

Meeting: Cabinet **Date:** 17 March 2026

Wards affected: All

Report Title: Best Start in life – Torbay’s Local Plan

When does the decision need to be implemented? Immediate

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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide members with the draft Best Start in Life (BSiL) Plan, which is due to be published on the Council’s website by 31 March 2026. The Plan sets out how Torbay will achieve its locally set targets for the proportion of children reaching a Good Level of Development (GLD) by age five (end of the Early Years Foundation Stage). It outlines the vision, strategic approach, and delivery mechanisms that will be used to meet these targets.
- 1.2 Publication of the BSiL Plan by 31 March 2026 is a requirement of the Department for Education (DfE), and this draft is presented to members to support transparency and oversight ahead of final approval.
- 1.3 Sign off the final Plan in order to meet the required deadline will be by the Director of Children’s Services, Nancy Meehan, in consultation with the Lead Member for Children’s Services, Nick Bye.

2. Reason for Proposal and its benefits

- 2.1 The proposals in this report help us to deliver our vision of a healthy, happy and prosperous Torbay by strengthening the foundations of early childhood development and ensuring that every child has the best possible start in life. The Plan sets out how Torbay will address and meet the locally set targets for children meeting a Good Level of Development (GLD) by age five. It provides a coordinated, targeted, evidence-informed programme of support from pregnancy to age five, focusing on improving children's development, reducing inequalities, and ensuring more children are ready to learn and thrive when they start school.
- 2.2 The reasons for the proposal and need for the decision are to formally adopt the Best Start in Life Plan as directed by the Department for Education and enable delivery of a coordinated, system-wide approach to improving early childhood development across Torbay. The plan responds to clear evidence of need, including lower levels of developmental attainment at age two to two-and-a-half, persistent gaps in Good Level of Development (GLD) at age five, and widening inequalities affecting disadvantaged children.

3. Recommendation(s) / Proposed Decision

- 3.1 That the Cabinet considers any views from the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Board review on the draft Best Start for Life Plan.
- 3.2 That, subject to 3.1 above, the draft Best Start for Life Plan set out at Appendix 1 to the submitted report be approved and the Director of Children's Services be given delegated authority to make any necessary amendments to the Plan to enable its publication by 31 March 2026, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Best Start for Life Plan.

5. Background Documents

None

Supporting Information

6. Introduction

- 6.1 The Best Start in Life Plan sets out how Torbay intends to meet the government-set early years development targets detailed in table one.
- 6.2 The plan has been co-written with stakeholders across the Early Years system, including the Local Authority, Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust (TSDFT), and Action for Children.

Table one: Torbay's GLD Targets 2024 - 2028

| Year | All Children reaching GLD | | FSM Children reaching GLD target | |
|------------|---------------------------|--------|----------------------------------|--------|
| | Percentage | Number | Percentage | Number |
| 2024/2025* | 68.5% | 749 | 50.7% | 109 |
| 2025/2026 | 71% | 776 | 55% | 118 |
| 2026/2027 | 74% | 809 | 58% | 125 |
| 2027/2028 | 78% | 850 | 62% | 132 |

* 2024/2025 figures represent actual performance, not targets

- 6.3 The plan uses Torbay's local data to illustrate where children are performing well and where the most significant developmental gaps remain.
- 6.4 The Plan provides the approach to improving early childhood outcomes from pregnancy to age five, ensuring that more children achieve a Good Level of Development by 2028. It outlines the key strengths of the current system, organised across major areas of the early years offer:

6.5 Home Learning Environment

The plan highlights the continued development of Torbay's HLE offer, including home-visit support, PEEP, Chat-Play-Read messaging and the Early Years Development Pathway. It reflects how coordinated work across the early years system is helping to strengthen parent-child interaction and early language development.

6.6 Parenting

Torbay's parenting support offer is well established and delivered through a wide range of evidence-based interventions. The plan describes how this support is now more coordinated, accessible and responsive to parental need, with antenatal, postnatal and early childhood pathways increasingly aligned through Family Hubs.

6.7 Early Education, Childcare and SEND

The plan describes strong quality across early years settings, high engagement from providers and a maturing SEND offer including Portage, Small Steps and strengthened referral pathways. It also highlights where capacity, sufficiency and inclusion continue to require targeted action.

6.8 Healthy Babies

The Healthy Babies programme brings together infant feeding, perinatal and infant mental health and wider maternal health support. The plan reflects the progress of these programmes and their role in strengthening early relationships, improving emotional wellbeing and reducing the inequalities that contribute to poorer child development.

6.9 System enablers

The plan identifies the foundational features that underpin the early years system, including Best Start Family Hubs as the central access point, workforce development, family involvement and improvements in data sharing, monitoring and evaluation.

6.10 Alongside these strengths, the Best Start in Life Plan sets out the gaps that continue to affect children's early development, together with the actions required to address them and the anticipated impact of doing so.

6.11 These gaps relate particularly to:

- The timeliness and consistency of early identification
- The reach of services into communities
- Workforce capacity
- Limitations of current data and digital systems
- Limitations to co-production

6.12 Supported by actions designed to address these issues and demonstrate the impact of doing so, each section of the plan includes a dedicated gaps section that identifies where the system is not yet meeting children's needs, the action needed to address the gap and how these changes will contribute to improved early years outcomes across Torbay

7. Options under consideration

7.1 No other options have been considered as this is a DfE requirement.

8. Financial Opportunities and Implications

8.1 Not applicable

9. Legal

9.1 None.

10. Engagement and Consultation

- 10.1 We have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders in developing the BSiL Plan, including colleagues from across directorates and partner organisations such as TSDFT, Action for Children and wider system partners.
- 10.2 Feedback from families was gathered through Family Hub activity, service-led engagement and routine parent insight, giving us a clear picture of how families understand child development and how they experience current support.
- 10.3 Family involvement and co-production is a core theme throughout the Plan with actions associated with the need to strengthen co-production, improve the reach of services to families who do not routinely engage, and provide clearer, more consistent child development messages. These findings shaped actions across the Plan, ensuring it reflects lived experience and supports inclusive, accessible delivery.

11. Procurement Implications

- 11.1 Not applicable

12. Protecting our naturally inspiring Bay and tackling Climate Change

- 12.1 Not applicable

13. Associated Risks

- 13.1 N/A

14. Equality Impact Assessment

| Protected characteristics under the Equality Act and groups with increased vulnerability | Data and insight | Equality considerations (including any adverse impacts) | Mitigation activities | Responsible department and timeframe for implementing mitigation activities |
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| Age | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18% of Torbay residents are aged under 18 years old. • 55% of Torbay residents are aged between 18 to 64 years old. • 27% of Torbay residents are aged 65 and older. | <p>The BSiL Plan focuses on conception to age 5 and therefore has a positive impact on young children, particularly those at risk of not achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD). Targeted approaches ensure that children in low-income families, children with delayed development, families with English as an Additional Language and young parents receive enhanced support.</p> | | <p>Children's Services and Public Health, April 2026 – ongoing.</p> |
| Carers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the time of the 2021 census there were 14,900 unpaid carers in Torbay. • 5,185 of these carers provided 50 hours or more of care. | <p>The Plan addresses socio-economic disadvantage meaning that carers including young carers and parents caring for a child with SEND will benefit from the enhanced support offer. Carers can be more vulnerable to financial strain, reduced employment opportunities and increased stress, and the Plan's emphasis on early and coordinated support for families in need has a</p> | | <p>Children's Services – Early Years. April 2026 – ongoing</p> |

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| | | positive and proportionate impact on many carers. In particular, the strengthened early identification and support pathways for children with SEND are expected to offer additional positive benefits to carers who may face greater pressures navigating services. | | |
| Care experienced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As of January 2026, there were 277 former care experienced young people aged 18-24 in Torbay. | Many of the Plan's targeted actions are designed to positively support young adults who are or may become parents and who have care experience. The BSIL Plan's focus on early identification, relationship-based practice and coordinated family support provides benefits to care experienced young parents. In particular, families where children have a care plan will receive enhanced and joined-up support. | | Children's Services. April 2026 and ongoing. |
| Disability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the 2021 Census, 23.9% of Torbay residents answered that their day-to-day activities were limited a little or a lot by a physical or mental health condition or illness. | The BSIL Plan provides clear positive impacts for disabled parents, carers and children by strengthening access to inclusive services and early support. The Plan's focus on early identification, parenting programmes, mental health and emotional wellbeing programmes and SEND-specific pathways ensure families who may face additional challenges are better supported, more | | Children's Services and Public Health April 2026 ongoing. |

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| | | confident and able to access the help they need. | | |
| Gender reassignment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the 2021 Census, 0.4% of Torbay's community answered that their gender identity was not the same as their sex registered at birth. | It is not anticipated that the Plan will have a specific positive or negative impact based on this characteristic. | | |
| Marriage and civil partnership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Of those Torbay residents aged 16 and over at the time of 2021 Census, 44.2% of people were married or in a registered civil partnership. | It is not anticipated that the Plan will have a specific positive or negative impact based on this characteristic. | | |
| Pregnancy and maternity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Between 2013 and 2024, the rate of live births (as a proportion of females aged 15 to 44) has been slightly but significantly higher in Torbay (average of 56.0 per 1,000) than the Southwest (53.4) and broadly in line with England (56.3). For the period 2022 to 2024, rates in Torbay (44.6) have been significantly below England (50.0). | Much of the BSiL Plan is directed towards pregnant women and young pregnant women, who are expected to benefit significantly from its strengthened early support offer. The Plan enhances antenatal pathways, improves access to parenting and infant-feeding support, and strengthens perinatal mental health provision. These actions help ensure that pregnancy, birth and the early postnatal period are healthier, safer and better supported. The Plan also enhances early identification of risks, including perinatal mental health concerns and wider maternal health issues, enabling families to receive timely and coordinated support. As a result, the Plan is anticipated to have a strong positive | | Children's Services and Public Health. April 2026 and ongoing. |

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| | | impact on maternal wellbeing and early child development. | | |
| Race | <p>In the 2021 Census, 96.1% of Torbay residents described their ethnicity as the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.6% as Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh • 0.3% as Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African • 1.5% as being of Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups • 96.1% as White • 0.4% described their ethnicity another way. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities are more likely to live in areas of Torbay classified as being amongst the 20% most deprived areas in England. | BSiL Plan has a positive impact for Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic families, including those with English as an Additional Language (EAL), it explicitly identifies EAL families as a targeted cohort for early and enhanced support. By recognising that language and cultural diversity can shape how families access early years services, the Plan strengthens opportunities for children with EAL to thrive through co-production of services and culturally and language appropriate interventions. | | Children's Services and Public Health April 2026 and ongoing. |
| Religion and belief | <p>The 2021 Census showed that the residents in Torbay identify their religion and/or belief as the following;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 48.5% are Christian • 0.4% are Buddhist • 0.2% are Hindu • 0.6% are Muslim • Less than 0.1% are Sikh • 0.1% are Jewish • 0.7% have another religion | It is not anticipated that the Plan will have a specific positive or negative impact based on this characteristic. | | |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 43.2% have no religion • 6.3% did not answer | | | |
| Sex | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 51.3% of Torbay's population are female. • 48.7% of Torbay's population are male. | <p>The BSiL Plan has a positive impact on both mothers and fathers by promoting access to high-quality early years support regardless of sex. While elements of the Plan such as antenatal care, infant feeding support and immediate postnatal interventions naturally focus on women during pregnancy and after birth, the overall parenting and early development offer is designed to be inclusive of all parents and caregivers. The Plan recognises the important role of fathers and male carers in children's development and includes targeted approaches to increase paternal engagement, improve access, and ensure that early years services are welcoming and responsive to fathers as well as mothers.</p> | | |
| Sexual orientation | <p>In the 2021 Census, residents described their sexuality as follows;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 89% as Straight or Heterosexual • 1.7% as Gay or Lesbian • 1.1% as Bisexual • 0.1% as Pansexual • 0.1% described their sexuality another way • 7.4% of people didn't answer the question | <p>It is not anticipated that the Plan will have a specific positive or negative impact based on this characteristic.</p> | | |

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| <p>Armed Forces Community</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2021, 3.8% of residents in England reported that they had previously served in the UK armed forces. • In Torbay, 5.9% of the population have previously served in the UK armed forces. | <p>It is not anticipated that the Plan will have a specific positive or negative impact based on this characteristic.</p> | | |
| <p>Additional considerations</p> | | | | |
| <p>Socio-economic impacts (Including impacts on child poverty and deprivation)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Torbay is ranked as the 39th most deprived upper tier local authority in England in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025. | <p>Socio-economic deprivation is the strongest predictor of GLD outcomes in Torbay, and the BSIL Plan takes a proactive and strength-based approach to improving outcomes for children and families who may be more likely to experience disadvantage. By identifying families living in deprived areas as a priority cohort, the Plan supports earlier access to health, parenting, and early child development interventions.</p> | | |
| <p>Public Health impacts (Including impacts on the general health of the population of Torbay)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the five-year period 2020 to 2024, data shows there is a 6-year life expectancy gap between males who live in Torbay's least and most deprived areas and, a 3-year gap for females. | <p>The Plan aims to improve the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children, their siblings and their families / carers by providing evidence-based interventions, support, signposting and referral to specialist services.</p> | | |
| <p>Human Rights impacts</p> | | <p>The Best Start in Life Plan strongly aligns with the principles of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the UN Convention on the</p> | | |

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| | | Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Plan promotes children's rights to health, development, education, safety, and participation in decisions that affect them. | | |
| Child Friendly | | By prioritising early development, positive relationships and inclusive access to services, the Plan helps create an environment where children feel safe, supported and able to express their views. | | |

15. Cumulative Council Impact

15.1. None

16. Cumulative Community Impacts

16.1. None