

**SUPPORTING
CHILDREN IN THE
PRESCHOOL YEARS :**

**PRESCHOOL
CHILDREN ARE THE
UK'S FUTURE**

Supporting children in the preschool years: A new approach to improving the UK's health

This update highlights:

- **New evidence** since the Child of the North report in 2024 [1] highlighting **only 67.7% of children have the skills needed to achieve and thrive in school**, leaving one in three children not school ready. Teacher surveys show 49% believe the issue is worsening, with **concerns over toilet training, social interactions, and screen time** [2].
- Stark regional inequalities with a **9.6% gap between advantaged and disadvantaged neighbourhoods** (Inner London: 64.9%; North West: 55.3%). Children in Northern regions remain disproportionately disadvantaged [3].
- A welcome **government commitment** to improve the numbers of 'school ready' children with **an emphasis on integrated health-education partnerships and family hubs**.
- **Economic modelling** showing that early life disadvantage causes problems to multiply and cascade across a child's life course [4].
- **New evidence from Bradford on effective approaches** to improving outcomes for preschool children [5].

Prevention means birth to preschool

The evidence is unequivocal - **the first years of life, from pregnancy to 4 years of age, are critical to a child's lifelong physical and mental health, their educational attainment, and life opportunities**. These outcomes are unequal, with those living in sociodemographic disadvantage more likely to have poor early developmental and health outcomes. The UK needs to take an evidence-based approach to addressing childhood disadvantage in the preschool years if it wants **a healthy and well educated workforce to grow the economy and decrease the financial burden created by ill health**.

There is **growing evidence of what works to engage families and improve preschool outcomes**. Over the past ten years, Bradford have evaluated multiple early years interventions and now have in-depth information on: (i) what works to enhance uptake of interventions in the early years; (ii) what interventions can and cannot be delivered with fidelity; and (iii) which interventions have a positive impact on a child's long term outcomes.

Preschool update

A new approach

We need to take a different approach if we want to stop inequalities in the first years of life creating poor long term health and preventing economic growth. There is a shift in international thinking away from a "silver bullet" approach, in recognition of the growing evidence that a single service or intervention will never reduce entrenched inequalities in early years outcomes [6]. **A system-wide solution** is required that addresses the multiple social determinants of unequal child development and health. A **"pragmatic radicalism"** approach needs to be adopted where the UK systematically delivers a pathway of evidence-based interventions in combination with an empirical approach to evaluation. Taking these actions could reduce child inequities and improve the UK's health within a generation.

Bradford has pioneered an **Early Years Systems Approach**, showing how using data to reframe services around children can help to close the gap in school readiness.

This approach offers **a model that other local authorities can adopt to achieve the 75% school readiness target**.

Connecting the system

Bradford has trialled the novel approach described above and the evidence suggests this should be scaled up across the UK. Born in Bradford first created a 0-5 years outcomes framework for the Bradford District, and then extended this to 19 years of age. A 'long-list' of outcomes were first developed from existing outcome frameworks used across different services together with the existing evidence base describing the major drivers of inequalities in child health and development.

The framework reflects the fact that **children and their families receive care and support from numerous different organisations** including health (e.g. maternity, health visiting, GPs, dentists, hospitals); children's services (e.g. Family Hubs, Early Help, social care); education (nurseries, schools); and other key services (e.g. Families First, VCSOs, police, housing etc.) Over a period of three years, partners from these key services across Bradford joined together in a 'task and finish' group to co-produce a 0-19 years **'Children and Young Peoples shared outcomes framework'** that measures important aspects of children and young peoples' safety, health, and development. The shared framework provides: 1) in-depth, locality based, needs assessment; 2) evaluation of the impact of interventions through improved outcomes over time; 3) a catalyst for a single shared child record across organisation within Bradford.

In this way, Bradford is moving from the current perspective of data at the level of a service to a shared data record that is focussed on the perspective of the child. The outcomes framework acted as a catalyst to develop a single shared child record across organisations where important information that is in the best interests of the family can be shared across the services that are supporting them.

The framework has three components:

1. The Bradford 0-19 Outcomes Framework: A co-produced set of key indicators from birth to adulthood integrated from datasets across all services working with babies, children and young people. This framework allows analysis of need at a more granular level than District wide. In doing so, stark inequalities have been identified that are hidden by district averages (e.g., while Bradford District's 2024-25 GLD average was 62%, this varies from 52% in the most deprived areas to 86% in more advantaged areas). The wide level disparities are found for many outcomes including access to the healthy child programme two-year review, and early developmental assessments.

The linked data also highlight important differences in the types of need of families living in different areas, allowing more appropriate targeting of services (see the opposite Figure).

2. Connected Bradford as a predictive modelling tool: Connected Bradford holds pseudoanonymised individual level data on all Bradfordians [7].

These connected data are being used to link sociodemographic characteristics, the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (a developmental assessment carried out at 2 years), and school readiness outcomes (the EYFSP) in order to identify which children have an elevated likelihood of adverse outcomes. The Connected Bradford database is allowing an exploration of the individual domains within the EYFSP so we can go one step further and identify what type of support may be most effective, and which children would benefit most from targeted interventions.

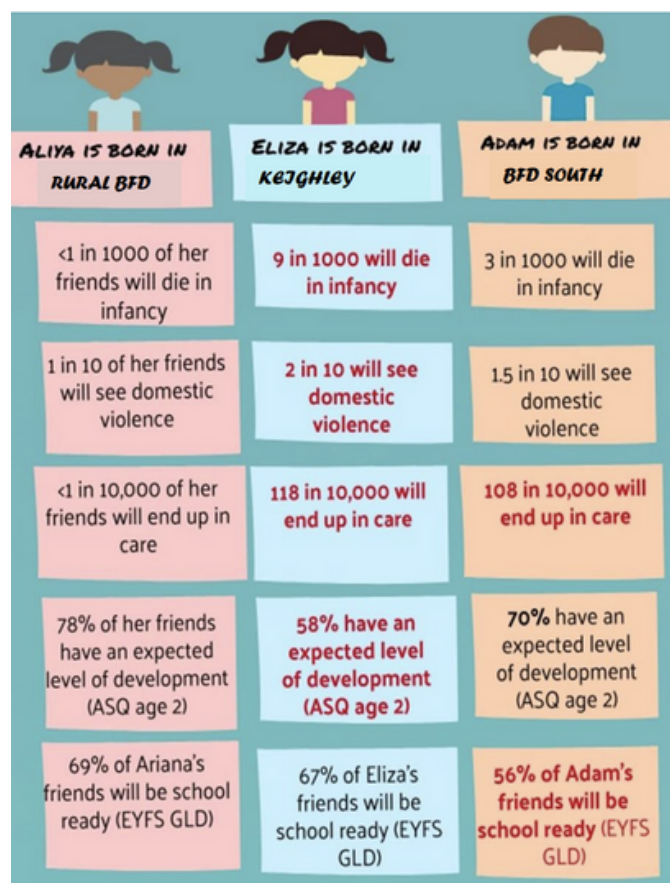
3. Shared accountability: Bradford have created a partnership across health, local authority, children's trust, education, police and VCS leaders, who have co-created a Theory of Change that can help improve school readiness in the district and align efforts to improve outcomes equitably.

These approaches are ripe for UK scale up.

"The potential for every child to thrive is there, but we must act now to ensure that this potential is nurtured, not stifled.

Every pound we invest today in high-quality early years education saves us many more in the future."

- Paul Lindley OBE Founder of Ella's Kitchen and led of the Raising the Nation Play Commission



Conclusion

The 2024 CotN report described the crisis where a third of children are arriving at school without the core skills needed to achieve and thrive.

One year later, new government policies reflect the CotN evidence and offer cautious optimism. Change is possible but **cross-government leadership** is critical for successful delivery.

We must **systematically evaluate what works** and ensure that children in disadvantaged areas—such as Northern England—are not left behind. The use of **connected datasets** is critical to these endeavours.

Government must maintain **a relentless focus on prevention and that means preschool children.**

Nurseries, Best Start centres, and Family Hubs should be **anchor institutions within our communities** and used to support disadvantaged families with consistent and effective interventions.

References

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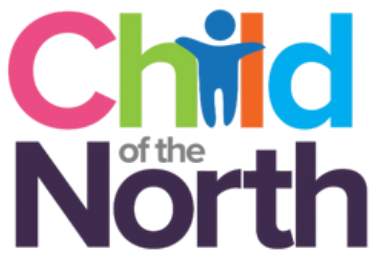
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This report is a collaborative programme of work between Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives.

A note about language

Please note that this report often uses “schools” as shorthand for “schools, nurseries, and other educational settings such as pupil referral units and special schools.” One central message of this report is the need for a “whole system” approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system.

About Child of the North

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. [@ChildoftheNort1](#) [@childofthenorth.bsky.social](#)

About the N8 Research Partnership

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. www.n8research.org.uk [@N8research](#) [@n8research.bsky.social](#)

About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives is a dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children’s Commissioner, Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children’s issues for decades, the Centre’s agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people’s futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous. www.centreforyounglives.org.uk [@CfYounglives](#)

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