Sure Start Annual Report Card 2025/2026



Department of Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk

Department of Health

HSC Health and Social Care

Policy Outcomes

- Improved language skills
- Early identification of developmental delay
- Improved access to services
- Enhanced parenting skills
- Effectively integrated services



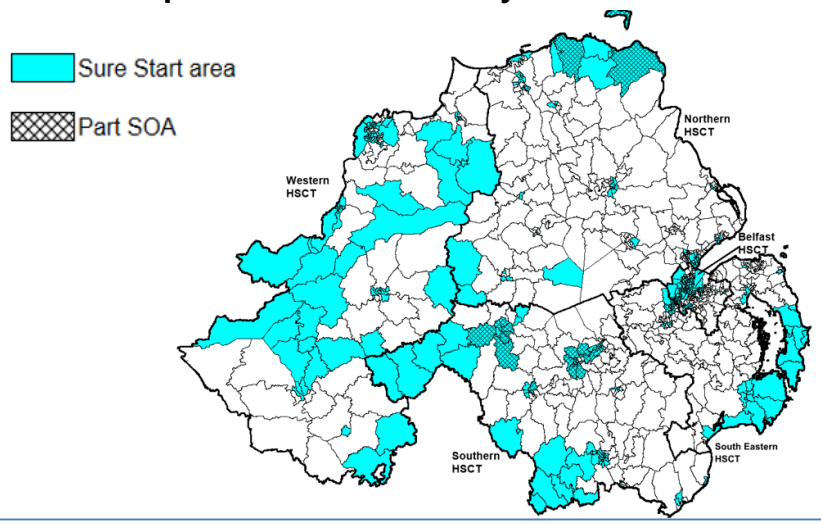
Partnership working
is at the root of
what makes Sure Start work

#SureStartWorks

How much did we do?

Endnote

Number of Operational Sure Start Projects across Northern Ireland – 38 *(in at least, the 25% most disadvantaged Areas Across NI as per NIMDM 2017)*



38 Sure Start Projects

- 6 Northern
- 9 Belfast
- 5 South Eastern
- 9 Southern
- 9 Western

£37.4M invested into Sure Start by the Department of Education

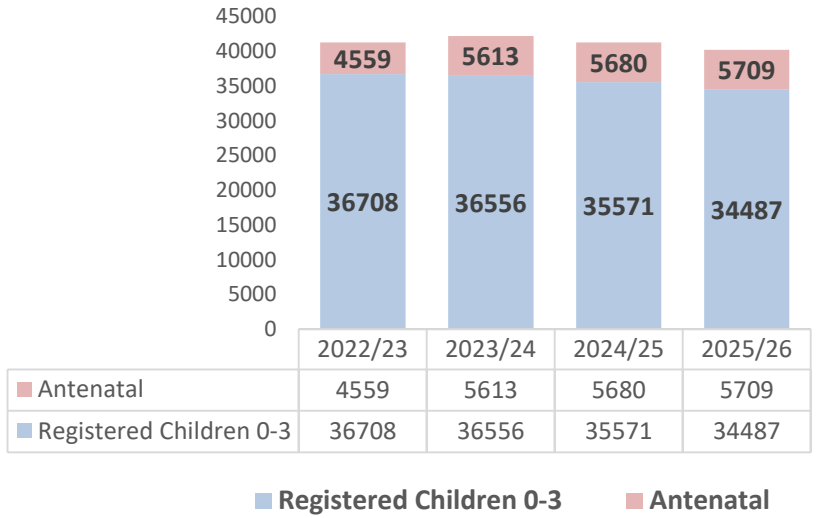
This includes:

- £7.7M invested into the Sure Start Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds
- £1.8M invested into SLT provision (where associated outcomes are included)
- £1.55M invested into Exceptional Need Outside of Catchment Area

How much did we do?

Endnote

Number of Children 0-3 Years Registered 2025/26



	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Antenatal	4559	5613	5680	5709
Registered Children 0-3	36708	36556	35571	34487

Source: Sure Start Go Database – Score Card Report

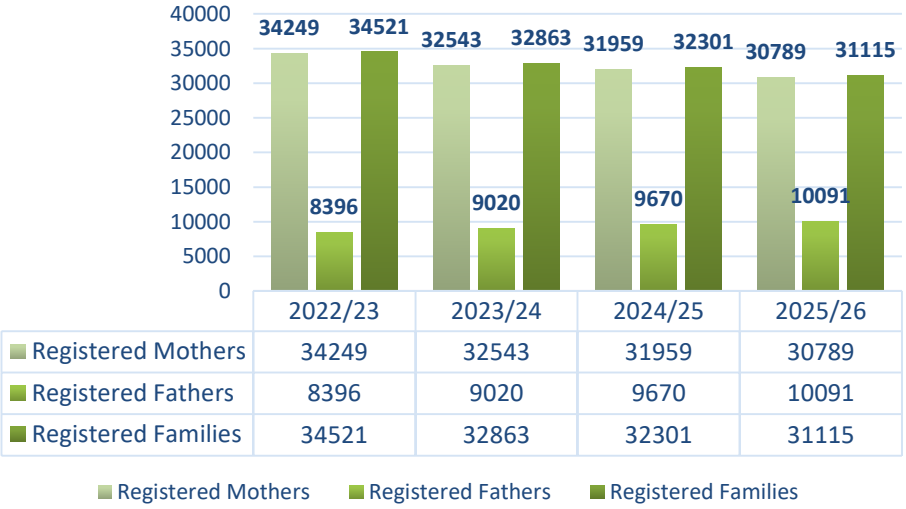
Children Registered as part of 'Outreach - Meeting Exceptional Need Outside of Catchment Area' by 31st March 2026



2.74%

Outreach provision has registered an additional 874 children, representing 2.74% of existing catchment numbers

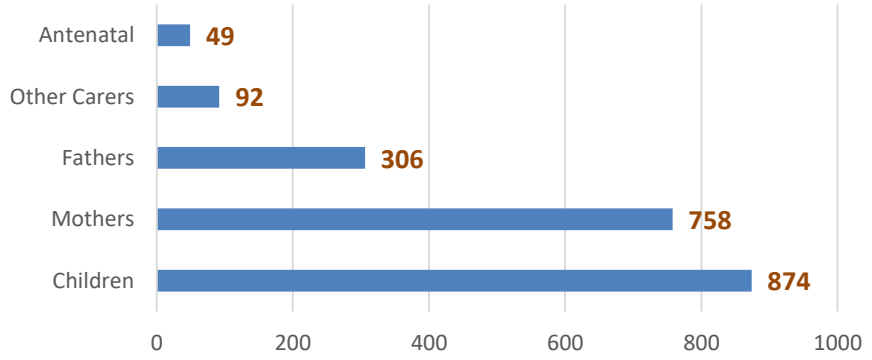
Number of Registered Mothers, Fathers, Families 2025/26



	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Registered Mothers	34249	32543	31959	30789
Registered Fathers	8396	9020	9670	10091
Registered Families	34521	32863	32301	31115

Source: Sure Start Go Database – Score Card Report

Number of Registered Children, Mothers, Fathers and Carers as a result of the Meeting Exceptional Need Outside of Catchment Area Criteria 2025/26



Source: Sure Start Go Database – Score Start Info Reg (Other Agencies)

How well did we do?

Endnote

Percentage of eligible children registered
(compared to estimated number living in targeted areas, based on 2021 census data)

68%

of eligible children 0-3 years registered by 31st March 2026

Source: Sure Start Go Database – Children Registered by Age Report

Percentage of children registered before 1st birthday 2025/26

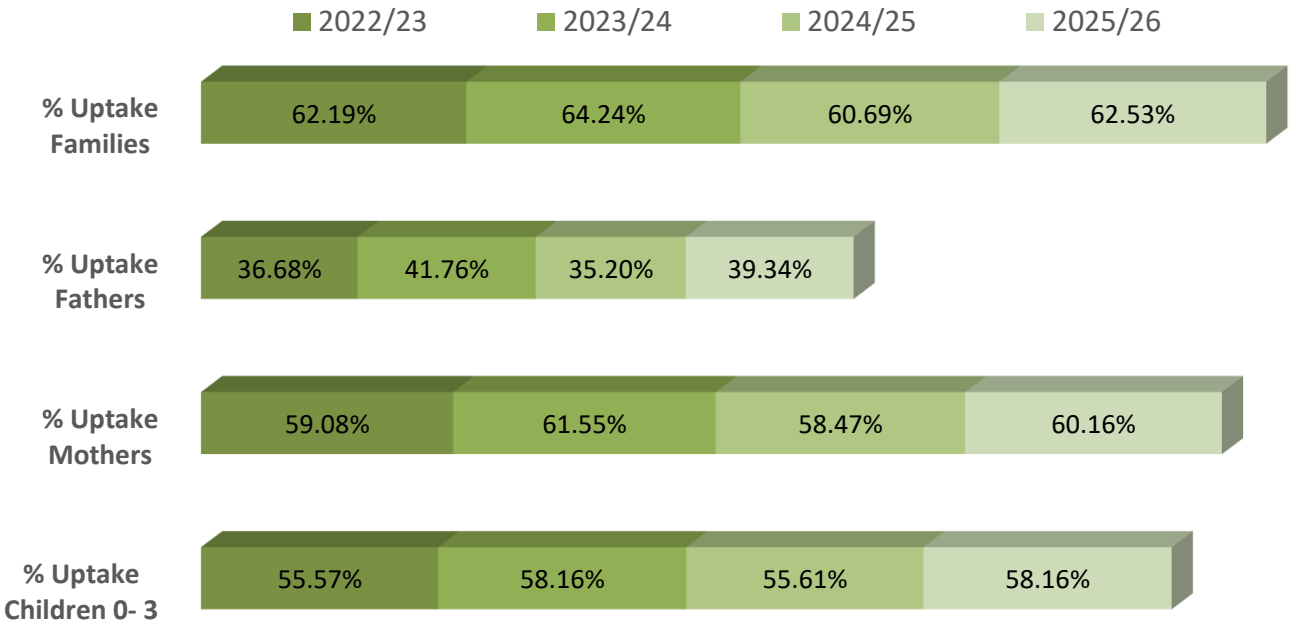
72%

of children registered before their 1st birthday

Source: Sure Start Go Database –Registered before 1st Birthday Report

Percentage Uptake of Registered Users 2025/26

(Note: registered Users have availed of at least one activity during 2025/26)



Source: Sure Start Go Database – Score Card Report

Policy Outcomes – Improved Language Skills

Endnote

Hanen Communication & Language Stages Model

The Hanen approach is now used widely in Sure Start therefore Hanen Communication & Language stages are a complementary indicator of progress. Training in Hanen also provides Sure Start Staff with practical research-based strategies to help promote children's language development through attuned adult and child interactions.

Number	Percentage	
1147	85%	Children whose Hanen Communication & Language stage progressed by at least one stage from Autumn 25 to Spring 26 or who remained at the highest stage on this measure.
199	15%	Children who stayed at the same Hanen Communication & Language stage (not at highest level) from Autumn 25 to Spring 26

SLC progress of children in the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds n= 1346 (excluding Bilingual children and children who did not receive a Hanen screen due to other reasons - see end note)

Bilingual Language Profile

The Sure Start Bilingual Language Profile (BLP) was introduced as a measure to indicate progress with bilingual children. The BLP is a tool developed by Sure Start SLTs to support SLC monitoring and planning. It enables staff to profile children's development across three areas: development of play, development of attention and number of words used in a sentence. This provides a method of capturing progress and also supports staff to identify areas of strength and challenge to aid practical planning.

Number	Percentage	
158	88%	Children whose language and communication development progressed by at least one stage from Autumn 25 to Spring 26 or who remained at the highest stage on this measure (as monitored by BLP)
21	12%	Children whose language and communication development stayed at the same stage (not at highest level) from Autumn 25 to Spring 26 (as monitored by BLP)

SLC progress of bilingual children in the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds n= 179

Policy Outcome – Improved Language Skills

Endnote

WellComm

WellComm is a speech and language assessment tool that measures progress in SLC development. It is used for children attending the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds (DP2-3YO).



WellComm uses easy-to-understand traffic light reporting to highlight a child's speech and language development. Green indicates an expected level, amber suggests targeted support may be needed and red signals more complex needs that could require referral to a speech and language specialist.

2024/2025(Academic Year)	Number	%
Number of eligible children	1513	
Number of children who were screened	1377	90%
Number of eligible children who were not screened pre and post, as they were absent on one or both of the screening dates	136*	10%
Number of children screened - who showed improvement **	993	72%
Number of children screened - who did not show improvement Note: 383 children received additional support. 2 children did not receive additional support due to SLT vacancy. ***	385	28%

* All children receive additional SLT support even if only one screen has been administered. All children also receive individual observations from DP2-3YO staff on play, language, motor and social skills.

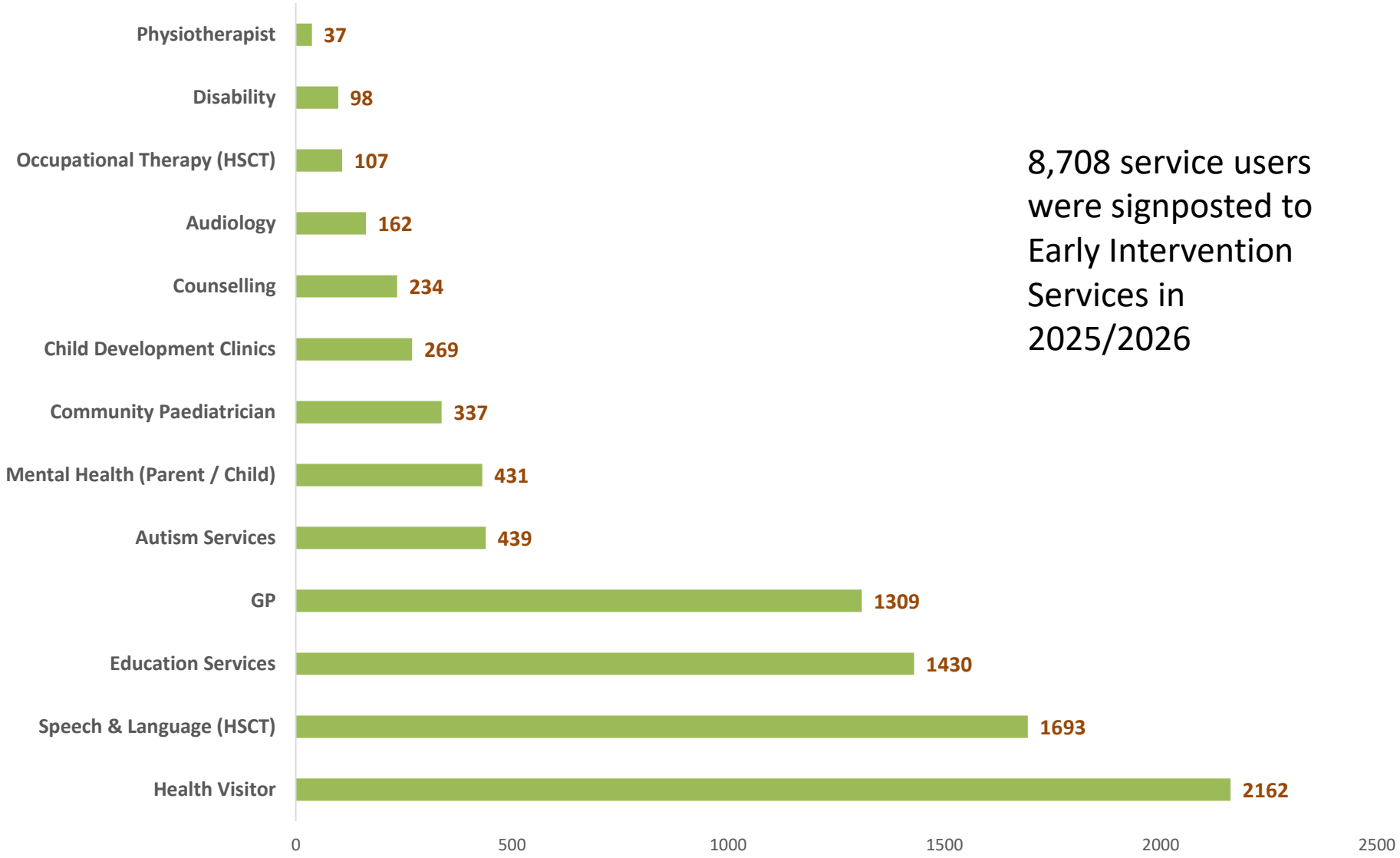
** Improvement defined as progressed towards **Green** or **Stayed Green**, that is, progressed towards expected level for chronological age or stayed at expected level for chronological age.

*** Through collaborative planning between DP2-3YO staff and Sure Start SLT and/or by signposting to internal Sure Start services and/or by signposting to external clinical services.

Source: WellComm Monitoring

Policy Outcome – Early Identification of Developmental Delay

Endnote



8,708 service users were signposted to Early Intervention Services in 2025/2026

Source: Sure Start Go Database – Signposting by Plan Report

Policy Outcome – Improved Access to Services / Effectively Integrating Services

Signposting	Total Offered
Charitable Aid	3170
Dentist	1815
Community Services	1544
Breastfeeding Support	1466
Food Banks	1002
Home Safety	716
Early Years	700
Benefits Advice	689
Family Support Hubs	666
Midwife/Antenatal (HSCT)	590
Voluntary Organisation	530
Financial Advice	496
Fire Service	478
Housing Executive	424
Ethnic Minorities	325
Smoking Cessation	303
Social Services	303
Legal Advice	212
Citizens Advice Bureau	207
Women's Aid	189
Training for Education	158
Homestart	155
Local Housing	141
Addiction Services	33
NICMA	26
Gingerbread	1

Source: Sure Start Go Database – Signposting by Plan Report



Resources	Quantity Issued
Information	27730
Play	13821
Books	13429
Family Support	13325
Speech and Language	13182
Health Promotion	13153
Baby	9114
DP2-3YO	6154
Toys	5222
Bookstart	4847
Parenting	4568
Dental	4510
Postnatal	3832
New Registration	3698
Antenatal	2983
Breastfeeding	2432
Home Safety	2105
Transition	1224
First Aid	1007
Smoking	45

Source: Sure Start Go Database – Resources by Plan Report

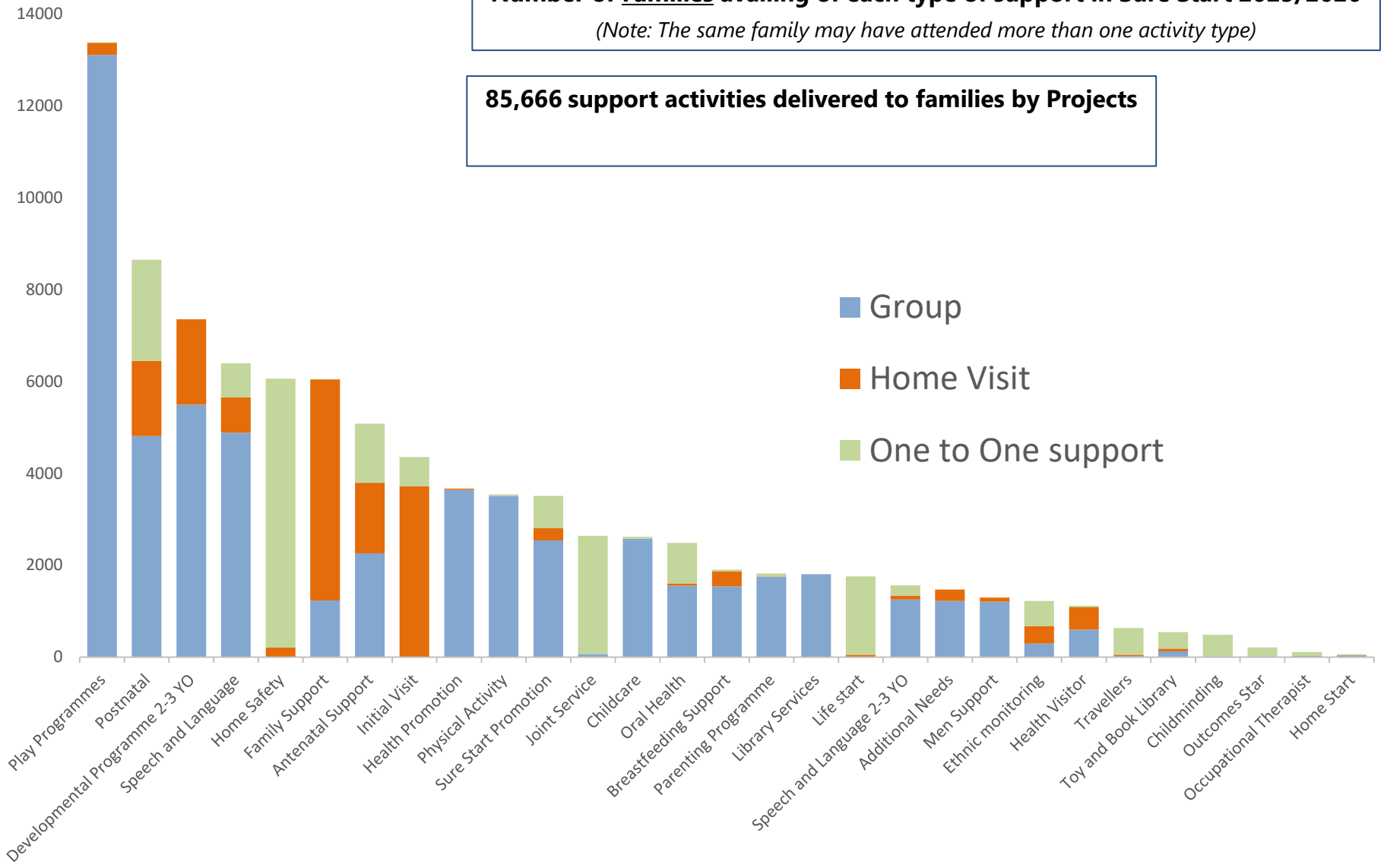
Projects signposted **16,339** clients to other service providers and
issued **146,381** resources in 2025/26

Policy Outcome - Improved Access to Services

Number of <u>Families</u> availing of each type of support in Sure Start 2025/2026

(Note: The same family may have attended more than one activity type)

85,666 support activities delivered to families by Projects



Source: Sure Start Go Database – Regional Activities Attendees Report

Policy Outcomes – Enhanced Parenting Skills

Endnote

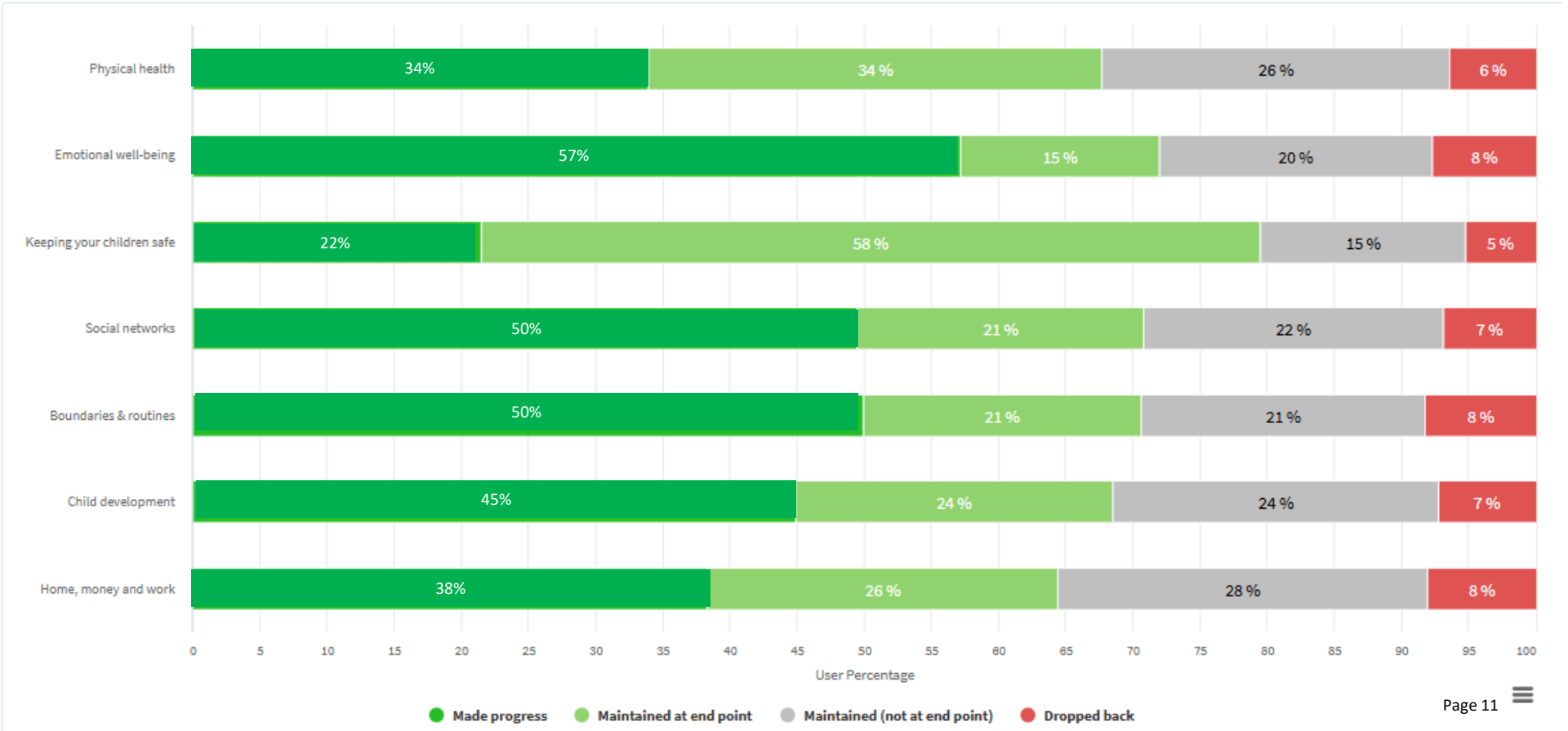
OUTCOMES STAR
2025/26

The figures provided below are based on **597** service users who **completed** first **and** second star readings after a Sure Start intervention.

1746 service users during 2025/26 completed at least 1 Star reading.

Are people making progress?			
In 1+ outcome areas Percentage of people making progress in at least one outcome area	In 2+ outcome areas Percentage of people making progress in at least two outcome areas	In 3+ outcome areas Percentage of people making progress in at least three outcome areas	Outcome areas showing progress Average number of outcome areas in which someone is making progress
91%	75%	54%	3

How much progress are people making in each outcome area?



Policy Outcome - Effectively Integrated Services

Partnership Working

Excerpts from Narrative Reports

"Integration with partner agencies has continued to strengthen over the course of the year through established multi-agency working arrangements and ongoing collaboration with key partners, including health services and a range of community organisations. Multi-agency coordination remains central to supporting children and families, particularly where needs are complex and require input from multiple services. This includes ongoing liaising with health visitors, schools, GPs and social services to support early identification, information sharing (where appropriate) and coordinated intervention."

"Integration is embedded across all levels of delivery, from strategic planning to day-to-day practice. We maintain formal Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with key partner organisations. These partnerships enable services to be delivered directly within Sure Start ward areas, ensuring families can access support within their own communities and reducing barriers such as transport, cost, and accessibility."

"Recently, we have engaged with two services we have not had a lot of contact with, in the past - The Forest School at the YMCA and the PSNI. We hope to work with the YMCA to give more children and families (particularly from the inner-city communities) the experience of outdoor play in the forest. The relationship with the PSNI will help us support those families experiencing issues such as domestic violence, intimidation or antisocial behaviour which negatively impact on family life."

Our Referral Partners



Policy Outcome - Effectively Integrated Services

Endnote

Northern Ireland Maternity and Antenatal System (NIMATs)

8,285 live births in Sure Start Areas across Northern Ireland

2023/24
(this is the latest figure available at time of completion of this Report Card)

Source: Children's Health in NI 23/24

82% of live births in a Sure Start Area referred to Sure Start via NIMATS

2023/24
(this is the latest figure available at time of completion of this Report Card)



5,810
NIMATS referrals to Sure Start
2025/26

Source: NIMATS

5,709 Registered Antenatal on Sure Start Go **2025/26**

(Equates to 98% of NIMATS referrals registered)

Source: Sure Start Go Database – Score Card Report

UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative

The UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative enables public services to better support families with feeding and developing close and loving relationships so that all babies get the best possible start in life.

- 9 Sure Start Projects are progressing toward this accreditation
- 24 Sure Start Projects are at stage 3
- 3 Sure Start Projects have achieved GOLD standard

unicef UNITED KINGDOM | THE BABY FRIENDLY INITIATIVE

Is anyone better off? Health Outcomes

Endnote



% of Children Overweight or Obese (IOTF)

BMI levels in Primary 1 children across Northern Ireland (IOTF)

	2022/23	2023/24
Children living in Sure Start areas	22.6%	**23.5%**
Children not living in Sure Start areas	18.8%	**19.8%**
All Children	20.4%	**21.3%**

These are the latest figures available at time of completion of this Report Card

Source: Children's Health in NI 23/24



% of Mothers who Smoked During Pregnancy

Percentage of Mothers who smoked (recorded at antenatal booking appointment)

	2022/23	2023/24 partial data see endnote
Mothers living in Sure Start areas	16.2%	**14.80%**
Mothers not living in Sure Start areas	6.6%	**5.70%**
All Mothers	10.6%	**9.70%**

These are the latest figures available at time of completion of this Report Card

Source: NIMATS via Business Objects (Health Intelligence Unit, PHA), 23/24



% of Children Breastfeeding at Hospital Discharge 2022/23

Prevalence of breastfeeding of live infants born to Northern Ireland residents, at various stages during first year of life, by Sure Start area.

	Discharge	Primary visit (10-14 days old)	6 weeks	3 months	6 months	12 months
Children living in Sure Start areas	43.6%	38.5%	29.8%	24.4%	19.8%	13.3%
Children not living in Sure Start areas	57.7%	51.0%	41.9%	35.4%	29.7%	20.4%
All children	51.8%	45.8%	36.8%	30.9%	25.6%	17.5%

These are the latest figures available at time of completion of this Report Card

Source: Children's Health in NI 23/24

Is anyone better off? Health Outcomes

Endnote



Maternal Age at time of Delivery

	2022/2023				2023/2024			
	<25 years	25 - 29 years	30 - 34 years	35+ years	<25 years	25 - 29 years	30 - 34 years	35+ years
Mothers living in Sure Start areas	1,579	2,229	2,827	1,897	1,491	2,223	2,647	1,951
Mothers not living in Sure Start areas	1,088	2,749	4,655	3,379	990	2,661	4,546	3,391
All Mothers	2,667	4,978	7,482	5,276	2,481	4,884	7,193	5,342

These are the latest figures available at time of completion of this Report Card

Source: Children's Health in NI 23/24

Is anyone better off? Health Outcomes

Endnote

% of Mothers who delivered by diabetic diagnosis

	2022/23	2023/24
Mothers living in Sure Start areas	13.6%	13.0%
Mothers not living in Sure Start areas	11.5%	11.8%
All Mothers	12.4%	12.3%

These are the latest figures available at time of completion of this Report Card

Source: Children's Health in NI 23/24

% of Mothers Maternal BMI recorded as Obese at Antenatal booking

	2022/23	2023/24
Mothers living in Sure Start areas	30.1%	30.7%
Mothers not living in Sure Start areas	26.5%	27%
All Mothers	28%	28.6%

These are the latest figures available at time of completion of this Report Card

Source: NIMATS via Business Objects (Health Intelligence Unit, PHA), 23/24

Infants Born By Birth Weight.

	2022/2023			2023/2024		
	<2,500g	2,500 - 3,999g	4,000+g	<2,500g	2,500 - 3,999g	4,000+g
Infants living in Sure Start areas	627	6,936	969	590	6,858	857
Infants not living in Sure Start areas	639	9,575	1,648	677	9,344	1,563
All infants	1,266	16,511	2,617	1,267	16,202	2,420

These are the latest figures available at time of completion of this Report Card

Source: Children's Health in NI 23/24

Is anyone better off? Health Outcomes

Endnote



% of Dental Registrations against GP Registrations

Children Aged 0-5 years

NI Average 38.8%

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23; 2023/24; 2024/25; 2025/26
Children living in Sure Start areas	50.9%	40.5%	35.7%	No data available
Children not living in Sure Start areas	57.1%	46.7%	42.6%	



% of Dental Registrations against GP Registrations

Children Aged 0 -2 years

NI Average 13.2%

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23; 2023/24; 2024/25; 2025/26
Children living in Sure Start areas	28.5%	14.2%	11.2%	No data available
Children not living in Sure Start areas	32.4%	17.8%	15.7%	



% of Dental Registrations against GP Registrations

Children Aged 3-5years

NI Average 60.9%

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23; 2023/24; 2024/25; 2025/26
Children living in Sure Start areas	71.2%	64.1%	56.4%	No data available
Children not living in Sure Start areas	79.6%	72.0%	66.0%	

Source: Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service and Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership

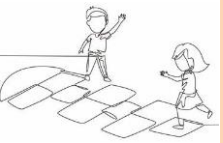
Is anyone better off? Education and Living in Safety Outcomes

Endnote



% of Year 1-7 primary pupils with a statement of SEN
NI Average 24/25 -7.5%
Source: DE, Annual School Census

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Children living in Sure Start areas	5.90%	Data not available for 2023/24 due to ASOS	7.90%	9%
Children not living in Sure Start areas	4.30%		5.70%	6.4%



% of Year 1-7 primary pupils recorded as Newcomer
NI Average 24/25 -8.6%
Source: DE, Annual School Census

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Children living in Sure Start areas	11.70%	Data not available for 2023/24 due to ASOS	13.10%	12.8%
Children not living in Sure Start areas	5.10%		5.70%	5.7%



% Percentage of leavers 5 GCSEs
A*-C inc English & Maths
NI Average 24/25 - 71.9%
Source: DE, School Leavers Survey

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Children living in Sure Start areas	68.20%	63.80%	63.70%	Information not available until May 2027
Children not living in Sure Start areas	81.20%	76.50%	77.0%	



Number of Domestic Abuse Recorded Crimes

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23; 2023/24; 2024/25; 2025/26
Children living in Sure Start areas	11664	13525	11754	No data available
Children not living in Sure Start areas	6976	8198	7282	

Source: Department of Education and Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership

Endnotes

Page 4 – 2.74% of children have been registered via the 'Outreach – Meeting Exceptional Need Outside of Catchment Area' by 31 March 2026. Through the new Outreach model, 874 children living outside catchment areas, have been registered within their local Sure Start project. 874 represents 2.74% of existing numbers of children in current catchment areas.

How Well did we do?

Page 5 - Percentage of eligible children registered have decreased in this reporting year (70% to 68%). The decline in registrations may be attributed to lower birth rates. Note the % usage of children aged 0-3 has increased.

Page 5 - There has been an increase in the number of fathers registered and an increase in the number of fathers accessing a service. It is important to note that fathers' work can be specific and specialised, and Projects continue to focus on increasing fathers' registrations and engagement. *Note: Fathers also includes male carers.*

Page 5 – There has been a decrease in the number of Mothers and Families registered (see Page 4), but notably the % usage of services by registered Mothers and Families has increased. Factors that may have influenced registrations of Mothers and Families may include:

- Increasingly complex needs, resulting in more targeted service delivery, which consequently impacts on Projects' scope to work with higher number of families.
- Impact of staffing pressures on ability to meet full-service delivery.
- Working patterns of families may influence the decision to register.
- Lower birth rates may also contribute to a decline in registration.

Page 5 – Children registered before 1st birthday figure has remained consistent at 72% in 2025/26.

Policy Outcome: Improved Language Skills

Page 6 & 7 - Speech Language and Communication (SLC) Language tools used throughout 2025/26 were WellComm, the Hanen Communication and Language Stages Model and Bilingual Profile to map progress of all eligible children. These language tools recognise areas of strengths and help identify where additional support is required.

Some children did not receive Hanen screens due to long term absence, SLT vacancies and leaving the DP2-3YO before receiving their second screening.

Policy Outcome: Early Identification of Development Delay

Page 8 - Signposting families to Early Intervention Services has decreased slightly (less than 1%) in this reporting year. Key factors affecting this are –:

- Families presenting with increasingly complex needs, resulting in more targeted service delivery, which consequently impacts on Project's scope to work with higher number of families.
- Impact of staffing pressures can affect all areas of service delivery.
- Variations in recording – ongoing work to promote a consistent approach.

Endnotes

Policy Outcome: Enhanced Parenting Skills

Page 11 - Outcomes Star captures 'distance travelled' on the journey towards sustainable changes in Individual's well-being and circumstances.

This year saw a 4.2% increase in recording of the Outcome Star tool from 1675 to 1746.
The number of families receiving 1st and 2nd star has decreased from 627 to 597. This reduction may be related to the timing of the outcome stars resulting in the second stars not being completed within this reporting period.

SPPG have issued additional licenses and facilitated Sure Start Managers' training on Outcome Star and will work with Projects to ensure increased implementation of the tool across the region.

Policy Outcome: Effectively Integrated Services

Page 13 - 82% of Live Births referred to Sure Start via NIMATS in 2023/24.
Please note that the figure presented is the most recent data available at the time of completion of this Report Card. The publication of the 2024/25 Children's Health in NI report has been delayed, therefore up-to-date statistics are not available. Consequently, the data presented should be regarded as the latest available at the time of reporting.

NIMATS - Referral to Sure Start via NIMATS requires parental consent. The remaining 18% can register with the Project through a range of other methods, such as self-referral, Health Visiting referral or Family Nurse Partnerships. Antenatal parents can register with the Project at any point during their pregnancy or indeed postnatally.

Page 13 - 98% of NIMATS referrals registered – When Projects contact those referred through NIMATS, the remaining 2% of antenatal parents may choose to defer registration until the postnatal period, or they may no longer require Sure Start services, or they may decide that they do not wish to register and withdraw consent.

Is anyone better off? Health & Living in Safety Outcomes

Page 14 – Percentage of women who smoked – Data excludes women delivering in SEHSCT area between 9/11/23 and 31/3/24. Consistent data for smoking status was not available for these women on EPIC and so these women have been excluded from the data in this table. Data refers to women who were resident in Northern Ireland.

Sure Start area is allocated based on the postcode of the woman at time of birth. Percentage of women who smoked is a valid percentage i.e. number of women who smoked as a % of number of women delivering who had a smoking status recorded.

Please note that the figure presented is the most recent data available at the time of completion of this Report Card. The publication of the 2024/25 Children's Health in NI report has been delayed, therefore up-to-date statistics are not available. Consequently, the data presented should be regarded as the latest available at the time of reporting.

Endnotes

Is anyone better off? Health Outcomes

Page 14, 15, 16 and 18 - Please note that the figure presented is the most recent data available at the time of completion of this Report Card. The publication of the 2024/25 Children's Health in NI report has been delayed, therefore up-to-date statistics are not available. Consequently, the data presented should be regarded as the latest available at the time of reporting.

Is anyone better off? Health & Living in Safety Outcomes

Page 17 and 18 - Sure Start areas are designated by application of the current, official measure of deprivation (i.e. the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2017). It has not been possible to include 2022/23 and 2023/24 figures for dental registrations and numbers of domestic abuse recorded crimes as the collation of related data does not align with NIMDM 2017.

Page 18 - Figures for 2023/24 could not be provided as this data was not available at pupil level, due to Action Short of Strike (ASOS), therefore unable to distinguish between children within Sure Start areas and non Sure Start Areas.

Is anyone better off? Education Outcomes

Page 18 - Percentage of Leavers 5 GCSEs A*-C including English & Maths 22/23.

Given the various assessment adaptations or other supports in place for 2022/23, caution should be taken when drawing any conclusions relating to changes in student performance. Year-on-year changes might have been impacted by the different processes for awarding qualifications in these years rather than reflect a change in underlying performance.

Figures for 2024/25 could not be provided as this data was not available at pupil level, due to ASOS, therefore unable to distinguish between children within Sure Start areas and non Sure Start Areas.

Page 18 - A newcomer pupil is one who has enrolled in a school but who does not have the satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum, and the wider environment, and does not have a language in common with the teacher, whether that is English or Irish.

This has previously been referred to as English an Additional Language. It does not refer to indigenous pupils who choose to attend an Irish medium school.