

SUBJECT: BEST START IN LIFE UPDATE

MEETING: PUBLIC SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 27TH JULY 2026

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: ALL

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with an overview of the emerging Gwent Public Services Board Best Start in Life priorities and to outline how these six priorities are being delivered through existing Early Years and Flying Start services within Monmouthshire.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That Members scrutinise the performance of the Council's Flying Start and Early Years Services in providing intensive support within core Flying Start areas, and universally across the local authority, to reduce inequalities and support children and families with the greatest levels of need.
- 2.2 That the Committee recognises the challenges and progress made in expanding the Flying Start childcare offer across Monmouthshire and the future challenges associated with achieving a fully universal offer and makes any recommendations as appropriate.

3. KEY ISSUES:

3.1 Background

The Gwent Public Services Board is developing a regional Best Start in Life approach which recognises the critical importance of pregnancy and early childhood in determining lifelong outcomes for children and families.

The six proposed priorities focus on:

- Planning the best pregnancy for me and my family.
- Building strong emotional and mental health for me and my family.
- Supporting my family with my development from baby to child to help me be ready to start school.
- Ensuring my home is warm, safe and secure for me and my family.
- Helping my family maximise their income to meet my needs.

- Helping me and my family access high-quality, inclusive childcare.

These priorities align strongly with services already delivered within Monmouthshire through Flying Start, Children and Communities grant, Early Years, Health and partner agencies.

3.2 Legacy of the Early Years Integration and Transformation Programme

Monmouthshire's current approach to supporting families in the first 1,000 days has been significantly shaped by the Early Years Integration and Transformation Programme (EYITP).

A key legacy of this programme has been the development of a universal First 1,000 Days offer based upon the principle that every family should be able to access the right support, at the right time, and at the appropriate level of intervention.

Access to support is coordinated through the Early Years and Parenting Support Panel. Referrals can be made by professionals or directly by parents, ensuring that families can access support swiftly and without unnecessary barriers.

Families can begin receiving support during the antenatal period through:

- Flying Start led universal antenatal programmes and support, promoted and supported by ABUHB's midwifery services.
- Group-based interventions.
- Individual support where required.

Following birth, families can access:

- Infant feeding support groups.
- Baby groups.
- Home-based support.
- Parent and child activity groups.
- Evidence based parenting programmes.
- Speech, language and communication activities.
- Targeted and bespoke family support interventions.

This integrated approach enables support needs to be identified early and ensures families receive timely intervention before difficulties escalate.

3.3 Flying Start Delivery Within the First 1,000 Days

Within Monmouthshire, the priorities relating to pregnancy, family wellbeing and child development during the first 1,000 days are delivered primarily through the Flying Start service. Flying Start continues to provide intensive support in core Flying Start areas through an integrated model incorporating:

- Health Visiting.
- Parenting support.
- Infant feeding.
- Attachment.
- Family support.
- Speech, language and communication interventions.
- Child development support.
- Dads Advisors.

The service operates through a "team around the family" approach, ensuring support is coordinated across agencies and tailored to "what matters" to individual family circumstances.

Parenting support is available universally, with one-to-one support available where families require additional assistance.

Monmouthshire has also strengthened universal support for fathers and male carers through the employment of three dedicated Dads Advisors. These roles promote the importance of positive father involvement in child development, attachment, play and early educational attainment and provide targeted support to improve engagement with services. This support extends beyond the early years when required.

3.4 Supporting Speech, Language and Communication Development

Speech, language and communication development remains a key priority within the early years offer. Universal parent and child activity groups are available to all families and are enhanced where additional developmental needs are identified. These groups form an important part of Monmouthshire's Speech and Language Pathway and aim to ensure children receive appropriate support before referral to specialist Speech and Language Therapy services becomes necessary. This graduated response supports earlier intervention and promotes improved school readiness outcomes.

3.5 Supporting Young Children with Additional Needs and Disabilities

Monmouthshire Flying Start delivers a registered Portage Service for young children with diagnosed disabilities and additional developmental needs. Portage provides intensive home-based support, helping families to develop children's skills through structured play and learning opportunities tailored to individual developmental needs.

The service works closely with:

Health Visitors.

Speech and Language Therapists.

Occupational Therapists.

Physiotherapists.

Monmouthshire County Council's Early Years ALN Team

Early Years providers.

This collaborative model ensures that children with complex needs, and their family receive coordinated support at the earliest possible stage. A challenge within the current model is that Portage provision is funded through Flying Start resources and is therefore only available within designated Flying Start areas. Whilst need is not determined by geography, current capacity and funding arrangements do not allow county-wide delivery. As demand for specialist early intervention continues to grow, consideration will need to be given to how equitable access can be achieved whilst maintaining service quality and sustainability.

3.6 High Quality, Inclusive Childcare

High quality, inclusive childcare is one of the six Best Start in Life priorities. Monmouthshire currently operates four local authority-led Flying Start childcare settings located in the core Flying Start target areas:

- Abergavenny
- Monmouth
- Chepstow
- Caldicot

These settings provide high-quality childcare within communities where children and families are more likely to require enhanced support. Within Core Flying Start areas, childcare is not viewed as a standalone service. Rather, childcare acts as the centrepiece of the wider Flying Start intervention model and serves as a key route through which families engage with support services.

The childcare offer is strengthened through close integration with:

- Health Visiting.
- Parenting support.
- Family support.
- Speech and language interventions.
- Developmental support services.

This creates a coordinated "team around the family" approach with childcare acting as a key point of engagement and early identification. The settings are also a key component within the Flying Start Hubs where they are situated.

3.7 Expansion of the Flying Start Childcare Offer

As part of the phased rollout of Flying Start expansion, all childcare settings across Monmouthshire are now registered to provide Flying Start funded childcare. The expansion programme has prioritised those children who were least likely to access childcare before nursery education. This targeted approach has sought to ensure that available funding delivers the greatest possible impact by reaching children who may otherwise miss opportunities to develop communication skills, social skills and school

readiness. The rollout has presented several challenges including provider capacity, eligibility criteria and ensuring equitable access across communities.

Additional funding available from September will enable Monmouthshire to begin the process of extending Flying Start childcare funding towards a universal offer for all two-year-olds. However, achieving a fully universal offer remains dependent upon continued Welsh Government investment.

Should funding continue, future aspirations include:

- Universal access for all eligible two-year-olds.
- Expansion to the full entitlement of 20 hours childcare per week for 48 weeks per year.
- Extension of eligibility to children from nine months of age to 4 years of age.

3.8 Protecting Core Flying Start Provision

Whilst childcare provision is expanding across the county, protecting childcare provision within Core Flying Start areas will remain a priority. Children attending the four local authority-led Flying Start settings are more likely to be living in communities with higher levels of disadvantage and are more likely to require the additional developmental, family or wellbeing support.

These settings, and the Flying Start Hubs they are within, have developed strong relationships within the community, wider Flying Start services, other Children and Communities Grant projects, Social Services etc, and act as hubs for integrated family support within the early years.

As childcare provision becomes increasingly universal, it will be important to ensure that resources are not diluted within communities where the need for intensive intervention remains greatest. Maintaining this balance between universal provision and targeted support will be essential in reducing inequalities and delivering positive outcomes for children and families.

3.9 Childcare Development and Quality Improvement

Responsibility for the strategic development of childcare places, childcare sufficiency, quality improvement activity and the development of additional childcare provision sits within Monmouthshire's wider Early Years and Childcare Team.

This includes supporting:

- The sustainability of childcare provision.
- Childcare Sufficiency.
- Development of new childcare places.
- Continuous quality improvement.
- Workforce development.

- Expansion of Welsh-medium childcare opportunities.
- Healthy and Sustainable Pre-Schools
- Early Years Additional Learning Needs

Increasing Welsh-language childcare provision remains a key priority, supporting both parental choice and Monmouthshire's wider Welsh language ambitions. Monmouthshire County Council's Flying Start childcare settings are all working towards bi-lingual levels of Welsh language.

Flying Start will continue to work closely with the wider Early Years Team and childcare sector to support the needs of Monmouthshire's youngest children as they commence their childcare journey.

Flying Start will continue to provide expertise and training as required in:

- Child development.
- Parental engagement.
- Speech, language and communication development.
- Family support and early intervention.

This partnership approach ensures that childcare expansion is underpinned by a strong understanding of child development and family support needs.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

The Best Start in Life priorities are expected to have significant positive impacts on children and families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, poverty or additional needs. The approach supports prevention and early intervention by ensuring families can access support from pregnancy onwards. Positive impacts are anticipated in relation to child development, school readiness, emotional wellbeing, safeguarding, educational outcomes and family resilience.

The continued expansion of childcare provision improves accessibility for families whilst maintaining targeted interventions for communities with greater levels of need.

The proposals support the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act by promoting prevention, collaboration, integration and long-term planning. The approach contributes towards reducing inequalities and supporting healthier, more resilient communities.

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

- 5.1 Option 1 (Preferred):** Continue to deliver services through the integrated First 1,000 Days model, combining universal, targeted and intensive interventions.

Benefits:

- Supports prevention and early intervention.
- Builds upon established partnership arrangements.
- Aligns with Best Start in Life priorities.
- Maintains targeted support for families with greater levels of need.

Option 2: Maintain separate service delivery arrangements with limited integration between services, and strict adherence to the geographical nature of the Flying Start model.

Reasons not preferred:

- Reduced opportunities for early identification of need.
- Increased risk of duplication.
- Less effective coordination for families requiring support from multiple services.
- Families with comparable needs may not receive the support they require if they live outside a Flying Start area, creating an inequity in access based on location

6. EVALUATION CRITERIA

6.1 Progress will be monitored through:

- Flying Start performance measures.
- Childcare uptake data.
- Parenting programme engagement.
- Speech, language and communication outcomes.
- Family feedback.
- Portage service outcomes.
- Early Years and Parenting Support Panel activity.

7. REASONS:

7.1 To provide Members with an overview of the emerging Best Start in Life priorities and demonstrate how Monmouthshire's Flying Start and early years services contribute to improving outcomes for children and families from pregnancy through to school age.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

8.1 Current delivery of the universal First 1000 days offer, is supported through the Welsh Government's Flying Start funding which forms part of the wider Children and Communities Grant.

8.2 The expansion of the Flying Start two-year-old childcare offer is funded by the Welsh Government Flying Start funding, alongside additional Welsh Government childcare

funding for the three-year-old childcare offer. The Early Years ALN and Childcare team receive funding from the Children and Communities Grant disability element, the Flying Start grant, and core Early Years funding.

- 8.3 The continued expansion of the Flying Start childcare programme, including future ambitions for universal provision, increased hours and reduced age eligibility, remains dependent upon ongoing Welsh Government funding.
- 8.4 Resource implications will continue to be assessed as funding arrangements and programme requirements evolve.

9. CONSULTEES:

Early Years Team
Flying Start Team
Aneurin Bevan University Health Board
Gwent Public Services Board representatives
Childcare providers
Parenting Support Services

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

- 10.1 <https://www.gov.wales/flying-start-statistics>
- 10.2 <https://www.gov.wales/flying-start-childcare-guidance-html>
- 10.3 https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2024-05/flying-start-speech-language-communication-guidance_0.pdf
- 10.4 <https://www.portage.org.uk/about/what-portage>

- 11. **AUTHOR:** Beth Watkins, Flying Start Manager

12. CONTACT DETAILS:

Tel: 01633 644057
E-mail: bethwatkins@monmouthshire.gov.uk