

Best Start in Life Area of Focus - Update for the PSB Annual Report

Background

As a Marmot Principle, enabling **every** baby and child in Gwent to have the best start in life is a priority Area of Focus for the Gwent Public Services Board (PSB).

The Best Start in Life (BSiL) in Gwent refers to the crucial period from pregnancy to age seven, which is understood as the following phases:

- Preconception
- Pregnancy
- Birth to 2 years & 11 months
- Preschool – 3 to 4 years
- Primary school – 4 to 7 years

A systematic focus on parents, babies and young children is where the evidence tells us we can make the biggest difference in reducing inequities (Academy of Medical Sciences, Prioritising Early Childhood to Promote the Nations, Health, Well-being and Prosperity report 2024).

Over the past year, the work of the Best Start in Life Area of Focus has prioritised building the BSiL system and governance structures in Gwent, whilst also supporting and connecting services and programmes that deliver against the strategic mission to give every child in Gwent the best start in life.

Through collaboration across Gwent partnerships, a Regional BSiL Delivery Plan for Gwent is in development, which brings together collective action to achieve the best start in life mission.

Building a Best Start in Life System for Gwent

BSiL Leadership and Regional Management governance groups are now well established in Gwent to drive meaningful, system-wide change. Membership includes senior leaders across Public Service Board (PSB) organisations and includes representation from the Voluntary and Community sector.

BSiL governance groups have collaborated to develop and agree a **shared BSiL definition and scope for Gwent** and continue to work together to shape and lead an evidence-based **regional delivery plan** for babies, children and families in Gwent.

Ongoing **engagement** is ensuring alignment with existing strategic plans, reduced duplication and strengthened opportunities for collaborative working across the region. The Plan, and accompanying documents, have been developed bringing together the agreed elements of the Delivery Plan approach:

- Programme Monitoring
- Priorities for Improvement
- Community of Practice

The suite of documents include:

- The Gwent Best Start in Life: The Journey So Far
- The Gwent Best Start in Life Regional Delivery Plan
- An Early Years Framework for Action: Building an Early Years System in Gwent for The Long-Term

The Gwent Best Start in Life: The Journey So Far

This document provides detail on the background and approach undertaken to developing a regional delivery plan for Gwent.

Key national programmes will be monitored via BSIL governance groups to understand their impact on addressing inequities across Gwent.

The **BSiL Community of Practice** is a forum to support early years professionals in Gwent. It is now well established in Gwent, with bi-monthly webinars and quarterly newsletters providing regular opportunities for learning, collaboration and engagement across the region.

The Gwent Best Start in Life Regional Delivery Plan

The draft Gwent Best Start in Life Regional Delivery Plan sets out six priorities, and associated actions, that have been identified where improvement can be made and where the evidence tells us can make a significant impact on outcomes for babies, children, and their families. These priorities have been shaped around the voice and experience of the child:

Priority 1: Planning and supporting the best pregnancy for me and my family

Priority 2: Building strong emotional wellbeing and mental health for me and my family

Priority 3: Supporting my family with my development from baby to child to help me be ready to start school

Priority 4: Ensuring my home is healthy, safe, secure and comfortable in all weather for me and my family

Priority 5: Helping my family to maximise their income to meet my needs

Priority 6: Helping me and my family access high-quality, inclusive childcare

Collaboration with partners across the region has been ongoing to identify lead organisations and individuals for each priority area and to support the development of proposed actions to drive the priorities forward.

This Plan has a strong focus on **reducing inequalities**. It takes a proportionate universalism approach, providing support for all babies, children and families, while offering additional help to those most affected by poorer outcomes.

An Early Years Framework for Action: Building an Early Years System in Gwent for The Long-Term

Recognising the need for a **whole-system approach** across Gwent, work has been undertaken to map existing regional activity against the foundation stones set out in [Public Health Wales' Best Start in Life: An Early Years Framework for Action](#).

This provides a clear picture of current strengths and highlights opportunities to strengthen collaboration, address gaps, and support continuous improvement across the region.

Together, these actions will help create the conditions for every baby and child in Gwent to have the best possible start in life.

Guided by the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act** and its five ways of working, BSiL governance groups will continue to work across the BSiL system and other Areas of Focus to drive long-term, sustainable improvements across Gwent.

Next Steps

The next stage in the planning process for the Regional BSiL Delivery Plan is to secure leadership for all six priorities for improvement. Leads have been identified for five of the six priorities and work is already underway to secure leadership to progress priority 5.

Engagement on Plan development and implementation will take place with parents/carers, children and the groups that are the focus of the delivery to ensure the Plan is informed by experience and reflects the voices of those it seeks to support.

Talk into Action

Case Study - Ready to Learn, Ready to Grow: Positive Outcomes for Children and Families Across Gwent (25/26)

The Ready to Learn, Ready to Grow (R2LR2G) project, funded through the Welsh Government Child Poverty Innovation and Supporting Communities Grant, was delivered across Gwent between November 2025 and March 2026. It combined direct support for families living in poverty with wider engagement with parents, carers and practitioners to improve understanding of child development and school readiness.

This project was led by Newport City Council, ABUHB's Gwent Public Health Team and Home-Start Cymru, in partnership with Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Torfaen and Monmouthshire Local Authorities, as well as the Health Determinants Research Collaboration – Torfaen and Torfaen Voluntary Alliance.

What did the evaluation tell us?

- Many children needed extra support in several areas before starting school, especially with speech, language, communication, social skills, emotional development, attention and independence.
- Children who took part in the programme showed improvements in communication, social interaction, learning through play, coping skills and self-care.
- Parents felt more confident supporting their child's development. They also reported improved parenting skills, better emotional wellbeing and less isolation.
- The evaluation highlighted the importance of speech, language and communication in helping children get ready for school. It also showed the value of whole-family approaches that address both developmental and wider family needs.
- Feedback from more than 400 parents, carers and practitioners showed a need for a shared understanding of school readiness across Gwent, more consistent information and resources for families, and stronger partnership working between health, education and community services.
- Parents and practitioners recognised the significant impact of poverty on child development and highlighted the need for accessible, practical support to help reduce inequalities in outcomes.

The evaluation has generated a series of recommendations focused on developing a **shared understanding of child development and school readiness, strengthening partnership working, improving support and resources** for families and practitioners, and building on existing examples of **effective practice** across Gwent.

Next Steps

The next phase of work will focus on **progressing the evaluation recommendations**, a number of which have already shaped key actions within the **Gwent Best Start in Life Regional Delivery Plan**. The evaluation report and associated learning will be shared widely across Gwent and Wales to support learning, influence future practice and strengthen partnership approaches to improving child development, reducing inequalities and supporting school readiness.

Case Study - Funding secured for a pilot focusing on early interaction and speech, language & communication development with parents and babies.

A collaborative partnership across Gwent has secured £189,000 funding from the 1001 Critical Days Foundation to deliver a three-year pilot of the To and Fro programme in Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen. The funding has been awarded to Home-Start Cymru, who will deliver the programme in partnership with Aneurin Bevan University Health Board Speech and Language Therapy Services, Specialist Public Health Nursing (Health Visiting), the Gwent Public Health Team and Local Authority Early Years services.

What's it about?

To and Fro is an evidence-informed, strengths-based intervention designed to promote responsive parent-child interactions and support speech, language and communication development during infancy.

The programme will work with families of babies aged 6-15 months who may be at increased risk of poorer developmental outcomes, particularly those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, low literacy levels, language barriers, social isolation, or who are less likely to engage with statutory services.

The programme combines home-based support, group activities and community-based opportunities for families, alongside delivery of the To and Fro intervention, which uses video feedback to strengthen responsive communication between parents, carers and their children. The approach is intended to help families build confidence, create communication-rich home environments and strengthen connections to local sources of support.

Why does this matter?

The pilot presents an important opportunity to test an earlier preventative approach to speech, language and communication development. Traditionally, interventions of this nature have focused on children where concerns have already been identified at an older age. By working with families during infancy, the programme aims to prevent emerging difficulties from becoming more persistent, while supporting children to achieve the best possible developmental outcomes. Initial measures of success will include improvements in responsive parent-child interactions, parental confidence, social connectedness and programme completion rates.

The funding represents a significant achievement for partners and reflects a shared commitment to reducing inequalities and giving every child the best start in life.

Next steps

The To and Fro pilot forms part of the **Gwent Best Start in Life Regional Delivery Plan**, supporting delivery of Priority 3: *Supporting my family with my development from baby to child to help me be ready to start school*. Progress, learning and outcomes from the pilot will be reported through the Best Start in Life Leadership Group.

The RTLRTG and To and Fro work directly supports the Gwent Public Services Board (PSB) priority: Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life, and we'll be reporting progress through the PSB.