

Background

The selection of Dorset Council as a Families First for Children Pathfinder (FFCP) provides a unique opportunity to deliver pioneering reforms to support Children, Young People and Families.

We know that our Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners are well placed to support the programme with its ambitions not least in ensuring that families get local, preventative, community led support in the right place and at right time.

The projects have been agreed with input from a range of stakeholders across Children's Services, Health, and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). The projects align to the Dorset Children, Young People and Families Plan.

The Grants are available to VCS organisations to fund support for families from September 2024 - March 2026 across the Dorset Council Family Hub Network. We wish to take a collaborative and emergent approach to delivery during the grant period, as best practice is developed and shared.

Feedback from the VCS

VCS partners have told us that commissioning and partnerships work better when there is:

Sustainable funding with the opportunity to streamline opportunities and make efficiencies (specifically across health and local authority). Providers are often required to make multiple applications and provide similar information e.g. due diligence info such as financial assurances, policies, and procedures.

Clear communication throughout the process. That there is defined specification, support with application forms, agreed timeframes and transparent criteria for decision making, with feedback at all stages.

Innovation, with community providers trusted to shape provision based on experience, expertise, local knowledge, and relationships with community. For the community to be involved in decision making.

Clear outcomes, with defined – and where possible co-designed - outcomes from start of commissioning process.

Reporting is proportionate and meaningful. There are various ways to evidence impact and effectiveness, not always quantitative. Performance indicators may fit strategic priorities but not reflect impact at local level. KPI data can require considerable resource to collate, but it's not always clear how this is used.

Local operating context - Dorset Children, Young People and Families Plan: Best Start in Life

We aim for Dorset children to have the best possible start in life, with a specific focus from pre-conception to being ready for the transition to school.

The partnership seeks to influence local strategies and strengthen operational delivery to support healthy pregnancy and parenthood, good physical and emotional child development outcomes and for children to achieve their potential.

This is important because research tells us the first 1,001 days of a child's life is a unique period of opportunity where the foundations for health, growth, and neurodevelopment across the lifespan are established.

Information taken from The Best Start for Life, A Vision for the 1,001 Critical Days, The Early Years Healthy Development Review Report

Children can form attachments with more than one caregiver, but the bond with the people who have provided close care from early infancy is the most important and enduring as highlighted by the NSPCC. It is these relationships that support early development of emotional health and physical wellbeing, social skills, cognitive and linguistic capacities so important for an individual's success in childhood and in later life (The Best Start in Life).

This time can also have potential for increased vulnerability for our youngest children. Smoking, excessive alcohol, poor nutrition, stress, or the absence of a warm loving relationship can have significant short and longer-term negative impacts on children. When children and their families face challenges and need help, they should be able to easily access the support from their community and from professionals, with clear roles and responsibilities, who can respond confidently to deliver effective prevention and early intervention.

Babies, young children, and their families can have regular contact with several different services such as midwifery, health visiting, childcare, early education provision and a range of voluntary and community services.

Early identification of need is critical to provide right support, at the right time, in the right place. In Dorset, there are some stark differences between where children grow up and the chances they have of doing well in adult life, with Weymouth and Portland ranking one of the lowest areas for social mobility in the whole country. This means that some of our children are less likely to do well at school, find a good job and have a good standard of living than children from other areas.

Children who have been known to social work or who have experienced care can face a range of challenging social and health outcomes, including poorer educational results, higher rates of mental health problems and even higher rates of homelessness and unemployment later in life. In Dorset children aged 0-4 years continue to represent the highest number of new Child Protection cases.

We have a unique opportunity, within the Best Start in Life partnership, to realise the benefits of developing a pre-birth to 5 years strategy together which builds on strengths, responds to needs and delivers what works, for our local children working with their families and communities.

Community support delivered across the Family Hub Network

In line with the Family Hub and Start for Life Programme Guide we are working towards delivery of at least the minimum service expectations as detailed in [Family Hub Service Expectations \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Funding is available to enable voluntary and community organisations to develop provision and provide services across our Family Hub network as part of our Start for Life Offer.

We are seeking to work in partnership with voluntary and community organisations to develop provision within our designated Family Hub spaces in the areas detailed below.

We are also keen to consider opportunities to expand reach – such as offering support for fathers, co-parents, foster carers, or kinship carers.

