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Early years policy making

How can government ensure that boys from low-income families are not left behind during delivery?



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About this report

This report, part of the Institute's series on policy making for left-behind groups, sets out how governments can ensure boys from low-income families are not left behind in early years policy implementation. It combines our expertise on effective policy making and delivery with insights from those with deep knowledge of the early years system.

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Contents

Summary	5
Introduction	8
Part 1: Implementation challenges	12
Part 2: Recommendations	21
Conclusion	28
References	29
About the authors	34

Summary

The Institute for Government is committed to improving how government makes and delivers policy. Our 'Policy making for left-behind groups' series explores how governments, present and future, can avoid designing and implementing policies that persistently under-serve certain groups. These are groups whose specific needs may not always be recognised or fully understood, who may have been deprioritised by policy makers (for whatever reason) or who have been deemed too difficult or costly to engage with by successive governments.

The Institute has applied this lens to the Labour government's early years agenda – identifying *who* is most at risk of being 'left behind' at age five and the systemic policy making failures that leave some children behind from the start. Boys from low-income families emerged as a key group in our research.*

In 2024–25, nearly three in five boys eligible for free school meals (FSM) in England were not reaching a 'good level of development' (the government's metric for school readiness) by the end of reception year, and the gender attainment gap for children eligible for FSM was wider than it was for their peers from higher income families.

Early gender and socioeconomic attainment gaps in England are among the widest in the OECD.¹ Successive governments have overlooked this or struggled to address the root causes of wide and persistent differences in early attainment.

This report combines Institute expertise on effective policy making and delivery with insights from those with deep knowledge of the early years system² to set out how governments can better support this large but poorly served group in early years policy implementation. This is critical for the current government as it implements its Best Start in Life strategy – but also for any future governments wanting to avoid implementing policies that persistently leave this group behind.

Our analysis focuses on boys from low-income families, but our recommendations have broader applicability and would support government to identify and address systemic weaknesses in policy making processes that can unintentionally overlook or deprioritise certain groups.

* We use free school meals eligibility as a proxy for low income in this paper. See Box 1 of Metcalfe S and Davison N, *Starting behind, staying behind*, Institute for Government, 20 November 2025, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/policy-making-left-behind-groups-boys-low-income-families

Key findings

The Starmer government has set out its early years policy objectives, choices and spending plans for this parliament. Its priority now, as it enters its second parliamentary session, is to deliver these over the next three years. If ministers want to avoid inadvertently leaving boys from low-income families further behind, they need to grip five major implementation challenges:

1. The Department for Education (DfE) has few levers to prevent this group from being overlooked by a fragmented early years delivery system.
2. Stretched local services are 'firefighting' acute demand, limiting early, comprehensive support for this group.
3. Resource pressures and market failures in the childcare sector disproportionately affect this group's access to high-quality provision.
4. The government's early years targets do little to incentivise the system to focus on this group.
5. Local authorities lack the guidance, infrastructure, capacity and flexibility to avoid missing the needs of this group in delivery.

Recommendations in brief

Central government should:

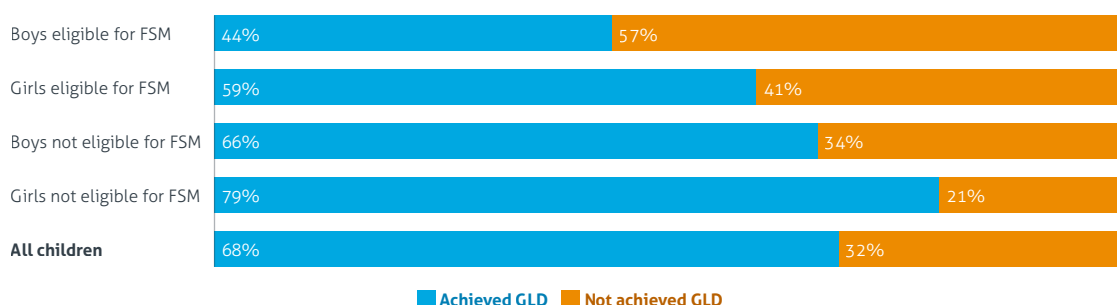
- Communicate a clear vision from ministers and ensure delivery partners understand and respond to the needs of this group
- Monitor and address perverse incentives
- Strengthen central governance to enable co-ordinated action to tackle the drivers of lower attainment
- Use the existing knowledge and evidence sharing infrastructure to address gaps in how to best support this group
- Facilitate sector- and peer-based partnerships to scale best practice
- Provide local authorities with the flexibility to build on what is working well in their areas
- Ensure local areas have the capability and infrastructure to collate, share and use data to understand this group's local outcomes and needs
- Take steps to address market failures.

Introduction

Boys from low-income families have been left behind by policy making under successive governments

Boys from low-income families face systemic barriers in their earliest years that increase their risk of not being school-ready* by the end of reception year. In 2024–25, only 44% of this group** were school-ready by age five – meaning nearly three in five were not.*** The overall effect of their early experiences and development trajectories is leading to, at a population level, far fewer of them attaining a ‘good level of development’ at age five (Figure 1).

Figure 1 **Five-year-olds attaining a ‘good level of development’ at Early Years Foundation Stage, by free school meal eligibility and sex, 2024–25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Education, ‘Early years foundation stage profile results’, 2024–25. Notes: The government uses a ‘good level of development’ at Early Years Foundation Stage as an indicator for school readiness, and defines this as performing at the expected level in 12 specified Early Learning Goals.

Policy making processes have persistently overlooked the specific and intersecting barriers faced by boys from low-income families. This is despite the size of this group – around one in 10 of all children in reception in England – and the well-established attainment gaps that open early and persist throughout their schooling. We have not identified any education policy that has been explicitly designed or implemented with this group’s needs in mind.

* The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is a development check administered by teachers at the end of reception year, assessing 17 ‘early learning goals’ covering areas such as communication, motor skills, social and emotional development, maths and literacy. To achieve a good level of development (GLD) – or be ‘school ready’ – reception-aged children must be performing at the expected level across 12 specified early learning goals. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/670fa42a30536cb92748328f/%20EYFS_statutory_framework_for_group_and_school_-_based_providers.pdf

** Throughout this report we use eligibility for free school meals (FSM), as collected by the Department for Education (DfE), as a proxy for low income. See Box 1 in *Starting behind, staying behind* for our rationale for this: www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-11/Staying-behind-left-behind-boys-low-income.pdf

*** Throughout this report, we define ‘higher-income families’ as those not eligible for free school meals. We use this to describe those who are on relatively higher incomes than FSM-eligible families – some of these families will be classified as low-income on the wider income distribution due to the very low FSM-eligibility threshold.

The Institute has previously set out five policy making failures – primarily evident during the policy design phase – that contribute to this group being left behind from an early age. These are:

- There are limited political incentives to prioritise disadvantaged children.
- The primary focus of early years policy has been to expand childcare entitlements, leaving comparably less funding for child development and tackling inequalities.
- Successive governments have not stewarded the childcare market well enough for quality and better outcomes.
- Siloed and vertical accountability structures make it hard to implement joined-up approaches that tackle the root causes of inequalities.
- Central government’s pragmatic approach to managing complexity comes with trade-offs: missed opportunities and a disconnect with the front line.¹

In this report we set out how these policy making failures, and others, exacerbate the risk of boys from low-income families being left behind during the *implementation* phase of key government policies and strategies.

Labour’s early years focus provides an opportunity to ensure boys from low-income families are not left behind

Recognising – and acting – on the consequences of systemic weaknesses in policy making and delivery is particularly relevant for the current government’s early years priorities. These are to deliver:

- Better support for families in children’s early years (pregnancy to age five)
- More accessible early education and childcare
- Improved quality in early years provision, including reception.

The government’s stated long-term ambition is “to give every child the best start in life” and “break the link between a child’s background and their future success”. Its priority metric is for 75% of children to reach a ‘good level of development’ at the end of reception year, by 2028. In addition, DfE has set each local authority stretching targets and tasked them with developing Best Start local plans to deliver on these.

Boys from low-income families are not specifically mentioned in the government’s *Best Start in Life* strategy, and appear only as part of a broader category of “white working-class children” in the March 2026 schools white paper. The government has an opportunity – during delivery – to ensure this group does not continue to be overlooked. And it has an additional incentive to do so: ensuring the needs of boys from low-income families are met during implementation would support its long-term objective of narrowing early attainment gaps.²

Structure of this report

This paper draws on interviews and sessions with combined authorities, local authorities, academics, experts and early years sector representatives, as well as visits to four early years settings with a strong focus on serving children from families living on low-incomes – in Sheffield and Bradford, and in King’s Cross and Brixton in London. We set out to understand how government can avoid leaving boys from low-income families behind in the implementation of its early years policies. The report is arranged in two parts:

- **Part 1:** Five implementation challenges that risk leaving boys from low-income families further behind
- **Part 2:** Eight recommendations for government on what it can do over the next 12 months to better serve this group.

Policy making for left-behind groups

The Institute for Government is committed to improving how government makes and deliver policy. Our 'Policy making for left-behind groups' series explores how governments can avoid designing and implementing policies that persistently under-serve the needs of certain groups. All our work in this series is found on our [dedicated project page](#).

Part 1: Implementation challenges

As the government enters the critical implementation phase for its Best Start in Life strategy, this chapter sets out five risks it needs to grip to avoid leaving boys from low-income families further behind.

Challenge 1: DfE has few levers to prevent this group from being overlooked by a fragmented early years delivery system

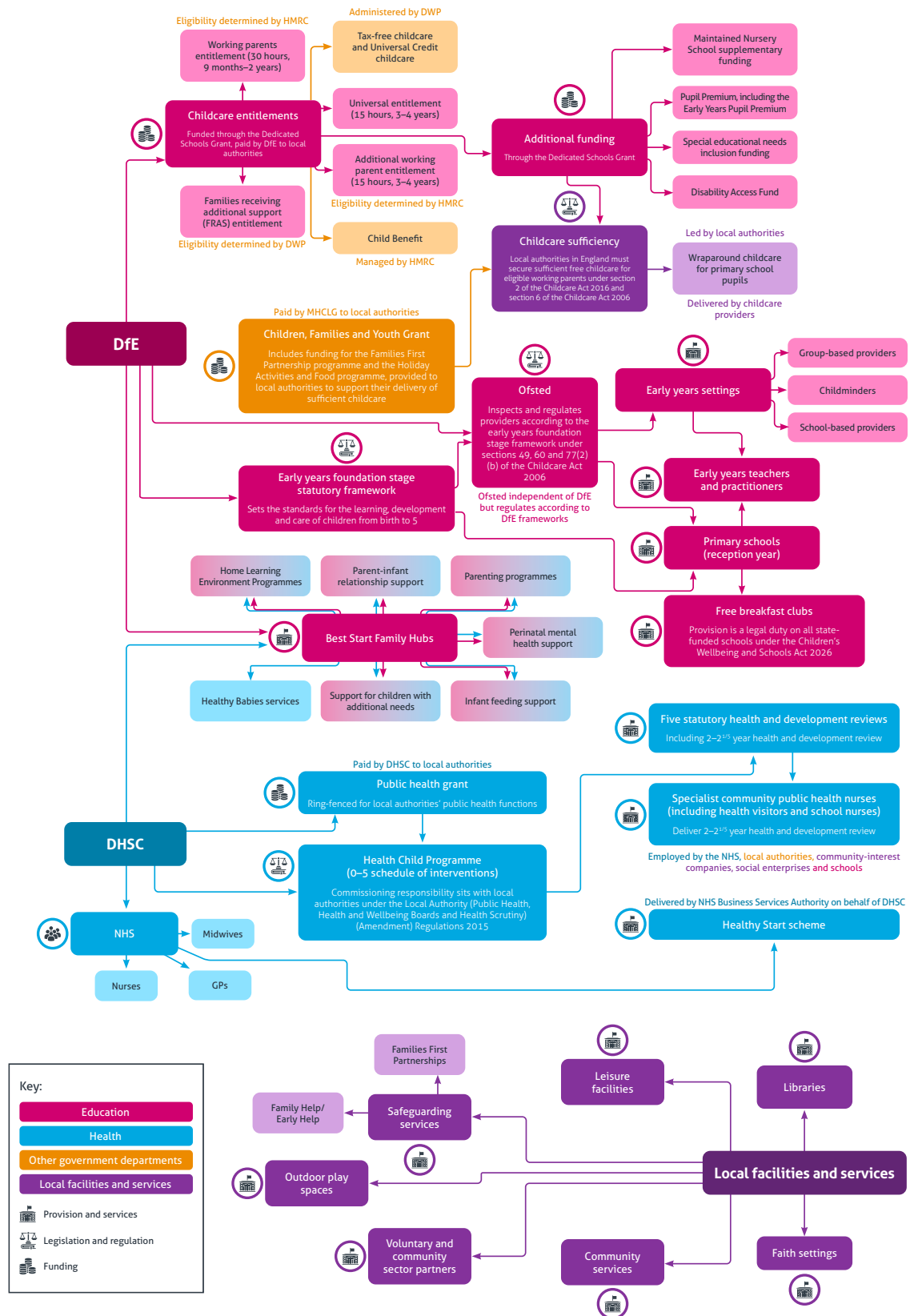
A fragmented delivery landscape has historically failed to address the cross-cutting drivers of low attainment for this group

There is no single policy lever or approach that central government can rely on to avoid leaving boys from low-income families behind.* Instead, it needs to mobilise various actors with differing mandates, responsibilities and incentives to ensure this group's needs are effectively met during delivery. This is a major challenge.

The early years system is vast and fragmented, and families interact with many different parts of it throughout their child's early life (see Figure 2). Some of the strongest levers and tools for addressing the systemic factors that hold this group back sit outside the Department for Education (DfE), whether in other departments or agencies and local bodies. For example, the Healthy Child Programme for 0–5-year-olds – a schedule of interventions for children led by health visitors – is a key tool for improving children's development but sits with the Department of Health and Social Care, not DfE.

* See Metcalfe S and Davison N, *Starting behind, staying behind*, Institute for Government, 20 November 2025, p. 20, 22, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/policy-making-left-behind-groups-boys-low-income-families

Figure 2 The delivery landscape for early years support, June 2026



Source: Institute for Government analysis of various government strategies, press releases, legislation and policy documents. Notes: The figure sets out the key components of the early years delivery landscape – including legislation, regulations, funding, provisions, services and workforces. These components are colour coded to indicate their position within the system, which cuts across the remits of DfE, DHSC, DWP, HMRC, MHCLG and local authorities.

The Department for Education lacks levers to drive better co-ordination for this group

Effective cross-government co-ordination is needed to avoid leaving boys from low-income families behind in their early years, but this is something successive UK governments have struggled to get right.¹ Departments' budgets are siloed, disincentivising ministers and officials to work across Whitehall and creating a culture that is stubbornly hard to change.

Recognising this, and in line with its 'missions' approach, the current government has created several mechanisms that could – in theory – support the early years delivery landscape to address the cross-cutting drivers of low attainment for boys from low-income families. These include:

- A cabinet committee chaired by the chief secretary to the prime minister and chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster focused on "improving the population's experience of public services"^{**}
- An "opportunity mission board" chaired by the education secretary "providing cross-government discussion on priorities and delivery"^{***,2,3}
- An officials' board convened by the director general of DfE's Strategy Group
- A "Best Start in Life pillar board" to co-ordinate cross-departmental implementation of the government's Best Start in Life strategy
- Programme boards, including joint DfE–DHSC boards, that make operational decisions.

However, in our engagement with government departments, we saw limited evidence of these mechanisms supporting meaningful joint working around groups at high risk of falling through the cracks during delivery, including boys from low-income families. It is, for example, unclear how the mission boards, mission delivery unit (a joint No.10 and Cabinet Office team) and various cabinet committees interact, and what powers, if any, DfE has as chair of the opportunity mission board to co-ordinate implementation across government.^{***} On top of this, ministers are mentioning 'missions' far less frequently than during the early days of the Starmer government, raising questions over the authority the boards and associated frameworks have in practice.

* This committee is attended by the chancellor of the exchequer and secretaries of state for health and social care, education, and housing, communities and local government.

** Ministers from relevant departments and external experts are invited to attend, depending on the discussion area.

*** More generally, the Institute notes: "Ultimately, Labour's missions have failed to provide the guiding force needed to lift a state still floundering in the wake of long-standing structural issues and workforce decisions taken during Brexit and Covid." www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/whitehall-monitor-2026/overview

Challenge 2: Stretched local services are ‘firefighting’ acute demand, limiting early, comprehensive support for this group

Over the last 16 years, local services have negotiated a combination of real-terms funding cuts and rising need.⁴ In many parts of the country, services like local housing, health and social care services are now firefighting high acute demand, diminishing spending on early intervention and support.⁵ For instance, health visitor staff numbers have nearly halved from a peak of 10,300 FTE staff members in October 2015 to 5,575 in January 2026.^{6,7,8} The Health and Social Care committee described this as a “major shortage”, with much higher than recommended caseloads severely limiting the time and follow-up support health visitors can provide.^{9,10,11}

These resource pressures affect all families but have a disproportionate impact on those with higher needs who are unable to pay for services privately. This includes many boys from low-income families, who are more likely than their peers to experience speech and language delays and have identified special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) by reception year.¹² Those who do are also less likely to reach a good level of development than other children with SEND, indicating that current support and provision is not meeting their needs.¹³ Our parallel paper – *Insights from early years settings* – sets out just how scaled back services are, as experienced on the ground by the families who rely on them the most.

The government has taken steps to increase the support on offer for children from low-income families, including nearly doubling the number of Best Start Family Hubs from 575 in September 2025 to 1,000 by 2028,¹⁴ and increasing the early years pupil premium funding rate by over 45% in 2025–26 relative to 2024–25.^{15,16,17,18,19}

However, though welcome, this funding is unlikely to substantially ease the pressures facing early years services, leaving limited room for meaningful early intervention and support. For instance, the Best Start Family Hubs initiative is funded to the tune of £500million – modest compared to its predecessor Sure Start programme, which received some £2.7billion in 2009–10 (in 2023/24 prices).^{20,21}

Moreover, the bulk of early years spending remains focused on the expansion of government-subsidised childcare for *working* parents, for which boys from low-income families do not benefit (apart from those who are eligible for 15 government-funded hours per week at age two).²²

* Additional changes include: rolling out free breakfast clubs in primary schools in England; providing a dedicated SEND practitioner for each Best Start Family Hub by 2029–30; removing the two-child limit on Universal Credit; expanding free school meal eligibility in England to all children with a parent in receipt of Universal Credit.

** The Sure Start programme of the Blair and Brown years received £2.7bn (in 2023–24 prices) in 2009–10 and covered 3,600 centres at its peak.

*** To qualify for the working-parent childcare entitlement, each parent (or the sole parent in a single-parent household) must be in paid work (or treated as working), and earn at least the equivalent of 16 hours per week at the national minimum wage. Families eligible for free school meals have an income after tax of £7,400 per year. Many are therefore not eligible for this childcare entitlement because they do not work or are unemployed, or do not (consistently) work 16 hours per week.

Challenge 3: Resource pressures and market failures in the childcare sector disproportionately affect this group's access to high-quality provision

The Institute has previously set out how market failures can lead to uneven access to early education and variation in its quality.²² Ongoing funding pressures in the sector exacerbate this. Rising demand and provider costs mean that providers' core resource per hour for three- and four-year-olds was 15% lower in real terms in 2024–25 than in 2012–13.²³ As a result, more providers are being forced either to exit the market or to scale back provision to a 'bare bones' service.^{24,25,26,27}

Children from low-income families are disproportionately affected by this. Childcare 'deserts' are much more common in deprived areas, and the National Day Nurseries Association found that 40% of nursery closures in 2023/24 were in the 30% most deprived areas in the country.^{28,29} This increases the risk of those from low-income families missing out on high-quality early education, especially as they have fewer opportunities to access early learning and enrichment activities outside formal settings (like paid extra-curricular activities and shared reading at home).³⁰

Within this group, boys face particular barriers to access, as a higher proportion of them have SEND compared to their peers. Growing pressures across the sector have limited the number of places available for children with SEND. Just 6% of local authorities reported having enough provision for children with SEND in 2024, down from 18% in 2023.³¹ The Early Education and Childcare Coalition's 2025 'pulse check' found that nearly a quarter of providers had cut places for children with additional needs due to the cost of specialist support.³²

The government has committed to monitoring and, where necessary, intervening to address market failures (such as patchy and low-quality provision) in the childcare market. This includes supporting high-quality providers to grow, monitoring the sector's financial sustainability and expanding the number and size of not-for-profit providers.³³ This 'market shaping' approach – if done well – could help resolve the market failures that leave this group behind. But this will take time. And it being done well is far from guaranteed, given the government's mixed track record in stewarding public service markets.^{34,35} In the meantime, patchy and poor-quality provision is likely to persist, continuing to leave boys from low-income families behind.

Challenge 4: The government's early years targets do little to incentivise the system to focus on this group

The Institute has previously warned that the government's key early years target – for 75% of children to be reaching a 'good level of development' [GLD] by the end of reception year, in 2028 – could introduce perverse incentives, by encouraging policy makers, teachers and practitioners to concentrate on pupils nearest the 'pass' boundary rather than those with the greatest needs, or to focus on the cohort reaching reception year in 2027–28.³⁶ As noted, boys from low-income families are among those least likely to reach a GLD, further putting them at risk of being left behind.

The government has taken steps to mitigate this risk for children on free school meals in general. It has tasked local authorities with developing Best Start local plans* to meet stretching statutory local GLD targets *while also* ensuring that gaps between children eligible for free school meals and their peers at age five *do not widen*.**³⁷ The schools white paper went further and committed to halving the disadvantage gap in Key Stage 4 attainment in 2024–25 and (ambiguously) “when this generation finishes secondary school”.

However, these targets still risk boys from low-income families being overlooked in delivery. For example, the government could in theory reach its GLD target while maintaining the disadvantage-based attainment gap, solely by boosting progress among girls from low-income families (who are already more likely to be school-ready than their male peers) and children from higher income families, leaving boys from low-income families further behind.***

There is evidence to suggest that the targets may already be encouraging some level of ‘gaming’ on the ground. For instance, one primary school head teacher went as far as to say they felt incentivised “to cheat or fail” – a risk exacerbated by the government’s decision to scrap mandatory local moderation of these results in 2020.****,^{38,39} As the early years lead of one local authority put it, “moderation led to really strong conversations around consistency across the borough with outcomes [...] we don’t want teachers being under pressure to meet the target” without moderation.

* DfE asked local authorities to develop first drafts of Best Start local plans by 31 March 2026, with plans focused on providing better support for families, and improving access to and quality of early years education. These first drafts have now been published by local authorities and will be refined in partnership with central government.

** The government has introduced statutory targets for local authorities to increase the proportion of children reaching a good level of development at the end of reception year by 2028 – in all cases to at least 70%, and in most cases by 9 percentage points (from 2023-24 levels). It has also specified that, to meet these targets, children eligible for free school meals (FSM) must show at least an equal percentage-point improvement in GLD rates by 2028 as children not eligible for free school meals.

*** We can illustrate this point with a thought experiment using 2024–25 Early Years Foundation Stage Profile data. In that year 69.2% of children reached a good level of development in reception, and the gap between the proportion of children eligible and not eligible for FSM reaching a good level of development was 21.2 percentage-points (i.e. the disadvantage attainment gap). In theory, the government could have hit its target for 75% of children to reach a good level of development and maintained the 21.2ppt disadvantage attainment gap (in accordance with local targets) by only improving attainment among girls eligible for free school meals, and boys and girls not eligible for free school meals. For example, we calculate that the 75% target and the stipulation that attainment gaps do not widen would be fulfilled if 72.6% of boys not eligible for free school meals, 86.3% of girls not eligible for free school meals, and 73.7% of girls eligible for free school meals had reached a good level of development (up from 66.0%, 79.3% and 59.2% respectively).

**** Government guidance on moderation, before it was scrapped, lists its benefits. It: “secures the consistency and accuracy of judgments made by different practitioners; reassures practitioners that their judgments are accurate, valid and consistent with national standards; assures moderators that an acceptable level of accuracy and validity has been achieved for assessments recorded and reported by the settings for which they have responsibility”, https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/22642/7/Moderation%20of%20the%20EYFS%20profile%20-%20GOV_UK.pdf

Challenge 5: Local authorities lack the guidance, infrastructure, capacity and flexibility to avoid missing the needs of this group in delivery

Several local and combined authorities we spoke to were not confident that they would be able to develop and deliver effective Best Start local plans without leaving some groups behind, including boys from low-income families. They reflected that this was partly due to a lack of clarity and support from central government. One local government expert we spoke to said: “The intention [to support local authorities to develop good Best Start local plans] is there, but government are not giving local authorities the wider conditions for success.”

Local authorities have received conflicting messages from central government and struggled to develop effective Best Start local plans

Combined and local authorities described struggling to make sense of an irregular and often unclear patchwork of strategies, programmes and funding from central government. We heard that rapidly evolving expectations and funding announcements made it highly challenging to undertake the detailed strategic planning needed to develop effective Best Start local plans.

For instance, additional SEND funding was announced in the government’s schools white paper on 23 February, just five weeks before Best Start local plans were due to be published. As one local policy lead described it at the time:

“Funding was unclear and guidance was unclear. Regionally, we have come together and developed plans over time, then had to amend them because new messages from central government have come out. Messages are also mixed because you have health messages and education messages. We asked ‘will there be a template for us to follow?’ and were told no, but now DfE have shared a template.”

Compressed timeframes have made producing Best Start local plans harder still. Although the need to move quickly is understandable given the government’s fast approaching 2028 target, insufficient support increases the risk of speed being prioritised over quality.⁴⁰ Early evidence suggests that this might be the case.

Several first drafts of Best Start local plans are brief and high level.^{41,42,43,44} While many set out key target outcomes (including for children eligible for free school meals⁴⁵ or families experiencing economic disadvantage),⁴⁶ and provide interim indicators of progress, there is little detail on how local authorities will actually deliver these, including realistic implementation timelines and the associated human and financial resources that will be required.

National approaches could crowd out promising local practices and models that serve boys from low-income families well

To ensure quality and value for money, the government has provided local authorities with an 'approved list' of programmes that can be funded through the Best Start Family Hubs grant. It has invited local authorities to apply for exemptions, so that they can use a portion of this grant to fund local programmes that are proving effective.⁴⁷ Some we spoke to have de-programmed local initiatives that are unable to pass the evidence bar required for an exemption. This reflects a deliberate policy choice by central government: to direct funding towards programmes that can demonstrate clear, measurable outcomes in a defined time period and strong value for money.

There remains a risk, however, that some programmes have been scaled back or discontinued before their full value – including for boys from low-income families – has been understood, particularly where benefits are not immediately visible, but lay foundations for future progress. Some local authorities explained that they lack the capacity and infrastructure to 'prove' the value of key programmes and meet the evidence thresholds for an exemption. Likewise, one expert we interviewed warned that some programmes – particularly those targeting the root drivers of attainment gaps – may need to operate over a longer time-horizon than standard evaluations to deliver a proven positive effect.

This introduces a risk that the government's approach unintentionally crowds out promising approaches that need time to mature, or additional capacity and infrastructure to evaluate. This could narrow the evidence and insight available to policy makers and practitioners seeking to improve provision (alongside intentionally deprioritising programmes that have little or no proven benefit).

Local government does not have the capacity, expertise or data infrastructure to effectively identify and target support for boys from low-income families

Most local authorities are unable to assess how boys from low-income families are performing in their area with any great detail, and why they might be performing better or worse than their peers across the country. DfE has taken some steps to address this. Its analysis teams produce reports for schools and local authorities, highlighting which pupil groups are most at risk of being left behind – including in specific areas of child development – and how they are performing on headline metrics relative to other schools and local authorities.* This work has also been supported by Nesta, which has launched free personalised early years data profiles for every local authority in England, designed to help them understand their local performance and population characteristics.⁴⁸

* Specifically, schools can use these reports to view and compare: the overall percentage of children achieving a good level of development; the overall percentage of pupils reaching each early learning goal; GLD results for different pupil groups; a contextual GLD data – a school's contextualGLDscore shows the overallGLDpercentage DfE would expect a school to achieve with their context taken into account. Pupil groups that the reports spotlight include: children with any SEND; children with an EHCP; free school meal eligible children; children with English as an additional language. www.gov.uk/guidance/compare-your-good-level-of-development-gld-data

However, these reports present data aggregated by a single demographic characteristic – such as boys or (all) children from low-income families. This means most local authorities cannot pinpoint how groups with intersecting characteristics perform locally relative to national trends.

More broadly, most local public services lack the systems, data sharing agreements and infrastructure to join up early identification and support for children.^{49,50} For example, in most local authorities, two separate checks are carried out at age two: a health check by a health visitor or community nurse, and a learning development check by the child’s nursery or childminder. These are not aligned.⁵¹ Local authorities told us that early opportunities to identify children’s needs and provide targeted support are routinely missed.

The Best Start Family Hubs model should, if successful, help to reduce these issues by bringing health and educational development support under one roof. Likewise, the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act introduced a new information sharing duty enabling easier and more consistent information sharing across agencies for safeguarding and welfare purposes. Following this, the government launched ‘Early Years Kickstarter’ in June 2026, a cross-government project joining up local data from health visiting, education and childcare providers to help services respond to families’ needs early (initially in several councils, before rolling out nationally in the long term).⁵² DfE is also piloting using unique ‘child identifier’ codes to track children’s interactions with local services.⁵³

These are all welcome steps, but the history of government data transformation indicates that progress could be slow without clear data sharing protocols and sufficient resourcing.⁵⁴

Part 2. Recommendations

This chapter sets out eight recommendations for government over the next 12 months to ensure implementation of its early years policy does not leave boys from low-income families further behind. They draw on our case studies of promising early years provision for this group, set out in a parallel *Insights from early years settings* paper.

Although our analysis focuses on better policy making and delivery for this group, the recommendations have the potential to be applied more broadly to other groups at risk of being left behind in this policy area.

Recommendation 1: Ministers should communicate a clear vision and ensure delivery partners understand and respond to the needs of this group

Ministers, and particularly the minister for early education, will have an important role to play. In practice, this means maintaining ministerial oversight of delivery plans to ensure that this group's needs are adequately reflected, and that the systemic barriers they face are recognised and addressed.

To ensure this oversight is not perceived as an additional layer of pressure from central government, ministers need to determine 'what altitude' to operate at – avoiding micro-managing while ensuring accountability mechanisms "keep the entire system pointed in the same direction."¹ A positive and motivational vision will help here. Previous IfG research on London Challenge attributes its success to the genuine partnership central government built with the sector.² A minister focused on 'steering' rather than 'riding' the agenda can serve as a consistent, visible champion of progress in this area, communicating 'the why', not just 'the what'.³

As the Institute has also argued previously:

"[The] prestige and authority of a minister can be an effective way to keep others focused on delivering commitments they have made. Meetings with, or letters from, a minister to remind those implementing a policy of its political importance can help speed up the process."⁴

For example, Nick Gibb's weekly visits to schools signalled his personal commitment to phonics teaching to the wider sector, while also creating an important, informal feedback loop with teachers he met on the front line of reforms.⁵

Recommendation 2: Monitor and address perverse incentives

Without sufficient focus on boys from low-income families in delivery documents and accountability frameworks, the government risks hard-wiring perverse incentives that encourage gaming or neglect of this group across the system (as set out in Challenge 4 above).

DfE should monitor if this is happening nationally. As the government tracks progress towards its good level of development (GLD) target, analysis teams should identify which groups are showing less progress than others, including subgroups (in this case, boys from low-income families).

If certain groups are being persistently left behind across the country, the government could consider introducing additional accountability measures focused on improving these groups' outcomes, including through Ofsted's inspection criteria. For example, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act will introduce new criteria in Ofsted inspections that assess inclusion, testing how effectively academy trusts support "positive outcomes for *all children* in their area". The government could look to extend this approach to early years settings too.⁶

Local authorities should also monitor how performance against local target metrics varies across demographics to identify whether any groups are getting left behind. This is likely to require granular data collection and analysis to better understand variation in outcomes locally. Where local authorities do not have the in-house capacity, we recommend that DfE builds this into the data analysis it routinely provides to local authorities (see Recommendation 7 below).

To address perverse incentives, the government should consider how it can best reward local authorities that begin to tackle the underlying drivers of low attainment among groups that are persistently left behind, including boys from low-income families, even if local GLD targets are not met. This could involve recognising progress towards the local interim measures of success that local authorities have set out in their Best Start local plans* (where DfE feels these are effective markers of progress towards addressing the root causes of low attainment among certain groups).

This would send clearer signals to the system about the importance of addressing the complex, cross-cutting drivers of low levels of school readiness – which will require sustained action beyond a single parliamentary term – alongside the drive to meet overall GLD targets by 2028.

* Measures vary across local authorities and include access to key services, improvements against health-visiting targets, and improvements in healthy weight and vaccine uptake. The National Children's Bureau has argued that government should retain the GLD indicator as a headline measure of progress but "supplement it with a richer outcomes set including measures of engagement, relational practice, inclusion, parent experience and home learning environment". www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/BSiL%20cross-sector%20consensus%20paper.pdf

Recommendation 3: Strengthen central governance to enable co-ordinated action to tackle the drivers of lower attainment for this group

Co-ordinating multiple delivery partners across a fragmented early years landscape is critical for preventing the needs of boys from low-income families being unintentionally missed by front-line services. As it proceeds with implementation, DfE – working closely with No.10, the Cabinet Office and DHSC – should **assess whether current governance mechanisms are effective in driving co-ordination and action to address this group’s needs**. The government’s *Managing Public Money* document lists a range of models for joint working that might better support cross-departmental delivery. DfE should consider which, if any, of these mechanisms could be used to support its early years agenda.^{7,8}

Alongside aligning departments behind a co-ordinated early years strategy that does not leave some groups behind, central government must ensure consistent, aligned and timely messaging to local government and front-line services across education, health and related portfolios. Communications teams across DfE and DHSC should actively engage local authorities to identify where messages, guidance or expectations are unclear or conflicting, and resolve issues where necessary.

This would ensure local authorities receive coherent information from the centre, enabling effective implementation and the long-term delivery planning required to address the underlying drivers of lower attainment for boys from low-income families.

Recommendation 4: Use the existing knowledge and evidence sharing infrastructure to address gaps in how to best support this group

Since the 1990s, successive governments have built up an infrastructure for sharing best practice and driving up quality in early years settings. DfE has been at the forefront of this and there is an established body of evidence on how to narrow the attainment gap for children on free school meals.* However, there is a knowledge gap in ‘what works’ for groups within this broad category – and despite the persistent attainment gaps boys from low-income families face at age five and beyond, there is no government guidance on how to better support this group in early years settings and reception.

* For instance, DfE invested £125m in the Education Endowment Foundation in 2011, and set up a ‘What Works’ centre in 2013. The government also shares and scales best practice through Ofsted assessments, non-statutory guidance, Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs (regional hubs disseminating evidence-based interventions to improve quality), and Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) advisers. The government’s schools white paper outlines plans to launch a new RISE reception network; publish and share best practice for supporting children into reception; create new training for reception classroom teachers; and strengthen and extend RISE maths hubs programmes in reception. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6996ee6a047739fe61889e05/Every_child_achieving_and_thriving_web_accessible_version.pdf

Central government should work with existing evidence and improvement bodies – including stronger practice hubs, local authorities, charities, think tanks and academic institutions – to fill this critical knowledge gap. It should commission research* and draw on sector experts – such as Sue Robb, the government’s Best Start in Life champion, and specialist organisations like Boys’ Impact⁹ and the Boys’ Education Commission¹⁰ – to better understand the practices that are working well for this group.¹¹

Our parallel *Insights from early years settings* report found that gendered solutions are not a “silver bullet” for this group; what emerged as more important was how settings grounded interactions with families in care, respect and a shared commitment to improve children’s wellbeing and outcomes. We identified five principles, drawn from insights from parents and practitioners, that underpin effective early years provision for boys from low-income families. DfE, working closely with DHSC, should build on these findings and deepen its evidence base to determine which approaches best serve this group, gendered or otherwise.

Central government should also consider whether the principles we identify are relevant to other services that interact with this group, and whether these should be set out in guidance for delivery partners.¹²

Recommendation 5: Facilitate sector- and peer-based partnerships to scale best practice

The government should also **make the most of opportunities to disseminate and scale best practices for boys from low-income families** through existing mechanisms. ‘Mission North East’ – announced in the schools white paper to support children from white working-class communities by bringing together “clusters of schools facing similar challenges”, backed by leadership and support from DfE¹³ – presents an opportunity to test, evaluate and scale interventions that are particularly effective for boys from low-income families in this area.

In addition, the government should ensure early years providers also benefit from new guidance being rolled out for reception settings to develop and share best practice.** This might include **facilitating sector- and peer-based partnerships** to scale best practices for boys from low-income families. DfE could:

- **Partner early years settings in high-performing local areas for boys from low-income families with similar*** settings located in areas where a lower proportion of boys from low-income families reach a GLD.**

* UKRI’s £31.9m ‘The Home Learning Environment R&I Challenge’ is a great start on this front, and researchers should keep this challenge of finding ‘what works’ for boys from low-income families in mind as they design projects. This could include considering whether their findings vary by demographic, and exploring if interventions they are evaluating could be particularly beneficial for boys from low-income families. <https://www.ukri.org/news/new-research-and-innovation-challenge-to-improve-home-learning-environment/>

** While the schools white paper sets out many commitments for primary and secondary education, the government has not yet, to take a few examples, pledged RISE support for early years settings; extended new training opportunities (including specialist NPQs) to early years practitioners; or created minimum expectations for parent-teacher engagement in early years. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69972c02bfdab2546272c007/Every_child_achieving_and_thriving_print_ready_version.pdf

*** Settings could be matched based on type (i.e. group-based, state-maintained, childminder).

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- **Facilitate 'consultant'-type support to early years settings.** Emulating the successful London Challenge model, the government could develop a 'consultant bank', comprising practitioners and early years leaders with proven experience leading excellent nurseries. These leaders would provide consultancy services on a voluntary, ad hoc or regular basis to settings struggling to close attainment gaps.

Recommendation 6: Provide local authorities with the flexibility to build on what is working well in their areas

Alongside supporting local authorities with spreading and scaling national best practice, DfE should create space for local innovation* to avoid unintentionally crowding out emerging beneficial initiatives for boys from low-income families (see Challenge 4, above). The government should:

- **In the short term, make it easier for local programmes to provide the evidence needed to qualify for the approved list.** Central government should support local authorities to conduct evaluations and ensure programmes can use a range of evidence¹⁴ to demonstrate impact – including qualitative evidence gathered by speaking to families directly.
- **In the medium term, give more autonomy to areas to design, commission and deliver locally relevant programmes.** This could include designating some areas with a track record of success as 'trailblazers', where new delivery models are actively explored and encouraged (in line with Test, Learn and Grow principles**), and enabling experimentation to pinpoint how different areas can maximise results from existing funding pots.
- **In the long term, give local authorities the powers to adapt national tools and assessments to better identify and target the local needs of specific groups.** This could include providing greater flexibility around the use of Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQs) by health visitors and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) progress check by early years practitioners, enabling local authorities to bring assessments forward, combine them, or design enhanced local versions to identify emerging needs earlier. The government should retain a standardised element to assessment to allow for evaluation and comparison across the country.

* A 'tight-loose' design, where outcomes are defined by central government and local areas have the freedom to determine how to achieve these outcomes, was a pillar of SureStart's success in the 2000s. www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-04/ministerial-leadership-public-service-reform_0.pdf

** The Test, Learn, and Grow principles emphasise iterative and evidence-based policymaking, with "enhanced local discretion, collaboration between different levels of government, user-centred design, and real-time learning." <https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/about/test-learn-and-grow/>

Recommendation 7: Ensure local areas have the capability and infrastructure to collate, share and use data to understand this group's local outcomes and needs

The government has been proactive about supporting local authorities to access the data and analysis they need to tailor Best Start local plans to local need and demographics (see Challenge 5). But we recommend it goes further over the next 12 months to ensure local authorities have the data, analysis and insight to understand how boys from low-income families are being left behind locally, and to join up services around their needs. The government should:

- **Further develop the dashboards and data reports produced by DfE analysis teams so they include more intersectional analysis across multiple characteristics.** For example, local areas would benefit from seeing how boys from low-income families perform locally in more granularity (such as which early learning goals they are not reaching), and relative to other comparable local authorities.
- **Offer practical support and guidance to help local authorities set up new partnerships with local universities, research organisations and charities to better understand the specific challenges this group faces locally.** These would be a useful one-off exercise, but particularly valuable if areas are able to secure long-term partnerships for multi-year studies. These could emulate the highly successful 'Born in Bradford' approach.*
- **Draw together insights from local authorities to better understand the drivers behind variation in outcomes for FSM-eligible children (and within this, FSM-eligible boys) around the country.** Previous IfG research has found, for instance, that FSM-eligible pupils (particularly boys) are more likely to reach a good level of development in areas where there are more FSM-eligible pupils in general, and less likely to in areas where there are more pupils with identified SEND.^{15,16} Central government – drawing on more granular datasets and longitudinal cohorts data, where possible – should seek to understand why this is the case and recommend how local authorities with wide attainment gaps for this group can emulate the success of other local areas where those gaps are narrower.
- **Ensure that data provided to schools and local authorities is paired with appropriate support (such as tools, resources, guidance and peer support).** This will give local authorities the capacity and capability to act on data findings and develop local plans, policies and services that reflect local needs.

* The Born in Bradford study uses a large linked dataset to evaluate interventions for a birth cohort of around 5,500 families to evaluate interventions. The dataset captures heterogeneity by ethnic minority status, socioeconomic background, and whether English is an additional language at home, helping researchers better understand intersectionality. Born in Bradford also works on Connected Bradford, a pseudonymised dataset linking health and education records for every Bradford resident.

In the longer term, the government must improve national data sharing protocols and infrastructure – which are needed to support better integrated local data systems more generally.* Previous Institute for Government work recommends how the government can achieve this.^{17,18,19} The government’s ‘Early Years Kickstarter’ is an encouraging start.²⁰

Recommendation 8: Take steps to address market failures

Early years education market failures systematically leave boys from low-income families behind. Many of the settings that best support this group have been set up explicitly to serve children at risk of poorer outcomes, as not-for-profit providers and social enterprises.

The government has committed to addressing market failures and Bridget Phillipson has recently written to the Competition and Markets Authority requesting an investigation into practices in the childcare market to inform DfE’s Childcare Review.^{21,22} DfE has asked the CMA to “give a rounded assessment of how the childcare market is working”, including examining market pricing practices, supply and access issues and the role of local and mayoral combined authorities in shaping provision for children, especially those with additional needs or disadvantages.

This is a welcome step. If encouraging the market to better support groups that have been persistently left behind (including boys from low-income families) is a priority, the government should also:

- **Publish clear guidance for local authorities on how to support not-for-profit providers to enter, remain and thrive in the market.** This should showcase effective local practice and set out practical steps local authorities can take. The Institute has previously recommended longer contracts – for example, three to five years with two-year break clauses, rather than annual ‘recommissioning’ – and lower reporting demands for smaller organisations, including not-for-profits, as practicable options.²³
- **Create a dedicated support package to help burgeoning social enterprises to grow and succeed.** This could include additional funding and tax exemptions, or low-cost practical support like advice, facilitating peer networks or fast-tracking new enterprises through government processes (e.g. planning consents). DfE should consult with sector bodies – like the Early Years Social Enterprise Collective – to design this support.

* As the National Children’s Bureau notes, alignment across services is essential for better partnership working, including through “consistent operating tools – shared assessments, referral processes, common language and core data sets”. www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/BSiL%20cross-sector%20consensus%20paper.pdf

Conclusion

Nearly three in five boys from low-income families are not school-ready at age five. Successive governments have overlooked the needs of this group, in so doing stalling their development – and future prospects – as they enter school. In short, this group has been persistently 'left behind' by policy making.

As the government implements its early years agenda, it has a critical opportunity to address this. Our recommendations set out how this government – and future governments – can mitigate the risks of leaving this group behind in delivery.

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