



**REPORT SUBJECT: Best Start in Life: PSB Progress Update**

**MEETING: Gwent Public Services Board**

**DATE: 17.09.25 – Gwent PSB Scrutiny Committee**  
**25.09.25 – Gwent Public Services Board**

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| <b>1</b> | <b>Purpose of Report</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|          | The purpose of this report is to provide the Public Services Board (PSB) with an update on progress relating to the Best Start in Life (BSiL) Area of Focus (AoF).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Background</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|          | <p>In March 2025, an update report was presented to Gwent PSB detailing progress made in relation to the Best Start in Life AoF and proposed next steps. This update focussed on the Regional Best Start in Life Management Group and the Gwent BSiL Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (0-4 years):</p> <p><b>I. Regional Best Start in Life Management Group</b></p> <p>An initial meeting of the Group was held on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2025 with representatives from all Local Authority areas of Gwent and Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) to discuss how best to provide strategic support to the PSB to deliver on reducing inequity through the Best Start in Life Area of Focus.</p> <p>Considering the feedback at this initial meeting, additional work was required to refine documents and structures for further consideration by partners. The following steps were proposed:</p> |

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|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree a definition for Best Start in Life;</li> <li>• Identify priority workstreams in line with the agreed definition;</li> <li>• Utilise a distributed leadership model to identify workstream leads to set up task groups and develop delivery plans;</li> <li>• Ensure that the realisation of Children's Rights (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) underpin the delivery plans;</li> <li>• Finalise BSIL Regional Management Group membership, and reporting.</li> </ul> <p><b>II . The Best Start in Life Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) 0-4 Years</b></p> <p>The Best Start in Life (BSiL) Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) (0-4 years) intends to provide an overview of the needs of babies, young children and families/carers in Gwent and identify key priorities to inform services and support that give every baby and child in Gwent the best start in life.</p> <p>At the point of reporting to Gwent PSB in March, the data analysis and engagement phases of the JSNA had been completed and Early Years partners were due to be consulted on the draft recommendations.</p> <p>The final JSNA was expected to be considered by the ABUHB Executive Board in mid-April and was anticipated to be published by the end of April 2025.</p> <p>The recommendations from the JSNA are intended to help inform the delivery plans for the BSIL AoF.</p> |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Assessment of Progress</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|          | <p><b>I. Building the Best Start in Life Foundations</b></p> <p>To drive meaningful, system-wide change, a Best Start in Life Leadership Group is being formed. This high-level, multi-agency Group will consist of Directors of Education from across the five Local Authorities, the Divisional Director of Families and Therapies for Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) and a Consultant in Public Health representing the Gwent Public Health Team.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

The purpose of the Group will be to achieve strategic alignment of organisations and priorities in Gwent, enabling collaboration and partnership working across the BSiL agenda.

The Group will shape and steer an evidence-based regional delivery plan for BSiL that is grounded in the findings of the Building a Fairer Gwent (Marmot) Report and the Gwent Best Start in Life Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (0–4 years). The following BSiL Marmot recommendations will be considered by the Leadership Group for inclusion in the delivery plan:

- Define best start and school readiness in Gwent in partnership with parents, early years staff and health.
- Assess impact of staff shortages on the delivery of Flying Start in areas of higher deprivation.
- Healthy and Sustainable Pre-school scheme identifies actions across seven health topics and shift aim to reduce inequalities in every nursery.
- Assess and recommend improving maternity and parental leave policies and support for childcare in PBS members.
- Identify areas of low childcare provision and map to deprivation and assess quality of provision.
- Monitor best start and school readiness in Gwent in partnership and reduce inequalities.
- Healthy and Sustainable Pre-school scheme actively implements actions to address inequalities across seven health topics in every nursery.
- Recommendations for improving maternity and parental leave policies implemented in PSB members.
- Extend improved parental leave policies to private employers, including improved flexible working offer.
- Intensive recruitment for early years staff in areas of higher deprivation.
- Increase childcare provision and quality in areas of higher deprivation with aim of reducing inequalities.

The Gwent BSiL delivery plan will be actioned by the Regional BSiL Management Group.

A clear focus will be placed on tackling inequality by prioritising support for families facing disadvantage, including those with protected characteristics and those affected by socio-economic challenges. The voices of parents, babies and young children will be at the heart of the delivery plan.

The BSiL Leadership and Management Groups will be guided by the Well-being of Future Generations Act and its five ways of

working to collaborate, not only across the BSIL system, but also with other Area of Focus (AoF) teams, to ensure a lasting impact across Gwent.

The first meeting of the Leadership Group is being arranged for September 2025. The second meeting of the Regional BSIL Management Group took place on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2025. This was a productive meeting, with several significant updates and discussions taking place, including:

- PSB Update: BSIL governance; RPB Children & Families Strategic Group; and the Regional Support Fund to progress PSB priorities.
- Healthy Child Wales Programme Update: progress of phases 1 and 2 of the programme. Discussion took place about collaborating to reduce Did Not Attend (DNA) rate, action being taken to 'level up' and how data collection in ABUHB can be strengthened to enable measurement of school readiness.
- National Flying Start Conference Feedback: Flying Start expansion progress and roll out of baby bundles for families experiencing poverty.
- Key Updates from Local Authority Partners: development of an Early Intervention Hub in Torfaen and quarterly Health Visiting Forums have been established across Gwent.
- School Readiness Project Update: this project aims to support children and families living in poverty in Gwent to achieve key developmental milestones and be ready to thrive when they start school. A project regarding school readiness is also being explored in Torfaen.
- Early Years Framework for Action Conference: Framework launched on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2025.

## **II. BSIL Mathematical Modelling**

Exploratory discussions have commenced with Health Board ABCi quality improvement colleagues to begin to scope out how mathematical modelling approaches may be used to analyse and improve outcomes for babies and children and to better understand the factors that are influencing child development within Gwent. The digital maternity system, BadgerNet, holds data relating to a person's pregnancy journey and this may provide an opportunity to support the mathematical modelling approach.

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|  | <p>Further discussions with Public Health Team Intelligence colleagues will take place to explore this opportunity further.</p> |
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### **III. The Best Start in Life Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) 0-4 Years**

The BSiL JSNA has been led by the Gwent Public Health Team in collaboration with Early Years partners across Gwent.

It has now been published (August 2025) and the full suite of documents can be found here: [The Gwent Best Start in Life Joint Strategic Needs Assessment - Aneurin Bevan University Health Board.](#)

A JSNA launch webinar is arranged for 8<sup>th</sup> September 2025 to explore the findings, recommendations, and next steps.

Insights for the JSNA were gathered between August 2024 and March 2025 through data analysis, engagement with families and professionals, and a review of local services.

Summary of key findings:

- Families reported limited access to antenatal breastfeeding advice, maternal mental health support, and financial pressures during parental leave, alongside low awareness of services.
- Professionals noted better collaboration via BadgerNet but flagged gaps in postnatal support, especially for women whose babies were removed, and a need for more training among childcare staff.
- Services across Gwent are high quality but unevenly available, with outdated information, reduced capacity post-COVID, and limited inclusive support for dads, partners, and LGBTQIA+ families.
- Access barriers, workforce challenges, and funding constraints remain significant.

A series of 17 recommendations have been identified which aim to strengthen early years support, focusing on:

- Better preconception and pregnancy care
- Improved vaccination, child development, and speech/language services
- Expanded training and family support
- Inclusion of underrepresented families in planning

Two key themes emerged from the JSNA recommendations:

- Shifting support earlier in the life course and
- Targeting child development in low-income families.

The findings from the JSNA will inform delivery plans across Gwent. Stakeholders across Gwent are reviewing the JSNA and a 'You Said, We Did' approach will ensure feedback is acted on and shared.

The Public Health Wales Early Years Framework for Action Launch took place on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2025. The Gwent Public Health Team were invited to present the Gwent BSiL JSNA at this event.

#### **IV. School Readiness - 'Ready to Learn, Ready to Grow' | 'Barod i Ddysgu, Barod i Dyfu'**

A new project is underway across Gwent, made possible by funding from the Welsh Government's Child Poverty Innovation and Supporting Communities Grant. The project aims to support children and families living in poverty to achieve key developmental milestones and be ready to thrive when they start school.

The project is being led by Newport City Council, ABUHB's Gwent Public Health Team and Home-Start Cymru, in partnership with the five Gwent Local Authorities, the Health Determinants Research Collaboration – Torfaen, and Torfaen Voluntary Alliance.

The project is focused on co-creating new, innovative approaches to support families experiencing poverty, which we know has a negative impact on child development and long-term outcomes.

There are two aspects to the project; consultation with healthcare professionals and families on their views and experiences of 'School Readiness', as well as a direct intervention with 50 families across Gwent.

Through meaningful engagement, the project aims to:

- Develop a shared understanding of what "school readiness" means in Gwent.
- Co-design activities and resources that support children's speech, language, social skills, routines, and play.
- Test and refine new approaches that complement existing Early Years support.

'Ready to Learn, Ready to Grow' | 'Barod i Ddysgu, Barod i Dyfu' is now ready to accept referrals for families who would benefit from the intervention. The project steering group are developing

the next stakeholder briefing which will be shared, alongside details of how to refer and what families can expect.

Linked to this work discussions have taken place with colleagues in the Early Years branch of Welsh Government to explore how a national school readiness indicator may be reinstated to understand patterns of inequity. School readiness impacts on a child's future health, education and social wellbeing. It is critical we understand how effectively pre-school environments are preparing children to positively benefit from their school experience, to shape appropriate policy and service responses.

## **V. Wales as a Marmot Nation**

Welsh Government have announced that Wales will become a Marmot nation as part of its ongoing work to tackle health inequalities.

With Gwent having been the first area in Wales to become a Marmot region, Welsh Government are interested in sharing the Gwent BSIL work and learning with other parts of Wales. The Gwent Public Health Team have therefore been invited to present on the work being undertaken in the region at the Welsh Government Flying Start & Families First conference in October 2025.

## **VI. Welsh Government Healthy Eating in Schools Consultation**

Welsh Government recently consulted on Healthy Eating in Schools. The consultation covered proposals relating to food and drink in maintained primary schools in Wales and included a call for evidence on the food provided in secondary schools.

The Gwent Public Health Team prepared and submitted a response to this consultation on behalf of the Health Board. The response can be found in the 'Background Documents' section of this report.

## **VII. Maternity and Neonatal Improvement & Assurance Group**

Quarterly updates are provided to the ABUHB Maternity and Neonatal Improvement & Assurance Group (MANIAG) in relation to the following areas:

- BSIL JSNA (0-4)
- Making Every Contact Count (MECC)

- Substance Exposed Pregnancy Pathways
- Weight Management in Pregnancy
- Maternal Smoking Cessation Programme
- Vaccination in Pregnancy

The aim is to report on progress, identify any issues and to drive improvements in these areas collectively, thereby supporting every baby to have the best start by enabling the best possible health and wellbeing outcomes for the mother.

MECC training has been included on Maternity study days for 2 years. The Public Health Team develop the training in collaboration with Midwifery, and it is delivered by the Public Health Midwife. The next training (year 3), commencing in September, will focus on embedding behaviour change skills into practice to enable effective conversations about lifestyle decisions during pregnancy.

The most recent update presentation can be found in the 'Background Documents' section of this report.

### **Next Steps**

Providing the best start in life means enabling all parents, babies and children in Gwent to have the optimal conditions necessary for healthy physical, emotional and cognitive development and supporting them to reach their potential. A systematic focus, prioritising support for families facing disadvantage, is where we can make the biggest difference in reducing inequities.

The next steps for BSiL in Gwent will be:

- Hold the first meeting of the BSiL Leadership Group to guide the development of BSiL delivery plans for Gwent.
- Develop and implement plans to support a BSiL Community of Practice via a webinar series and newsletters/bulletins. PSB funding will be used to support this.
- Collaborate and develop synergies with other PSB Areas of Focus
- Progress exploration of mathematical modelling approaches to analyse and improve outcomes for babies and children and to better understand the factors that are influencing child development within Gwent.
- Ensure the findings from the BSiL JSNA inform delivery plans across Gwent and actively encourage stakeholders to utilise the JSNA and provide feedback to inform future JSNAs.

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|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop the next 'Ready to Learn, Ready to Grow' stakeholder briefing and share referral details.</li> <li>• Present at the Welsh Government Flying Start &amp; Families First conference in October 2025 to share learning on becoming a Marmot region.</li> </ul>                                                                                                     |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Recommendations to the PSB</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 4.1      | Note and discuss the progress update relating to the Best Start in Life Area of Focus.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Recommendations to the Scrutiny Committee</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 5.1      | Note and discuss the progress update relating to the Best Start in Life Area of Focus.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 5.2      | Provide comments and/or recommendations for the PSB to consider.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|          | <p><b>Background Documents</b></p> <p>Appendix 1 - BSiL PSB Update Report March 2025</p> <p>BSiL JSNA Documents: <a href="#">The Gwent Best Start in Life Joint Strategic Needs Assessment - Aneurin Bevan University Health Board</a></p> <p>Appendix 2 - Maternity and Neonatal Improvement &amp; Assurance Group Update May 2025:</p> <p>Appendix 3 - WG Healthy Eating in Schools Consultation Response:</p> |