



**Hartlepool**  
Borough Council



# Hartlepool - Best Start Local Plan

[www.hartlepool.gov.uk](http://www.hartlepool.gov.uk)



# Foreword from the Lead Councillor for Children's Services

I am proud to introduce Hartlepool's Best Start in Life Local Plan, a shared commitment to giving every child in our town the opportunity, support and strong foundations they need to thrive.

In Hartlepool, we believe that the earliest years of a child's life matter profoundly. From conception to age five, children develop at a remarkable pace, laying down the building blocks for learning, health and wellbeing that will shape their futures. Our duty, as a council, as partners, and as a community, is to ensure that these foundations are as strong as possible for every child, whichever neighbourhood they grow up in and whatever challenges they may face.

We know that Hartlepool's families face real pressures: high levels of deprivation, rising needs in the early years, and widening inequalities that affect children long before they start school. Yet we also know that Hartlepool is a place of strength, where committed practitioners, schools, health teams, Family Hubs, community organisations, and parents work tirelessly for children every day. This plan builds on those strengths with renewed energy and a clear, ambitious direction for the years ahead.

The national Best Start in Life strategy sets an expectation that by 2028, more children across the country will achieve a Good Level of Development, and our local targets reflect this ambition. We are determined to go further than this, improving outcomes for all children while closing the gaps faced by children eligible for Free School Meals, those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, and those experiencing significant socioeconomic disadvantage.

This plan sets out how we will do that. It describes a more connected, more coordinated, and more inclusive early years system. One that identifies needs earlier, supports families more effectively, values and invests in our workforce, strengthens the quality of early years education, and builds a culture in which every partner shares responsibility for every child's development.

Our approach is grounded in evidence, shaped by national expectations, and rooted in the voices of parents, carers, practitioners and partners across Hartlepool. It is also guided by a simple belief: every child deserves the very best start in life, no exceptions.

I want to thank all those who have contributed to the development of this plan and all those who will play a vital role in delivering it. The work ahead will require continued dedication, collective effort and strong partnership. But together, we can build an early years system that is not only effective but transformative. One that creates lasting change for children, strengthens families, and helps our town to thrive.

I am confident that by working together, with ambition and compassion, we will make a real and lasting difference.

Together, we are giving Hartlepool's children the Best Start In Life.



**Councillor Melanie Morley**  
Chair of the Children's Services Committee  
Hartlepool Borough Council



# Contents

---

<b>1. Welcome and Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Why the Early Years Matter</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Our Vision and Values</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. Hartlepool Local Landscape</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>5. Leadership and Governance</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>6. Priority Areas for Hartlepool's Best Start Local Plan</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>7. Partnership response to priority areas</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>8. Scaling innovative practice to achieve sustainable improvement by 2028</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>9. Co Production and Sector Engagement</b>	<b>23</b>



# Welcome and Introduction

Every child in Hartlepool deserves the strongest possible start in life. Our Best Start Local Plan sets out how we will work together across education, social care, health, early years, and community services to ensure all children—particularly those facing disadvantage—have the foundations they need to thrive from conception to age five.

This plan is shaped by the national Best Start in Life strategy, which sets an ambition for 75% of 5 year olds nationally to reach a Good Level of Development (GLD) by 2028. This target is supported by a renewed national focus on improving early years education and health outcomes and is part of a broader strategy to address inequalities and developmental gaps that emerge before children start school.

In 2024/25, 65.0% of all children in Hartlepool achieved a GLD in their reception year compared to 68% of children nationally and 52.2% of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieved a GLD compared to 51.3% nationally. The Department for Education (DfE) has set targets of 74.5% of all children in Hartlepool and 63.3% of children eligible for FSM to achieve a GLD by 2028.

This initiative is part of a broader strategy to address inequalities and developmental gaps that emerge before children start school.

The requirements of The Best Start in Life strategy and the corresponding targets directly align with the local authorities legal responsibilities to:

- ✓ Improve outcomes for all children (Childcare Act 2006 and 2016)
- ✓ Reduce inequalities, particularly for FSM pupils (Childcare Act 2006, Equality Act 2010)
- ✓ Ensure high-quality early education provision (EYFS Framework 2014)
- ✓ Support early identification and SEND inclusion (Children & Families Act 2014, SEND Code of Practice 2014)
- ✓ Promote high standards across early years providers (LA improvement duties)

Therefore, improving GLD outcomes, and narrowing the FSM gap, is not only a strategic priority but a statutory requirement.

National expectations require all local authorities to publish their Best Start local plans by 31 March 2026 setting out a consistent, evidence based approach to tackling inequalities and raising outcomes in the early years to reach the 2028 targets.



The Best Start in Life Plan sets out our system wide priorities. The plan focuses on the key themes that matter most for Hartlepool. A dedicated programme of work will sit alongside the plan, turning priorities into practical actions. Families, practitioners and partners will shape this work through co-production.

In Hartlepool, we recognise that a child's earliest experiences lay the foundations for lifelong learning, health, and wellbeing. We have strong partnership working, committed professionals, thriving Family Hubs and a shared determination to deliver the best for children within the context of significant structural challenges: high levels of child poverty, deep-rooted inequalities, increasing numbers of children with SEND, variation in early years outcomes across settings and a workforce under significant pressure.

Our aim is to create a borough where:

- **Every child is supported to develop well**, socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively.
- **Families receive the right help at the right time**, with seamless support from pregnancy through the early years.
- **Inequalities are reduced**, including gaps in attainment for children with SEND, those eligible for Free School Meals, and those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.
- **Early years practitioners are empowered** with the tools, data, and partnerships needed to deliver high quality, inclusive practice.

This plan brings together our local ambitions with the national strategy's expectations, including the use of the DfE's GLD data tool to understand the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) outcomes, identify trends and shape targeted improvement work. Our approach is collaborative, inclusive, and firmly focused on children's outcomes. We will work closely with schools, early years providers, health partners, voluntary and community organisations and families themselves to ensure that every Hartlepool child, regardless of their background or needs, can flourish.

Together, we are committed to giving Hartlepool's children the best start in life.



# Why the Early Years Matter

## The Early Years as a Critical Window

The period from conception to age five represents the most rapid phase of human development. In these early years, children build the neural, social and emotional foundations that shape their long term outcomes. Strong early development supports better educational attainment, improved health, and enhanced wellbeing throughout life. The Best Start in Life strategy highlights the essential role of early years development in closing inequalities, improving children's readiness for school and increasing the proportion of children reaching a GLD.

## Reducing Inequalities Before They Take Hold

In Hartlepool, early years outcomes continue to show gaps between children who experience disadvantage and their peers. The outcomes for children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) remains lower than for non FSM children. Given these persistent disparities focusing our efforts on the early years is crucial. The national strategy emphasises the importance of effective early assessment and support; by intervening sooner, we can begin to narrow these gaps and prevent challenges from becoming entrenched as children grow older.

## The Role of High Quality Early Years Practice

High quality early education and care, delivered by skilled, reflective practitioners has a demonstrably positive impact on children's development. It shapes children's communication and language skills, supports social and emotional wellbeing and lays essential foundations in literacy and numeracy. This is particularly important for disadvantaged children where high-quality early support has the greatest impact.

## Partnerships that Support Families

Children thrive when families are supported, confident and engaged. The early years system relies on strong partnerships across health, education, social care, early help and the voluntary sector. By strengthening these relationships, we enable families to receive timely, appropriate and coordinated support, making a lasting difference to children's wellbeing and development.

## Setting the Foundations for School Readiness and Lifelong Success

By prioritising early years development through our Best Start Local Plan, Hartlepool commits to building a system where all children regardless of their starting point are supported to achieve their potential.



# Our Vision and Values

**‘Hartlepool is a place where every child gets the best start in life so that they can grow up healthy, safe and secure and able to fulfil their potential.’**



We aim to build a connected early years system in which education, health, social care, community partners and parents work together to remove barriers, reduce disadvantage and unlock every child’s potential. To achieve this, we will join services into a collaborative network that operates with shared priorities, shared language and shared accountability. This will ensure children and families experience support that is seamless, proactive, and genuinely coordinated.

Improving early years outcomes is a collective responsibility. Everyone across the system has a role to play, and progress will only be achieved when all partners share ownership of this work. A coherent, joined up approach is essential to delivering integrated support and ensuring every child in Hartlepool has the very best start in life.

This plan aligns with other Hartlepool Borough Council strategies; including Family Hubs, Early Intervention, SEND, AP & Inclusion, and Health and Wellbeing to maintain a consistent, shared vision for children and families across the town.

The plan links closely to the families first partnership reforms plan, as keeping children safe from multiple forms of abuse and harm and tackling child poverty are the foundations of giving every child the best start in life, ensuring they can achieve and thrive as they grow up.



In April 2025, the Council adopted a new Council Plan covering the period up to 2030. This plan sets out our long-term vision for Hartlepool and is structured around four key themes:

- People - A place where people live healthier, safe and independent lives
- Place - A place that is connected, sustainable, clean and green town
- Potential - A place that is welcoming with an inclusive and growing economy providing opportunities for all
- Organisation - A place with a Council that is ambitious, fit for purpose and reflects the diversity of its community

The council plan sets out clear values and behaviours:

<p><b>Creative</b></p>  <p><b>C</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are curious and look for ways to improve our services</li> <li>• We are flexible in our approach</li> <li>• We look for innovative solutions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Inclusive</b></p>  <p><b>I</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We promote fairness and equality</li> <li>• We value and include everyone</li> <li>• We celebrate difference and value diversity</li> </ul>
<p><b>Aspirational</b></p>  <p><b>A</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We work towards our vision for Hartlepool</li> <li>• We are driven to achieve good outcomes</li> <li>• We go the extra mile to deliver the best services we can</li> </ul>	<p><b>Nurturing</b></p>  <p><b>N</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are caring and people-centred</li> <li>• We grow talent and develop our workforce</li> <li>• We are supportive of each other and the people we serve</li> </ul>
<p><b>Respectful</b></p>  <p><b>R</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are kind and courteous to all</li> <li>• We listen to and value others</li> <li>• We involve and communicate with others</li> </ul>	<p><b>Genuine</b></p>  <p><b>G</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are honest and act with integrity</li> <li>• We are transparent and communicate openly to build trust</li> <li>• We care about our people, our communities and our borough</li> </ul>



## **Our Values:**

### **1. Prevention and Early Intervention**

We will place a renewed and unwavering focus on prevention, early identification and intervention—from conception, throughout pregnancy, at birth and through to a child's fifth birthday.

We will harness the strengths and expertise within existing services, bringing partners together to align and target our collective resources where they can make the biggest difference. Our approach will be cooperative, proactive and responsive, working closely with parents, partners and communities to design and deliver services that meet real needs.

### **2. Children and Young People First**

We are driven by a shared belief in putting children and young people first. Improving their opportunities and life chances will guide our policies, decisions and actions, creating a legacy of hope and aspiration for future generations.

We value all aspects of a child's life and development, recognising the importance of a holistic approach that nurtures wellbeing, resilience and readiness for life.

We know that emotional and physical safety form the foundations of healthy development, and we work collectively to ensure that children in Hartlepool are safe and supported.

### **3. High Expectations for All**

We want the very best for every child and young person, regardless of background, circumstance or individual need.

We believe all children should feel valued, have equal opportunities, and be supported to meet high aspirations.

Our expectations are ambitious because we recognise that every child has strengths, talents and potential that deserve to be nurtured and celebrated.

### **4. A Cooperative Community**

Hartlepool is a community that works together.

We are committed to placing children at the heart of strong, honest and effective collaboration.

Clear communication, trusted relationships and shared responsibility shape how we work across services.

We understand that supporting parents, carers and families is vital to supporting children, and we prioritise partnership approaches that strengthen our whole community.



## 5. Clear Accountability and Integrity

We will set ambitious, transparent and research informed milestones so that everyone understands our progress and what still needs to be achieved.

We will act with integrity, doing what is right for children and families, and ensuring that accountability sits at the core of our practice, governance and improvement work.

## 6. Listening and Responding to Need

The needs of the child are at the centre of everything we do.

We will listen carefully to children, families, practitioners and communities, ensuring their experiences and insights shape our services.

We take an inclusive and compassionate approach, ensuring that we use our collective resources efficiently, responsively and fairly to meet need.

### **Our ambition is clear:**

To build an Early Years system in Hartlepool that is cohesive, ambitious, and relentlessly focused on improving outcomes—so that every child can thrive, every family feels supported and every practitioner has the tools and confidence to make a difference.

This is not just a plan for improvement. It is a commitment to transformation. A commitment to ensuring Hartlepool's youngest children have the very best foundations for learning, for life and for a brighter, fairer future.



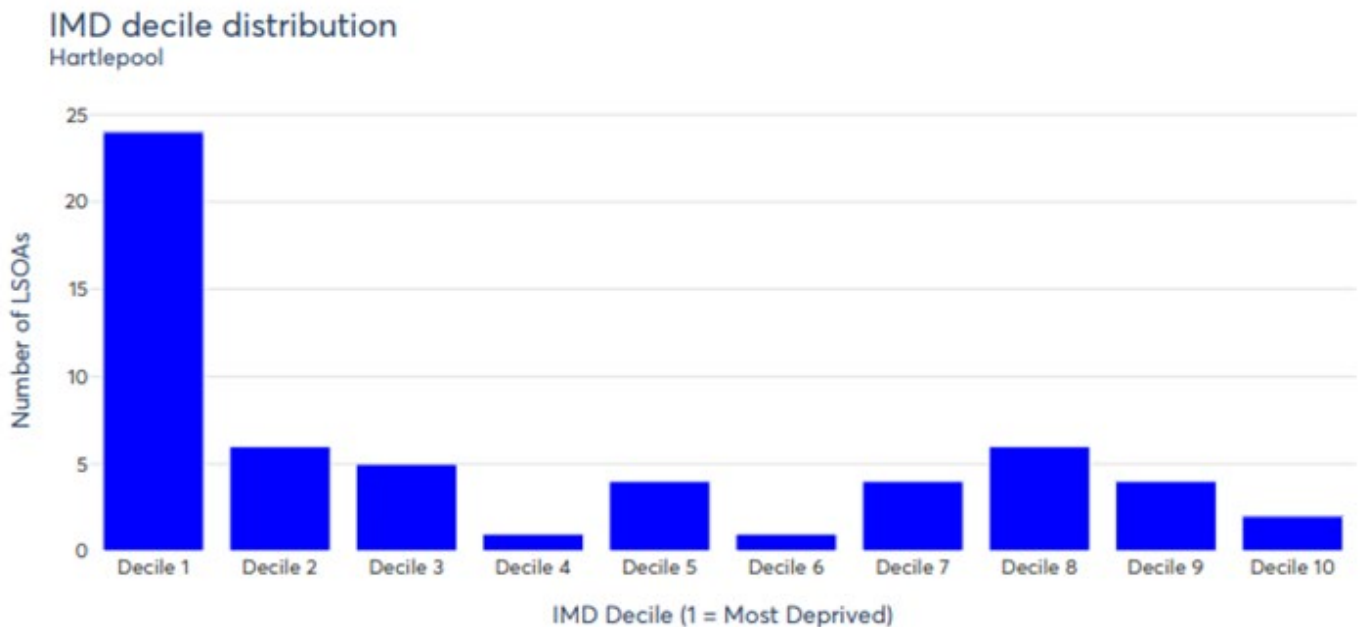
# Hartlepool Local Landscape

## Population (0-5 and beyond)

In Hartlepool, there are approximately **6,044** children aged 0-5, **6,905** aged 6-11, and **9,162** aged 12-19, giving a total of **22,111** children and young people aged 0-19 (February 2026).

## Poverty and Deprivation

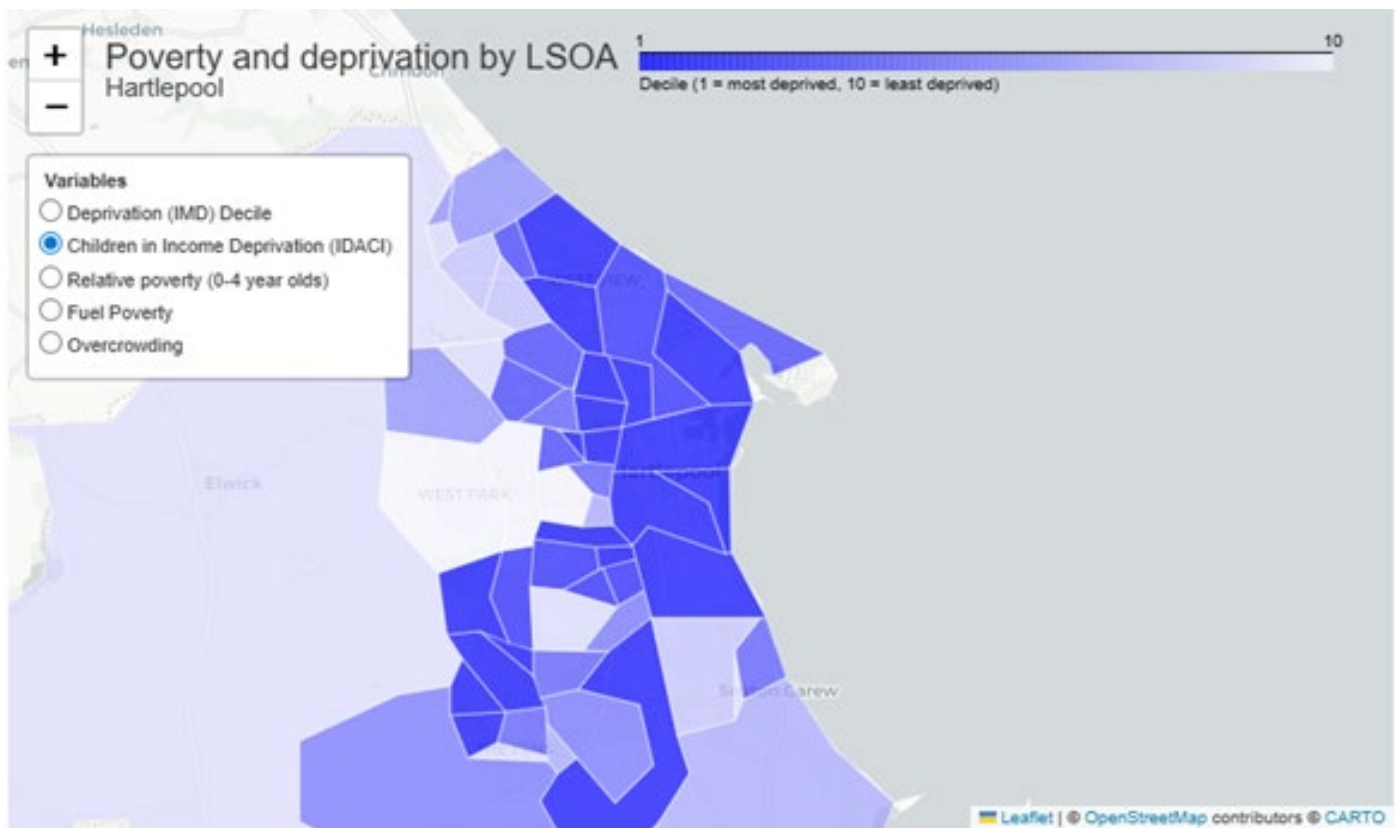
Hartlepool is ranked 30 out of 153 Local Authorities on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), placing it in the most deprived category (top 19%).



On the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), Hartlepool is ranked 36, placing it in the most deprived category for child poverty (top 23%).

Areas in dark blue in the map below indicate where individuals experiencing different types of deprivation are most concentrated.





The estimated level of child poverty in Hartlepool is 32.9% (Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University).

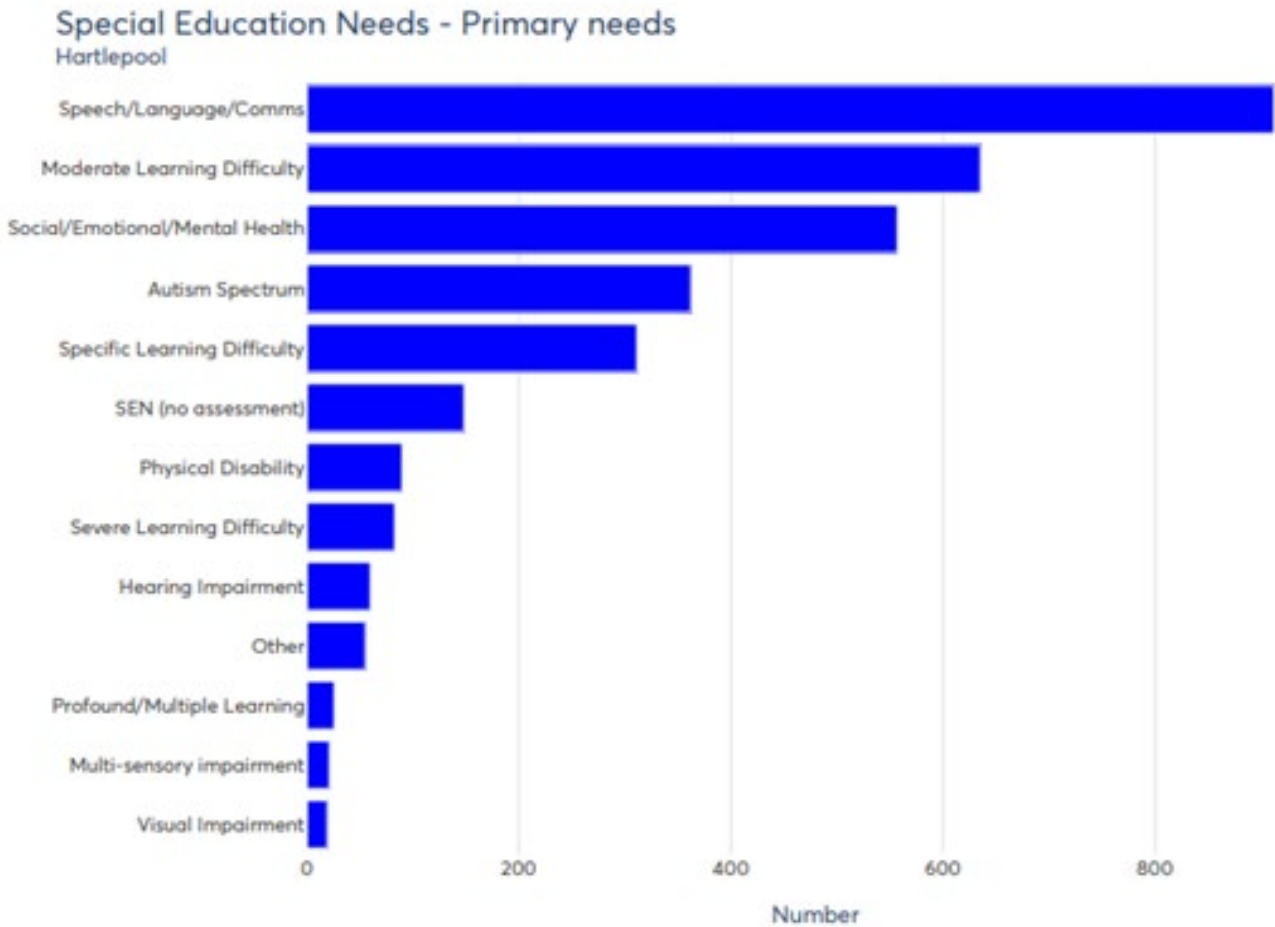
In 2024/25, there were 15,088 children eligible for free school meals in Hartlepool across all state-funded primary and secondary schools.

In the Early Years the proportion of children reported as eligible for FSM was 25.1%. 62% of the Early Years cohort live within the lowest 20% deprivation quartiles (31% within the lowest 5% quartile), suggesting that these figures require further investigation.



## Special Educational Needs

In the 2024/25 academic year, 3,279 pupils in Hartlepool were identified as having Special Educational Needs. Of these, Speech, Language and Communication needs is the most common primary need (912 pupils).



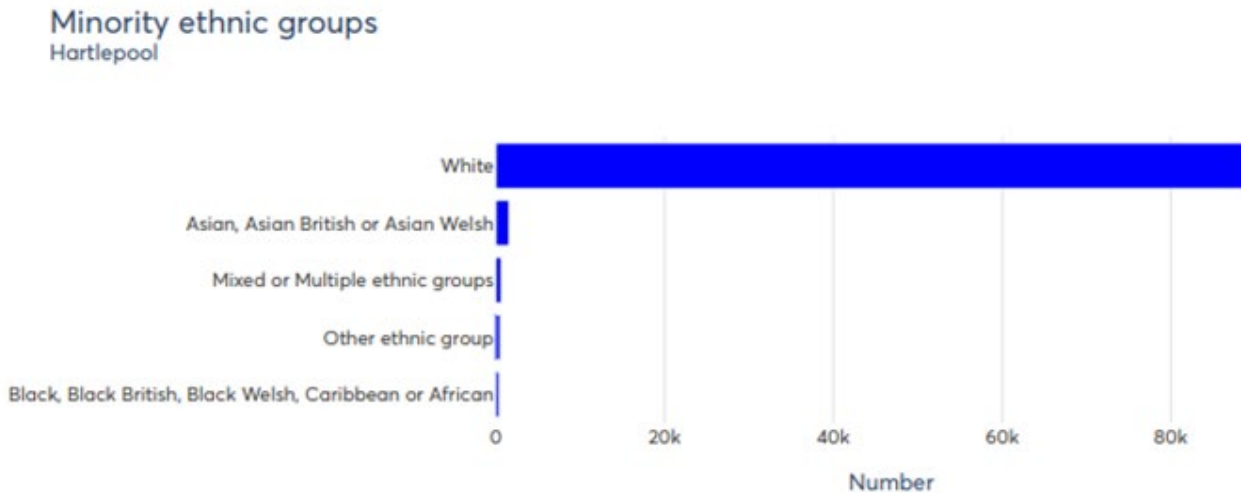
16.5% of the Early Years cohort (Reception) were reported as having Special Educational Needs (SEND Support & EHCP) compared to approximately 18-20% nationally.



## Demographics:

The 2021 Census recorded 92,379 residents in Hartlepool. 2.1% of residents in Hartlepool speak a language other than English as their main language at home.

In the Early Years, it is reported that 7% of children's first language is known or believed to be other than English.



## Hartlepool Early Years GLD Outcomes 2025

In 2024/25, Hartlepool's overall GLD was 65.0%, 3.3 points below the national average. Hartlepool's GLD has remained consistent over the last two years, placing the borough between 2.7 and 3.3 percentage points below national performance. This shows stability but not the improvement required to meet the 2028 national GLD targets.

The smallest gaps appear within the personal, social and emotional development (PSED) domain, where Hartlepool is closest to the national picture. Self regulation is just 2.8 percentage points below national levels, managing self is 3.4 points lower and building relationships is 3.8 points behind. These results indicate that PSED is a relative strength; however, outcomes still sit below national expectations and practitioners continue to express concern about children's social and emotional readiness.



In contrast, the largest gaps emerge in literacy and mathematics. Word reading and numerical patterns show the widest underperformance, both sitting 5.8 percentage points below national averages. Writing ( 5.0 points) and number ( 5.2 points) also represent significant areas of concern, highlighting ongoing challenges in children’s foundational literacy and numeracy development.

Language related outcomes similarly reflect notable gaps. Speaking is 4.0 percentage points below national levels, listening, attention and understanding is 4.3 points behind, and comprehension shows a 4.5 point gap. These trends suggest continuing difficulties in early language acquisition, which underpin both social interaction and later academic success.

Taken together, the data paints a clear picture: while PSED demonstrates relative strength, Hartlepool faces persistent challenges in early literacy, mathematics and language development. These gaps emphasise the need for a coherent, system wide focus on strengthening communication, language and early cognitive skills to support long term improvement in early years outcomes.

Whilst children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) do comparatively well against national FSM/contextual benchmarks, 52.2% achieved a GLD, this remains below the improvement required to meet the 63.3% FSM GLD target for 2027/28.

In 2025, inequalities across groups continue to shape outcomes:

- Girls significantly outperform boys, with a 12.6-point gap.
- Only 30% of the identified EAL cohort achieved a GLD. (This highlights a distinct group requiring targeted support.)
- Only 21.2% of children with SEND achieved a GLD in 2025. The most significant inequality remains the outcomes for children with SEND. Rising EHCP requests and assessments indicate increasing levels of need entering the reception year.

In addition, there is considerable school level variation. Some schools achieve EYFS outcomes consistently above national averages while others consistently fall well below other, similar contextual, schools and national averages. In addition, variation is pronounced across FSM, SEND and EAL outcomes. This indicates reporting inconsistencies across schools, system-wide differences in early years practice and/or the accuracy of assessment.

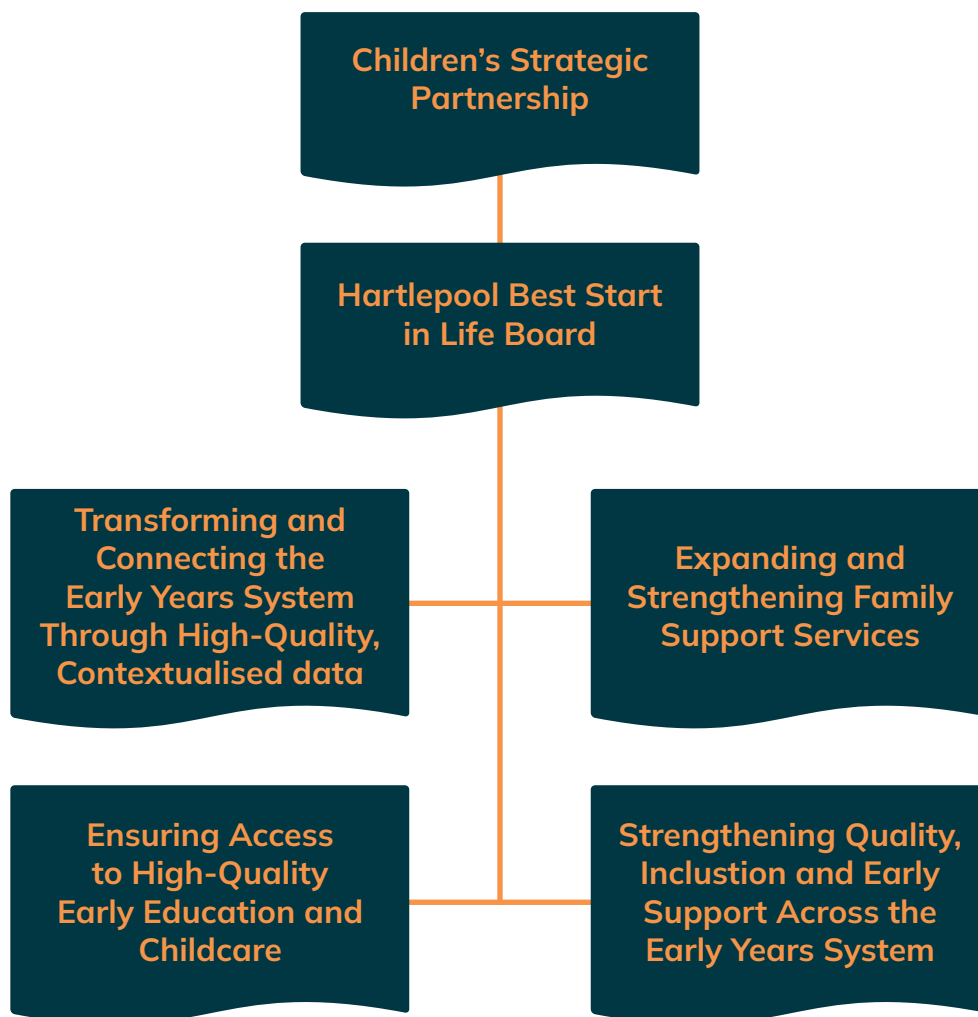
Achieving the national GLD targets will require strengthening early identification and intervention, transforming EYSEND support, improving the consistency and quality of EYFS practice, and prioritising focused improvement for FSM children, boys, EAL learners and children living in the most deprived neighbourhoods.



# Leadership and Governance

We will establish robust leadership and governance structures that provide clear direction, accountability and shared responsibility across all partners. This will ensure consistent strategic oversight and a united commitment to improving early outcomes. For each of the 4 priority areas below there will be a working group who will drive the developments forward. Each working group will have a named lead who will report into the Hartlepool Best Start in Life Board which will in turn report directly into the Children's Strategic Partnership.

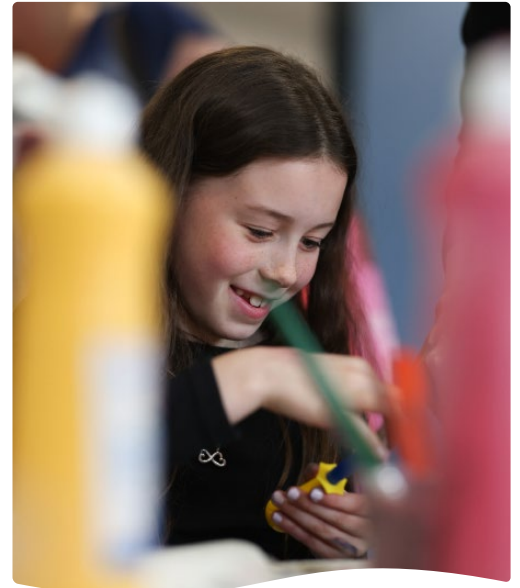
The Best Start in Life Board will closely align with other workstreams and governance structures within the local area, including SEND, AP & Inclusion, Families First, Vulnerable pupils and Health and Wellbeing and child poverty.



# Priority Areas for Hartlepool's Best Start Local Plan

Inline with the council plan and through the development of our Best Start in Life Plan Together, we will:

- work in collaboration with one another and in partnership with families, children and young people to design and deliver services, creating a families first culture. This will sit at the heart of our practice, enabling families, their networks and communities to play an active role in providing support and strengthening resilience.
- ensure families have a seamless journey through services, and receive the right support, in the right place, at the right time to meet their needs, making sure that information is readily available and accessible, so they can access support when they need it.
- champion inclusion, ensuring every child regardless of background, need, or circumstance accesses high quality experiences that nurture language, well-being and promote curiosity and school readiness. We will use shared data and collective intelligence to tackle the impact of disadvantage early. Targeting resources efficiently using evidence informed practice to intervene before gaps widen.
- value the expertise of the workforce and support high-quality, professional development. Ensuring that we have a highly skilled, passionate workforce, who invest in the relationships they have and work in a strength- based, trauma informed way.



## **Priority 1. Transforming and Connecting the Early Years System Through High Quality, Contextualised Data**

We will redesign the Early Years system so that services are cohesive, connected and easy for families to navigate. This means creating a fully joined up model where partners work seamlessly together, reducing duplication and ensuring that support is timely, accessible and responsive to need.

To achieve this, we will strengthen how we collect, analyse and share high quality, contextualised data across the whole system. This includes undertaking a full early years system analysis so we understand our cohorts well, can track their journeys, and can identify emerging needs earlier and more accurately. By enhancing collaboration and ensuring that data, insights and practice flow freely across partners, we will reduce fragmentation and build a more integrated service landscape.

A stronger evidence base, combined with a more coherent and connected system, will support better decision making, inform targeted and effective interventions, and ensure that services are designed and delivered in ways that prepare and support Hartlepool's youngest children at every stage. Ultimately, this transformation will help ensure that every child has the best possible start in life.

## **Priority 2. Expanding and Strengthening Family Support Services**

We will broaden and enhance the range of support available to families, ensuring parents and carers can easily access timely, high quality help, guidance and community based provision that nurtures their children's learning, health and development. This will include strengthening pathways into support, reducing barriers to engagement and ensuring that families receive the right help at the right time.

Aligned with the Best Start Family Hubs approach, we will create a more coordinated and consistent offer across the early years system, one that brings services together, promotes strong relationships, and responds to local needs. By developing a wider, more flexible and connected network of family support, we will empower families, build resilience and improve outcomes for Hartlepool's youngest children.

The Family Hubs across Hartlepool provide parents and carers access to a range of services, information and support, to care for and nurture their babies and children and look after their own wellbeing. In particular we provide access to:

- Home Learning Environment programmes
- Parenting programmes
- Perinatal mental health support
- Parent–infant relationship support
- Infant-feeding support

We will also ensure we provide support for children with additional needs and their families via the Family Hub.



### **Priority 3. Ensuring Access to High Quality Early Education and Childcare**

We will ensure that early education and childcare in Hartlepool is accessible, inclusive and responsive to the needs of all families. This includes securing sufficiency of places across the borough, particularly in light of the expanded childcare entitlements offering up to 30 hours of funded provision from 9 months onwards. We will work closely with providers to build capacity, strengthen sustainability and ensure the local market can meet rising demand.

Our focus will be on ensuring high quality provision for every child, with particular attention to those from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with SEND, who may require additional support or specialist places. By reducing barriers to access, improving information for families and ensuring the right provision is available at the right time, we will widen participation and ensure that every child can benefit from rich early learning experiences.

Through strong partnerships, targeted support and a clear understanding of local needs, we will create a more equitable early years offer, giving all children in Hartlepool the foundations they need to thrive, learn and reach their full potential.

### **Priority 4. Strengthening Quality, Inclusion and Early Support Across the Early Years System**

We will create a high quality, inclusive early years system that identifies needs early, responds swiftly and effectively, and supports every child to thrive as they progress through the early years and into school. Working closely with partners—including Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs, health services, SEND teams and early years providers, we will promote evidence informed practice, sector-wide professional development and strong multi agency collaboration.

A key focus will be embedding consistent, high quality inclusive practice across all settings, ensuring the majority of children make strong progress within the universal offer. This will be aligned with our SEND, AP and Inclusion Improvement Plan and national reforms, ensuring clear expectations, strengthened graduated responses and improved mainstream inclusion. We will provide targeted support for settings with higher levels of need so they are equipped to deliver effective inclusive practice within the core offer.

We will also strengthen the earliest identification of needs by integrating assessments, including the 2–2½ year health review and the EYFS progress check, to create a single, coordinated understanding of each child's development. Improved multi agency information sharing, across early years providers, health, SEND and wider services, will support timely decision making and help prevent children from falling through gaps in the system. This will include embedding strong Section 23 reporting and shared pathways for early intervention.

We will support and promote smooth, child centred transitions throughout the early years and into school, supported by consistent processes, shared professional understanding and high quality transition records. This will align with national expectations for curriculum progression, multi agency wraparound support and strengthened speech and language pathways.

Together, these actions will create a coherent, inclusive and responsive early years system where quality is consistently high, needs are identified early, support is timely and effective, and every child in Hartlepool is well prepared to succeed at each stage of their learning journey.



# Partnership response to priority areas:

To deliver on our shared priority areas, the Best Start in Life Board will work collaboratively across Education, Health, and Social Care, alongside children and families, to ensure a truly joined up early years approach that gives every child the best possible start in life.

Multi agency working groups will be established for each identified workstream. These groups will drive forward development activity, maintain a clear and shared purpose, and hold one another to account for progress and impact.

Each workstream will have a dedicated development plan outlining actions, responsibilities, and measures of success. Progress will be monitored and reported through the Best Start in Life Board to ensure alignment, efficient and effective use of resources, oversight, and collective responsibility.



# Scaling innovative practice to achieve sustainable improvement by 2028

Following the transformation of Hartlepool's early years system, our next phase of delivery will focus on scaling innovative, evidence informed practice across all early years' services. This will ensure we make sustained progress towards the Government's 2028 target for Good Level of Development (GLD) and secure long lasting improvement for every child. Our ambition is clear: improvement across the board for all children, so that every child experiences the best start in life with no exceptions.

## Developing the Workforce

A highly skilled, confident and adaptable workforce is central to achieving and embedding lasting system transformation. Hartlepool will:

- Invest in, carefully considered, continuous professional development focused on the early years prioritise across the system.
- Establish communities of practice across settings and sectors to share innovative approaches, explore challenges and co design solutions.
- Promote a culture of reflective practice so that new approaches are trialled, adapted and refined based on what works for children and families.

## How We Will Achieve This

### To ensure innovation becomes embedded and widespread, we will:

- Use data and insight to identify where innovation is needed most and where impactful practice is already working.
- Pilot new approaches in targeted areas or settings, capturing learning and refining before wider roll out.
- Develop clear guidance, toolkits and models of delivery that standardise effective practice while allowing flexibility for local needs.
- Align multi agency contributions, ensuring health, education, community services, early help and the voluntary sector work together to embed new ways of working.
- Ensure strong leadership and governance to maintain pace, remove barriers, and keep the focus on outcomes for children.

This structured approach ensures practice does not remain isolated or dependent on individual teams—it becomes part of our shared system.



## What It Will Look Like in Practice

As we scale innovation, families and professionals will experience:

- Consistent, high quality support across all early year's settings, with clear pathways and aligned language.
- Seamless collaboration between health, early education, family support and community organisations.
- Greater use of evidence informed practice, supported by shared tools, training and data insights.
- A stronger home learning environment, where parents feel confident, connected and equipped to support their child's development.
- More inclusive provision, with early identification and tailored support for children with SEND or other vulnerabilities.
- Children entering school ready to thrive, with fewer gaps in their communication, social emotional and physical development.

Innovation will become part of everyday practice, not a one off project.

## Voice: Listening, Learning and Co Designing

Children's, families' and practitioners' voices will play a central role in shaping and scaling innovation. We will:

- Actively seek feedback from parents, carers and children using accessible, sensitive and engaging methods.
- Create structured opportunities for practitioners to contribute ideas, identify challenges and highlight what works.
- Co design new approaches with families and the workforce to ensure solutions reflect lived experience.
- Ensure under represented voices are heard, including families experiencing poverty, SEND, young parents and minority groups.

Voice will actively guide decision making and continuous improvement.

## Measures of Success

By 2028, success will be evidenced through:

- A sustained increase in GLD, with Hartlepool meeting or exceeding its local target.
- A consistent, high quality early years offer, accessible and equitable for all children and families.
- A skilled, confident and stable workforce, recognised for excellence in early childhood practice.
- Children who are emotionally, socially and academically ready for school, with fewer requiring high level interventions later.
- A fully integrated Early Years system, known for innovation, collaboration and measurable impact.

Together, these measures ensure that transformation is not temporary but embedded, creating a legacy of improved outcomes, reduced inequalities and a brighter future for every child in Hartlepool regardless of their starting point.



# Co Production and Sector Engagement

## Strategic Context

Hartlepool is committed to delivering a high quality, evidence informed Early Years system that enables all children to achieve and thrive. Achieving this ambition requires a unified, whole system approach across education, early years provision, health, SEND services, and wider partners. Our approach is rooted in genuine co production, ensuring that the local plan reflects the insights, priorities and professional expertise of those working directly with young children and their families.

## Co Production Approach

Hartlepool has undertaken an extensive programme of co production activity to shape the foundations of our Early Years, SEND, and Inclusion strategic direction. This work has ensured that the development of the local plan is informed by robust engagement across stakeholders, including schools, early years providers, health professionals, family support partners, and parent/carer voices.

- **Early Years Stakeholder Engagement**

A series of Early Years stakeholder events has been delivered to capture practitioner insight on local needs, barriers and opportunities for strengthened universal and targeted support. These events have included engagement with Early Years practitioners and partners with themes on current provision and collaborative discussions on school readiness, attendance, workforce capacity and shared expectations for early years settings. This has also been achieved through the development of our Early Years Ordinarily Available Inclusive Mainstream Provision Framework.

- **Education & Inclusion Summit**

The Education & Inclusion Summit (March 2026) provided a critical platform for cross sector dialogue, bringing together headteachers, SENCOs, early years specialists, health partners, and inclusion leaders. The Summit supported a shared vision for raising the aspirations for all children, young people and their families across Hartlepool. Specific workshops focussed on the themes of inclusive practice in the early years along with how early intervention can improve GLD outcomes and what do we need to do as a town to ensure all children get the best start in life.



- **SEND & AP Change Programme (ELSEC Focus)**

Hartlepool's participation in the SEND & AP Change Programme, with particular emphasis on ELSEC, has supported the strategic direction of early identification and support. Through ELSEC workstreams, partners have collaborated to further model approaches for supporting learners with emerging needs within mainstream contexts and strengthen alignment between early years practice and statutory reforms to ensure consistency across the system.

- **Working Parties Under the SEND, AP & Inclusion Improvement Plan**

Working parties aligned to the SEND, AP & Inclusion Improvement Plan have contributed to refining priorities, ensuring coherence across early years, education, health, and social care. These groups have:

- Supported early years integration within wider inclusion transformation activity
- Informed decision-making on targeted interventions
- Ensured that co-production with families, practitioners, and leaders is embedded throughout all improvement activity.

- **Families First Reforms**

The Families First reforms involve continuous multi / cross partnership working which plays a significant role in shaping this plan by strengthening collaboration across education, health, and social care. Through this reform programme, partners have worked collectively to align practice, streamline pathways, and embed a consistent, relationship based approach to early support. Central to this work is a commitment to ensuring that children's voices and the wishes, needs, and aspirations of their families, are integral to decision making. This ongoing collaboration is helping to create a coherent, child centred system that supports families effectively and enhances outcomes from the earliest stages.

## **Cross Service Governance and Strategic Alignment**

The developing Best Start in Life plan has been reviewed and discussed across key governance structures, ensuring strategic alignment and collective ownership. This includes:

- Education Senior Leadership Team (SLT)
- Children's Services Transformation Board
- Children's Strategic Partnership
- SEND, AP & Inclusion Operational Group

These forums have ensured:

- Coherence between early years work and broader children's services transformation.
- A shared commitment to achieving sustainable improvements in early outcomes



## Summary and Forward Direction

Reaching the 2028 GLD target and improving outcomes for all children, will depend on continuing to work closely as a partnership. We must maintain clear focus and ensure that improvements are implemented consistently from conception through to the end of the Reception year. With ongoing co production, strengthened governance and alignment with national reforms, Hartlepool is well placed to make sustained progress for its youngest children and their families.

Through this continued partnership led approach, Hartlepool's Best Start in Life plan will remain dynamic, responsive, and firmly connected to wider education and inclusion developments, ensuring our collective efforts lead to meaningful and lasting improvements for young children and their families.

