



Programme: BSc (Hons) Health and Social Care

Module: Protecting and Supporting Families in Health and Care

Module code: BMHP5021

Title – An examination and analysis of how the ‘Early Help’ system is signposted to UK families by their local authority website.

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Introduction

This report will aim to discuss how the 'Early Help' system is signposted to UK families via the local authority website. This system is considered to be a key part of the work done by strategic safeguarding partnerships. By visiting three local authority websites (here the focus will be on Norfolk, Staffordshire, and Leeds City Council), a comparative study will be showcased where it will be shown which one does best to communicate and support families with early services.

Outlining the structure, the report will start with an introduction. It will then move towards an explanation of the Early Help system, an explanation of multi-agency working, an evaluation of the three local authority websites, and then a comparative analysis. In this analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of the authority websites will be shown. Justification will be given on which one gives the most support and communicates fruitfully. Later, a recommendation section will be attached along with the communication.

Explanation of the Early Help System.

Simply, it can be mentioned that the 'Early Help System' is a multi-agency approach which has been working effectively in the UK since 2012. This is designed to provide support to children, young adults and local families while assessing the risk early. With the integration of the Supporting Families Programme (earlier called the Troubled Families Programme), it has been easier to help locals and transform their services and systems in achieving relevant outcomes. While multi-agency workers undertake the task, it includes timely intervention, focusing on the whole family, depending on consent and active cooperation, as well as other necessary factors (GOV.UK, 2022).



The Diagram of 'Early Help System'

(Source: GOV.UK, 2022).

In the words of Taylor *et al.* (2019), while deriving the benefits and impact associated with the 'Early Help System' of the UK, the headwinds faced by this service process need to be addressed. This voluntary process faces funding cuts that the government needs to keep an eye on. Due to high caseloads, the system is going through capacity constraints where staff shortages are seen. In a way, it can be said that local practitioners are struggling to deliver timely interventions to children, young adults and families.

Explanation of Multi-Agency Working.

From the perspective of Shaw and Greenhow (2020), multi-agency working is a collaborative working approach where different public, private or volunteer organisations, including health services, education, social care, and the judiciary system, work together to share information and provide the public with the autonomy to safeguard themselves while using the help provided by them.

In this case, it is worth mentioning the statutory guidance called 'Working Together to Safeguard Children (2026),' which explicitly details how entities and agencies should work collaboratively via multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. In this guidance, the focus has been on children who have not yet reached the age limit of 18. This also showcases that all child who are living with birth parents or who are adopted requires beyond primary care, which is social welfare and safeguarding. While discussing the importance of multi-agency working, this guidance also states

that with multidisciplinary working it becomes easier to discover and respond to the needs of children and their families. In multi-agency working, the expectations go through three levels for strategic leaders, senior managers, middle managers and lastly direct practice. All of them follow the same pattern: first, collaboration, learning, resource sharing, including inclusive culture, and lastly challenge mitigation (GOV.UK, 2026).

Evaluation of each of the three local authority websites.

Norfolk County Council: The first local authority website is Norfolk County Council, which communicates with families and safeguards children with ‘Early Help’ information through a mix of digital hubs and direct customer contact (Norfolk.gov.uk, 2026). While they maintain dedicated web pages, they display specific guidance for young children via ‘Best Start Family Hubs.’ This dedicated page is active towards young children and their families who need learning and support. With the use of ‘Best Start Family Hubs,’ one can access SEND local officers who will give tailored support services. They also have ‘Early Childhood and Family Service (ECFS)’ specialised for children aged 0 to 5 years and their families (Norfolk.gov.uk, 2026b). As per the view of Hanson *et al.* (2025), in terms of how they communicate, the Norfolk County Council’s website also lists questions for users so that they can improve further. They want to bring changes and have improvements as per customers' say. The features are user-guided, along with active question prompts.

It is worth noting that they actively use social media platforms such as WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Nextdoor to provide required help across the UK (Norfolk.gov.uk, 2026).

Staffordshire County Council: The second one is Staffordshire County Council, where the 'Staffordshire Connects' acts as a primary online directory on which the locals depend more. With this dedicated website, people can find information on children, families, special educational needs (SEND), care leavers, and others (Staffordshire Connects, 2026). Parents who need to take care of their children might visit multiple agency groups placed by them in local areas, which will professionally guide individuals. All such activities and information are available at the local family hub website. Their communication style is a little different, as they are an information directory; they design the website layout for users' safety and clear understanding, while also asking them to keep up with them via email alerts and phone calls. They are more focused on early intervention pathways (Staffordshire.gov.uk, 2026).

Leeds City Council: Focusing on this one, which is Leeds City Council, it gives details of multi-agency services via its ‘Leeds Local Offer’ website. Such a website crucially showcases how young people and children with special education needs as well as disabilities, and their parents or carers, can get a comprehensive understanding in a single place. Families can access local agencies such as health and social care, education, etc. Leeds City Council operates this dedicated website to provide a range of information before families or parents take any critical decision regarding the welfare of their children (Leeds.gov.uk, 2026).

Providing more details for ‘Early Help,’ they have built 22 local partnership clusters, meaning a form of partnership with education, local authority and health care within the city of Leeds, UK. From here, it is worth mentioning that their communication style is different from the above two, as they are more interested towards parents/carers, school-based staff, as well as social care professionals. They communicate with these target audiences via cluster support teams, who identify those (either families or young children) who require the most help, and they also ensure such people get the right intervention at the same time. To communicate, Leeds City Council also uses direct practitioners (Leeds Local Offer, 2026).

Comparative analysis of how the local authority websites communicate the Early Help and which one is best.

Comparative analysis of the main strengths and weaknesses

Norfolk County Council:

Strengths

One of the key strengths of Norfolk County Council is how they deliver information to the target audience, which is their dedicated family hub integration. This ongoing shift of family hubs creates localised access points, which makes face-to-face and online multi-agency coordination more appealing and visible (McManus and Boulton, 2020). Another strength is their active presence across various social media. This multi-channel media strategy is helpful as it showcases social media signposting and video walkthroughs directly from the website pages (Norfolk.gov.uk, 2026).

Weaknesses

While it may seem primarily helpful, their age division feature and then offering support or help is one of the key weaknesses. Information by Norfolk County Council is heavily split between

early years (0-5) via the ECFS as well as general support (0-25), which requires parents to see separate pathways depending on the child's age (Norfolk.gov.uk, 2026b).

Staffordshire County Council:

Strengths

The strength of Staffordshire County Council includes a centralised directory utilising a standalone 'Staffordshire Connects' portal. This portal clearly defines early help in simple terms and relates information to families who then know how to connect with the authority for early interventions or risk mitigation before the problem grows bigger (Staffordshire Connects, 2026). Also, their EHA timelines, which are a standardised operational workflow, mandate clear target days for associated tasks, including referral logging, allocation, and team around the family reviews, and it pushes them to act on the information quickly instead of being delayed in backlogs (Staffordshire.gov.uk, 2026).

Weaknesses

Often, the pages by the council are scrutinised and criticised due to jargon and complexity. The user interface is leaning towards bureaucratic and professional jargon, which is restricting vulnerable families from requiring an empathetic entry point. Families often fail to separate messages that are written for them but with heavy procedural text meant for social workers and agencies. Also, getting the contact details is more complex as these often remain hidden. Families, when in an emergency, may face challenges to get direct referral phone numbers, requiring clicking multiple sub-pages (RRC, 2025).

Leeds City Council:

Strengths

Leeds City Council, while sharing 'Early Help' information, uses 'One-minute Guides,' which are bite-sized information helping individuals to precisely understand the complex definitions, which then transforms into fast reads (Leeds.gov, 2026). While sharing information across its websites, this local council uses a unified framework utilising shared language, known as CAF (Common Assessment Framework). This provides clear pathways and steps (Leeds.gov, 2026b).

Weaknesses

On the contrary, the weakness includes high caseloads and workforce pressure. While Leeds City Council expands partnerships and dedicates cluster support teams due to high caseloads across

partner agencies, this results in delayed inputting and updating of records. This also negatively impacts the reputation of the authority (Leeds Local Offer, 2026).

Justification

While there is no official ranking or evidence of comparison, and the most effective local authorities are comparing these city councils such as Norfolk, Staffordshire, and Leeds, it can be said that Norfolk is the most effective one that communicates with vulnerable children and their families. Their ‘Best Start Family Hubs’ critically guide children while mentioning the age limit and providing different pathways based on age. They also simply showcase the calling numbers rather than complex findings (unlike Staffordshire). Also, the local authority is easily accessible as it has an active presence across different social media platforms ranging from Facebook to YouTube (Norfolk.gov.uk, 2026b).

Also, Norfolk’s way of communication and intervention is better as they divide the county into 15 zones, unlike Leeds, which divides the city into 22 distinct clusters. The SCTs (dedicated teams) map schools, pupil numbers, and others and then proceed to find risks before they escalate (Norfolk.gov, 2026).

Conclusion and recommendations

This report has showcased some critical understandings of the ‘Early Help System,’ which is a significant factor that helps vulnerable children, young adults, and families avoid high challenges by safeguarding themselves with early interventions and support services. The report has also explored three local authorities, such as Norfolk, Staffordshire, and Leeds, to discuss how they communicate and support the locals in times of emergency or share early help information. All of them have been seen to be using dedicated pages and contacts to communicate and engage with communities. Later on, justification has been given on which council most effectively connects with its people. The report has also mentioned what multi-agency working means.

In terms of recommendations, Fernbach *et al.* (2015) opined that the local councils (Norfolk, Staffordshire, and Leeds) should undertake budget prioritisation. As such, local authorities often face funding constraints; they need to take care of crisis and resilience funds and advocate for experts who will constantly check on the expenditures.

In the words of Munsch and Munsch (2025), another suggestion is reducing workload, which can be built with the help of effective leadership. When leaders create a collaborative culture and dedicated teams, and assign roles to each person, it will mitigate confusion, and the work will be

completed faster. By assigning tasks to individuals, it will be easier to understand everyone's role in the workplace, and it can mitigate workloads/caseloads, which will in turn mitigate delays in services and updating of records.

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