



Name- Sylvie Djeuga Djeuga

Student ID- 2335842

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INTRODUCTION

Early help, also known as early intervention, provides families with the right kind of support at the right moment to effect long-lasting change. It can be administered to a child or young adult at any stage of their life, from pregnancy to puberty. Early support services can be offered to parents, children, or entire families with the main objective of improving children's outcomes and preventing any condition from worsening or causing new problems.

Early aid, sometimes referred to as early intervention, is voluntary assistance provided to kids, teens, and families when problems first arise or when they don't qualify for specialised services like CAMHS or social care. Its goals are to increase family resilience, stop issues from getting worse, and support children's development. Health visitors, therapists, mental health practitioners, social workers, and family support workers are just a few of the professionals who may provide support. These professionals can deal with issues like disabilities, emerging mental health needs, bullying, family conflict, exploitation risk, housing or financial difficulties, or care duties. Early aid provides mentorship, parenting classes, access to resources, and expert assistance. An Early Help Assessment (EHA), which determines needs and results in an Early Help Plan overseen by a Lead Professional, is the first step for families. There may be waiting lists for services, and local authorities have different policies. In order to increase wellbeing and avoid escalation into statutory services, early help works in conjunction with schools, charities, health services, and occasionally CAMHS to ensure families receive prompt, coordinated care.

This study examines Early Help data from the councils of Southwark, Norfolk, and Leeds to ascertain which offers families the most useful, transparent, and efficient help.

B. OVERVIEW OF THE EARLY HELP SYSTEM

Early assistance programs are essential for helping kids and families, but the national financial and policy environment is still disjointed and unpredictable. Despite the fact that these services help hundreds of thousands of children annually, local governments are not required by law to offer them, and there is no specific funding source to guarantee consistency. This has led to an increase in spending on late treatments, such as residential care, and a decrease in early intervention funding throughout England.

In areas like knife crime and juvenile mental health, the new Labour government places a strong focus on prevention; nevertheless, its manifesto does not apply the same preventative strategy to children's social care. This omission is important. Enhancing early assistance has a significant chance to enhance children's outcomes, lessen harm, and stop the growing expenses related to children entering foster care. By addressing issues including food insecurity, disability, mental illness, trauma, substance abuse, marital breakdown, and extrafamilial violence, early assistance also serves as a shield surrounding families. Building on family strengths and putting them in touch with neighbourhood resources including housing, food banks, and financial guidance are the main goals of this voluntary support.

Financially speaking, early intervention is significantly less expensive than crisis response. Early intervention relieves pressure on overburdened public services and produces long-term savings by preventing escalation into statutory systems like children's social care or NHS mental health services.

Early assistance is crucial, but it differs greatly throughout municipal governments. financing for councils comes from a variety of sources, including government grants, public health financing, core budgets, and temporary national initiatives. Through a number of programs, such as Supporting Families (2022–2025), Family Hubs and Start for Life (2022–2025), Family Hubs Transformation Funding (2021–2025), the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme (2018–2025), Strengthening Families, Protecting Children (2019–2024), and the Families First for Children pathfinder and Family Networks pilot (2023–2025), the central government has made an effort to make up for this disparity. These initiatives, however, lack the consistency and long-term stability required to reconstruct a long-lasting early assistance program.

All things considered, early assistance is still a crucial but underfunded component of children's care. Opportunities to prevent harm and enhance outcomes will continue to be lost in the absence of structural transformation and steady investment.

From conception to age 19 (or 25 with SEND), family hubs offer a place-based, integrated approach to family assistance by combining health, social care, education, and

community resources. By ensuring families receive early, relationship-centered, whole-family care, they enhance access through outreach, virtual support, and a single point of entry. The model promotes multi-agency collaboration, data sharing, and a smooth blend of universal and specialised services while coordinating national initiatives like Families First, Young Futures, and Best Start for Life. Hubs make it easier for families to access services by addressing local needs and reducing support fragmentation.

C. EXPLANATION OF MULTI-AGENCY WORKING

Effective multi-agency collaboration is essential to preventing child abuse, neglect, and exploitation. In accordance with national organisational responsibilities, local organisations that assist children and families have legal obligations to protect and advance children's welfare.

Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, or MASAs, outline how agencies collaborate to exchange information, recognise threats, and provide coordinated, focused assistance. Timely decision-making, effective leadership, and effective communication are essential for successful arrangements.

The local government, the Integrated Care Board (ICB), and the police are the three statutory safeguarding partners, and they are equally accountable for making sure that:

1. To safeguard every kid, organisations work together.
2. Organisations that are relevant are involved and included.
3. To increase outcomes, there is a clear shared vision.
4. Children who are in danger receive prompt, efficient protection.
5. Agencies are accountable to and confront each other.
6. Practice is influenced by information, practitioner comprehension, and the viewpoints of families and children.
7. Information is shared and analysed in order to find new risks.
8. Every service has a culture of learning.

In order to guarantee accountability, uniformity, and productive teamwork that protects children, MASAs must be implemented in every region of England.

A child-centered strategy called "early permanence" aims to provide children with secure care as soon as possible while courts decide on their long-term care plan. It lessens trauma and shields kids from repeatedly losing connection figures by cutting down on placement movements. When appropriate, early permanent placements must now be taken into consideration by local authorities. The target audience for this webinar

is legal professionals and individuals who collaborate with children's services legal teams. An overview of early permanence, its legislative framework, recent national advancements, and a firsthand account from an early permanence carer are all included.

D. REVIEW OF LOCAL AUTHORITY WEBSITES

An assessment of the Early Help content on the websites of the councils of Norfolk, Leeds, and Southwark is provided below, with an emphasis on its usability, accessibility, and clarity for families.

1. Norfolk County Council- To learn about a family's needs, strengths, opinions, and objectives, an Early Help Assessment and Plan (EHAP) is done. This results in a Team Around the Family-supported coordinated plan. In order to help families overcome obstacles and stop them from getting worse, the goal is to spot new problems early, build on family strengths, and broaden support systems.

EHAPs are always based on consent and are utilised when universal services are insufficient to meet needs. The procedure is coordinated by a Lead Worker who concentrates on important queries like:

What is functioning effectively and what are the concerns?

What aspects complicate the situation?

What kind of support is available already?

The family and pertinent specialists meet once the assessment is finished to decide on the course of action and next measures. Until objectives are reached or a higher degree of intervention is needed, progress is monitored through regular review sessions. EHAP training can be accessed via the NSCP Early Help website. Professional consultations or referrals may also start an EHAP.

2. Leeds City Council- Early Help, according to Leeds, is volunteer assistance provided as soon as issues emerge in order to stop problems from getting worse and requiring the engagement of a social worker. In order to enable children to flourish, the strategy focusses on strengthening the abilities of parents and carers.

The Thrive model, a progressive framework that ranges from universal services (such GPs, schools, clusters, children's centres, and youth services) to focused and specialised interventions, is how Early Help in Leeds operates. Families may be sent to Family Hubs for coordinated assistance, guidance, and hands-on work when their needs grow.

Leeds provides more intense treatments, such as Children's Social Work treatments, the SAFE Project, Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST), and Therapeutic Social Work, in areas where hazards are greater. The idea of "the right conversation at the right time" and restorative practice influence all support and decision-making.

Leeds offers a well-organised Early Help approach, but some of its advice is still practitioner-focused, which could make it less accessible to families looking for clear information.

3. Southwark Council- For children, adolescents, and families, Southwark's Early Help CAMHS team offers secure, considerate, and efficient early mental health assistance. Psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, counsellors, and mental health nurses make up the team. They work with kids who are Southwark residents, students, or GPs. The program provides assessment, consultation, and brief therapeutic interventions (up to 12 sessions) for children with mild to moderate mental health issues up to the age of 18. Because there isn't a single strategy that works for every family, practitioners customise support for each one.

Because the team is embedded within the Family Early Help Service, they work closely with FEH practitioners to ensure quick access to the right support. A duty clinician is available daily for advice and signposting. Referrals are made through the FEH referral form, with Early Help CAMHS attending referral meetings to ensure children receive timely, appropriate help. The team also collaborates with Tier 3 CAMHS for cases requiring more specialist input.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS

Early Help's vision is a multi-agency structure intended to address the needs of infants, kids, teens, and families as soon as feasible. It is anticipated that genuine coproduction of the Early Help method will increase participation and lessen the frequent confusion between Early Help and child protection. A new legal obligation would improve responsibility among local partners and provide a precise definition of Early Help. By promoting local system reform and guaranteeing uniform procedures across agencies, such a duty would indicate a reinvigorated national commitment to early support.

Through enhanced joint accountability, shared commissioning, and more robust information sharing agreements, this strategy seeks to integrate Early Help across the health, education, SEND, social care, and policing sectors. It is anticipated that as Family Hubs continue to grow, families will have more access to Early Help services. It is hoped that future national proposals would take this view into consideration, as strengthening Early Help could serve as a catalyst for broader improvements in children's social care.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of Early Help data from Norfolk, Leeds, and Southwark reveals that although all three councils acknowledge the need of early intervention, their methods for arranging and presenting help differ. Although Norfolk provides comprehensive procedures, families find it less accessible because it is primarily practitioner-focused. Leeds offers a structured Early Help strategy that is in line with national norms, however parents may still find it difficult to understand some of the material. On the other hand, Southwark offers the most transparent and family-friendly solution, complete with clear instructions, easily accessible referral channels, and robust multi-agency connections.

All things considered, Southwark has the most efficient online Early Help service; however, all three councils should use more straightforward language, more precise signposting, and more regular communication to guarantee that families can readily obtain timely assistance.

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