WAKEFIELD FAMILIES TOGETHER
happy, healthy, safe

Wakefield Best Start Strategy

2026-2028

BEST START IN LIFE | HEALTHY BABIES

Introduction

Wakefield Families Together is a local partnership that makes it easier for families to find and access support when they need it. This strategy sets out how we will work together to deliver the early years aspects of our ambitious Children and Young People's Plan, to enable all children in Wakefield District to have the best start in life. We want to ensure that, for every parent and carer, all it takes is one conversation to get the right support to create the best start in life for our children.

The first 1001 days of a child's life, from conception to their second birthday, shape the rest of their lives. We must focus our attention on the early years of life to enable parents and caregivers to build strong foundations for their families. With strong foundations in place, children will grow up with curiosity, love, and a sense of belonging and to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives, whatever that means for them.

There is a dedicated Early Years Strategic Board to ensure that our work is coordinated and effective. West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) has identified the early years of life as a priority for our region. We welcome this focus and will work to align our activity to make best use of our joint resources and realise the benefits for Wakefield families. Our early years and integrated workforce are guided by national good practice and the best available evidence of 'what works' as we continue to build capacity and capability.

In Wakefield our aim is to work as an integrated early years system, creating seamless partnerships and approaches. Our goal is to provide parents with access to support, information, advice and guidance about child development, high-quality learning and play so that children can thrive.

Policy context

Wakefield's vision is that children and young people are happy, healthy, safe, resilient and hopeful for their future.

The Children and Young People Plan 2025-28 was created through listening to our children, young people, families, and people who work with them.

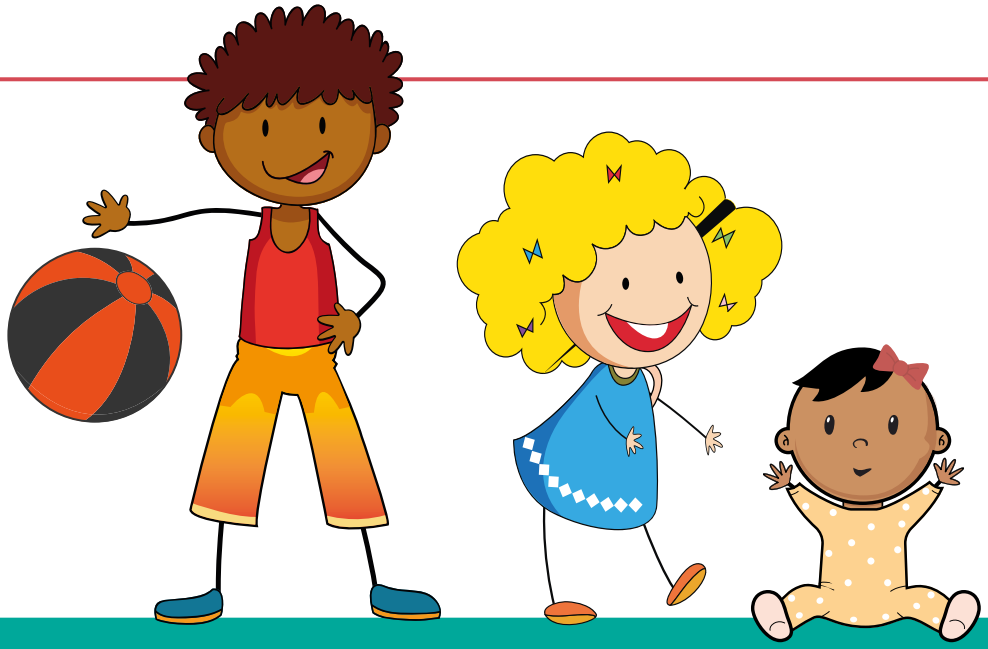
'Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life' was published on 7th July 2025 and sets out the government's commitment to the Early Years.

We want all families to have easy access to high-quality family support when they need it. Becoming a parent is a huge moment, full of excitement about the future. But all parents, at different times, need a helping hand – whether it's reassurance during moments of uncertainty, guidance through transitions such as weaning or potty training, support if relationships hit a rough patch or simply connection in the midst of everyday pressures. Without that, it can feel isolating and overwhelming. These services do not just offer a help, they offer hope and connection.

The ambitions in our Best Start Strategy align with the national policy commitment to support the local, regional and national vision.

Our success

- **96.6%** of Early Years settings in Wakefield achieved Good or Outstanding in their most recent Ofsted inspection
- **89%** of children achieved a Good Level of Development at 2-2.5 year old progress check, (JSNA 2024)
- **65%** (9500) children took up free childcare entitlement place (2025)
- **99%+** of families received the Start for Life leaflet at birth registrations
- **6873** people with over **4990** children and young people registered on the 0-19 app (health and well-being directory) since launch in Aug 23
- Dolly Parton's Imagination library delivered **73,000** free books to 2645 children (Sept 25)
- Health Visitors are using the 2-2.5yr health review to identify children with low communication standards with **62%** of all eligible children registering with the Imagination Library (2025)
- 50 Things offer continues to extend its reach with over **5700** downloads



Our level of need

- Wakefield is the **54th** most deprived district in England (out of 317 districts)
- **3,507** babies were born to Wakefield resident mothers (2023)
- **72.5%** of women have early access to maternity care (22/23)
- **30.6%** of women in early pregnancy are obese (22/23)
- **36.7%** of women breastfeed at 6-8 weeks (22/23)
- **16.0%** of women smoke in early pregnancy (22/23)
- **74%** of children in Reception were of a healthy weight. Source: Wakefield JSNA

Looking back at the 2021-2025 Early Years strategy we want to tell you about what we have achieved together

In Wakefield our partnership to deliver the best start for children is well established. We have a strong track record of our work together to improve outcomes in the early years. The previous Early Years Strategy was active between 2021 and 2024.

We made progress in each of the priority areas, which puts us in a strong position to continue working together to deliver this Best Start Strategy.

Create an ambitious and high-quality universal offer which ensures every child in Wakefield gets the best possible start in life

- There have been positive changes to our maternity services. Mid Yorkshire Teaching NHS Trust now has a fully staffed maternity workforce and has reduced workforce attrition by 42%.
- There are now specialist midwives in Wakefield to support pregnant women with additional vulnerabilities including pelvic health specialists, midwives who can support those who want to stop smoking, maternity befrienders, and midwives who focus on making sure that every pregnant person gets fair and appropriate care, no matter their background or circumstances. There is also a specialist doctor in the service who looks after pregnant people with medical conditions and diabetes.
- Our 0-19 Growing Healthy Service delivers the Healthy Child Programme for the District and also has specialist teams to support infant feeding, parent infant relationships and teenage parents. A preceptorship programme that helps staff to learn and grow in their roles will support the development of the future workforce.

Deliver highly effective Early Help and Intervention for families at the point of need with consistent service delivery

- Wakefield has established 9 Best Start Family Hubs across the district to offer resources, training and community events. Between 2023 and 2024 there was a six-fold increase in programme attendance.

Ensure universal access to good or outstanding Early Years provision and secure high uptake of free entitlement places

- We have continued to work closely with the sector to deliver high quality provision and sufficient places. In 2024-25 academic year 97.7% of settings were good or outstanding which is higher than in 2023-24. Take-up of the free entitlement continues to grow in light of the expansion of 15 hours from age 9 months and the increase to 30 hours free from September 2025.

Develop a highly effective pathway for communication and language; deliver a partner-wide strategy to support children's speech & language development in the early years

- Wakefield's Speech, Language and Communication Strategy was published in 2023, along with the Babies Are Born Ready to Communicate leaflet. Education and Home Learning

Workforce Development – safeguarding training and support for all professionals working with young children

- Wakefield Safeguarding Children Partnership has delivered the Safe Sleep Standard and trained Wakefield Families Together partnership professionals so that Every Sleep Is a Safe Sleep.

What we want to achieve over the next 2 years

Best Start Key Ambitions

The Wakefield Families Together partnership wants to make life better for every child in the Wakefield District. This means that we must understand the reasons for the unfair and avoidable differences that we see in access to services, in the experience that families have when they do access services, and in health and life outcomes.

These avoidable differences disadvantage families and children living in Wakefield District based on things like where they live, their race, ethnicity, culture and language, their religion, the education they receive, their socio-economic status and other factors like age, disability, immigration status, and sexual orientation. We will target our resources to ensure that people facing disadvantage are able to thrive.

All of the ambitions we have identified will contribute to children achieving a good level of development. Whilst this measure is assessed when children reach school age, we recognise that all the support that children and families receive from pre-conception through their early years will contribute towards achieving this outcome.

Each ambition is connected to the Children and Young People's Plan and the things that children and families told us are important to them.

Best Start Ambition 1:

Our Best Start offer supports babies and children to establish routines and positive behaviours

Our Aim: is to provide a nurturing early years offer that supports babies and young children in their development and relationships; building a strong foundation for lifelong wellbeing, confidence and learning.

Outcome for Children and Young People:

- I'm ready to begin my learning journey.
- I'm able to get good support for my emotional well-being when I need it.
- I'm able to get support and services I need to stay healthy.

We will do this by

- Offering support to families with infant feeding, promoting breastfeeding, weaning and healthy eating.
- Providing support to develop positive parent infant relationships, our offer of support will be responsive to different levels of need.
- Developing and delivering a graduated and accessible approach to promote healthy sleep.

- Delivering evidence-based programmes for parents to prepare for pregnancy and in the earliest years of their child's life.
- Supporting families to enable children to develop physical literacy and other aspects of healthy development.
- Ensuring there is a strong offer to engage and support Dads in their child's Best Start journey.
- Promoting our digital offer to ensure this is aligned with the national Best Start in Life website and digital tools for parents.

Parents and carers told us

More parental advice that doesn't seem 'judgey' and as more of guideline with tips.

I need help with a fussy eater to make healthy meals at home.

Best Start Ambition 2:

Our Early Years Offer is Inclusive

Our Aim: is to ensure that babies' and children's needs are understood, and adjustments are made to ensure they can access a learning and play offer that suits them.

Outcome for Children and Young People:

- I'm happy and feel included in the place where I learn (and play).

We will do this by

- Committing that leaders will offer training and support to embed an inclusive approach in all Best Start Early Years settings.
- Strengthening our layered and step by step approach to supporting developmental needs so that children and young people have access to a clearly defined and responsive offer.
- Committing to regular co-produced creative programming for early years & SEND across Museums & Castles, Libraries and WX.
- Recognising and supporting young carers from the earliest opportunity.

Parents and carers said

We need early support, not just when we reach crisis.

It shouldn't take a diagnosis for our children to get the help they need.

Best Start Ambition 3:

There is a comprehensive, graduated offer to support babies and children to be good communicators

Our Aim: is that babies and children are good communicators and able to use language effectively. We want the curriculum in Early Years settings to meet the full intention, breadth and ambition of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Outcome for Children and Young People:

- I'm ready to begin my learning journey.

We will do this by

- Delivering a broad range of literacy support for children in Early Years settings, and community settings including libraries and Best Start Family Hubs.
- Promoting a positive home learning environment.
- Delivering interventions that support literacy through reading, exploration and play.
- Providing Early Learning Goal support to settings across the Wakefield District.
- Delivering a clinical support pathway to meet the needs of children where there is an assessed need.

Best Start Ambition 4:

Our Best Start offer includes targeted support and affordable access to services and places in early years settings.

Our Aim: is for families to take-up the offer of early years care and education in their community, including childcare places and the offer from Best Start Family Hubs where there is access to timely support to promote child development.

Outcome for Children and Young People:

- I'm ready to begin my learning journey.
- I'm able to get support and services I need to stay healthy.

We will do this by

- Securing sufficient early years places across Wakefield to increase take-up of the funded 2 and 3 year old childcare entitlement, particularly in areas of greatest need.
- Working with early years providers to develop a sustainable supply of high-quality, affordable childcare places across the district.
- Targeting promotion of the funded childcare offer to families least likely to access it, addressing practical and cultural barriers to take-up.
- Embedding routine multi-agency early years conversations to support earlier identification of developmental needs and timely, coordinated intervention.
- Strengthening transition from nursery to reception by working with schools and early years settings to ensure continuity of support, information sharing and learning.

Best Start Ambition 5:

Wakefield has a skilled and valued Early Years workforce

Our Aim: is to promote careers in the early years as a rewarding and impactful profession, and to build and sustain a skilled, motivated and diverse workforce that reflects the communities we serve.

Outcome for Children and Young People:

- I'm supported by people who understand me and help me grow.

We will do this by

- Developing a coordinated early years training and development offer across the Wakefield partnership to build workforce capability and improve the quality of support for young children and families.
- Delivering joint, multi-agency training to strengthen shared understanding and collaboration between health and early years professionals.
- Implementing targeted recruitment and retention plans for key early years roles, including midwives, specialist child public health nurses, nursery nurses and early years practitioners.
- Creating a tailored Early Years training plan for arts, culture and leisure services to support early development, inclusion and family engagement.
- Working in partnership with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority to align local activity with, and contribute to, the West Yorkshire Early Years Workforce Plan.

Delivery and accountability

We will:

- Deliver on the ambitions of this strategy and the expectations of the Best Start Plan.
- Measure Good Levels of Development and Wakefield's progress towards reaching the target of 77.7% of all children achieving this measure.
- Measure any variation in the number of children who achieve Good Levels of Development between the most and least deprived neighbourhoods in our District.
- Set measurable targets to help us measure improvement across key priority areas.
- Report annually on progress to families, schools and the public via our network of providers, school leaders, the Early Years Strategic Board and our Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Arrangements.
- Align work that is focused on the Early Years with other Wakefield Strategies including Belonging, Early Help, SEND and Education & Inclusion.
- Support the delivery of the District Plan.
- Ask families if we are using a questioning approach to understand the underlying causes of a child or family's circumstances or behaviours and respond respectfully and with honesty.
- Check if families tell us that they know how and where to find the support they need, and that it makes a positive difference to their family life.

Conclusion

The Wakefield Best Start Strategy will drive change to improve how the early years partnership works and responds to parents, carers, babies and young children's needs to improve children's overall life chances. We will work as a partnership to identify need early and deliver a graduated offer of accessible and holistic support.

The Children's Health Service App

To get the latest information, advice and local support from Wakefield Families Together direct to your mobile phone download the Children's Health Service App.

https://hdftchildrenshealthservice.co.uk/ourservice/growing-healthy-0-19-wakefield/