

# Building Brighter Futures: Supporting babies and young children to get the best start in life

An overview of our early years strategy

May 2025



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## Background

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. 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, so that all babies, young children and pregnant women<sup>1</sup> can benefit.

This document, based on a detailed strategic review of the early years sector and the key pieces of policy, evidence, and research that underpins it, provides an overview of our early years strategy over the coming years, aligned to NCB's five-year strategy [Building Brighter Futures](#). NCB is uniquely positioned at the crossroads of research, practice, and policy, and we will use our power to convene and connect across sectors to drive meaningful change, welcoming partnerships and collaboration at every step of the journey.

## Good Levels of Development and the Best Start in Life pillar

The Government has set out the Best Start in Life as one of the pillars of its Opportunity Mission – this means delivering accessible, integrated maternity, baby and family support, and high-quality early education and childcare. The Government has also upheld its pledge to expand early years entitlements, which will be fully operational by September 2025. The Government has also pledged that 75 per cent of children reach a **good level of development (GLD)** at the end of reception year by 2028.

This is an important opportunity for NCB to lead and convene key stakeholders on supporting the roll-out of this pillar and the associated targets. We are starting this work by convening a flagship event to support the cross-departmental pillar board, responsible for delivering on the Better Start in Life pillar.

**The following outline of our expertise and priorities are grouped around four themes. For further details, email [ecuadmin@ncb.org.uk](mailto:ecuadmin@ncb.org.uk)**

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to 'pregnant women' in the interest of readability, recognising that there are pregnant people who do not identify as women.

## 1. All young children, whatever their background, have access to high-quality early education and childcare, delivered by an appropriately skilled and valued workforce.

There are several deep-seated issues facing this sector currently, namely a workforce crisis affecting recruitment, retention, and quality. This is coupled with a stark insufficiency of places for SEND children. Furthermore, there is a need to support **early years education and childcare (EYEC)** settings to improve health and nutrition, in collaboration with emerging national priorities.

NCB is already very active in the EYEC system through our **Early Childhood Unit (ECU)**. Either by working directly with early years settings through commissioned contracts or delivering on DfE contracts, NCB's ECU team focusses on supporting the early years education system to improve provision and the quality of early years education services.

### OUR PRIORITIES:

- Support the EYEC workforce to deliver quality provision and best practice
- Improve health and nutrition in early years settings
- Support the delivery of inclusive EYEC and earlier identification of SEND.

## 2. Parents and carers are given the right support so they can help their babies and young children develop and learn.

There are calls for reductions in inequalities around early learning and communications and language development, linked directly to the Best Start in Life pillar and the GLD milestone. More evidence is needed to know what works, for who and why.

NCB already implements the following early learning programmes: Making it REAL, Your Baby and You, and Natural Thinkers. ECU has a solid knowledge base in this area, and we have a strong network of engaged areas and stakeholders.

The specific expertise of our team, particularly regarding the ORIM early literacy framework from Making it REAL, means NCB is well-placed in this area. We will be exploring and developing new research partnerships to help build evidence in this space.

## OUR PRIORITIES:

- Implementing programmes to support an improved home learning environment (HLE)
- Building the evidence base around the HLE for under-2-year-olds.

### **3. All families, especially the most disadvantaged, have access to high-quality universal services that promote the early health and development of babies and young children.**

The sector wants to see reinvestment in community health (also known as a neighbourhood approach) and preventative care, as well as commitments to reforms in the health visiting and maternity workforces. There are also strong calls for place-based support for parents, inclusive of parental voice and engagement. Finally, in conjunction with the Single Unique Identifier, there are consistent calls for improved data integration.

LEAP and A Better Start have built knowledge, skills, and capacity across NCB, so we understand how to successfully implement integrated place-based early years support. After 10 years of testing and learning, we know what works for who, and why. We will use this unique experience to continue to push the sector forwards, to more holistic models of support for families and carers of babies and young children.

## OUR PRIORITIES:

- Sharing learning and evidence and on what works for integrated early years services
- Enhancing parent/carers participation in local early years provision
- Measuring what matters – developing outcomes frameworks and integrated data
- Supporting an integrated and strengthened early years health workforce.

#### **4. Parents are supported to nurture good relationships and attachment with their child.**

There are calls to see more wide scale implementation of parenting programmes focused on responsive caregiving. Specifically, there is interest in generating evidence on what works, for who and why.

NCB is committed to Infant Mental Health and has convened many actors in Northern Ireland as a result of our collaboration with the Public Health Agency. *From the LEAP programme, we have built experience in delivering an integrated infant mental health offer, with a systems focus. We understand the importance of intervention approaches coupled with group-based targeted and universal offers, alongside workforce development and reflective supervision. We have also developed training packages for non-therapeutic staff, such as social workers and parenting workers, to build knowledge, skills and confidence on infant mental health*

#### **OUR PRIORITIES:**

- **Equip the early years workforce with knowledge, skills, and capacity on infant mental health**
- **Generate evidence on services, particularly those for specific groups (e.g. foster carers etc.)**

At the heart of NCB's Early Years Strategy is our vision for a society where every baby and young child thrives in nurturing, inclusive, and high-quality environments -at home, in early education, and in their wider communities.

To push the dial on long-standing challenges, we will work at the intersection of evidence, practice, and policy, ensuring that what happens on the ground is informed by robust research. And that practitioner expertise shapes national decisions, and that families' lived experiences drive system change.

Together, these priorities reflect our commitment to breaking down barriers, reducing inequalities, and creating a cohesive system where all children, regardless of background or ability, have the opportunity to flourish from the very start of life.

**If you want to find out more about collaborating with NCB on early years work, email [ecuanadmin@ncb.org.uk](mailto:ecuanadmin@ncb.org.uk)**