and wider transformation programmes for children and young people

e) Public Health Initiatives

- Increasing uptake of Healthy Start vouchers.
- Review of the universal Vitamin D scheme.
- Delivery of supervised toothbrushing and wider oral health improvement initiatives.
- Improving vaccination and immunisation uptake.
- Supporting healthy weight and obesity prevention initiatives.