

A shared vision from conception to reception: Event summary

Overview

On 14 May 2025, NCB hosted a summit that brought together around 100 senior representatives from across the early years sector to help shape a shared vision to improve outcomes for babies, young children and their families.

With renewed momentum within government, along with the personal interest of the Prime Minister in the early years agenda, this was a critical time to shape lasting, system-wide change, and improve outcomes for babies, young children and their families. Around 100 experts in the field of early years came together to shape collective advice to the government about how to take forward their ambition to give children the best start in life. Attendees ranged from senior representatives from government departments, children's charities, early years and health providers, statutory services, professional associations and funders. Participants discussed the key issues facing families today and what systems and services need to change to deliver that vision. The event was introduced by Justin Russell, Director General for Families Group at the DfE and Chair of the Best Start in Life (BSIL) Board.

"There is a real sense of momentum behind the Best Start in Life target and it's a target that we can only deliver together as a coalition ... It's essential that we engage with all the knowledge and experience across the sector to hear ideas, to get input and to have discussions like we're having today."

Justin Russell, Director General for Families Group at the DfE and Chair of the Best Start in Life (BSIL) Board

The Summit explored five central themes identified as key to turning the dial on early education outcomes, with a cross-sector mix of participants. Consideration of special educational needs and disability was threaded throughout the themes, with attendees encouraged to think about young children who are more likely to find it difficult to meet the government's Good Level of Development target and should therefore be prioritised within government policy.

The themes were:

1. Access to high-quality inclusive early education and childcare, delivered by an appropriately skilled and valued workforce
2. High-quality universal services that promote the early health and development of babies and young children
3. The right support for parents so they can help their babies and young children develop and learn
4. Supporting parents to nurture good relationships and attachment with their child
5. Addressing and mitigating against poverty in the early years

Susie Owen, Director of Early Years at DfE, closed the Summit by telling the assembled participants that "this is a moment in time that does feel genuinely different, and we need to grab it." She said a key priority would be building "an early years system that speaks to each

other and talks the same language as children and families and maximises the impact of investment".

Summary of discussions

1. National government focus and accountability

As a sector, the Prime Minister's personal commitment to improving outcomes in early childhood for babies and young children, as set out in the Plan for Change is very welcome. As is the leadership of the Secretary of State for Education in prioritising the early years, and the wider support from the Cabinet. This high-level political will is vital in enabling the improvements that will drive lasting, meaningful change for babies, children and families.

To successfully deliver the Best Start in Life pillar of the Opportunity Mission (BSIL pillar), the Government must ensure this commitment is reflected across key areas of policy which will have the biggest impact on the milestone. Consistent prioritisation across departments will help align efforts and reduce fragmentation, ensuring that local systems receive clear, coherent guidance and direction from the Government.

The Opportunity Mission, the ambition for the 'healthiest generation of children ever', the Child Poverty Strategy, and reforms to the SEND system should all incorporate the BSIL pillar milestone as a key success measure. The BSIL pillar Board must provide transparent accountability for progress, including shared governance across departments. Joint ministerial oversight and clearly defined responsibilities will further help to avoid siloed working and to ensure real and lasting impact, this strategic focus must be underpinned by sustainable funding for the early years.

2. Good Level of Development, but not losing sight of inequalities

As part of the government's Plan for Change, it has set a target to ensure 75% of five-year-olds reach a Good Level of Development (GLD) by 2028. That's the equivalent to an increase of 45,000 children and would represent the highest ever proportion of children reaching this level of development, according to Mr Russell.

The sector recommends that the government sets out its intention to introduce a degree of nuance to the use of the Good Level of Development (GLD) milestone. Whilst there was recognition of GLD as a useful benchmark, there were numerous discussions about the consequences of this headline target and the children that it may inadvertently leave behind.

Too heavy a focus on whether children meet a single, standardised milestone, the metric will ultimately prioritise attainment over progress and lead to a narrow focus on measurable outcomes rather than a holistic view of the development of each child. A rigid focus on the GLD as a single success measure may obscure the meaningful progress children make, if it is not relevant to the milestone.

Children who are unlikely ever to reach the milestone, often due to complex needs or disadvantage, may be overlooked and receive less attention or support, despite needing it the most. Disproportionate focus is likely to be placed on children who are just below the threshold, as they are more likely to help boost overall attainment data.

National metrics like GLD may be misaligned with local realities and community need, and the government should empower local systems to adopt a more flexible, responsive approach. For example, by identifying the needs of young children in their area who may be particularly

challenged in reaching the GLD milestone and providing them with the resources needed to offer the appropriate additional support.

3. Involving families and engaging in co-production

As a sector, we are united on the importance of involving families in place-based arrangements and on the value of co-production. It was widely expressed that involving parents and professionals equally in governance, service design, and service delivery makes for better services and outcomes.

In local settings, families and communities should be co-creators of services, and recognised as essential stakeholders, not just service users. Furthermore, the Government should support Local Authorities to create infrastructure for parental consultation, meaningful participation, and community peer support networks to help improve experiences of service delivery.

The A Better Start (ABS) partnerships (In Blackpool, Bradford, Nottingham, Lambeth and Southend) threaded co-production through every stage of service design and delivery, involving parents in local decision-making produced remarkable results across all five partnerships. For example, in Southend, 'Parent Champions' were parents and carers who had been involved in their work. Harnessing the power, creativity and lived experience of parents and communities in their work, they went deeper than co-production and advocacy, and recognised parents as partners in setting the strategic direction and governance of all aspects of their organisation and work. Parent Champions enabled increased parental engagement with services through their outreach work, and partnering the lived experience of parents with the learned experience of practitioners made for stronger, more appropriate services that were tailored to local need. Each of the five partnerships developed approaches for involving families in a meaningful way and the positive results described above were found across each area.

To fully support community engagement, services must be inclusive and accessible for all parents and carers. For example, by being culturally aware, or by implementing strategies to reduce potential stigma families might feel engaging with services.

4. Use of data

Stronger data practices, both regarding collection and sharing, are needed to accurately identify need, assess the impact of early childhood services, and drive meaningful improvements across the system. This involves enhancing the quality and consistency of data collection, as well as promoting better infrastructure for sharing this data.

Data should be collected across a comprehensive range of early childhood development indicators, including health, emotional well-being and language acquisition, to develop a holistic understanding of each child. Standardised methods of data collection and reliable data infrastructure should be developed and implemented nationally.

Reliable infrastructure must simultaneously be put in place to ensure this can be shared across education, health and social care services. For example, the potential for integrated data dashboards to improve service delivery and track early years outcomes in real time is immense. These tools could offer professionals a clearer picture of child outcomes, help identify emerging needs early and support continuous improvement in service delivery. Further, there was strong support for the government to prioritise the national rollout of initiatives aimed at improving information sharing, including the implementation of a single unique identifier for children as early as possible. Extending the use of the Single Unique Identifier to enable it to be used for

research and commissioning purposes will make a marked difference on our ability to understand what is working for children and, therefore, will ensure the right services and programmes are commissioned.

The role of data should go beyond outcome measurement. It was noted that as a sector we must critically examine which data we collect, why we collect it, and how it will be used to effect change. This includes ensuring that feedback from parents and carers is collected and is meaningfully integrated into service development. When collected and applied intentionally, data can inform strategic planning, commissioning decisions, and the design and delivery of services.

5. Digital offer for families

Giving parents of babies and young children digital access to personalised, evidence-based support and signposting to local services has been shown to drive meaningful improvements in children's GLD.

Digital channels empower families to self-help and self-refer, particularly those not in contact with professionals or Family Hubs, ultimately supporting greater inclusion and reach. For example, digitising the red book would provide a secure health record that can follow the child across services.

When digital approaches are embedded within early intervention and prevention strategies, they can deliver whole-system benefits, reducing pressure on overstretched specialist services.

However, this offer should augment, and never replace, in-person services and high-quality relationships with trusted professionals. Further, we must be intentional about making digital tools inclusive and sensitive to varying local, language and cultural needs, as well as different levels of digital access and digital literacy.

6. Improved join up between services

Central to the BSIL pillar is better join-up between education, health and social care services. Systems should speak to one another, and joint accountability arrangements should be put in place, with no singular agency left to shoulder responsibility for progress on the BSIL milestone alone.

At Government level, cross-departmental sign-up and shared funding pots are needed to support this, rather than siloed working across separate missions. Local authorities and Integrated Care Boards, working with the early education and childcare sector and schools, should be held jointly accountable for driving this change provided they are given the resources and flexibility to deliver. Implementing a common outcomes framework across local areas will bring partners together and encourage the development of a joint pathway towards a joint vision.

Alongside clear accountability, the government must provide specific infrastructure funding for the place-based partnerships that will be needed to drive forward this work, in full collaboration with parents and communities to ensure good uptake of services, particularly in areas of high deprivation. There should be specific focus on engaging fathers and minority ethnic communities.

7. VCS and community orgs

Strengthening collaboration with voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations is essential to delivering joined-up, community-based support for babies and young children. The VCS can play a crucial role in engaging directly with local families and supporting progress towards the GLD milestone. The government should enlist the help of the VCS through open, multi-agency partnerships and with formal commissioning arrangements, where appropriate. Rather than simply consulted, the VCS should be embedded in decision-making and planning throughout.

Drawing on the strength of community and peer-based support is a route through which we build trusting relationships between services and families. A great example of this is the 'Small Steps Big Changes' Family Mentor Service- a commissioned, community embedded peer workforce, delivered across four A Better Start wards in Nottingham by community and voluntary organisations. Family Mentors have sought to ensure that community voice is heard and have supported their communities in a flexible and appropriate way, playing a key role in identifying and reaching less engaged families. Family Mentors have been allocated to families who reflect their own ethnicity, culture and core values, and their knowledge of the families they work with has helped shape these services for the better.

This kind of support should similarly be joined up and delivered by multiple services in one physical space to allow families to access a range of support.

8. Family income and child poverty

There was a clear understanding amongst the sector that poverty underpins every challenge that families face, and that it is difficult to implement meaningful, lasting change in the lives of babies and children whose basic needs are not being met.

When families are struggling to afford essentials like food, heating and housing, the foundations for healthy child development become severely undermined. Poverty is not a peripheral issue, but rather a primary barrier to progress across all domains, for all 4.5 million children who are growing up in poverty in the UK today.

Investment in social security that directly increases family income as part of the Child Poverty Strategy is an essential step in ensuring the milestone is met. No lever available to central government has such an immediate, measurable, and transformative impact on child development and outcomes as lifting families out of poverty and destitution.

The quickest way to do so would be to end the two-child limit and benefit cap; two of the leading drivers of child poverty in the UK. The End Child Poverty Coalition have said that scrapping these measures would immediately lift 300,000 children out of poverty. Providing an adequate level of social security is an essential investment in children's early development, and any Child Poverty Strategy that fails to address this will not be effective or credible.

There were further, more targeted proposals to financially support families during the crucial period from pregnancy through infancy. These include providing access to Child Benefit beginning in the third trimester of pregnancy, to help expectant parents prepare for the costs associated with a new baby, and doubling the child element of Universal Credit or equivalent support for babies under the age of one.

9. A national early education, health and childcare workforce plan

There are well documented challenges across the entire public sector workforce. However, delivering on the BSIL milestone will require priority to be given to those supporting pregnant people, babies, young children and their families. Workforce stability, continuity and expertise are central to effective support and service delivery. A consistent, knowledgeable workforce plays a vital role in supporting children's development and ensuring they are well-prepared to meet the Good Level of Development (GLD) milestone by the end of the reception year.

The sector identified several issues within the early years workforce, primarily regarding recruitment, retention, and upskilling. High turnover and workforce shortages can disrupt continuity of care, hinder relationship-building with children and families, and undermine the quality of provision. A more stable and supported workforce with improved access to training is essential to meeting children's needs and maintaining the quality of services across all settings. It was also felt that ensuring every child is reached by a health visitor should be prioritised. Addressing these challenges requires long-term investment in the specialist early years workforce.

Staff need to feel valued, respected and equipped to do their jobs well, particularly when working with children with more complex needs. The importance of a full rollout of Continued Professional Development (CPD) funding programmes across all local authorities, with dedicated time protected for staff to participate, was repeatedly discussed. Further, the early years career framework must be strengthened and clarified, with a simplified and coherent qualifications pathway that links CPD to long-term career opportunities.

Next Steps

"The depth and range of experience and knowledge in the room was a testament to the sector's commitment to improving outcomes for babies, young children and their families. With the government's renewed focus on giving children the best start in life, and a growing recognition of the importance of early years interventions, we are at a critical juncture. We are ready as a sector to work in partnership to deliver lasting and effective improvements, but we need the government to match its ambition to make early years a priority with a commitment to fund change in the Spending Review."

Alice Jones-Bartoli, NCB Deputy Director Education and Early Years, and Chair of the NCB Summit.

Following the summit, over 70 of the organisations present collectively signed a letter sent directly to the prime minister urging investment into the Early Years sector to support this vision for change: [Our joint open letter to the Prime Minister](#)

Many of the presenters and participants also shared their views on the next steps for the Best Start in Life.

- [Reflections on the NCB Summit: How neighbourhoods help support better starts for children – Steve Crocker, NCB Trustee](#)
- [Channelling energy and enthusiasm for change: Reflections on the NCB Summit – Alison O'Sullivan, NCB Trustee](#)
- [Building a system that delivers for early childhood: Reflections from the NCB Summit- Sophie Woodhead, Assistant Director for Innovation and Systems, NCB](#)

- Beyond the NCB Summit: Building A Better Start for every child – Clare Law, Director of Blackpool Better Start
- We need leadership to give children the best start in life – Nia Thomas, Director of A Better Start Southend
- Reflecting on the NCB Summit and creating a shared vision from conception to reception – Alice Jones Bartoli, NCB Deputy Director Education and Early Years and NCB Summit Chair

NCB recognises the urgency and opportunity to draw on learning from innovative long-term programmes like the [Lambeth Early Action Partnership \(LEAP\)](#) and [A Better Start](#), to support our role as a leading voice for early years policy and practice. Based on a detailed strategic review of the early years sector and the key pieces of policy, evidence, and research that underpin it, we have published an overview of our [Early Years Strategy](#) over the coming years, aligned to NCB's five-year strategy Building Brighter Futures. NCB will continue convening across the sector to ensure that all children have the best start in life. continue convening across the sector to ensure that all children have the best start in life.