City of London Corporation Committee Report

Committees: Community and Children's Services Committee	**Dated:** 8 September 2026
Subject: Families in the City Update	**Public report:** For Discussion
This proposal: • **delivers Corporate Plan 2024-29 outcomes** • **provides statutory duties**	Diverse engaged communities. Providing excellent services.
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	No
If so, how much?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	N/A
Report of:	Judith Finlay, Executive Director of Community and Children's Services
Report author:	Rachel Talmage, Head of Children's Social Care and Early Help – Families in the City Programme Lead Hannah Dobbin, Families in the City Programme Manager

Summary

This is the fourth Families in the City programme update report for Members of the Communities and Children's Services Committee. Families in the City is the Department of Community and Children's Services and partners' response to national government reforms; Families First Partnership (FFP) reform around a move to Family Help services and the development of Best Start Family Hubs for children and young people aged 0–19 years or up to 25 years for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

We are now in Phase 2 of the programme which initially ran from September 2025 to June 2026 and has now been extended to March 2027. The development of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network, which includes Best Start in Life services

for 0–5-year-olds, continues to build on our online offer and the delivery of services at sites across the City of London.

Developments in the FFP workstream are focused on preparation for a shift to a Family Help system.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. National government reforms are driving transformational change in service delivery for children, young people and families. The Department for Education (DfE) continues to publish guidance and requirements on FFP and Best Start Family Hub requirements which are driving progress.

2. The Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network brings together services for children and young people aged 0-19 or up to 25 for young people with SEND. Within this, there is a focus on the 0-5s, SEND and targeting the most deprived local areas.

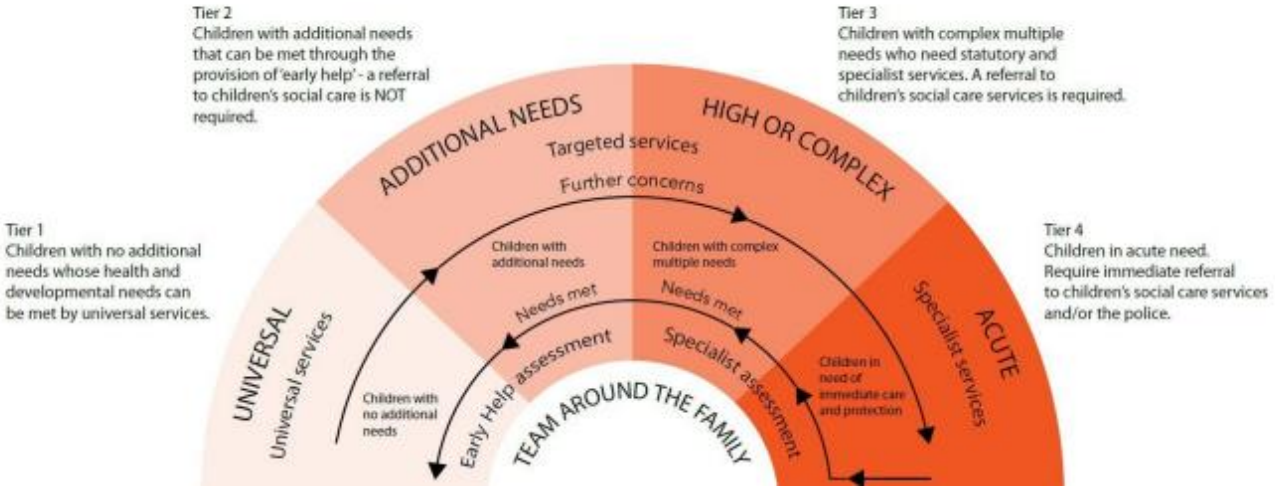
3. Phase 1 of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network development ended on 1 September 2025. The offer included:

    - a virtual information and advice offer on our Family Information Service website. There are dedicated Best Start Family Hub webpages providing information on activities and services for children, young people and their families
    - a pilot in-person support offer to help families navigate the Best Start Family Hub, available from the Guildhall every Monday during September to December 2025. A telephone translator offer was available if needed to support families
    - services continued to be delivered in person at various sites – including our libraries and community centres – across the City of London.

4. Phase 2 began in September 2025 and has primarily responded to DfE's requirement within the given timescales. Information from DfE on its expectations around the Best Start Family Hub model has been included in Appendix 1. This includes a main, physical Best Start Family Hub that should be in the most deprived area and the network sites around it. It also shows the wider offer that is expected around the key 0-5-years Best Start in Life offer.

5. The DfE's FFP programme requires local authorities to create an integrated system to 'support more children to stay safely with their families and see better outcomes'. This involves the review and design of a Family Help system that merges Early Help and Children in Need systems.

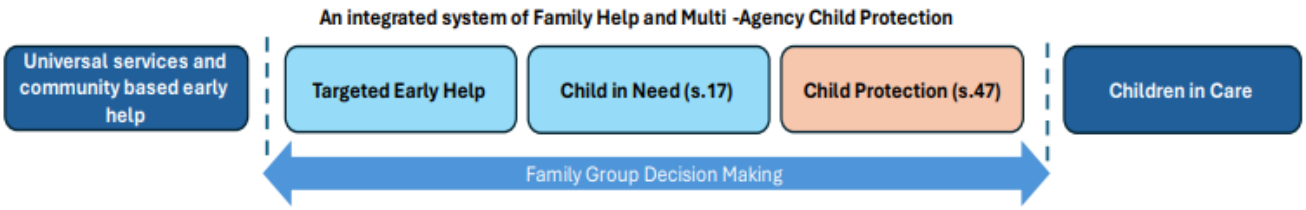
6. The current continuum of need reflects four tier levels:



7. To provide Members with a sense of scale, in the City of London at the end of April 2026 there were:

   - 13 children and young people open to Early Help (Tier 2) – 5 of which had an Education, Health and Care Plan (ECHP)
   - 12 children in need (Tier 3) – 3 of which had an EHCP
   - 17 children receiving Short Breaks support (Tier 3)
   - 0 children with Child Protection Plans (Tier 4)
   - 8 children in care
   - 44 care leavers

8. The DfE sets out its vision for a reformed system as an integrated system, shown in the graphic below:

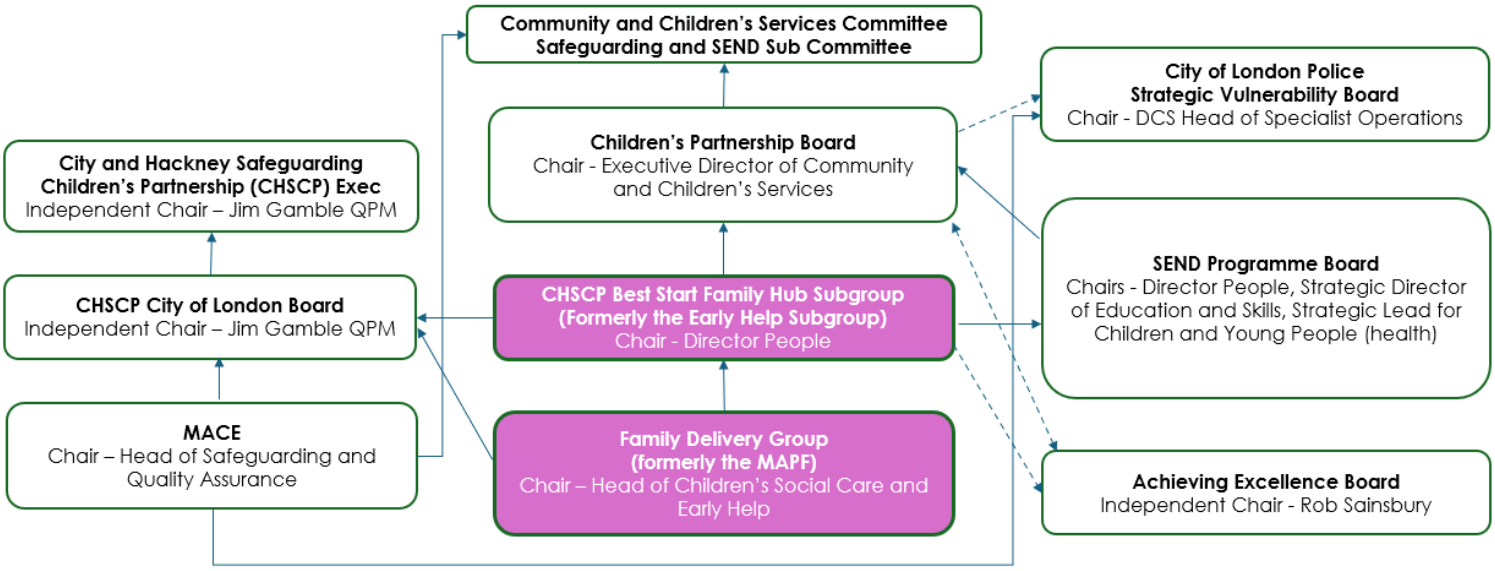


9. The reforms are an opportunity to build on our outstanding Children's Social Care and Early Help services. A focus on the best possible outcomes for children and families will be retained throughout the implementation of the Families in the City programme.

Current Position

Governance arrangements

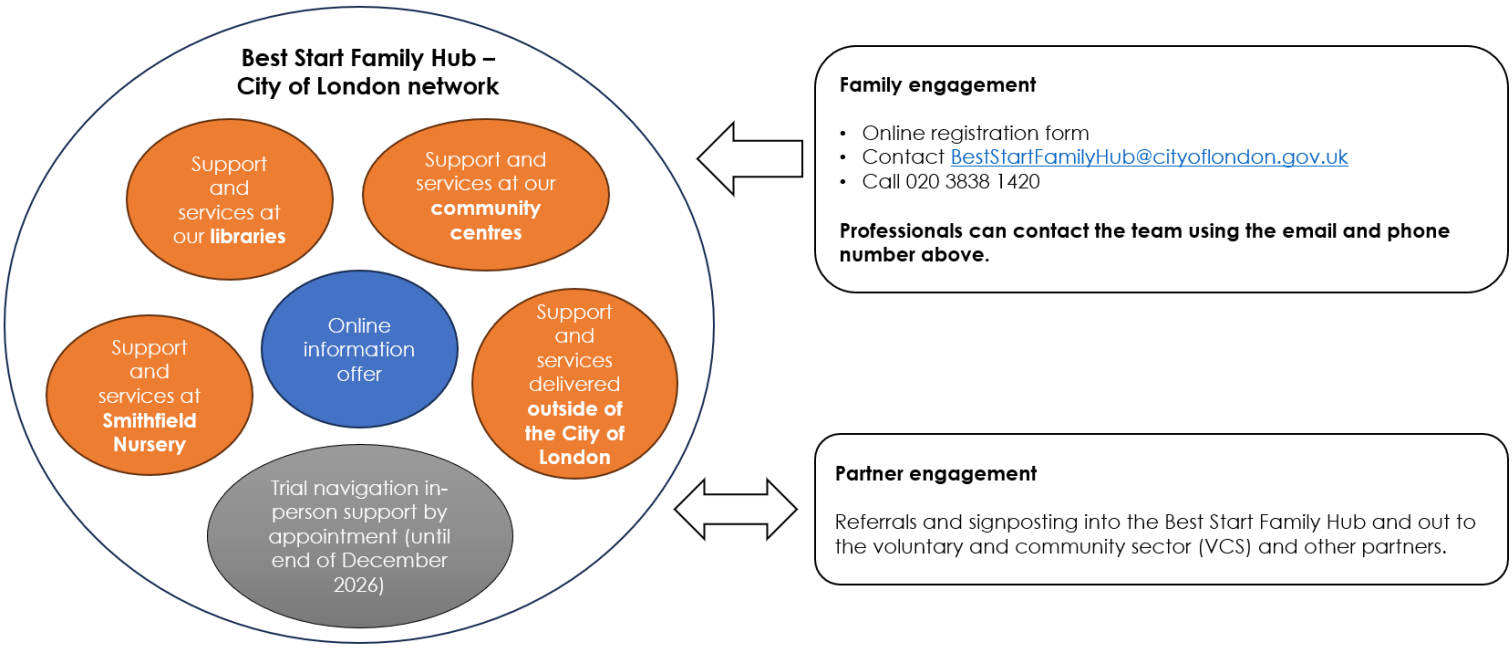
10. The City Corporation has reviewed the governance structure around the Families in the City programme to recognise a move to business as usual from 1 September 2026. The Families in the City Board will cease but the functions and partnership focus within it will be absorbed into a revised structure shown in the diagram below. The Early Help Subgroup will become the Best Start Family Hub Subgroup and the Multi-agency Practitioners Forum (MAPF) will become the Family Delivery Group. This retains both senior level, strategic engagement and a space for professionals to share learning and develop practice.



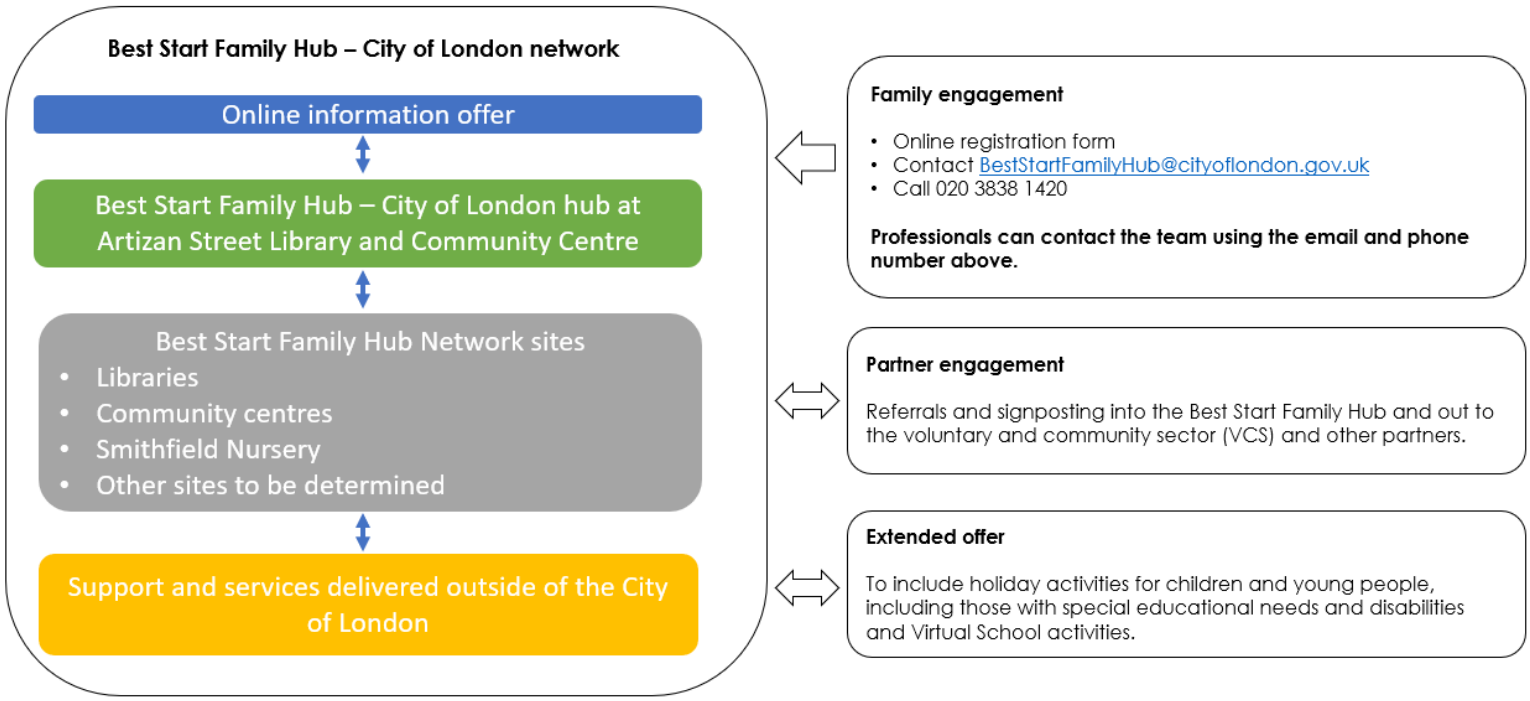
Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network development

11. The Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network brings together online and in-person services and support for children and young people aged 0–19 or 25 with SEND, and their families. In the City of London, the Best Start Family Hub Network offer also includes support for care leavers and our Virtual School cohort (children and young people – up to 25 years old) who have a social worker or who have previously been supported by social care).

12. The Best Start Family Hub – City of London is being developed in phases. The current model is:



13. The model we are currently aiming for by 2028 - subject to any further changes to requirements by DfE and completion of the hub within the Artizan Street Library and Community Centre (ASLCC) - is:



14. Information on how to access the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network offer has been made available online on the City of London Family Information Service website. Families can contact the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network directly or be signposted by a professional. Between 1 April and 9 July 2026, seven people registered to find out more about services. This included two families with new babies, signposted to the Education and Early Years Service. There have also been phone call enquiries to a dedicated Best Start Family Hub – City of London phone number but the volume is currently not logged.

15. The City Corporation's 0-25 Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network offer brings together existing support and services including:

    - a community-based universal offer including Health Visiting service, stay and play sessions across libraries, and baby massage
    - parenting support including an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) parenting programme delivered by a parent facilitator supported by Early Help and Social Care, parenting programmes and infant feeding support
    - therapeutic and systemic support for children, young people and families aged 0-25 (with SEND) provided by City Chorus
    - SEND and inclusive provision including statutory short breaks, Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS - free, independent information, advice and support service) and COLTALE and Verbo (online speech and language platforms)
    - holiday and enrichment activities
    - youth services
    - adult education and skills programmes

16. The Best Start in Life offer for 0–5-year-olds is a key part of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network. Activities and support continue to be delivered at multiple sites across the City of London.

    'It is very valuable to City parents to have the Bumps and Babies session [at the Barbican children's library]… I am also appreciative of the Stay and Play session at Smithfield Nursery as a new session for the western part of the City… new ideas such as outdoor sessions would be welcomed.'
    City of London parent

17. The Best Start in Life offer is open to families who live within the City of London: 46 new families in the City registered for the Best Start in Life service between September 2025 and June 2026. In June 2026, 76 City of London resident families were registered for Best Start in life Services, 46 of these had registered between September 2025 – June 2026.

18. Families accessed:

    - Stay and Play sessions
    - Bumps and Babies sessions
    - Monthly Infant Feeding sessions at Barbican Library and ASLCC
    - Baby clinics at ASLCC

- Baby Massage
- Rhyme Time and Story Time activities across City of London libraries

19. Appendix 2 provides a breakdown of engagement with the Best Start in Life offer.

20. The DfE requires all local authorities to deliver evidence-based parenting and home learning environment programmes. In the City of London, these will be the Peep Learning Together and Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (SFSC) programmes. Peep Learning Together forms a key part of the City Corporation's school readiness offer and supports wider ambitions to improve early language development and good levels of development which aligns with DfE ambitions around school readiness. SFSC complements this by strengthening parenting confidence, family relationships and emotional wellbeing.

21. A dedicated workforce development role has been created (funded by a DfE grant) to implement delivery of these programmes and additional quality assurance. Key achievements to date include:

    - completion of Peep Learning Together Train-the-Trainer training
    - completion of SFSC facilitator training
    - delivery of practitioner Peep training
    - completion of pre-implementation observations at Shoe Lane Library and Barbican Children's Library
    - development of a safeguarding and Family Hub practice training offer for library staff
    - start of workforce skills auditing to identify existing safeguarding knowledge and development needs

22. This specific workforce development activity will continue until March 2027 with delivery to families planned to start in Autumn 2026. It is anticipated that by March 2027, Peep Learning Together will be embedded across the City of London libraries' Stay and Play and Rhyme Time provision, reaching families through 11 regular weekly sessions. The aim is to support at least 20 families through the SFSC programme by March 2027, with further families expected to benefit through social workers applying SFSC approaches and techniques within their one-to-one work with parents and carers.

23. Intended outcomes of the evidence-base programmes include:

    - improved parenting confidence
    - improved family relationships and enhanced parent-child interaction
    - stronger home learning environments
    - improved language and communication development
    - increased school readiness
    - greater access to evidence-based support
    - improved integration across Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network services

24. Other key elements of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network include:

- at the end of April 2026, there were 17 children receiving short breaks support and 13 children open to Early Help
- holiday activities continue to develop as part of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme. Successful Christmas and Easter clubs were delivered in partnership with the community-based organisation KABs. Attendance by children from the global majority was high and the number of children with SEND increased from 23% at Christmas to 29% at Easter. Summer holiday clubs are planned from 27 July to 14 August 2026 with a continued focus on accessible activities including games, arts and crafts, and trips to Tate Modern, Hampstead Heath Secret Garden and St Paul's Cathedral
- the recommissioned youth service went live from April 2026. The service offers a range of activities and support for young people and a new information, advice and guidance (IAG) worker is in place. Between April and June 2026, 24 City young people attended youth services sessions.
- SENDIASS at Tower Hamlets is commissioned to deliver free information and advice for families with children with SEND from the City. Families can be referred by a professional or self-refer. From April to June 2026, 11 cases were supported and 43 parent consultations were delivered
- City Chorus is commissioned to provide therapeutic groups for families with children experiencing adverse life events, to help improve outcomes for the whole family. From April to June 2026, 13 new families were seen by the service and 17 one-to-one sessions were delivered

Site developments

25. The DfE requires every local authority to operate two different kinds of sites:

- **'Best Start Family Hubs** will be warm, welcoming, inclusive and play-friendly spaces at the heart of local communities. They will act as one-stop shops where families can drop in, make connections and get trusted information and advice. Nationally we are aiming for 70% of hubs to be located in the 30% most deprived areas.'
- **'Best Start Network Sites** will be other, trusted, community locations that extend reach. They will deliver at least one Best Start Family Hub or Healthy Babies service on a regular, sustained basis – for example, related to health, early years education, parenting, or early SEND support – and can connect families with others. These sites might be early years settings, including specialist settings and schools, libraries, health and faith venues, leisure and recreation centres, and other voluntary, community or faith venues, private and public buildings. They should be identified as part of the Best Start network.'

26. As agreed at Families in the City Board, Children's Partnership Board and previously shared in Committee papers, the ASLCC will be developed and refurbished as our Best Start Family Hub. This builds on its existing offer for

families and young people and reflects DfE guidance that hubs should be in the most deprived areas.

27. ASLCC would retain its library function and access for the whole community. The Best Start Family Hub – City of London will sit as a branded space/offer within the ASLCC. Priorities include making that space as family-friendly as possible and suitable for the co-location of staff (e.g. across Early Years, Family Help, Public Health and other commissioned services), and delivery of required Best Start Family Hub services.

28. DfE grant funding is being used to engage an architect and design company to complete an initial assessment and options report on the development of ASLCC. The company has been given the DfE guidance so that it is aware of requirements on local authorities and understands that engagement with families will be key to any refurbishment plans. Additional funding will have to be sought for any capital investment.

29. Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network support and services are already delivered at community settings including our libraries, community centres and Smithfield House Children's Nursery. A process to formally identify and brand Best Start Network Sites – initially our libraries and Smithfield House Children's Nursery - is underway. These Network Sites will retain their names and existing functions but additional DfE branding will be introduced as required by national guidance.

30. This approach ensures that the City Corporation is meeting DfE requirements while continuing to provide families with access to a range of support and services across the City of London.

Engaging families in the development of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network and activities

31. Parent and carer feedback continues to inform the development of activities and support for families. In April 2026, the Best Start in Life team delivered a Plant and Grow workshop at ASLCC following feedback from parents in the Portsoken Ward that many of them lived in flats and would like the opportunity to plant with their children. The session was facilitated by the Head Gardener of Westminster Abbey and attended by eight adults and eight children. Of the parents and carers that attended:

    - 100% enjoyed the session and found it very knowledgeable and useful
    - 100% said that this was their children's first experience of planting and potting plants
    - 100% said they would do more planting at home
    - 100% said they had gained some new knowledge on planting and gardening

32. The Best Start in Life team is planning another workshop in the Golden Lane/Barbican area to be delivered before the end of March 2027.

“I have always enjoyed planting and since I had my children, I stopped doing this... Today’s session made me so happy… and it was so nice to do this with my children! I liked that we could take our plants home with us to watch them grow... Thank you for putting this workshop on for us” (Parent)

33. The Best Start in Life team held a coffee morning on 10 July 2026 at the Barbican Library to gather feedback on the 0-5 offer. One parent attended and was provided with information and initial advice by the Early Years team. The parent shared that they had engaged with some of the support on offer including Infant Beast Feeding which they described as **“utterly marvellous and saved and started my breastfeeding journey positively.”**

34. Representatives from the Education and Early Years Service attended The Aldgate School’s Summer Fete on 10 July 2026. Key feedback from more detailed conversations with several parents and carers included:

    - most parents had not heard of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network or ‘outreach’ as a term but they were keen to understand what support is available where and when, and some recognised the branding from other local areas
    - parents responded positively once the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network was explained, with strong interest in accessing local support and services
    - positive feedback was received on the Family Information Service website, particularly the regularly updated ‘What’s On’ section
    - positive feedback was received on the Best Start in Life/Family Hub activities timetable and how it helped families plan activities
    - feedback on a Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network leaflet included that it clearly explained the different types of support available and that parents and carers appreciated having all information presented in one place. Some parents and carers suggested that the leaflet would benefit from making Family Hub locations more visible. This feedback will be shared with communications officers to inform the development of promotional materials

35. Parents at The Aldgate School Fete were signposted to a wide range of support including around parenting advice and family support, SEND, housing and finances, and health services. In addition, opportunities were identified to strengthen partnerships with community providers and expand culturally appropriate provision, particularly for Bengali-speaking families.

36. Officers continue to review the approach to engaging young people and families across the City of London in the development of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network, including the option of developing an advisory group. Opportunities to engage will continue throughout the coming months, with a focus on developing the Outreach Strategy and the refurbishment of ASLCC.

Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network development funding

37. The City Corporation continues to receive national government funding to deliver statutory provision for children, young people and families.

38. The development of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network and implementation of the FFP reforms are funded by dedicated DfE grant streams. DfE provides grant conditions and regular reporting on spend is required.

39. In 2025/26, the City Corporation was given a DfE Best Start Family Hub development grant of £95,880, of which £23,795 was spent in 25/26 on refurbishing the ASLCC and investment in additional workforce development capacity. DfE agreed that the remaining £72,085 can be carried over into 2026/27. This must be spent on the refurbishment of ASLCC as the City of London's Best Start Family Hub and continued investment in the dedicated workforce resource.

40. The Best Start Family Hub development 2026-29 total grant is £264,000. For 2026/27, the breakdown is £84,500. Within it, this has allocations for programme delivery, home learning environment and parenting programmes, and children with additional needs. There is also a small capital allocation. The City Corporation has submitted a costed delivery plan to DfE as required. This is an iterative plan that provides assurance and accountability against national requirements.

41. There is also DfE grant money specifically for Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) profile assessment support; £18,000 for 2026-29: £6,000 for each financial year.

42. The City Corporation continues to work within existing budgets. Any additional funding allocated to the development of Best Start Family Hub – City of London services would have to align with the stage of development and DfE requirements. Funding decisions would consider:

    - progress against DfE requirements and where we could strengthen existing or developing activity
    - the City of London's Best Start Local Plan (focuses on 0-5s) action to work with partners to identify the needs of local families and gaps in current provision, and implement a joined-up approach to addressing any gaps – with a particular focus on vulnerable families, e.g. children with SEND, families in overcrowded accommodation, families with English as an additional language, and fathers
    - findings of the City of London Joint Strategic Needs Assessment which is in development
    - insight from families on their experiences and thoughts on support and services for City of London residents

43. Any development or spending decisions would be underpinned by equity, equality, diversity and inclusion with a focus on achieving the best possible outcomes for all children, young people and families.

Next steps for the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network

44. The next stage of the development of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London will include and reflect:

- the development of ASLCC as the Best Start Family Hub and formalisation of Network Sites
- exploration with partners, including Health, of co-location and delivery of services in the City of London
- six-month progress review of the Best Start Local Plan (focus on 0-5s as required by DfE) in September 2026
- development and implementation of an outreach strategy (required by DfE to be live from 1 November 2026)
- consideration of DfE data requirement implications on existing systems and reporting
- development of publicity material to better promote the offer and engage families across the City of London
- alignment with FFP reform.

45. Officers will continue to have monthly meetings with the DfE regional representative about what can be delivered within the resources allocated and the City of London's unique context, while also meeting reform requirements.

FFP reform implementation

46. The FFP development workstream continues to evolve in response to national government reform and the City Corporation remains compliant with DfE reporting requirements.

47. The DfE has stated that local authorities must have an operational Family Help service by the end of March 2027.

48. A focus has been on how to ensure that our data systems can deliver against the FFP requirements. Mosaic is the case management system used by the City Corporation's Children's Social Care and SEND services. We are exploring additional, dedicated resource to support a Mosaic upgrade in the Autumn to ensure that we have the necessary systems and processes in place.

49. The Children's Social Care practice standards have been updated to reflect the principles of the reforms and a session was held with Children's Social Care and Education and Early Years staff around Family Group Decision Making (FGDM). This relates to a key principle within the reforms that families should be offered FGDM as early as possible and at key points so that families have the option to be central to decisions made about them.

50. Other progress includes a test and learn approach which has been applied to Tier 2 and 3 work with families, where qualified social workers and alternatively qualified staff work across the Tiers. This builds on our existing practice and

provides families with a consistent professional. Positive feedback has been shared by professionals taking part in the test and learn.

51. The City Corporation has also been working with the City of London Police, Health and the London Borough of Hackney colleagues to form proposed arrangements for a virtual Multi-agency Child Protection Team (MACPT) which is required by the reforms.

52. An Ofsted Focus Visit in July 2026 acknowledged positive progress around implementation of the FFP reforms: 'relationship-based practice is a notable strength, with continuity of worker frequently prioritised to promote stability and sustained engagement and reduce possible change and disruption for children. This makes a positive difference to families and is in line with 'Families First' ambitions.'

FFP implementation funding

53. The City Corporation received DfE grants totalling £60,000 for 2025/26 to implement the FFP reforms. The majority was spent on additional programme resource. £6,177 has been carried over into 2026/27 and will be used to support a Mosaic (Children's Social Care case management system) upgrade to ensure alignment with DfE requirements. For 2026-29, dedicated FFP funding of £98,846 sits within the Children, Families and Youth Grant, and this breaks down to around £30,000 for each financial year.

Next steps for FFP implementation

54. The next stage of implementing the FFP reforms will focus on the workforce and the data system upgrade. This is essential infrastructure that will inform decision-making around processes and practice, and will align with the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network development.

Options

55. There are no options for the CCS Committee to consider.

Proposals

56. There are no proposals for the CCS Committee to consider.

Key Data

57. In response to a Member's request that baseline data is shared, Appendix 3 provides Census 2021 data on children and young people who live in the City of London.

58. Officers are considering data and system requirements for the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network in line with DfE requirements. There are currently limitations around data and insight due to existing systems.

59. Current insight on the seven registrations to find out more information about Best Start Family Hub – City of London services between 1 April and 9 July 2026, indicates that the majority live in the North West of the City of London, with a few in the East.

60. Out of the 76 City families registered with Best Start in Life 0-5 services in June 2026, 67 live in the Cripplegate, Aldersgate, Portsoken and Farringdon Within Wards. 9 families live in the Portsoken Ward.

61. Data on income and employment status of families as part of universal engagement with the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network is not collected. This type of data is not asked for until a formal family assessment is done.

62. However, data for the Best Start in Life 0-5 service between September 2025 and June 2026, shows that of the families that registered:
    - 49 were employed
    - 17 were unemployed
    - 12 were on parental leave
    - 11 were self-employed
    - 1 was on a career break
    - 11 were in receipt of Universal Credit

63. It is worth noting that DfE requires each local authority to produce a Best Start Family Hub Outreach Strategy by 31 October 2026. This should set out how local authorities will reach groups facing specific barriers (identified locally) and/or health inequalities and maximise take up of services.

64. The City of London's Outreach Strategy will reflect the national focus on delivery and engagement in the most deprived areas – the east of the City of London – and reaching those who are not currently engaged with support and services. Target groups, such as children and young people with SEND and families from Global Majority communities, will be identified.

65. The Outreach Strategy will be accompanied by an action plan and agreed by the Best Start Family Hub Sub-group and the Children's Partnership Board.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

66. The following strategic implications are relevant to this report.

    - **Strategic implications –** Families in the City aligns with objectives within the Corporate Plan 2024–2029 to deliver excellent services and a diverse, engaged community. It will align with the vision of the Children and Young People's Plan which is due to be revised in 2026. It sits alongside SEND reform and the national Youth Strategy. Governance arrangements are changing from 1 September 2026.

    - **Financial implications –** Financial information is included in the report. Financial implications will remain monitored, and additional funding will need to be sought if

necessary.

- **Resource implications –** These are still being assessed.

- **Legal implications –** Developments will need to ensure that the City of London Corporation continues to deliver all statutory functions and requirements.

- **Risk implications –** A Families in the City risk and issues log is reviewed at Families in the City Board meetings moving to the Best Start Family Hub Subgroup from 1 September. Risks are escalated to Children's Partnership Board if appropriate.

  Risks around lacking the data and systems for both FFP implementation and Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network development have been acknowledged and data system working groups set up to co-ordinate activity in response to this, working with the Access Group and Mosaic Advisory Group and taking on board national and other local area learning.

  Regarding the development of the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network, risks identified include:
  - funding for the programme is not sufficient – officers are working within DfE grant allocations and conditions. Additional funding will be sought if required, e.g. for capital works
  - stakeholders, particularly families, are not clear on what the Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network offer is and how to access it – key messages and a communications plan remain iterative to allow continued alignment with DfE guidelines. More promotional materials will be developed, some produced in different languages to meet local needs
  - services are not accessed equally by families – Equality Impact Assessments were completed at the start of the programme and did not identify any negative impacts. These will be regularly reviewed. The Outreach Strategy will focus on engaging families who are not already accessing support and services. Services will continue to be delivered at different sites across the City of London.

- **Equalities implications –** Equality Impact Assessments were developed at the start of the programme and will remain as live documents. Individual assessments will be completed for specific projects as required, e.g. the Outreach Strategy and development of the ASLCC as the Best Start Family Hub.

- **Climate implications –** none.

- **Security implications –** none.

Conclusion

67. Families in the City continues to progress at pace as we move deeper into implementation and start to shift to business as usual. The Best Start Family Hub – City of London Network is becoming increasingly established and work will continue to promote and embed it across communities. Implementation of the FFP reforms continues with a commitment to have a Family Help service operational by the end of March 2027. The focus remains on ensuring children, young people and families get the right support when they need it.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – DfE Best Start Family Hub model expectations
- Appendix 2 - Breakdown of engagement with the Best Start in Life offer
- Appendix 3 – Census 2021 data for the City of London

Background Papers

- 16 March 2026 – public paper updating Members on Families in the City
- 17 September 2025 – public paper updating Members on Families in the City
- 1 July 2025 – public paper updating Members on Families in the City
- 11 November 2024 – non-public paper providing an update on the City of London Children's Centre Services
- 5 May 2023 – public paper asking Members to note that an independent City of London Children's Centre Services Review would take place
- 11 March 2024 – non-public paper on the City of London Children's Centre Services Review
- 13 December 2023 – non-public paper on the City of London Children's Centre Services and Family Hub Development

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