



HM Government

Family Hubs and Start for Life programme guide 2025–26

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The Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme is jointly overseen by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education.

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Purpose of document

The Family Hubs and Start for Life programme is jointly managed by the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care. It seeks to join-up and enhance services for families with children of all ages through a network of family hubs, with start for life services for families with 0 to 2 year-olds at their core. Funding is provided to 75 upper-tier local authorities with high levels of deprivation.

In January 2025, £126 million was announced to continue delivery of a network of family hubs and start for life services, delivering on Plan for Change¹. This publication provides non-statutory guidance for the 75 upper-tier local authorities participating in the programme to set the delivery expectations for this period.

This document is an update to the [Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme Guide 2022-25](#)². It should be read alongside the following documents [published for delivery in financial year 2025–26](#)³.

- Delivery Expectations for Funded Services 2025-26, which sets out the minimum expectations for each of the funded strands:
 - Parenting support for families
 - Parent-infant relationship and perinatal mental health support
 - Early language and the home learning environment (HLE)
 - Infant feeding support
 - Parent and carer panels
 - The Start for Life offer
- The Family Hubs Service Expectations, which lists the core services we expect local areas to deliver through their family hubs and sets out the minimum expectations of the services which are not receiving additional investment through this programme.
- The Family Hubs Model Framework, which includes the criteria for the two stages of family hub transformation: a basic family hub model and a developed family hub model.

¹ [Plan for Change – GOV.UK](#)

² [Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme Guide](#)

³ www.gov.uk/government/publications/family-hubs-and-start-for-life-programme-local-authority-guide-2025-to-2026

Introduction

The [Plan for Change](#)⁴, published in December 2024, outlines the approach to mission-led government to deliver meaningful change felt by people across the country. Through the Opportunity and Health missions, this government is clear on its ambition to break the link between a child's background and their future success, and to create the healthiest generation of children ever. What happens in the earliest years of a child's life is critical to achieving these aims, which is why the government has set the ambitious target of a record proportion of children starting school ready to learn; by 2028, 75% of 5-year-olds reaching a good level of development in the early years' foundation stage.

To help children become adults who live long, healthy and economically productive lives, there must be a sustained focus on the 1,001 days from conception to the age of two, and continued support during the early years of childhood. The early years are crucial to a child's health, development and life chances, setting the foundations for their cognitive, emotional and physical development.⁵ All children should be starting primary school ready to learn. By positively shaping the most influential part of a baby or child's environment – through support for strong parent-infant relationships, nurturing home experiences and ensuring early access to services – we can set every child up for success.

For most babies and children, the primary institution looking after their health and wellbeing is the family. Families need an integrated offer that can support them in the right way at the right time. They need access to information and tools to help them to care for and interact positively with their babies and children, and joined-up services, which take a whole-family perspective.

All families need help from time-to-time. Often the difficulties they face can be closely connected and holistic care is required to fully meet a family's needs. For example, difficulties with breastfeeding can sometimes be caused by, or result in, perinatal mental health challenges,⁶ and struggles with attachment and bonding.⁷ Evidence shows preventative early intervention can deliver better outcomes for babies, children and their families.

The Family Hubs and Start for Life programme is well-placed to deliver this joined-up holistic care by providing accessible, integrated maternity, baby and family support

⁴ [Plan for Change – GOV.UK](#)

⁵ [Homepage – Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University](#)

⁶ Brown, A. et al (2015). Understanding the relationship between breastfeeding and postnatal depression: the role of pain and physical difficulties: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jan.12832>

⁷ Chen, J. et al (2020). The association between breastfeeding and attachment: A systematic review, *Children and Youth Services Review*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740920309452#:~:text=From%20a%20psychological%20perspective%2C%20breastfeeding%20not%20only%20serves,and%20infants%20during%20breastfeeding%20%28Orengul%20et%20al.%2C%202019%29>

services through the first 1,001 days of life and beyond. The programme also has a key role to play in ensuring the commitment that all children start school ready to learn is met.

The investment for the first phase of the programme has been used to deliver system and cultural changes both locally and nationally. It is bringing communities and families together in collaborative action, supporting parents and carers to give their babies and children the best start in life. Some areas have developed family hubs as the front door to an end-to-end system of family support and protection, from universal start for life services, through Family Help and multi-agency child protection, and to the edge of care. This means more families are getting the joined-up support they need, when they need it.

Thanks to the huge commitment from local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, communities and other local services, we've seen the rapid introduction of ambitious plans in local areas. Families are already benefitting from access to a wider range of tailored support, including:

- more than 400 family hubs across the country which are **welcoming places** where families with children aged 0 to 19, (or 25 with SEND), can be connected to a wide range of services
- a clear and joined-up **universal Start for Life offer** which provides the essential support that families need
- **parent and carer panels**, through which caregivers can share their views on both the design and delivery of local support
- **new and enhanced parenting, perinatal mental health and parent–infant relationship support**, to promote positive early relationships along a continuum of need
- new and enhanced services supporting **home learning** and the development of babies born during the pandemic
- round-the-clock support and advice about breastfeeding, including through the extension of the **National Breastfeeding Helpline** opening hours, and new and enhanced local 1:1 support to **help parents to meet their breastfeeding goals**
- new, trusted NHS advice and guidance to help parents build a secure relationship with their baby and support development, through the '*If they could tell you*' and '*Little moments together*' public awareness campaigns.

Recognising the programme's important contribution, the Plan for Change includes a commitment to continue investing in joined up family services to support pregnancy, early child health, parenting and home learning. As a first step, in January 2025, £126 million was announced for the continuation of the programme for 2025–26.⁸ This includes:

- £22.4 million family hubs programme and capital funding to consolidate and enhance family hubs and services

⁸ [Families to receive £126 million in early years support – GOV.UK](#)

- £36.5 million to improve perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationship support
- £18.5 million to improve infant feeding services and provide practical support with breastfeeding
- £20 million to enhance parenting support for expectant parents and those with babies aged 0 to 2, focusing on promoting bonding and attachment
- £10.7 million to help parents create rich home learning environments to support early child development
- £2 million to ensure families can access and understand their local Start for Life services and to support parents and carers to bring their valuable insight into service delivery

The remaining £16 million will be used to support the delivery of a network of family hubs. This investment will provide a strong foundation to deliver the opportunity mission and the government's ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children ever.

Section 2: Year 4 expectations

For financial year 2025-2026, the programme's objectives remain the same, to:

- provide support to parents and carers so they are able to nurture their babies and children, improving health and education outcomes for all
- contribute to a reduction in inequalities in health and education outcomes for babies, children and families across England by ensuring that support provided is communicated to all parents and carers, including those who are hardest to reach and/or most in need of it
- build the evidence base for what works when it comes to improving health and education outcomes for babies, children and families in different delivery contexts

Joined-up and enhanced services should be delivered through family hubs so that all parents and carers can access the support they need, when they need it. Start for Life services should remain at the core of the offer to families, with a particular focus on those with babies up to the age of 2.

By now, we expect that you are delivering services in accordance with the delivery expectations set out for the initial phase of the programme⁹. The funding for 2025–26 allows the opportunity to consolidate, embed and enhance your family hub network and start for life services offer. This means continuing to deliver the minimum expectations. The expectations for each of the strands of the programme are set out in the Delivery Expectations for Funded Services 2025–26. The expectations for the family hubs transformation funding for 2025-26 are listed in the Family Hubs Service Expectations and the Family Hubs Model Framework, [published alongside this document](#)¹⁰.

We continue to encourage ambition and, where possible, you should build on the progress made and seek to strengthen your offer, learning from delivery to date. This could be by delivering more of the 'go further' options or other innovative approaches to enhance your offer and ensure it is reaching all families, particularly those most in need of your services. We see this as being achieved through the use of population data, data on take-up of services, local needs assessments and feedback from parents and carers to continually improve services and ensure they are designed with families at the centre. We will work with you to develop an offer that makes the biggest difference for babies, children and families in your area.

We encourage – and will support – local areas to share learning and good practice to support services to build on the progress made so far.

⁹ These expectations were set out in the [Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme Guide \(2022-2025\)](#)

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/family-hubs-and-start-for-life-programme-local-authority-guide-2025-to-2026>

Changes to funded services expectations

While minimum expectations and 'go further's' remain broadly the same, we have made the following small amendments:

- **Early language and home learning environment (HLE):** The narrative has been updated to reflect that this funding is no longer COVID-recovery funding. We have clarified the scope of fundable HLE activity and extended the age range from 3 to 4 years to 2 to 4 years to provide additional flexibility for local authorities. We have also added peer support and community outreach as activities within the HLE strand. These are existing elements that have shown success in the parenting strand.
- **Parenting:** The guidance has been updated to make it clearer that parenting support should have a focus on bonding and attachment and the in-scope age range is 0- to 2-year-olds only.
- **Infant feeding:** The requirement to invite parents antenatally to decide whether they want to breastfeed has been amended as we know that parents may want to keep an open mind about infant feeding until after their baby is born. Rather than inviting parents to make this decision antenatally, parents should be given the opportunity to discuss feeding their baby. This should include a discussion about the benefits of breastfeeding, potential feeding challenges and information about the support available.
- **Perinatal mental health and parent-infant relationships:** We have provided some additional detail on the expectation to develop a local multidisciplinary strategy, in response to queries previously received.

Section 3: Funding and assurance

Funding allocations

We issued letters with information outlining provisional funding allocations for 2025–26 on 20 December 2024. Funding will be paid in two tranches. Year 4 allocations will include funding for:

- family hubs transformation
- the grant for the funded services (parent–infant relationship and perinatal mental health, infant feeding, parenting, early language and HLE)
- continuation of parent and carer panels and Start for Life offers

Assurance expectations

Recommitment to the programme

In August 2022, we launched the formal programme sign-up process to confirm your interest in taking part in the programme and your commitment to delivering the programme asks.

As you have already signed up to the programme, we will not repeat the sign-up process for year 4, but your local authority will have the ability to opt out of the programme if you do not wish to continue.

We will ask you to sign an updated Memorandum of Understanding to re-confirm your commitment to continuing to deliver on the programme expectations for 2025-26.

The next phase of this programme runs to March 2026. However, we reserve the right to reduce, suspend or withhold in whole or in part funding for year 4 in the event that your local authority does not meet the expectations set out in the Memorandum of Understanding.

Delivery plans

Prior to the initial first grant award of 2025-26 being made, you will be expected to confirm that you will continue to deliver the minimum expectations and agree a number of 'go further' options over year 4 of the programme. More detailed conversations and agreements on the activities you plan to deliver will take place as part of the delivery planning process.

You will be expected to produce a delivery plan demonstrating how funding will be used to continue to achieve the programme objectives in your area. Your delivery plan should set out the activities you plan to deliver in year 4 of the programme with associated

financial forecasts. We have developed a revised delivery plan template and we will share further information on the process for completing this delivery plan template.

Programme reporting expectations

Programme reporting is an important element in understanding delivery and financial progress. As per previous years, we anticipate there will be 4 elements of reporting:

- programme delivery returns
- financial returns
- management information
- maturity self-assessment

Taken together, these reporting expectations will provide us with the data we need to:

- monitor programme delivery
- develop the evidence base
- understand what good delivery looks like
- identify areas where additional support is required

All of the data collected may also be used for internal and external evaluation, reporting to ministers and programme assurance.

Beyond receiving formal reporting, the Regional Delivery Leads and Regional Delivery Support Advisors will provide some hands-on support with planning and delivery. This will include, where possible and appropriate, signposting wider support; helping to manage delivery risks that arise; and sharing knowledge and good practice.

Programme delivery returns

You will be asked to submit updated information about your progress against your delivery plan ahead of each payment round. You will outline status updates of planned activities, refreshed financial forecasts and timelines of activity delivery.

Further information about the format of this return will be shared in due course.

Financial returns

To provide assurance that your expenditure is in line with the grant determination letter, you will be asked to complete one financial return in the form of an annual statement of grant usage. This will be required at the end of the financial year.

Management information

Collecting and using management information (MI) will continue to be an important way of regularly assessing and monitoring the outcomes of all elements of programme delivery. MI will be collected at regular intervals, with some elements collected quarterly.

Our selection of MI has been based on the balance of the need to be ambitious enough to provide sufficient evidence of the overall programme's effect, but not unduly burdensome to provide.

Our MI collection for year 4 will be similar to year 3, however, we will be seeking to improve the process in order to improve clarity and reduce duplication whilst capturing the information we need. In particular, for year 4 we will explore alternative ways to collect user data for funded services to make this more meaningful in light of the new government's mission-led approach. Over the next few months, we will work with local authorities to get feedback on our current questions.

Data we will collect includes:

- system and service-level activity, for example, metrics on family hubs transformation/maturity, and delivery and maturity of local services
- professional/workforce activities and characteristics, for example, metrics on inter-professional collaboration, staff attendance at learning and development, etc
- family hub and funded service usage and reach, for example, metrics on service users and demographics
- parent outcomes, for example, metrics relevant to funded services such as parent–infant relationship, perinatal mental health, breastfeeding, etc
- family hub maturity self-assessment data

For more detail on the data collected through the MI, please see the MI guidance document available to access by your programme data lead. Please note, that the MI guidance document will be updated in quarter 1 2025-26 to reflect improvements being made to the template following feedback from LAs and a review of the data collected.

Evaluation

Evaluation is crucial to informing our understanding of how the programme is being delivered in different contexts, to help us assess early effects of the programme and to build the case to support future funding decisions. This will enable us to understand how the programme meets different population needs, and what works, for whom, and in what circumstances.

The Family Hubs and Start for Life programme will continue to evaluate the rollout of family hubs and start for life services overall alongside the delivery of individual elements. Evaluations will continue to be commissioned and led by independent evaluation teams.

If you are invited to participate in an evaluation, you will work with our evaluation teams on areas such as, but not limited to:

- in-depth case studies of your experiences of using the funding, including understanding how existing services or workforces are changing
- surveys of families' experiences of services
- surveys of workforces' experiences of services
- detailed analysis of the delivery and effects of specific policy options in breastfeeding and mental health
- working with evaluation team leads to identify and return detailed data for impact analysis

We expect local authorities participating in current evaluations to continue to participate in evaluation activity. Additional local authority areas may be selected to participate at different times throughout the programme. Local authorities invited to participate will be selected based on a robust process to identify a diverse and representative sample for in-depth evaluation.

If selected, you will be expected to enable staff members to participate in evaluation activity, including case studies, completing surveys, and to identify and return more detailed data than will be expected through the MI collection.

We expect the independent evaluation teams to support you in meeting the additional needs of the evaluation. The evaluation will likely be beneficial to you as it will, among other things, provide an increased understanding of services, and enhanced data and evidence on the effect of interventions.



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