

Croydon's Best Start in Life Local Plan 2026-2031

A local plan for achieving Good Level of Development



Helping families get the right support, in the right place, at the right time



Foreword

I am pleased to share Croydon's 'Good Level of Development Plan' which has been shaped through meaningful collaboration with all partners, including schools, early years settings, and wider stakeholders. This collective approach reflects our shared commitment to improving outcomes for children and ensuring that every child has the strongest possible start in life. As such, this plan is not the responsibility of any single organisation, it is a shared priority that must be owned, championed, and delivered by us all.

Early childhood is a critical period in every child's life as it lays the foundations for future learning, wellbeing, and success. High-quality early development particularly in communication, language, and social and emotional skills has a lasting impact on children's ability to thrive both in education and beyond. Supporting children to develop positive relationships, resilience, and confidence is as important as fostering their cognitive growth.

Our local area plan sets out our collective ambition to strengthen early development outcomes and reduce inequalities from the very start. By working together, aligning our efforts, and maintaining a clear focus on what matters most for young children, we can create the conditions in which every child is supported to reach a Good Level of Development.

Achieving this will require sustained collaboration, shared accountability, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Together, we can ensure that all children are given the opportunities they deserve to flourish.



Shelley Davies
Director of Education



Executive summary

This plan delivers the Best Start in Life aspiration in Croydon. It uses DfE-funded Parenting and Home Learning Environment evidence-based interventions at scale, anchored in 12 Best Start Family Hubs, to reach a Good Level of Development (GLD) of 78.3% and 66.6% for children eligible for FSM by 2027/2028 academic year. The plan is built around a theory of change developed collaboratively by working with internal and external colleagues, including early years practitioners, managers and leaders from across Croydon's early years system.

On current trend, Croydon would not reach 78.3% GLD until 2032. Closing the 356 gap is designed to accelerate this trajectory through Evidenced-Based Interventions (EBIs) at scale plus system-level changes across three shifts.

Croydon's Current GLD (2024/25)	70.4%
National target (2028)	75%
Croydon target (2028)	78.3%
Gap to close	7.9 percentage points = 356 additional children per year
Projected on natural drift	78.4% reached by 2032 (four years too late)
Closing the 356 gap	78.3% by 2028 via scaled EBIs and system change

The three shifts are:

- **Shift 1: Empowered parents and the home learning environment.** • Parents and carers have the knowledge, confidence and ability to create a home learning environment that supports their child's development, and they act on it. Primarily targets: communication and language, Personal, Social, and Emotional Development (PSED), early literacy, and self-regulation.
- **Shift 2: Early identification and targeting.** • Interventions reach the children who need them early enough to make a difference, and no child is missed. Primarily targets: communication and language, SEND identification, and PSED.
- **Shift 3: Consistent practice across early years settings.** • Early years settings and practitioners consistently support the GLD mission, weaving it through everything they do. Primarily targets: all GLD domains, with focus on language-rich environments and transition consistency.

This plan focuses on what we can achieve within the timeframe, resources available, while continuing to deliver core services and how we aim to do it well. It supports other key Croydon strategies including Helping Families Thrive, the Early Help Strategy, the Early Years Strategy and the SEND and AP Strategy and aligns with the Families First Partnership currently in development.

Our Best Start Family Hubs programme is linked to the work that is taking place across London through the Opportunity Mission coordinated by the Greater London Authority and London Councils. This will enable us to ensure that there will be more consistency in the offer available to families and children across London.

Closing the 356 (children) gap on a page

The challenge: Croydon’s GLD is 70.4%. The local target is 78.3% by 2028. That means 356 more children reaching their GLD. On current trend, we would not get there until 2032.

The approach: Three shifts, informed by a theory of change developed with practitioners, health, education and community partners, underpinned by shared foundations.

Shift 1: Empowered Parents	Shift 2: Early Identification	Shift 3: Consistent Practice
Parents and carers have the knowledge and confidence to build a strong home learning environment	Children at risk of not achieving GLD are found early and get timely support	All EY settings consistently support the GLD mission through high-quality practice
Key EBIs: Incredible Years, EPEC, Making it REAL, EasyPeasy, PEEP, Early Words Together Collaborative antenatal education and early years working within settings	Key mechanisms: 2-2.5 year reviews with robust escalation pathways into early years support, 2-year integrated review, Family Hub Navigators, Early education providers, data-led targeting, waiting well approach	Key mechanisms: shared GLD mission, joint moderation, transition protocol, practitioner training
GLD domains: communication & language, PSED, early literacy, self-regulation	GLD domains: communication & language, SEND identification, PSED	GLD domains: all, with focus on language-rich environments and transition

Foundations: joined-up, collaborative working and shared mission across agencies; data sharing and review; digital and virtual offer (complementing face-to-face, not replacing it); parent and carer voice; joint communications; 12 Best Start in Life Family Hub sites as delivery infrastructure.

Governance

Early Help Family Hubs Partnership Board
Family Hubs Joint Strategic Oversight Group
Closing the 356 gap Governance (Director or Education as system sponsor) + Healthy Babies
Shift 1 Delivery (Karen Rasmussen) Shift 2 Delivery (Juliette Penney) Shift 3 Delivery (Jenni Murphy)
12 Best Start in Life Family Hub sites (locality-based delivery)

DfE/Best Start reporting sits at the Closing the 356 gap governance level, with escalation through the Joint Strategic Oversight Group.

Context: the national aspiration and Croydon's starting point

In July 2025, the Department for Education published Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life, a cross-government strategy backed by close to £1.5 billion in multi-year investment. Best Start Family Hubs create a more integrated, accessible system of support from conception to age 5, with a particular focus on the 1,001 critical days. Jointly funded by DfE and DHSC, Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies brings together the strongest elements of Sure Start and the Family Hubs and Start for Life approaches.

Croydon has the largest population of children and young people in London. Our local target of 78.3% GLD is aligned with the national aspiration while reflecting our baseline and the scale of change needed. The Council, Croydon Health Services NHS Trust, schools and early years educators are in agreement: Croydon's aim is not to focus narrowly on 356 children aged 3-4 to hit a target. Our aspiration is for every child to have the opportunity that a solid early years' foundation brings. We want to make a sustainable shift in how we work, reach the target by 2028, and continue on an upward trajectory to exceed it.

GLD trend

Croydon's children outperform our statistical neighbours and the national GLD rate for England. GLD in Croydon has risen steadily since 2021/22: 67.4% in 2021/22, 69.1% in 2022/23, 69.4% in 2023/24, and 70.4% in 2024/25. That is a 3-point gain over three years, which tracks natural year-on-year improvement. Structured evidence-based interventions have been delivered over this period, which is a strong base for this plan and presents significant opportunities to increase the delivery of EBIs at scale and enhance joined up working across the early years system to really focus on shifting the GLD trajectory together.

Identifying the gap

The gap between those who do and do not achieve a GLD is unevenly distributed. The number of children not achieving a GLD varies significantly between wards. Children living in the most deprived areas are currently less likely to achieve a good level of development. While Croydon is focused on increasing the number of children achieving a GLD by 356 to achieve the target set by the Government, there are 1250 children who didn't achieve a GLD in 2024/25 who we will aim to provide access to programmes, interventions and support through this plan. 389 children who didn't achieve a GLD live in the five wards with the highest number of children not achieving their GLD. Two of these wards (Broad Green and West Thornton) are in the top five most deprived wards, and a further two wards (Thornton Heath and South Norwood) are in the top ten most deprived wards. This gives us very clear areas to focus our efforts.

“The impact of child poverty on educational attainment emerges early. By age five, children eligible for free school meals are already five months behind, by age 16 that gap has widened to over 19 months. In families with the lowest incomes just one in four children gets five good GCSEs including English and Maths. For children in the families with the highest incomes, the figure is nearly three in four. As adults, those who grew up in poverty are more likely to be unemployed or in low-skilled and lower-paid jobs.” [Our Children, Our Future: Tackling Child Poverty](#).

Group	Gap	GLD domain impact
Free school meals	13.64%	Language, literacy, PSED
SEND	51.08%	All domains
Gender (boys behind girls)	15.05%	Language, literacy, PSED
EAL	5.73%	Early literacy, language

The pattern across deprivation, EAL, SEND, FSM and ethnicity points strongly to communication, language and early literacy as the domains driving Croydon’s GLD gap. This is consistent with national trends in similar boroughs. **A focus on Communication and language is the primary lever for GLD improvement in Croydon.** The three shifts are built around that conclusion.



What practitioners and parents tell us

A practitioner survey (36 responses across PVI nurseries, schools, childminders, Family Hubs and health) confirms the data. Speech, language and communication delays are overwhelmingly the most cited developmental concern. Social and emotional needs, self-regulation challenges, and toileting and personal independence delays follow. Practitioners describe low parental confidence, weak home learning environments and high family stress as major limiting factors. As one Family Hub worker put it: “Parents want to help but they genuinely don’t know what ‘ready for school’ means – they think it’s about knowing the alphabet.”

Barriers include long waits for speech and language services, lack of clarity around referral pathways, families not aware of available support, and limited access to early identification. Transition between nurseries and schools is described as poorly coordinated, with no consistent borough-wide protocol.

From consultation, parents and carers tell us that information about services is hard to find, many families feel isolated regardless of income, and they want consistent advice from professionals. They want to feel welcome in their community and not be stigmatised for seeking help. Parents and carers want access to activities they can do with their children, both at home and in their local area. They want their children to have the best possible early years and to grow up safe, happy and healthy.



What we have learned so far

Since 2016, Croydon's Best Start programme has delivered school readiness and family-facing programmes through Children's Centres established under Sure Start. As one of the initial 75 local authorities to receive Start for Life and Family Hubs funding, Croydon has built a strong digital and universal offer in line with the new Best Start in Life programme funding. For example, EasyPeasy reached 574 families in the baseline period and has grown to a projected 1,400 in 2025/26. Stay and play, infant feeding drop-ins and early learning groups continue to see strong usage across the 12 Best Start in Life Family Hub sites.

Most of the Early Years delivery in Croydon has been concentrated around hub buildings rather than targeted outreach to date. As we have increasingly developed our outreach offer across communities, through Family Hubs delivery, we can see early indicators this is a good model for Croydon's physical size and diverse population. While EBIs have been a part of the early years delivery model in Croydon there is more we can do to reach more families at scale. Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC), Incredible Years or Early Words Together are EBIs which can reach more of Croydon's families in our communities through a scaled-up model.

This honest assessment is the evidence base for what follows: scaling structured EBIs significantly from 2026/27 and targeting delivery towards the wards and families where the gap is widest.

How we will know this is working

The key assurance for this plan is: we will know early if this is working, and we will change tack if not. The six-monthly 'Closing the 356 and beyond' reviews have decision points to stop, scale, re-target or re-design activities based on what the data shows.

Leading indicators (first 12-18 months)

- EBI completion rates in priority wards (are the programmes reaching the right families at the planned volumes, and are the outcomes around parental confidence showing a change?)
- 2-2.5 year developmental review coverage by ward (is the check reaching children in the lowest-GLD areas?)
- Speech and language referral timeliness (is the pathway working, are there referral timelines, and is the 'waiting well' approach reducing the impact of waits?)
- Practitioner confidence measures across schools, early years settings, Family Hubs, health and partners (is the shared GLD mission landing in settings?)
- EBI reach among FSM-eligible and EAL families (are we getting beyond the 'usual suspects'?)
- Family Hub Navigator contact rates in target wards (are we finding the missing 8%?) and how effective are our strategies to engage families?

GLD measurement plan

We will track GLD by ward and by cohort year-on-year. The first cohort of children who have been through the full EBI offer will reach Reception in 2027/28. We realistically expect to see a measurable shift in GLD for that cohort in the lowest-performing wards first, given that targeted EBIs will be concentrated there. At borough level, the first visible kink in the curve is likely to appear in 2027/28 data, with a more substantial effect in 2028 at the end of Reception. We are cautious about forecasting exact magnitude before the first round of delivery data is in, but the six-monthly reviews will track trajectory against plan and adjust accordingly.

The full indicator framework will be published alongside the delivery plan and will align with national Best Start in Life metrics where they exist. DfE will have sight of the framework and of six-monthly review findings.



Evidence-based interventions: summary

The following EBIs are funded through the Best Start in Life Family Hubs grant, sitting across two domains: Parenting EBIs and Home Learning Environment EBIs. They will be delivered through the 12 Best Start Family Hubs sites and through outreach and community-based delivery.

EBI	Type	Evidence base	Target group	2026/27 reach	2027/28 reach
Incredible Years (+ADVANCE)	Parenting	Multiple UK and international RCTs	Parents of 3-5s in low-GLD wards	Mobilisation from April; first cohorts by Q2	20% uplift on 26/27
EPEC	Parenting	Independent evaluations; peer-led model tested in multiple LAs	Hard-to-reach communities; peer-led	Relaunch July 2026	20% uplift
Making it REAL	HLE	Practitioner-led; evidence from NCB evaluation	Families in low-GLD areas	Continues from April	20% uplift
EasyPeasy	HLE (digital)	Independent evaluation; improvements in self-regulation and engagement	All parents (universal reach)	1,800-2,000 families	2,000-2,400 families
Early Words Together	HLE	National Literacy Trust programme; evidence of language gains	EAL and low-literacy families	Go-live TBC	20% uplift on 26/27
PEEP Learning Together	HLE	Longitudinal evidence of impact on language, literacy and numeracy	Parents of 0-5s	Continues; proj. 116+ families	20% uplift

Croydon also delivers the full Triple P range (Group, Enhanced, Transitions, Baby and Stepping Stones) outside this grant, contributing to the broader parenting support infrastructure. Triple P Baby online licenses were part of the Start for Life offer in 2024 and are still available for families who are expecting or new parents.

At the planned volumes, the combined reach of face-to-face EBIs is projected at 265-320 families in 2026/27, rising to 350-420 in 2027/28, alongside 1,800-2,400 families reached digitally via EasyPeasy. Total combined reach should exceed 2,000 families per year by 2027/28 against an annual Reception cohort of roughly 4,450.

The three shifts

The theory of change identifies three intermediate outcomes. The logic runs sequentially: the first priority is equipping parents / carers; where that is not enough, the system must identify and target children early; and for children whose home circumstances make parent-led change difficult, early years settings must provide a consistent, high-quality safety net. Each shift makes a distinct contribution, but the greatest impact comes when all three operate at scale together.

Shift 1: Empowered parents and the home learning environment

Outcome: Parents have the knowledge, understanding and ability to cultivate a home learning environment that maximises their child's chance of achieving GLD, and they act on it.

Primarily targets: communication and language; PSED; early literacy; self-regulation.

The home learning environment is the starting point of this local plan's logic. How adults talk, play, read and interact with young children is one of the strongest predictors of early language, cognitive development and later attainment, even after accounting for family income and parental education. In Croydon, where the GLD gap tracks deprivation and FSM eligibility closely, what happens at home before a child reaches a setting is where the biggest gains are available.

Evidence has shown that parents or carers may be apprehensive to seek support out of fear of being stigmatised. In addition to this, parents and carers may have had negative experiences themselves of the education system and/or statutory services. There hence needs to be an emphasis on 'working with' rather than 'doing to', helping parents and carers build on existing strengths. Parents are their child's first educator, they want the best for their children, and by working with parents and carers we will be building confidence and agency for all parents in Croydon.

Group-based parenting programmes.. Incredible Years Preschool has been tested in multiple RCTs in UK and similar settings, consistently showing reductions in child behaviour problems alongside gains in social competence and parenting confidence. The +ADVANCE component addresses parental mental health. EPEC trains parent group leaders to deliver evidence-based support within their own communities; independent evaluations show improvements in parenting confidence and reduced child behaviour difficulties. Incredible Years provides the structured, professional-led component. EPEC extends reach into communities that professional services do not currently get into.

Home learning interventions. Making it REAL, PEEP Learning Together and Early Words Together focus on everyday language-rich activities and building parents' confidence to weave these into daily routines. Evidence from NCB evaluations, longitudinal studies and National Literacy Trust programmes links participation to gains in early language, communication and early literacy. EasyPeasy extends this digitally; independent evaluation evidence points to improvements in self-regulation and engagement in learning. That combination of face-to-face and digital is how we get both depth and scale. Offering a variety of EBIs delivered through a range of models will also allow us to cater for the varying needs of parents and carers. This includes parents with SEND themselves, low literacy levels, fathers and other male carers for example.

The logic

If we deliver a coherent set of evidence-based parenting and HLE programmes at sufficient scale, in accessible locations and times, and if we actively target parents in wards with the lowest GLD rates using outreach, Family Hub Navigators and digital tools, then more parents will understand what supports their child's development. They will feel confident to use specific strategies and increase the quality of everyday interactions at home.

Adopting a strength-based partnership approach will ensure that parents will continue to seek support as and when needed

Over time, this leads to more children starting Reception with stronger communication and language, PSED, early literacy and self-regulation.

Targeting

We will prioritise the wards Broad Green, West Thornton, Thornton Heath, South Norwood and South Croydon with the largest numbers of children not achieving their GLD. We will use Best Start in Life Family Hubs as local bases, supplemented by outreach via Family Hub Navigators, Parenting teams, Home-Start and partners including early years providers, schools, faith groups and VCS organisations. EPEC's peer-led model extends reach into communities that professional-led services do not currently access. We will track whether the families we are reaching are the families who most need support.

Key challenge

Incredible Years and Early Words Together have not yet been delivered in Croydon. EPEC needs relaunching. Scaling from near-zero to target volumes is a significant mobilisation task. There are accessibility issues: English as a second language, standard daytime provision does not reach working families, and in Croydon most families are working, with fathers being more likely to be the working parent. Extending session availability beyond standard hours is part of the delivery plan, along with working with our VCSF partners to deliver different sessions which appeal to parents who may feel less confident in a Council or Health setting. Supporting families to know what a good Home Learning Environment is where all parents and carers can make a difference to their child's learning.

Shift 2: Early identification and targeting

Outcome: Interventions reach the children who need them early enough to make a difference, and no child is missed.

Primarily targets: communication and language; SEND identification; PSED

Developmental gaps are visible by age 2. Without targeted support, they typically increase by school age. The 2-2½ year developmental review is the critical moment for spotting emerging needs. In Croydon, around 8% of children are not in early years settings and risk being invisible to services.

Strengthening the health visitor review at 2-2.5 years. Coverage currently sits at approximately 80%, up from around 60% in recent years. The Director of Public Health has confirmed this check is a critical mechanism and that public health is committed to increasing coverage further. Early analysis suggests the 20% not receiving the check may include a significant proportion of working parents rather than necessarily the most deprived families, which reinforces the need for multiple identification routes (and more data to test this hypothesis and map it against the GLD geographical findings). Options include conducting reviews in early years settings and more flexible delivery models. The DPH has committed to a geographical breakdown of coverage data through Health Visiting contract management, to be shared with 'Closing the 356 gap and beyond' governance.

A 'waiting well' approach to speech and language. Rather than treating the SALT waiting list as a problem beyond our control, we utilise the EBIs and practitioner-level language strategies (Makaton, vocabulary modelling, language-rich environments) as what families and settings can actively do during the waiting period. Little Links, a virtual communication and language tool, has been rolled out to every early-years setting in the borough. Bridging this gap becomes a shared responsibility across the system where we can set expectations on what waiting well looks like for Croydon families.

Finding the missing 8%. Family Hub Navigators, community partners and Local Area Coordinators will find and engage families not in contact with core services. The EAL gap and limited access to translators reinforce the need for culturally and linguistically accessible pathways.

SEND and early support. The SEND gap of 51.08% is the largest single gap in the data. Whilst maintaining high expectations, not all children with SEND will meet the GLD benchmark, however, every child will be supported to thrive and make meaningful progress through early identification and appropriate support to reduce gaps and improve functional outcomes. A GLD-focused system must be inclusive by design and capture the development journey of all children, especially those with SEND.

The logic

If we use the 2-2½ year review as a consistent trigger, backed by clear referral pathways and proactive outreach to families not in contact with services, then more children at risk will be identified earlier and receive targeted support at a point when it can still make a real difference. Developmental gaps are easier to close in the first five years.

Key challenge

The 8% of children not in any early years setting are largely invisible. Practitioner survey confirms children arriving at Reception with unidentified needs. Current referral pathways are inconsistent, slow and lack clarity across multi-agencies.

Shift 3: Consistent practice across early years settings

Outcome: Early years settings and practitioners consistently support the GLD mission, weaving it through everything they do with the vast majority of children in their care.

Primarily targets: all GLD domains, with particular focus on language-rich environments and transition consistency.

For children whose home circumstances make parent-led change difficult, the early years setting is the critical environment. Higher-quality settings produce better outcomes, particularly in communication and language, PSED and early literacy. Parents and carers are more likely to be open to support and advice from their early years settings who are working with their children on a regular basis. This plan sets out the change we will make with our workforce, starting where early years practitioners' are confident and competent in sharing effective strategies including at a universal level, ensuring that messages to parents and carers are consistent across the system. Right now, Croydon does not have consistency in assessment of the GLD outcomes across settings.

A shared GLD mission across all providers, supported by joint training and common language on school readiness. **Revitalised moderation and assessment** to align standards across nurseries, childminders and schools. **Stronger transitions:** there is currently no consistent borough-wide protocol. As one childminder put it: “We hand over detailed records and never hear whether they made any difference.” The strategies practitioners already know work (visuals, Makaton, small group language interventions, dual-language books) align closely with the EBI. The task is to make these practices and assessment consistent borough-wide in a peer-to-peer approach.

The logic

If we develop a shared GLD mission supported by joint training, moderation and aligned transition processes, and if settings embed evidence-informed practice in daily routines, then children will experience more consistent, high-quality support across the 0-5 system. Practitioner skill and consistency are key determinants of children’s outcomes.

Key challenge

The SEND provision gap remains the most significant constraint. The gender gap (15.05%) suggests boys may need specific attention through language-rich and physical play-based approaches. There is a disparity between the GLD outcomes and different ethnicities that needs to be taken into account to ensure that all children in Croydon have the same opportunities to achieve their GLD. 10% more Asian children (74.42%) achieve their GLD than Black children (64.71%).



Best Start in Life foundations

Underpinning all three shifts is a set of foundations. Without them, the shifts can deliver isolated improvements but not the cumulative 8-point gain.

Joined up working and shared mission. Every partner needs to understand their role in delivering GLD outcomes. Joint training and shared standards across health, education and council services will reinforce a common language about what school readiness means and what good looks like.

Data sharing and review. Geographical data will be used to concentrate effort where GLD is lowest. Consistent referral pathways mean anyone who identifies a child needing support can trigger help without stigma. Shared data is how we know what is working faster than waiting until 2028.

The digital and virtual offer. We are clear-eyed about the role of digital. The evidence shows face-to-face support is more effective for changing parenting behaviours, and parents consistently say they want human connection. At the same time, in a borough where most parents work, digital tools have a practical role: EasyPeasy provides a route for parents who cannot attend sessions; Little Links gives every setting a virtual SLCN support tool; and our online parent-facing information needs to be easy to find and consistent with in-person advice. Digital complements face-to-face delivery. It does not replace it.

Parent and carer voice. Parent Carer Panels will provide ongoing input. **Communications and shared language** across all partners so that families hear consistent messaging. **12 Best Start Family Hub sites** as the main physical infrastructure, supplemented by outreach, community-based delivery, peer support and parent carer panels

Connected strategies. Croydon has recently launched strategies on infant feeding and perinatal mental health, both connecting to GLD outcomes. There is a risk that these become siloed. The governance structure below is intended to hold the connections. Public health has offered to support evaluation of local initiatives.

Universal and targeted. Not every disadvantaged family lives in a deprived area, and universal services are how needs are spotted across the whole population. This local plan operates at both levels: universal reach through EasyPeasy, Family Hub services and consistent practice in all settings, with targeted intensity in the lowest-GLD wards.

Governance and accountability

The delivery of this local plan is led jointly by Denise Bushay and Katy Sparrow Robins. Each shift has a named senior lead: Karen Rasmussen (Shift 1), Juliette Penney (Shift 2), Jenni Murphy (Shift 3). The Director of Education (Shelley Davies) acts as system-level sponsor, connecting the GLD mission to public health commissioning and ensuring health data flows into this work.

Closing the 356 gap reports into the Family Hubs Joint Strategic Oversight Group, which in turn reports into the Early Help Family Hubs Partnership Board. The Healthy Babies workstream (infant feeding and perinatal mental health) sits alongside closing the **356** gap within this structure. Delivery groups, organised by shift, bring together the people who manage teams and run localities to look at data, review progress and make operational decisions.

Six-monthly reviews

These reviews bring together shift leads, public health, NHS partners, early years leads and other key stakeholders to: assess progress against reach targets and leading indicators; review whether assumptions are holding; track ward-level data to check whether interventions are reaching the widest gaps; and adjust the model based on what the evidence shows.

Decision rights: the six-monthly reviews can stop activities that are not delivering, scale those that are working, re-target delivery towards different wards or groups if the data warrants it, and re-design programme delivery models (timing, location, format) to improve reach. This is a test-and-learn approach with structured decision points, not a set-and-forget plan.

DfE will have sight of the indicator framework and of findings from the six-monthly reviews. Indicators will align with national Best Start in Life metrics where they exist.

Funding and sustainability

This local plan is funded through the DfE Best Start in Life Family Hubs grant. A mid-point evaluation in June 2026 and an end-point evaluation in 2027 will provide the evidence base for decisions about sustainability beyond DfE funding. Where EBIs demonstrate impact, Croydon will work to integrate them into core commissioning and local spend, using evaluation results to make the case for continued investment.

If funding were reduced, our priority would be to protect the EBIs with the strongest evidence base and the highest reach relative to cost. In practice, that means EasyPeasy (high volume, low marginal cost, strong evaluation evidence) and Incredible Years (strongest RCT evidence base for parenting behaviour change) would be first to protect. EPEC's peer-led model also has a lower cost per family once trained leaders are in place. We would look to sustain targeted delivery in the lowest-GLD wards rather than spread reduced funding thinly across the borough.

This shows we have thought about value for money and are prepared to make hard choices if circumstances change.

Risks, assumptions and mitigations

About families

We assume parents and carers will engage with the EBIs if they are accessible, relevant and non-stigmatising. We assume changes in parenting behaviour at home will translate into measurable developmental gains. We assume the families with the most to gain can be reached through Family Hub Navigators, community outreach, peer-led models and digital tools. If engagement is lower than planned, particularly in priority wards, we will use the six-monthly review to re-examine delivery models, timing and accessibility.

About partners and the workforce

We assume sufficient practitioners can be trained and retained to deliver EBIs at the planned volumes. We assume health visitors, early years professionals and Family Hub staff will have capacity and willingness to adopt new approaches. We assume partners will commit to data sharing and a common mission. The main workforce risk is the mobilisation challenge for Incredible Years and Early Words Together, neither of which has been delivered in Croydon before.

About the system

We assume the governance structure can hold the connections across workstreams and agencies. We assume the six-monthly review cycle provides enough agility to adjust. We assume DfE funding is sustained for the period covered by this local plan. If funding were reduced, our contingency is set out in the section above.

External factors

Wider economic and social conditions (cost-of-living pressures, housing, employment) affect family stress and capacity to engage. National reforms to early education, SEND and family support may change entitlements or accountability. Demographic change in Croydon may alter demand. These factors will be monitored through the six-monthly review cycle and reflected in adjustments to the local plan.

Mitigations alone are not sufficient for the highest-impact risks. Contingency plans are built alongside them, and the six-monthly reviews have the decision rights to activate them.

Delivery milestones

Date	Milestone
March 2026	Publish the Best Start Local Plan, including this local plan
April 2026	EasyPeasy, Making it REAL and PEEP continue. Mobilisation for Incredible Years and Early Words Together begins
June 2026	Mid-point evaluation
July 2026	EPEC relaunches with first cycle of peer leaders
September 2026	First six-monthly review. Initial ward-level data on EBI reach and 2-year review coverage
March 2027	Second review. Full-year 2026/27 data. Assessment of reach targets and targeting effectiveness
2027	End-point evaluation to inform sustainability planning post-DfE funding
2027/28	20% uplift in EBI reach. First cohort through full EBI offer reaches Reception
2028	GLD target assessment against 78.3% local target and 75% national aspiration

This local plan will be refined as delivery progresses and we test and learn the approaches, programmes and implementation. The assumptions and risks set out here are where we need to pay closest attention. Where assumptions prove wrong, the model will be adjusted. Where risks materialise, contingency planning will be activated. The six-monthly reviews are the mechanism for making sure we do not wait until 2028 to find out whether this is working.

Croydon Best Start in Life Family Hubs Theory of Change

Best Start in Life Good Level of Development



The DfE funded EBIs delivered through Best Start in Life Family Hubs are a critical component but meeting the national 75% and local 78.3% GLD ambitions requires the whole system to rally and a shared mission



www.croydon.gov.uk/family-hubs

