

# BEST START POLICY AND GUIDELINES



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## Executive Summary

### What is Best Start?

The first years of life are crucial to lifelong learning, wellbeing and success. The Andrews Labor Government is making Victoria the Education State and this begins with giving every child a great start in life by strengthening early childhood services for children and families.

Best Start is a prevention and early intervention program that aims to improve the health, development, learning and wellbeing of all Victorian children from conception through to transition to school (up to eight years old).

There is consensus that a loving, healthy and intellectually stimulating early childhood is critical to a person's wellbeing and success throughout their life. Children who have a strong start in life are more likely to do well academically and socially as they grow older. Conversely, young children who miss out on positive experiences with parents, caregivers and educators are much more likely to have to struggle to catch up.

Best Start is characterised by an approach that supports parents and caregivers to create a positive environment for children by encouraging communities to work with their local early years services and schools.

Communities and service providers collaborate to address issues as they are experienced at a neighbourhood or regional level.

This localised, targeted way of finding solutions to problems faced by families has been shown to be extremely effective. Efforts are focused on boosting children's participation in the programs we know have the best results for setting them up for success, such as kindergarten and maternal and child health (MCH) services. The program also puts in place prevention strategies, such as providing referral pathways when targeted supports are required.

Victoria has a strong early childhood system with high participation rates in MCH services and kindergarten – however some children are missing out. Typically, these are children who are experiencing vulnerability and have the most to gain from engaging in high-quality services.

The Best Start program operates in 30 locations across Victoria. There are 24 mainstream sites and six Aboriginal Best Start sites in rural and metropolitan locations.

It is based on formal partnerships of local agencies and service providers to improve the outcomes for children.

### Aboriginal Best Start

The Aboriginal Best Start projects have been established to ensure that local Aboriginal communities and organisations are given every possible opportunity to support positive outcomes for their children and families.

The Aboriginal Best Start sites are operated by Aboriginal organisations in Horsham; La Trobe and Baw Baw; Wathaurong-Geelong; Echuca; and Dandenong-Casey. The East Gippsland Aboriginal Best Start site is operated by East Gippsland Shire.

### Why is Best Start changing?

In 2015, the Department of Education and Training conducted a comprehensive review of Best Start with the aim of updating the project in light of the latest research and policy developments.

The review identified a number of priorities to ensure that Best Start remains an effective program for supporting families, including the need for:

- clearer, more measurable and more evidence-based strategies and actions
- a strengthened focus on boosting the participation of all Aboriginal children and children experiencing vulnerability in key universal and targeted services, in particular in kindergarten, maternal and child health services and supported playgroups; and
- improved monitoring, data collection and reporting.

The review has led to the development to a set of new Best Start guidelines.

## What has changed?

The new guidelines set out four new priorities. These replace the 15 indicators in the previous guidelines.

The new outcomes have a sharper focus than the previous 15 indicators, and emphasise a child's holistic growth, including their learning, health and development. There is also a greater focus on ways to improve and tailor the service for families and children experiencing significant challenges.

Best Start Outcomes	
Primary	Children engage and participate in early childhood education (kindergarten and supported playgroups).
	Children and families actively engage with MCH services, attending key ages and stages visits.
Optional	Children acquire literacy and numeracy skills through active participation in their education.
	Early childhood services provide an engaging and high-quality environment for children and families experiencing vulnerability.

The new approach is also centered on monitoring and reporting. An evaluation of the Best Start program highlighted the need for clearer, more measurable and more evidence-based strategies and actions.

The new approach provides Best Start partnerships with evidence-based strategies and actions to deliver measurable benefits for young children.

Best Start Partnerships will now use rapid action-reflection 'Plan, Do, Study, Act' cycles. The cycle tests an idea by temporarily trialing a change and assessing its immediate impact.

## How will the new approach be implemented?

The approach will commence from 1 July 2016. Training and support to Best Start sites has already commenced and will continue throughout 2016 and into 2017.

Improved data collection and reporting will assist local communities, service providers and Government to track and regularly monitor the progress towards the outcomes.

## What support will be provided?

The Murdoch Childrens Research Institute's Centre for Community Child Health will deliver training and support to Best Start Facilitators to assist all Best Start Partnerships implement the new approach. This will include a focus on building local capacity to understand and apply data from a range of sources to plan and implement effective strategies to improve children's learning and development outcomes.



## About Best Start

**Vision:** Communities work in partnership to improve the learning, health and development outcomes of young children and their families, particularly those in greatest need.

### Purpose and focus

Best Start is a Victorian Government early years, place-based initiative that is funded and administered by the Department of Education and Training (the Department) to support families, caregivers and communities in providing the best possible environment, experiences and care for children from birth to age eight.

Best Start places a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention, and has a particular focus on children experiencing vulnerability and all Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> children. It is based on formal partnerships of local agencies and service providers that plan, deliver and monitor evidence-based strategies to improve outcomes for children.

### Defining vulnerability

In the context of the Best Start program, vulnerability can refer to a broad range of factors that may prevent children from reaching their potential – for example, children in Out of Home Care or at risk of abuse or neglect, newly arrived migrants/refugees, children with a disability or developmental delay, isolated and rural communities, transient populations and areas of entrenched disadvantage.

Best Start partnerships should use local data and community knowledge to identify those who are experiencing vulnerability at their sites.

**Best Start supports the principle that participation and success in early childhood education should be equitable and should not depend on personal or social circumstances.**

### Best Start key directions

Victoria has a strong early childhood system with high participation rates in maternal and child health (MCH) services and kindergarten – however some children are missing out, typically, the children who are experiencing vulnerability and have the most to gain from engaging in high-quality services.

A comprehensive review of the Best Start program was undertaken in 2015. The review sought to build on the achievements of Best Start since its inception in 2002 and set it up for future success by:

- more closely aligning it with current Government policy priorities for early childhood
- incorporating contemporary knowledge and evidence regarding place-based approaches
- responding to evolving demographic and socio-economic patterns.

The 2015 review of the program confirmed the key directions for the Best Start program as being:

- a continued focus on local partnerships and community engagement as the program's foundation
- a greater focus on the participation of all Aboriginal children and children experiencing vulnerability in key universal and targeted services, in particular in kindergarten, MCH services and Supported Playgroups<sup>2</sup>
- improved monitoring, data collection and reporting by Best Start partnerships so that the intended outcomes are realised and sustained.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document the term 'Aboriginal' is used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of Best Start, 'Supported Playgroups' refers to Department-funded, targeted playgroups.

The shift in the Best Start program to have a greater attention on the participation of all Aboriginal children and children experiencing vulnerability in key universal and targeted services, in particular in kindergarten, MCH services and Supported Playgroups will further support improved outcomes for all Victorian children.

## Best Start outcomes

Being clear about the outcomes Best Start programs need to achieve is important for several reasons:

- an outcomes focus gives partnerships **an unambiguous view of what they need to achieve**. Having this information before implementing a strategy means partnerships will think about what they have to deliver to ensure they meet the outcomes – and this will not necessarily be the services they currently provide or know how to provide
- focus more intently on the change they want to bring about for children and families, as opposed to focusing on services
- identify the strategies and actions that are most likely to achieve desired outcomes for children and families
- determine whether a service is having the intended effect.

To deliver on these key directions we have moved from the previous 15 indicators to four outcomes that we know make a difference to the lives of children who are at risk of falling behind.

While the new outcomes have a sharper focus than the previous 15 indicators, the emphasis is still very much on a child's holistic growth including their learning, health and development. As well as the direct benefits that children receive from active engagement in kindergarten and MCH, these services provide a referral pathway when other, more targeted supports are required.

The primary and optional outcomes listed below are medium-term outcomes, and have been devised to focus and organise partnership efforts so that they align with Best Start key directions.

Best Start outcomes	
Primary outcomes	Children engage and participate in early childhood education (kindergarten and Supported Playgroups)
	Children and families actively engage with MCH services, attending key ages and stages visits
Optional outcomes	Children acquire literacy and numeracy skills through active participation in their education
	Early childhood services provide an engaging environment for children and families experiencing vulnerability

Refer to Best Start outcomes on page 22 for details on when a partnership may consider an optional outcome.



## Policy context: Why the early years are important

### Victoria the Education State

The first years of life are crucial to lifelong learning, wellbeing and success. The Victorian Government is making Victoria the Education State and this begins with giving every child a strong start in life by strengthening early childhood services for children and families.

Early childhood is the best time to transform a person's life. This is the time when a child's potential – their imagination, curiosity and creative spark – is first nurtured. Effort and investment well spent during our children's early years repay themselves many times over – in better lives and in fairer, more prosperous societies. Best Start contributes to achieving these outcomes by having a particular focus on supporting all Aboriginal children and children experiencing vulnerability to increase their participation in kindergarten and MCH services. See [www.educationstate.education.vic.gov.au](http://www.educationstate.education.vic.gov.au) for more information.

### Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children

The Victorian Government is committed to reform that protects families and sets a child up for life, leaving them more likely to be healthy, to form positive relationships, to learn and grow, and to get a job. The Roadmap for Reform will create services that are co-ordinated and work together to meet the needs of vulnerable families and children, forming an important step in the government's long-term response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Best Start aligns with this work by facilitating a partnership approach via services and communities working together to support children and families, in particular all Aboriginal children and children experiencing vulnerability to access high-quality early childhood services. See <http://strongfamiliesafechildren.vic.gov.au/roadmap-for-reform-strong-families-safe-children>

### The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) guides all early childhood professionals to work together and with families to support the learning and development of children aged birth to eight.

The VEYLDF describes outcomes for children's learning and development that provide shared goals for professionals' work with children and their families. These outcomes are:

- Children have a strong sense of identity
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children are confident and involved learners
- Children are effective communicators.

The VEYLDF also emphasises the importance of supporting children's and families' transitions as they move within and across services throughout the early childhood period. See [www.education.vic.gov.au/veylf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/veylf)

## Aboriginal Best Start

The Victorian Government acknowledges that early childhood development is at the heart of its vision for the Education State. Ensuring that all Victorian Aboriginal children have access to and participate in high quality early childhood education and care services is an imperative of this key Victorian Government policy.

The Victorian Government has recommitted to the Closing the Gap targets under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement between the Australian Government and state and territory governments to improve the educational outcomes for Aboriginal children.

Aboriginal Best Start projects have been established to make sure that local Aboriginal communities and organisations are given every possible opportunity to influence outcomes for their children and families.

There are six Aboriginal Best Start sites across Victoria run by the Aboriginal community for the Aboriginal community. While these sites focus specifically on the Aboriginal community the priority focus for all Best Start sites is Aboriginal children.

The Aboriginal Best Start sites have the same outcomes and accountabilities as mainstream sites.



## Values and qualities held by all Best Start sites working with Aboriginal children

The Aboriginal cultural beliefs that have been identified in Best Start and reaffirmed as part of the new policy are<sup>3</sup>:

- Our children are our present and our future.
- Our children should have access to good health, wellbeing and education programs so that they will be empowered to achieve their full potential.
- Our children have the right to an education that strengthens their culture and identity.
- Our children have the right to live in communities that are safe and free from violence.
- Our children have the right to identify as Aboriginal Australians, to be proud of our history, cultural beliefs and practices.
- Our children have the right to maintain connection to their land and country.
- Our children have the right to maintain their strong kinship ties and social obligations.
- Our children have a strong contribution to make to enrich the Aboriginal community and as members of the wider community.
- Our children have a right to be taught our cultural heritage by our Elders.
- Our children should be taught to respect their Elders.



<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal Best Start Status Report 2004, Department of Human Services



## Governance

Best Start partnerships establish governance mechanisms that are strong, clearly defined and transparent. Good governance ensures all partnership members have a voice at the table – it supports their ability to make strong decisions with group agreement and those decisions contribute to achieving Best Start outcomes.

Best Start partnerships must establish and meet the following governance requirements:

- A formalised partnership agreement or other legal partnership entity must be in place and approved by the relevant regional director. For more information, see 'Partnership agreements' on page 18.
- A chairperson must be appointed or elected for a specified period of time as outlined in the Best Start partnership agreement.
- New partners must be provided with a comprehensive orientation.
- In partnership meetings, partnership member representatives must hold sufficient delegated authority to make decisions and commitments on behalf of their organisation.
- Best Start partnership members have a shared responsibility for the implementation of Best Start program strategies, with a view to achieving service system change within their own organisation, across the partnership and more broadly. Working groups with a wider membership than the core Best Start partners may be established to address specific outcomes.
- Partnership agreements should be reviewed annually and updated every four years, in line with renegotiating Department funding and the service agreement with the Best Start site's fund holder. For more information about fund holders and the funding and service agreement, see 'Roles and responsibilities' on page 14 and 'Funding' on page 19.
- A local partnership may revisit their partnership agreement on a more regular basis, particularly if there are significant changes in the policy or service context.
- Where the Best Start partnership is part of a larger local early years network, Best Start business, strategies and reporting must appear as a regular agenda item with a clear line of sight to Best Start outcomes.



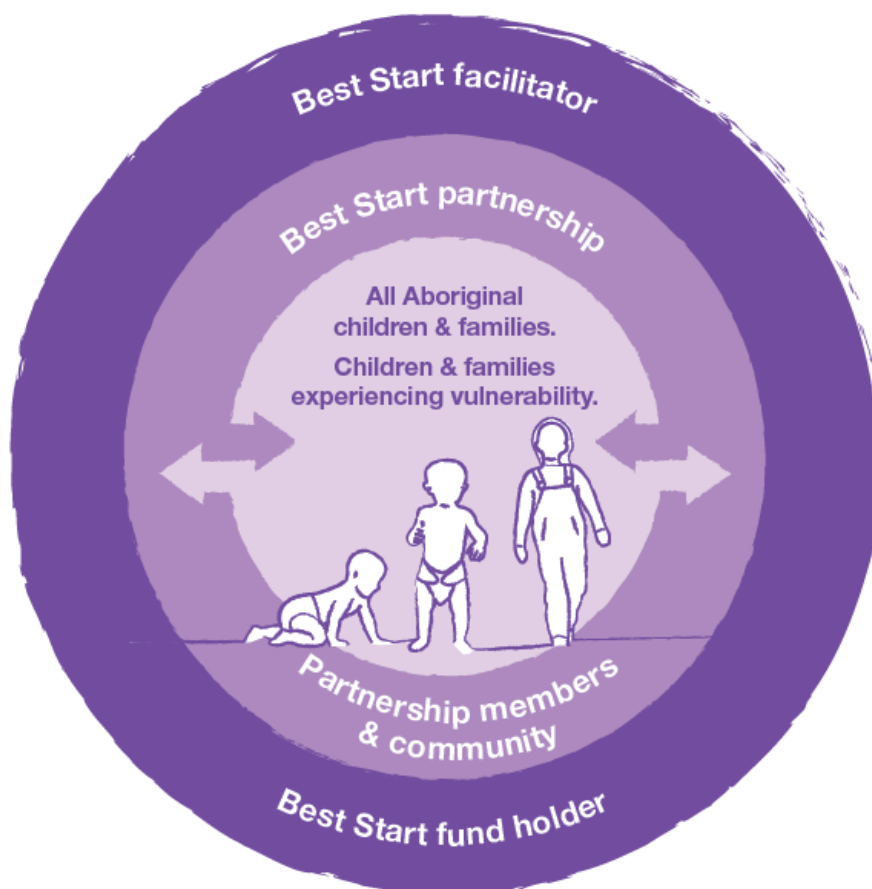
## Best Start partnerships

Best Start Partnerships lead reform at the local level. They play a key role in bringing local services together to deliver on the Best Start outcomes for children and their families, in particular those with the greatest needs. All Best Start partnerships have a role to play in working in a culturally inclusive manner with Aboriginal communities.

The Best Start partnership works collaboratively to:

- take responsibility for the interests of all children, especially all Aboriginal children and children experiencing vulnerability, to access the key universal platforms of kindergarten and MCH services, and targeted services like Supported Playgroups
- work in a culturally inclusive manner with Aboriginal communities
- define and agree on the barriers and needs for their Best Start site that align with the Best Start vision, key directions, outcomes and the site's special areas of focus. They are careful to ensure the impact of the partnership is placed ahead of the interests of any individual organisation
- develop a logic model and devise strategies and actions to test through Plan Do Study Act cycles, and engage in improvement cycles to achieve Best Start outcomes
- monitor and report on progress regularly so that improvements can be made to their Best Start strategies and actions
- prepare, develop and endorse all reports in line with the Department's requirements. See 'Reporting' on page 30.

The diagram below describes the collaborative relationships within a Best Start partnership.



## Partnership members

### Partner groups

Essential partner groups directly affect and contribute to achieving the Best Start outcomes. They work with the regional representative from the Department and other government partners, to progress towards the Best Start outcomes.

These essential partner groups include, but are not limited to:

- **families and other community representatives**, which could include Aboriginal Elders. Parents and families are critical partners in Best Start as they have the first and most enduring impact on their children's health, learning, development and wellbeing, and are 'experts' in their child's strengths, needs and abilities
- **other government departments**, such as the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
- **local government**. The Victorian Government values and supports the leadership role that local government takes in the planning, coordination and delivery of early years services in Victoria
- **Aboriginal community partners** provide specialist cultural and community advice to ensure the Aboriginal community plays the key role in guiding outcomes for Aboriginal children and families
- **early years education services**, e.g. supported playgroups, long day care providers, early years management organisations and family day care
- **early childhood intervention services**, e.g. speech pathologists, paediatricians and general practitioners
- **maternal and child health services (MCH)**, including services managed and operated by local government, local health services and Aboriginal-controlled services
- **health services**
- **government and non-government schools**
- **family services**, i.e. services that address the inclusion and participation of families experiencing vulnerability and families with complex needs in universal early years services
- **local community organisations**.

When a partnership determines the strategies they will put in place to progress towards the Best Start outcomes, they should objectively review the partnership members to decide if it has the right make up to affect the change.

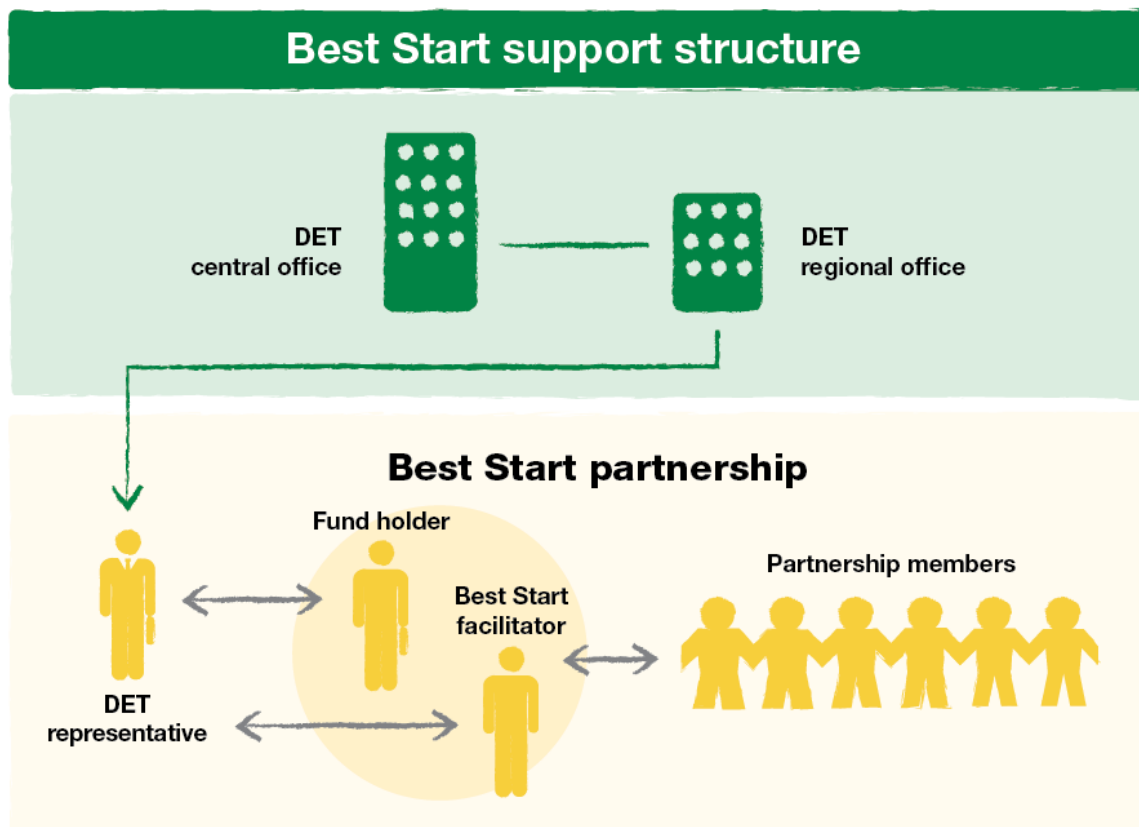
#### Example thinking:

For what we want to achieve, do we have the 'right' people/organisations in our partnership? Do they have the appropriate authority in their organisation to affect change? For example, the capacity to allocate and/or redirect resources, to identify and network with other agencies, to collaborate in joint strategies and pool resources? Do we need to engage others in our partnership for this strategy?



## Clearly defined roles and responsibilities support strong governance

Having strong governance in place supports effective and timely decision-making across the partnership. A hallmark of good governance is clearly defined roles and responsibilities.



## Roles and responsibilities

For Best Start partnerships, roles and responsibilities provide the clarity that helps many different partnership members to work together under the partnership. The table below outlines the responsibilities of the various partnership members.

Partner	Responsibility
The Department	<p><b>Central office</b> oversees the Best Start program design and implementation, and works in partnership with the regional offices to provide advice and guidance on Best Start requirements, and to facilitate sharing relevant data.</p> <p><b>Regional offices:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>are the first point of contact for Best Start sites.</b> Best Start sites contact their regional office for assistance, negotiation and guidance</li> <li>• <b>facilitate the sharing of innovative practice</b> between Best Start sites and partnerships by developing appropriate networks and participating in them</li> <li>• <b>administer funding and service agreement with fund holders.</b> The Department enters into a funding and service agreement with the fund holder who is the lead agency for the Best Start site. As the funding body, the Department requires the funded service to be monitored against the performance measures and targets specified for the activity in the service agreement. Monitoring is undertaken through data collection and financial accountability requirements (as specified in the service agreement and in these guidelines). Any proposal by a Best Start site to change the fund holder is discussed and negotiated with the Department through the relevant regional office. If agreed, a new funding and service agreement is established with the new fund holder</li> <li>• <b>nominate a regional representative to participate in a partnership.</b> This enhances collaboration with the Victorian Government as a key stakeholder. The regional representative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• monitors the funding and service agreement of the Best Start fund holder</li> <li>• provides the connection between the central office and Best Start site, including between key fund-holder managers, facilitators and partnership members.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>To avoid any conflict of interest, the regional representative has no voting or other decision-making rights in the Best Start partnership.</p>
Other staff employed by the Department	<p>Other staff employed by the Department who are participating in a Best Start partnership may have full voting and other decision-making rights, providing they do not have responsibility for monitoring the funding and service agreement or other aspects of the functioning of the partnership.</p> <p>Other Department employees include, but are not limited to, school principals, Koorie Education Coordinators, Koorie Engagement Support Officers and specialist children's services staff.</p>

Partner	Responsibility
Fund holder	<p>The fund holder:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• must be an incorporated body that is able to demonstrate financial viability as the holder of government funds, for example local government or health service</li> <li>• ensures the local Best Start program complies with the conditions of the funding and service agreement</li> <li>• is responsible for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• providing sound financial systems that ensure money is managed and spent in line with the funding and service agreement and the guidance of the local Best Start partnership</li> <li>• employing the Best Start facilitator and providing their professional support</li> <li>• ensuring spending represents value for money</li> <li>• ensuring Best Start reporting requirements, as outlined in these guidelines and any subsequent amendments, are adhered to, noting it is the responsibility of the partnership to develop and endorse these reports</li> </ul> </li> <li>• is accountable to the Best Start partnership and to the Department for appropriate management of funds and for clear and transparent reporting against expenditure.</li> </ul>
Best Start facilitators	<p>Facilitators support Best Start partnerships in their designated local area, as they work to achieve improved outcomes for children.</p> <p>Facilitator responsibilities include, but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• engaging and networking effectively with Aboriginal and mainstream services. They build relationships, gain commitment from partners and work to keep commitment levels high</li> <li>• the review of data, evidence and local knowledge with the partnership to identify community needs and then to develop key strategies and actions to respond to those needs</li> <li>• leading local data collection plans and transferring data to the Best Start central data repository</li> <li>• identifying learnings and opportunities for improvement</li> <li>• supporting the Best Start monitoring and reporting framework.</li> </ul> <p>While the facilitator plays a role in developing, monitoring and reporting on strategies, this role is not a service delivery or operational role. For more information about facilitator responsibilities, see the sample position description at <a href="http://www.beststart.vic.gov.au">www.beststart.vic.gov.au</a></p>

Partner	Responsibility
Local government	<p>Local government, as the third tier of government, understands and represents the interests of the local community, and is responsible for strategic local area planning that meets the needs of the local community.</p> <p>Local government plays a key legislated role in strategically planning and coordinating early childhood services within a municipality, and acts in the best interests of the community. It does this through its Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plans and its non-statutory Municipal Early Years Plans.</p> <p>These plans provide strategic direction for coordinating education, care and health programs and activities within the municipality that affect children – from birth, through kindergarten, to the time they enter school.</p> <p>It is therefore essential for local government to regularly engage with local early years service providers, including Best Start partnerships, to exchange data and information relating to the needs of the community, such as information on service enrolments, capacity and usage.</p> <p>This allows all providers to work together in responding to current and future community needs, and ensures that all children – particularly those who are experiencing vulnerability – have access to quality early years services and initiatives within their municipality.</p>
VACSAL	<p>The Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd (VACSAL) provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>intensive support to all six Aboriginal Best Start sites and a select number of mainstream Best Start sites</li> <li>general culturally specific support and advice to all Best Start sites across the state.</li> </ul> <p>Specifically, VACSAL provides advice and information on evidence-based strategies or emerging strategies that demonstrate they may be effective in addressing barriers to Aboriginal children's participation in kindergarten, Supported Playgroups and MCH services.</p> <p>This cultural advice and information sharing is provided through an annual forum, regular contact with Best Start sites and Best Start collaboration site updates.</p>
Other place-based partnerships	<p>In Victoria, a range of collaborative, place-based groups exist, including but not limited to Children and Youth Area Partnerships, Child FIRST, Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees, and Communities for Children.</p> <p>When planning Best Start strategies and actions, partnerships must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identify existing collaborative structures in the local area and where there is overlap in task and membership, then</li> <li>identify how the work of the Best Start partnership fits with the existing or emerging groups, and</li> <li>consider how the relationship between them might work.</li> </ul>

**Example thinking:**

Child FIRST (Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Teams) in designated sub-regional areas across Victoria provide a community-based referral point into Family Services.

Child FIRST is staffed by Family Services practitioners who have experience in assessing the needs of children experiencing vulnerability, and of young people and families.

In addition, community-based Child Protection staff facilitate collaboration between any community-based intake service and Child Protection. Specifically, Child Protection staff:

- provide advice to Child FIRST and Family Services about how to identify significant risk factors
- explain how to engage families with complex needs
- arrange timely Child Protection involvement if a child is at risk of significant harm.

Representation of Best Start in the Child FIRST Alliance and of Child First Alliance in Best Start partnerships is critical given Best Start's focus on all children experiencing vulnerability.

## Partnership agreements

Best Start partnerships are considered formal when a partnership agreement is signed and approved by the Department Regional Director.

### What makes up a partnership agreement?

- Details of the fund holder/lead agency.
- Details of the geographic focus of the partnership.
- A vision, the shared values and the objectives of the partnership, which are consistent with Best Start key directions and outcomes.
- Partnership accountability mechanisms, including documenting the role, responsibilities and limits of the Best Start fund holder.
- An outline of the structures that the Best Start partnership will use to implement the Best Start strategies, such as working groups, reference groups and parent/participant consultative advisory groups.
- Documented meeting procedures, including how often they are held, who is expected to attend, how many parties need to attend to make up a formal meeting, decision-making protocols and principles, and systems for managing potential conflicts of interest.
- Other key processes and procedures including dispute resolution, grievance, communication and confidentiality.
- The signatures of partnership members, and any partnership member that is invited to join the partnership for their specific skills, to implement a particular strategy.

A standard partnership agreement template can be found at [www.beststart.vic.gov.au](http://www.beststart.vic.gov.au).

### What to do when a new partner joins

If a decision is made to introduce a new partnership member, the Best Start partnership must formally endorse the new member and the new member must sign the existing Best Start partnership agreement.

Details of the additional partnership members and their signatures can be attached to the existing agreement as an addendum.

### Other ways to formalise the partnership

Partnerships may consider a more robust, legally binding method of formalising the partnership agreement, particularly if the partnership intends to investigate additional funding sources. This may include consortia agreements or incorporations.

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**Any alternative partnership arrangements need to be endorsed by the relevant regional representative of the Department.**

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## Partnership review tools

There are several available tools for reviewing the strength of the partnership. Best Start partnerships use these tools regularly to assist in improving collaborative practices within the partnership. An example of an available tool is the VicHealth Partnership Analysis Tool available at [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)



## Funding

### Funding allocation and reporting

#### Budget

Eighty per cent of Best Start funding makes up the Best Start facilitator's salary and salary-related costs such as long service leave, WorkCover and sick leave. The remaining twenty per cent is for administration costs, including professional supervision and development of the facilitator, and capital inputs such as office equipment, venue hire, and facilitator access to a mobile phone and motor vehicle.

#### In-kind support

The Department recognises the generosity of fund holders and partners in providing in-kind support to the Best Start program. They are often willing to use their own premises and infrastructure, for example to run working group meetings or for office space for the facilitator.

#### End of year reporting and surplus funds

At the end of each financial year, the fund holder will provide the relevant section of their organisation's audited financial statement of funding versus expenditure. If there is any unexpended funding at the end of financial year, it must be returned to the Department within 90 days of the new financial year or as otherwise agreed.

### Performance measures and targets

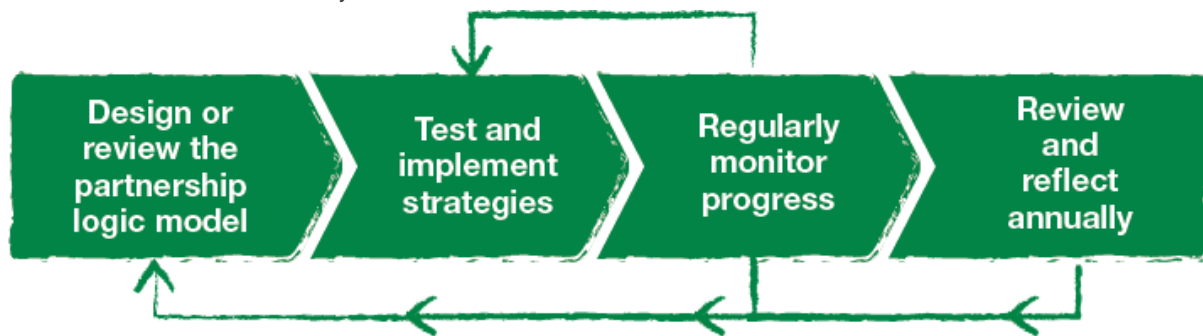
The Department monitors government-funded community service organisations against the performance measures and targets specified in their service agreement. Monitoring is undertaken through the data collection and financial accountability requirements specified in the service agreement.



## Implementing Best Start

Best Start partnerships take action towards the Best Start outcomes by completing these four steps:

1. Design or review the partnership's logic model. The logic model describes local needs, strategies and the outcomes to achieve.
2. Test and implement strategies.
3. Regularly monitor progress.
4. Review and reflect annually.



As shown in the diagram, there is no need to wait for the annual review to make changes to Best Start strategies.

A continuous feedback loop exists between testing and implementing strategies and regularly monitoring progress. This encourages partnerships to actively review data and act on it to:

- adapt, adopt or abandon strategies and actions
- revisit and adapt the partnership's logic model if required.

## Step 1: Design or review the partnership's logic model

### The logic model explained

Best Start partnerships use a logic model to define how Best Start will achieve its outcomes. A logic model is a 'picture' or visual description of how the program will work. It helps to define:

- the partnership's strategic focus or who it will be targeting (the target/focus group)
- what resources or inputs the partnership will use
- what the partnership will do (the strategies and actions)
- the results to be achieved (short-term and Best Start outcomes).

Engaging all partnership members in the design of the logic model helps to get 'buy-in' and develop a common understanding of what the partnership is trying to achieve.

### Designing and reviewing the logic model

Before starting the design of the logic model, it is useful to:

- familiarise all partnership members with the rationale for developing a logic model
- establish a shared understanding of terms used within a logic model.

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"Most of the value in a logic model is in the process of creating, validating, and modifying the model...The clarity of thinking that occurs from building the model is critical to the overall success of the program." (W.K. Kellogg Foundation Handbook, 1998, p. 43)

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It is unlikely that the Best Start partnership will need to redesign the logic model annually. Instead, they will use the annual review as an opportunity to see if anything needs adjusting. Changes to the logic model may also be made outside of the annual review period if required.

Best Start partnerships design and review their Best Start logic model by agreeing on and documenting the components shown in the diagram. Each component is described below and detailed templates and steps for developing the Best Start logic model are available at [www.beststart.vic.gov.au](http://www.beststart.vic.gov.au)



### Focus/Target

Every program or initiative has a particular focus or target group in mind. A logic model begins by describing the characteristics of the population or problem the partnership wants to address, and the characteristics of the service environment in which the population lives (CCCH, 2010). This focuses on issues and barriers that may be impacting on achieving Best Start outcomes and looks at opportunities that present or strengths to build on.

Understanding the focus or target group is crucial to understanding the inputs (the resources) the Best Start site will need and use to deliver on their strategies and actions.

There are a range of data sources partnerships may use to consider the local context and the focus or target. For example, local planning documents like municipal early years plans often summarise relevant data. Other data sources may include:

- consultations with families and service providers
- participation and attendance rates in key universal and targeted services – e.g. kindergarten, MCH key ages and stages visits, and Supported Playgroups
- Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data
- Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia (SEIFA) data
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data
- National Quality Standard (NQS) data
- NAPLAN results
- local government data snapshots and dashboards
- other relevant early years data, including but not limited to Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring Service (VCAMS) and Dropping Off the Edge.

### Inputs

Inputs refer to the resources needed by the Best Start partnership to address the target group's needs. An input will be members of the Best Start partnership.

### Strategies

The partnership devises and agrees strategies that will progress towards outcomes and respond to the needs of the focus/target group. Strategies may be:

- targeted, i.e. focused on a particular group or a particular geographic area, or
- universal, i.e. designed to influence all families across the Best Start site.

Strategies should be appropriate for the local community and where possible based on evidence.

Specific actions a partnership will undertake as part of a strategy will form part of their work plan.

After strategies are determined, it is useful to reflect on the composition of the Best Start partnership to make sure the actions can be implemented through the existing partnership or to decide whether to invite new members to participate.

### Short-term outcomes

Short-term outcomes are the results expected immediately after implementing strategies. They are often focused on attitudes or values.

Short-term outcomes consist of short-term changes unique to the partnership as well as short-term changes common across all Best Start partnerships. Common short-term outcomes and indicators used to measure progress towards these are at [www.beststart.vic.gov.au](http://www.beststart.vic.gov.au).

There should be a logical link between strategies, short-term outcomes and the Best Start (medium-term) outcomes. In other words, it must be feasible that:

- implementing the strategies will result in delivering the short-term outcomes, and
- achieving the short-term outcomes will lead to achieving the Best Start (medium-term) outcomes.

For more information, see Best Start outcomes, below.

### Best Start outcomes

The Best Start outcomes describe what Best Start partnerships need to achieve in the medium-term (e.g. three to five years).

All Best Start partnerships must focus on primary outcomes; optional outcomes may be included with approval from the Department if:

- there is demonstrated need in the local community
- the need is supported by data, and
- the partnership is able to provide evidence of capacity.

The table below outlines the Best Start outcomes.

Outcome type	Outcome
Primary outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children engage and participate in early childhood education (kindergarten and Supported Playgroups)</li><li>• Children and families actively engage with MCH services, attending key ages and stages visits</li></ul>
Optional outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children acquire literacy and numeracy skills through active participation in their education</li><li>• Early childhood services provide an engaging environment for children and families experiencing vulnerability</li></ul>

**Example thinking:**

Where in our community are we falling short of families engaging in MCH services? Who isn't engaging and why? How do we address this?

- Having defined outcomes enables partnerships **to devise strategies and plan actions that will deliver on the outcomes** they seek to achieve.

**Example thinking:**

- So now we've identified children in the birth to eight age group who experience vulnerability, let's talk about the strategies and actions that might address this.
- What do we know about the experience of these families and children? How can we learn more from these families?
- Which partners and community members do we need to engage with to decide on the right strategy or action for our region?
- What other services do we need to consider for this initiative – is there any overlap with other early childhood organisations?
- How will this strategy or action will help children to engage with and participate in (for example) a Supported Playgroup.

- The **outcomes become the reference point for the Best Start strategy and actions**. The partnership can measure the effectiveness of strategies and actions they implement or are running against the stated outcomes. Specifically, the Department looks for evidence – e.g. a positive change in the behaviour of children and families.

**Example thinking:**

- During this financial year, we used our Best Start partnership to improve the engagement of Aboriginal children in our childcare program.
- The service provided a room in the facility for outreach services and referrals on a weekly basis so families could drop-in to see a Maternal and Child Health nurse and a family support worker.
- The service had an Aboriginal Elder attend the centre to guide cultural activities for the children.
- The service arranged activities to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day.

**All Best Start partnerships must focus on the primary outcomes, and each partnership is required to design a logic model that describes how they will progress towards the Best Start outcomes. The logic model should be shared broadly within the community to demonstrate how the Partnership has reflected key community needs.**

## Step 2: Test and improve strategies

Introducing new strategies or changing strategies can be challenging. There may be low levels of confidence that an evidence-based strategy will be appropriate for a specific local context, or little research evidence to suggest a new strategy will be effective. It may also be difficult to know where to start when implementing or changing large-scale strategies.

### Tools to use for improvement

Best Start adopts an improvement approach – **The Model for Improvement** (Langley et al., 2009) – where strategies are broken down, tested and measured to ensure their effectiveness and fit. This approach incorporates rapid action–reflection cycles or **Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) cycles**.

Best Start facilitators are responsible for:

- encouraging and guiding Best Start partnerships to use the Model for Improvement
- collating and documenting PDSA cycles – documented cycles are then used to promote learning within other Best Start partnerships.

### Model for Improvement

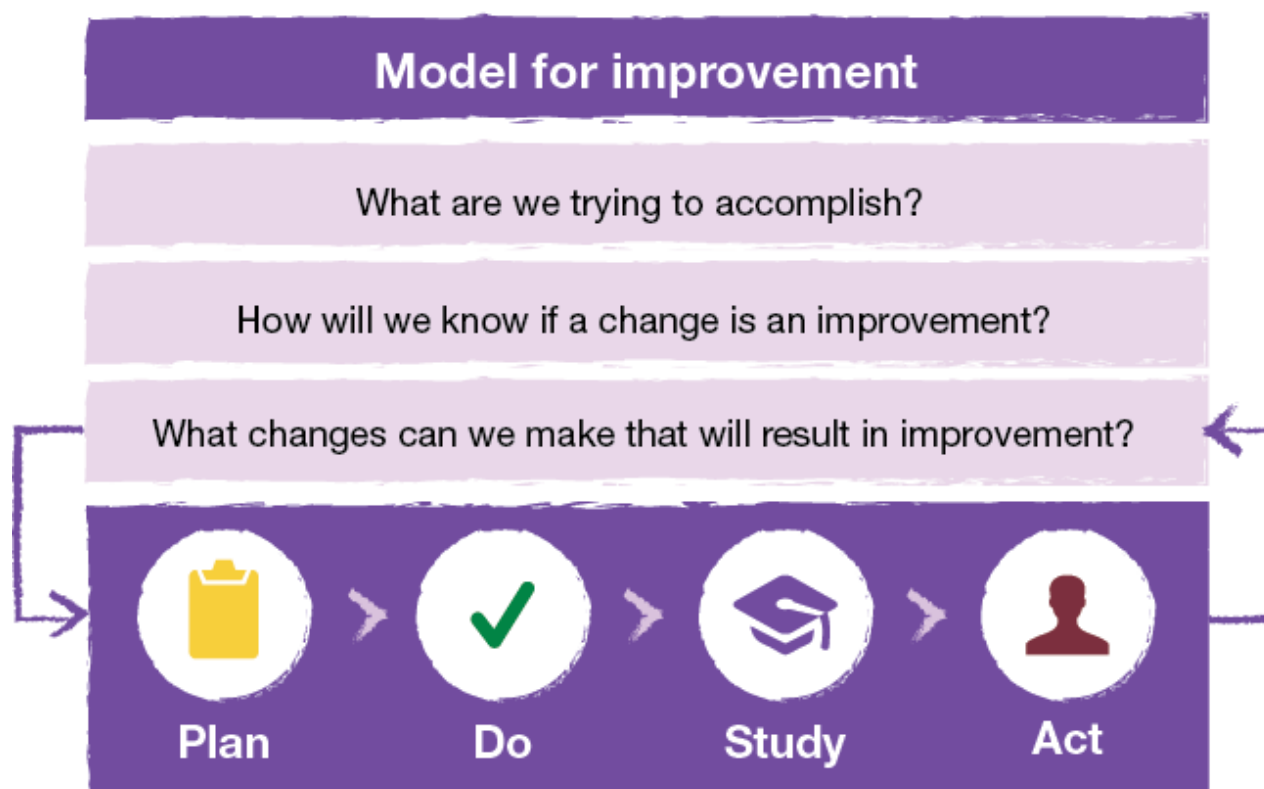
The Model for Improvement asks three key questions:

1. What are we trying to accomplish?
2. How will we know if a change is an improvement?
3. What changes can we make that will result in improvement?

### PDSA cycles

After answering these three questions, PDSA cycles are used to implement the change in small, manageable cycles and to identify when a change actually leads to an improvement.

The Model for Improvement and its relationship with PDSA cycles is shown below.





## Testing and improving



### Idea 1: Address low attendance in four year old kindergarten

#### Model for Improvement






**1. What are we trying to accomplish?** A Best Start partnership wanted to increase attendance rates at five kindergartens in one of their local government areas because they identified low attendance rates. This area had high levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

- Two services were part of an Early Years Management organisation, and a representative from that organisation sat on the partnership.
- Two services were standalone kindergartens and not in the partnership.
- One service was a long day care provider and not in the partnership.

**2. How will we know if the change is an improvement?** Attendance rates will increase.

**3. What changes can we make that will result in improvement?** Build relationships with kindergarten services then identify short-term strategies and actions to trial that may increase attendance rates, with a view to implementing them into practice as a service system change.

#### PDSA cycle

<b>Plan</b>	<p>The facilitator spent time building a relationship with the services and explained the aims of the Best Start partnership and then invited the services to participate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The long day care provider agreed to join the partnership.</li> <li>• One standalone kindergarten service did not want to participate in the partnership but was happy to participate in data collection.</li> <li>• The other standalone kindergarten service did not wish to participate in either the partnership or data collection.</li> </ul>	
<b>Do</b>	<p>The partnership worked with the four services that had agreed to participate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For four weeks each service collected attendance records that had no identifying information (e.g. the name was missing) and provided this to the Best Start facilitator. This served as the baseline data in the PDSA cycle.</li> <li>• For the next four weeks, each kindergarten trialed a two-tiered approach. For children: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• who attended sporadically, educators dedicated time to the child at pick up, providing positive feedback about the child to their parent/carer</li> <li>• who did not attend at all, a phone call was made to see if everything was okay and if there was anything that was stopping attendance.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>After four weeks of this trial, attendance records were again collected for a further four weeks, while continuing the two-tiered approach.</p>	
<b>Study</b>	<p>The attendance records determined that this approach resulted in, on average, a 72% increase in the attendance rates at each service.</p>	
<b>Act</b>	<p>The Best Start partnership reviewed the data and discussed whether this approach should be adopted, adapted or abandoned, and how that should occur. They determined the services would adopt this approach as part of their regular practice.</p>	
<b>Plan</b>	<p>The partnership noticed their data showed that several of the children still not attending were from two specific culturally and linguistically diverse communities. They decided their next PDSA cycle would focus on these groups and what they would like to test in that cycle.</p>	

## Testing and improving



### Idea 2: Parent support worker attends playgroup with parent experiencing vulnerability to support engagement






#### Model for Improvement

**1. What are we trying to accomplish?** We want to reduce the number of parents experiencing social isolation and increase their support networks.

**2. How will we know if the change is an improvement?** Parents report feeling more connected and having people to turn to when needed.

**3. What changes can we make that will result in improvement?** Encourage parent attendance at play group.

#### PDSA cycle

<b>Plan</b>	Parent support worker to attend playgroup with a parent experiencing vulnerability and their child, to help settle them in and ensure they feel comfortable and connected.	
<b>Do</b>	Parent support worker attended playgroup with one parent experiencing vulnerability soon after a home visit.	
<b>Study</b>	The parent experiencing vulnerability enjoyed the experience and connected well with the group. A follow-up with the parent found they had continued to attend the playgroup.	
<b>Act</b>	The partnership reviewed the evidence and decided to adapt the approach to trial this with more parents.	
<b>Plan</b>	Conduct a trial where parent support workers attend the first playgroup session that an identified parent experiencing vulnerability attends.	

## Testing and improving



### Idea 3: Maternal and Child Health Nurses introduce a feedback question at the end of appointments with families






#### Model for Improvement

**What are we trying to accomplish?** We want to get more regular feedback from families to make sure the maternal child and health service is meeting family needs.

**How will we know if the change is an improvement?** We are able to regularly collect feedback from families and use it to improve the service.

**What changes can we make that will result in improvement?** We will try asking some families for their feedback at the end of their appointment.

#### PDSA cycle

<b>Plan</b>	A Maternal and Child Health nurse will ask the following question of four families on Tuesday at the end of their appointment: 'Did we cover what you wanted to talk about today?'	
<b>Do</b>	The Maternal and Child Health nurse asked the question of four families on Tuesday.	
<b>Study</b>	Two out of four families responded that their appointment had addressed the things they wanted to talk about. The other two responded that there were other things they wanted to address in the appointment.	
<b>Act</b>	The partnership reviewed the evidence and determined that the approach should be adapted. Another PDSA cycle was planned to test this adaptation.	
<b>Plan</b>	The Maternal and Child Health nurse will ask the following question of four families on Thursday at the start of their appointment: 'What would you like to talk about today?' Then at the end of the appointment, they will ask: Did we cover what you wanted to talk about today?'	

## Step 3: Monitor progress regularly

Bringing together key information and data across a range of areas is a core part of the role of Best Start partnerships. This activity drives decisions and actions for the Best Start partnership, and provides information for monitoring and reporting on the Best Start site's progress against Best Start outcomes.

### Data dashboards

A data dashboard is a data visualisation tool. Data dashboards typically organise data onto a single screen or page to help data users review and make sense of real-time data from multiple sources.

Each Best Start site has a data dashboard that displays data for their partnership. The Best Start facilitator enters data into the central data repository so that it displays on each partnership's dashboard. This data is primarily collected to inform improvement (rather than being collected for judgement or research purposes).

### Using data dashboards for critical reflection

Partnerships use the dashboard data to reflect on their progress and to determine if strategies and ideas should be abandoned, adopted or adapted. This gives them a continuous feedback loop between the strategies and actions they have in place and the data reported through the dashboard. More information about partnership data and data dashboards is available at [www.beststart.vic.gov.au](http://www.beststart.vic.gov.au).





## Step 4: Review, reflect and report annually

Annual reviews allow partnerships to review, reflect and report on the:

- achievements and the work of the partnership, using slower-turning data like indicators of the Best Start medium-term outcomes
- governance, and how well the partnership is operating
- logic model (where appropriate)
- financial performance.



## Reporting

Bringing together key information and data across a range of areas is a core role of Best Start partnerships.

This data informs decisions and drives actions, and it is used to monitor and report on progress against Best Start outcomes.

Best Start sites must submit reports quarterly and annually.

### Quarterly progress reports

Report type	More information
Quarterly reports	To encourage active data monitoring, and to support implementation of the strategies and accountability, partnerships submit short quarterly progress reports to the Department.
PDSA reports	<p>Quarterly reports incorporate dashboard data (faster moving data) that focuses on short-term outcomes, PDSAs and other relevant information.</p> <p>To complete the quarterly report, Best Start facilitators collate information from PDSA activity completed during the reporting period. There is no minimum or maximum number of reports required, as the number of PDSA cycles will be determined by what is appropriate for the change ideas being tested at each partnership.</p> <p>Individual PDSA templates and a template for collating PDSA activity are at <a href="http://www.beststart.vic.gov.au">www.beststart.vic.gov.au</a></p>

### Timelines and responsibilities

Report	Responsibility	Reporting period	Report due
Quarterly report	Partnership prepares and submits to fund holder for endorsement.	Q1: 1 July–30 September	31 October
		Q2: 1 October–31 December	31 January
	Fund holder submits to the regional representative of the Department.	Q3: 1 January–31 March	30 April
		Q4: 1 April–30 June	31 July
PDSA report	Person implementing the PDSA submits the report to the Best Start facilitator.	Ongoing	Quarterly, regardless of which stage of the cycle



## The annual report

The partnership produces the annual report after the annual review is complete. The report includes:

- data related to the short-term and Best Start (medium-term) outcomes obtained through the data dashboard. See page 28 for more information about the data dashboard
- a summary of PDSA actions
- reflections from the partnership about progress and governance
- financial reports.

## Timelines and responsibilities

Report	Responsibility	Reporting period	Report due
Annual report	<p>Partnership prepares and submits to fund holder for endorsement.</p> <p>Fund holder submits to the Department regional representative.</p>	1 July–30 June	31 October



## Appendix 1 – Why focus locally?

Families are often faced with a range of complex problems. Place-based approaches aim to address these problems by focusing on the social and physical environment of a community and on better integrated and more accessible service systems, rather than focusing principally on the problems faced by individuals.

Both integrating services and building more supportive communities are done best through a place-based approach.

### Disadvantaged areas

In Victoria, just 11 postcodes (1.6% of total) account for 13.7% of the most disadvantaged. Dominant factors include unemployment, criminal convictions, disability, low education, child maltreatment, family violence and psychiatric admissions. (DOTE 2015)

Tony Vinson's recent report, *Dropping off the Edge 2015*, noted that "even in times of relative prosperity the individuals and families of some neighbourhoods can continue to miss out or 'drop off the edge', with consequences for their wellbeing and particularly for their children."

As Atkinson and Kintrea (2001) also report there are associations between poor neighbourhoods and other social problems that are more the consequence of macroeconomic forces and household characteristics.

"The larger and longer-running an area's problems, the stronger the cumulative impact becomes, causing a drain on services with resultant lower-quality 'outputs' such as educational performance and health care." (Vinson & Rawsthorne 2015:19)

### Reasons for disengagement

Some families make little or no use of services, even if they have concerns about their children or are experiencing family difficulties. The reasons for this lack of engagement – more common among families experiencing vulnerability – include:

- difficulties negotiating a fragmented service system
- not knowing services exist
- historical experiences
- an unwillingness and/or inability to access services.

### The benefits of a place-based approach

With a focus on collaboration and partnership between services, a place-based approach seeks to reduce these barriers by building integrated service systems that are more flexible and responsive to family and community needs and have an outreach capacity to engage vulnerable and socially isolated families. (RCH Policy Brief Issue 23, 2011)

When professionals work together to research, share information and plan, they ensure there is coherent support to families as they raise their children, and that children experience a cohesive, focused contribution toward their education, social wellbeing and health. (VEYLDF)

### What makes place-based initiatives work?

"The most successful place-based projects are those that have robust and collaborative governance arrangements. There should be senior representation from all levels of government, structures for community participation and a clear communication strategy for residents and stakeholders. Reporting requirements and the allocation of responsibility should be clear and funding and accountability mechanisms should support whole of government work." (Gilbert 2012:16)

Successful place-based interventions involve the engagement of communities in decisions of all kinds, the cultivation of community capacity, and the establishment of robust and collaborative governance arrangements (Moore et al., 2011). Despite their differences, all place-based approaches are informed by overarching principles that include:

- working in a defined geographic place
- developing a locally tailored response
- joining up of services – horizontally and vertically
- local flexibility and working in partnership with the community.

Place-based approaches are not:

- a bolt-on project or program
- a short-term solution
- centre-led responses
- single-agency responses with isolated impact and disconnected programs.

There is broad consensus (Downey, L., 2013, Moore et al. 2014; Moore and Fry 2014; Byron, 2010; Wilks et al. 2015) that a place-based approach is most appropriate when social issues:

- are long standing, interconnected and complex
- are concentrated in a readily identified geographic area
- require a multi-platform response from across government, community, business and the not-for-profit sector.

## Glossary

Term	Description
data dashboard	A data dashboard is a data visualisation tool. Data dashboards typically organise data onto a single screen or page to help data users review and make sense of real-time data from multiple sources. Each Best Start site has a data dashboard that displays data for their partnership.
Early Years Management	Formerly known as Kindergarten Cluster Management, EYM brings together a group of community-based kindergartens and other early years services under the management of a single organisation.
Early Years Management organisations	The organisation responsible for the overall management and delivery of kindergarten and other early years services under their organisation. They work closely with other EYM partners (the Department, local government, families, Parent Advisory Groups and Best Start sites).
indicator	A measure that suggests something has been achieved or some change has occurred. This change could be in the form of a behaviour, attitude, condition or status.
municipal early years plans	The plan that details the strategic directions for the coordination of educational, care and health programs and activities, and other local developments that impact on children from birth to the school entry age.
National Quality Standard (NQS)	The standard by which all education and care services are assessed and rated under the NQF. Services are rated as Working Towards, Meeting or Exceeding the NQS.
outcome	An outcome is a change we are hoping to see as the result of the strategy or action. Outcomes are generally changes in behaviour, attitude, circumstances, knowledge or skills. They can be short term, medium term or long term. Outcomes can occur at the level of an individual, organisation or at a systems level. In an outcome map, they are preconditions to longer-term impacts.
PDSA	The Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) cycle tests an idea by temporarily trialing a change and assessing its immediate impact.
Supported Playgroups	For the purpose of Best Start, Supported Playgroups refers to the Department funded targeted playgroups.
targeted services	Services available to selected groups or individuals known to be at risk of developing a particular health or developmental problem, and designed to reduce the likelihood of the problem developing. This includes Supported Playgroups and Early Start Kindergarten.
universal services	For the purposes of Best Start, universal services refer to kindergarten in the year before school and MCH services.