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Protecting and Supporting Families in Health and Care (BMHP5021)

Component 2: Written Report

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Introduction

Early Help is a central element of the safeguarding system in England, aimed at supporting children, young people and families before difficulties escalate into more serious concerns. It refers to support provided at any stage of a child's life, with the intention of preventing emerging needs or risks and improving long-term outcomes. Clear understanding of what is meant by 'early help' is important, as a lack of shared definitions can lead to variation in how services are delivered and accessed across different local areas (NSPCC, 2023). The effectiveness of Early Help is therefore closely linked to how clearly information is communicated to families, particularly through local authority websites, which often act as the first point of contact for support. The purpose of this report is to evaluate how information about Early Help and family support services is presented online by three local authorities: Leicestershire County Council, Leeds City Council and Tower Hamlets Council. The report will compare each website in terms of accessibility, clarity of language, ease of navigation and overall usefulness for families seeking help. By analysing and comparing these factors, the report aims to identify strengths and limitations in current practice and determine which local authority provides the most effective and accessible online information regarding Early Help.

Explanation of the Early Help System

Early Help refers to a broad range of support services designed to identify and respond to emerging needs within families at the earliest possible stage, before difficulties escalate to the point where statutory intervention is required. It forms part of a wider continuum of safeguarding and family support, operating below the threshold for formal children's social care involvement while remaining closely connected to it. Research suggests that Early Help is best understood as a preventative, family-centred approach that aims to strengthen resilience, address challenges early and improve outcomes for children and young people over time (Research in Practice, 2022). The primary aim of Early Help is early intervention; by providing timely and proportionate support, services seek to reduce the likelihood of issues such as neglect, family breakdown or poor mental health developing into statutory child protection concerns (Edwards et al., 2021). Early Help is intended for children, young people and families experiencing emerging or additional needs, including difficulties related to parenting, education, health, emotional wellbeing or wider social circumstances. It adopts a whole-family approach, recognising that children's wellbeing is closely linked to the circumstances and needs of their parents or carers. Families may access Early Help through a range of routes, including self-referral or referrals made by professionals such as teachers, health visitors or voluntary sector workers. Statutory guidance emphasises that Early Help should be accessible, flexible and responsive, enabling families to receive support without stigma or unnecessary barriers (Department for Education, 2024). Working Together to Safeguard Children highlights Early Help as a shared responsibility across all agencies working with children, stressing the importance of coordinated, multi-agency responses and clear local pathways for support (Department for Education, 2023). The legal framework underpinning Early Help is primarily set

out in Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, which places a duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need by providing appropriate services (HM Government, 1989). In practice, local Early Help offers vary, but typically include assessment processes, coordinated support plans and joint working between agencies to ensure families receive the right help at the right time (Priestley College, 2024).

Multi-agency Working in Early Help

Multi-agency working refers to the collaboration of professionals from different organisations and disciplines who work together to support children and families with identified needs. Within the context of Early Help, multi-agency working is essential because families often experience multiple, interconnected challenges that cannot be addressed effectively by a single service. Early Help therefore relies on coordinated input from a range of agencies to provide timely, holistic and preventative support before difficulties escalate to statutory intervention. The NSPCC (2023) emphasises that effective multi-agency working involves clear communication, shared responsibility and information sharing, all of which are vital to safeguarding children and promoting their wellbeing. In Early Help, this collaborative approach enables services to identify emerging concerns earlier and respond in a more proportionate and supportive manner. A wide range of professionals are typically involved in Early Help multi-agency working, including education staff such as teachers and school safeguarding leads, health professionals such as health visitors and mental health practitioners, social care workers, and organisations from the voluntary and community sector. These professionals often operate within multidisciplinary teams, which bring together different areas of expertise to deliver coordinated, family-centred support (Social Care Institute for Excellence, n.d.). Such teams are particularly effective in Early Help contexts, as they allow professionals to share perspectives, align interventions and reduce duplication of services. Evidence suggests that effective multi-agency working can lead to improved outcomes for children and families, particularly through early identification of need, clearer care planning and more consistent support (Welsh Centre for Public Policy, 2021). Benefits include faster access to services, improved continuity of care and stronger professional relationships. However, research also highlights challenges, such as differences in organisational cultures, unclear roles, information-sharing barriers and professional identity tensions, which can hinder collaboration if not managed effectively (Bifulco et al., 2007). In Early Help services, addressing these challenges through clear protocols, shared training and strong leadership is crucial to ensuring that multi-agency working supports preventative aims and delivers meaningful outcomes for families.

Evaluation of Local Authority Websites

4.1 Leeds City Council

Leeds City Council's Early Help information is presented in a highly accessible and user-focused manner. Early Help content is easy to locate through the council's website and is further simplified by the use of a dedicated "One Minute Guide," which provides a concise

overview of what Early Help is, who it is for and how support can be accessed (Leeds City Council, n.d.). This approach is effective for families who may feel overwhelmed or unsure about seeking help, as it reduces cognitive load and avoids overly technical language. The use of plain English makes the content suitable for non-specialists, increasing the likelihood that families will engage with the information. Navigation on the Leeds website is clear and intuitive, with logical headings and signposting that guide users toward further support if needed. Contact details and referral pathways are clearly outlined, enabling both professionals and families to understand how to access Early Help services. In addition, the website provides links to wider family support services, reinforcing the idea of Early Help as part of a broader support network rather than a standalone intervention. Accessibility features, including responsive design and clear layout, further enhance usability. Overall, Leeds City Council's website works well because it prioritises clarity, brevity and accessibility, aligning closely with the preventative aims of Early Help by making support easy to understand and access at an early stage.

4.2 Leicestershire County Council

Leicestershire County Council's Early Help information is more detailed and primarily oriented towards professionals rather than families. Early Help content is available through the Professional Services Portal, which may create a barrier for families who are unfamiliar with professional terminology or unsure whether the information is intended for them (Leicestershire County Council, n.d.). While the level of detail provided is useful for practitioners, it risks reducing accessibility for parents or carers seeking support independently. This limits the effectiveness of the website in promoting early, self-initiated engagement with services. Navigation within the Early Help section is structured but less intuitive for non-professional users, as it relies heavily on policy language and service-specific terms. Referral information is available; however, it is not always immediately clear how families can self-refer, which may discourage early access. The website does include information about a range of family support services, demonstrating a commitment to coordinated support, but the presentation could be clearer and more family-centred. Accessibility features are present, yet the overall tone and layout suggest that the site functions better as an internal or professional resource rather than a public-facing Early Help gateway. As a result, Leicestershire's website is less effective in supporting Early Help aims related to early access and prevention.

4.3 Tower Hamlets Council

Tower Hamlets Council provides Early Help information through its MAST (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Team) and Children and Families Service webpages, which emphasise early intervention and partnership working (Tower Hamlets Council, n.d.). Early Help content is relatively easy to find and is framed around the principle of "right help at the right time," which aligns well with Early Help policy objectives. The language used is generally accessible and family-friendly, helping to reduce stigma and encourage engagement. The layout of the Tower Hamlets website supports usability through clear headings, visual signposting and links to related services such as Family Hubs and Children and Family Centres. Referral routes are explained, and families are directed towards appropriate contact points,

supporting timely access to support. However, the volume of information on a single page may be overwhelming for some users, particularly those seeking quick guidance. Despite this, the website effectively highlights the range of support available and demonstrates strong integration between Early Help and wider family services. Overall, Tower Hamlets' approach is effective because it balances accessibility with breadth of information, although further simplification could improve user experience.

Comparative Analysis

A comparison of the three local authority websites reveals clear differences in how Early Help information is communicated and who it is primarily designed for. Leeds City Council's website stands out for its strong focus on accessibility and family-friendly communication. The use of a concise "One Minute Guide" simplifies key information and allows families to quickly understand what Early Help is and how it can be accessed. Compared with the other two councils, Leeds places greater emphasis on plain English, brevity and ease of navigation, which supports early engagement and reduces potential barriers for families seeking help independently.

In contrast, Leicestershire County Council's Early Help information appears more professionally oriented. While it provides detailed and structured information, much of the content is located within a professional services portal and uses technical language that may be less accessible to non-specialists. This differs from Leeds' approach, as Leicestershire prioritises professional clarity over family accessibility. As a result, families may be less likely to engage early without support from a practitioner, which undermines the preventative aims of Early Help.

Tower Hamlets Council adopts a more balanced approach, combining family-friendly language with a broad range of information about services such as Family Hubs and Children and Family Centres. Compared with Leicestershire, Tower Hamlets offers clearer signposting for families, although the volume of information presented may feel overwhelming for some users. In contrast to Leeds, however, Tower Hamlets provides less concise guidance, which may reduce immediate clarity for first-time users. Overall, Leeds City Council's website is the most effective in communicating Early Help information. Its clear language, simple layout and targeted design for families best support early access, engagement and prevention, aligning closely with the core principles of Early Help.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report has examined how Early Help information is presented on the websites of Leicestershire County Council, Leeds City Council and Tower Hamlets Council, focusing on accessibility, clarity, navigation and usefulness for families. The findings highlight notable differences in how effectively Early Help is communicated. Leeds City Council's website was found to be the most accessible and user-friendly, presenting information in clear, concise language that is suitable for non-specialists and easy to locate. In contrast, Leicestershire County Council's website provides detailed information but is primarily aimed at professionals, which may limit accessibility for families seeking support independently. Tower Hamlets Council

adopts a more balanced approach, offering family-friendly language and comprehensive information, although the volume of content may be overwhelming for some users.

Overall, Leeds City Council performs best in communicating Early Help information, as its emphasis on plain English, straightforward navigation and clear signposting supports early engagement and aligns closely with the preventative aims of Early Help. To improve practice across all local authority websites, several recommendations can be made. These include clearer signposting to Early Help information from council homepages, increased use of plain language to reduce reliance on professional terminology, and more prominent guidance on self-referral routes for families. Additionally, improving accessibility features, such as translation options, simplified layouts and consistent use of visual cues, would further support inclusive access. Implementing these improvements would help ensure that Early Help services are more visible, approachable and effective for families at an early stage.

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