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Introduction

Early Help is a central element of safeguarding practice in England, as it provides timely support to children, young people and their families when the first signs of need appear (NSPCC, 2023). By intervening before difficulties escalate, Early Help aims to prevent challenges from developing into more serious concerns that may require statutory intervention (Action for Children, 2022). In an increasingly digital society, many families turn to the internet as their first source of information, which means local authority websites now play a crucial role in explaining what Early Help is and how it can be accessed. Clear and accessible online signposting is therefore essential to ensure families understand the purpose of Early Help, the types of support available and the processes involved in seeking assistance.

The purpose of this report is to assess and compare how three local authorities, Norfolk County Council, Tower Hamlets Council and Nottinghamshire County Council, present Early Help information on their websites. The analysis focuses on clarity, accessibility, ease of navigation and the overall effectiveness of each site in communicating support to families. By examining these elements, the report identifies strengths, weaknesses and the extent to which each website meets the needs of families seeking Early Help.

Explanation of the Early Help System

Early Help functions most effectively when supported by a clear system framework that enables families to access support without delay. National guidance emphasises that Early Help should be coordinated, timely and proportionate to need (DfE and DLUHC, 2022). Academic research demonstrates that the quality of local information pathways significantly shapes whether families recognise support as accessible and non-stigmatising. This makes the structure and clarity of local authority websites central to effective Early Help delivery.

A core principle of Early Help is the integration of multi-agency practice. Coordinated models allow practitioners across education, health and community services to identify concerns early and share information appropriately (HM Government, 2023). Studies highlight that when agencies work collaboratively, they reduce service duplication and improve the consistency of support provided to children and families (Bifulco et al., 2007). Stuart, (2014) highlights that multi-agency responses are shown to enhance engagement, particularly for families who experience complex or overlapping needs, with research emphasising the importance of joint awareness, shared decision-making and coordinated action across services.

The evaluation of Norfolk, Tower Hamlets and Nottinghamshire websites demonstrates varied levels of accessibility and coherence. Liu, *et al.*, (2025) suggest that information must be concise, navigable and framed in language that families understand to increase engagement. Tower Hamlets demonstrates strong practice, offering translated materials, clear access routes and well-structured pages tailored to families. Norfolk's site presents extensive information but mixes practitioner and family content, making navigation more challenging. Nottinghamshire provides detailed procedural guidance but lacks a central Early Help landing page and relies on technical terminology, limiting accessibility.

Evidence consistently shows that clearer digital signposting strengthens Early Help uptake and supports earlier intervention. Local authorities would benefit from simplifying language, improving layout and separating practitioner and family information. These enhancements align with best practices and promote equal access to support, reflecting NHS England's, (2023) digital inclusion framework, which emphasises that online public services must be designed to be accessible, easy to navigate and understandable for all users, particularly those at risk of digital exclusion.

Explanation of Multi-Agency Working

According to HM Government (2023), no single practitioner or service can fully understand or meet the diverse needs that families may experience, which is why multi-agency working is fundamental within the Early Help system. Key partners include social workers, teachers, early years staff, health visitors, school nurses, GPs, midwives, police, youth workers and voluntary sector organisations. As outlined by DfE and DLUHC (2022), each agency contributes unique expertise, helping build a more complete picture of a family's circumstances.

The statutory framework set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children emphasises that coordinated practice across services is essential for safeguarding and early intervention (HM Government, 2023). Research further supports this: findings from the PLUSS model demonstrate that early identification is most effective when education, health and early-years practitioners jointly assess needs and share information efficiently (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2022). Such collaboration ensures that emerging concerns are recognised early and that appropriate intervention can be planned and delivered.

According to Gustafsson *et al.*, (2022), clear communication and integrated planning across agencies help reduce fragmented practice and create more coherent, continuous support for families. This reinforces national guidance that Early Help assessments and plans should involve contributions from all relevant professionals to ensure consistency and coordinated

support. These collaborative approaches also help to prevent duplication and improve family engagement.

Within the Early Help system, practitioners work together to ensure that families do not fall between service gaps. For example, a school may identify behavioural concerns while a health visitor notes issues relating to parental wellbeing. When such information is shared, professionals can coordinate a joint Early Help response, which may involve referral to family support services, youth mentoring or parenting programmes, with voluntary organisations often providing additional support. When multi-agency working functions effectively, it strengthens engagement and leads to more positive outcomes for children and families.

Evaluation of Three Local Authority Websites

Norfolk County Council

According to Wharton *et al.*, (2025), many local authority websites present navigation and clarity challenges and Norfolk County Council reflect several of these issues. Norfolk presents Early Help information within its wider Children and Families section, where content is divided across pages focusing on Family Hubs, parenting support, Early Help assessments and emotional wellbeing. Although this structure offers a broad overview of support options, families must navigate through several layers before reaching Early Help-specific information. Because the material is dispersed rather than centralised, families may spend longer locating the correct section, which is particularly challenging for those under stress or with limited digital confidence. The need to make multiple clicks and interpret various headings increases the likelihood of confusion and reduces the immediacy of online signposting (Wharton *et al.*, 2025).

NHS England, (2023) highlights the importance of clear, accessible digital information and Norfolk's written content aligns with this. The website describes Early Help using everyday language and relates it to common family difficulties, such as emotional issues, behaviour or parenting strain. Norfolk also includes a local service directory, allowing users to search for support by need or location, which links families directly to relevant services.

However, consistent with concerns raised by Wharton *et al.*, (2025), the website includes substantial practitioner-oriented content, such as referral guidance, assessment templates and procedural documents. While transparency is positive, parents may be unsure which information applies to them and for families under significant pressure, this overlap between professional and family content may create unnecessary barriers.

In terms of accessibility, NHS England, (2023) recommends visual aids and inclusive design features, yet Norfolk's visual layout is functional but text-heavy, with minimal icons, diagrams and cues to support users with lower literacy levels or those browsing on mobile devices. Strengths include its wide range of information, straightforward descriptions and inclusion of service directories. Weaknesses include complex navigation, limited visual support and a design that is not fully family-friendly (Wharton *et al.*, 2025).

Tower Hamlets Council

According to DfE and DLUHC, (2022), Early Help information should be clear, accessible and easy for families to navigate and Tower Hamlets provides one of the most user-centred Early Help webpages. The main Early Help landing page is easy to locate and organised with clear headings and concise explanations that outline the purpose of Early Help and the types of issues it can address. This clarity supports families in quickly understanding what Early Help is and when it may be beneficial (HM Government, 2023). The overall design aligns closely with national guidance encouraging simple messaging and straightforward access routes.

NHS England, (2023) highlights the importance of offering multiple access points to reduce digital exclusion and the Tower Hamlets website reflects this through online referral options, phone contacts and walk-in support via Family Hubs. A key strength of the site is the availability of translated materials, which responds to the borough's diverse population and enhances inclusivity (NSPCC, 2023). Providing multilingual resources ensures that Early Help information is accessible to families who speak languages other than English.

Action for Children, (2022) notes that families benefit from varied formats of information and Tower Hamlets strengthens user understanding through parent guides, short videos and links to partner organisations. These features also demonstrate strong multi-agency collaboration within the borough (Stuart, 2014). The site integrates voluntary sector support, helping families become aware of wider community resources. The design is mobile-friendly with balanced visual elements that make navigation straightforward (Wharton, *et al.*, 2025). A minor limitation is that practitioner documents are accessible from some of the same pages, which may occasionally confuse parents, although they are well labelled and do not significantly reduce overall accessibility.

Nottinghamshire County Council

Dispersed website structures can make navigation difficult for families, a challenge reflected in Nottinghamshire County Council (Wharton *et al.*, 2025). Early Help information is presented across several separate sections, including Children's Centres, targeted youth

support and Early Help Unit pages. This structure requires families to move between different areas to understand the full Early Help support offer. The absence of a single Early Help landing page reduces the ease of accessing a clear overview, increasing the risk that key information may be overlooked or that users may become discouraged by navigation challenges (NHS England, 2023).

The website provides detailed procedural explanations of Early Help, including assessments, referral pathways and multi-agency processes. While this level of detail supports professionals, the technical language can be difficult for families to understand (DfE & DLUHC, 2022). As a result, the site may feel more practitioner-focused than family-oriented, limiting accessibility for parents seeking straightforward guidance.

According to NHS England, (2023), accessible digital design should incorporate visual aids and reduce text-heavy layouts, yet Nottinghamshire's site relies on dense text with few supportive icons or graphics. This can make navigation particularly challenging for users browsing on mobile devices or those with lower literacy levels. The site also lacks prominent translated materials, potentially disadvantaging families with additional communication or language needs (NSPCC, 2023). Although Nottinghamshire provides strong professional guidance and a clear multi-agency framework, weaknesses remain in the fragmented organisation, dense text and limited accessibility for families (Action for Children, 2022).

Comparative Analysis

Tower Hamlets provides the most accessible and user-friendly Early Help digital offer. Canario, *et al.*, (2022) note that well-structured online content using simple language improves comprehension, which aligns with Tower Hamlets pages that avoid jargon and support families unfamiliar with safeguarding terminology. The inclusion of visual aids translated materials and clearly signposted access options, such as online referral forms and Family Hub locations, further ensures that families can quickly identify how to seek support (Middle & Welch, 2022). Tower Hamlets also demonstrates strong multi-agency integration through its links to voluntary organisations, youth services and family support teams, which strengthens coordinated support for families (Chadwick, *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, the design reduces cognitive load, making it easier for families to navigate and access support efficiently.

Norfolk County Council offers a wide range of services, particularly through its Family Hubs and service directories (Canario, *et al.*, 2022). However, navigation proves challenging because Early Help information is distributed across multiple layers of pages, making it difficult for families to access core details efficiently (Middle and Welch, 2022). A lack of clear separation between practitioner and family resources can confuse users who simply need

straightforward guidance. Enhancing visual signposting, clarifying content categories and simplifying navigation would improve accessibility and engagement for families with varied literacy or digital skills (Chadwick, *et al.*, 2013).

Nottinghamshire County Council provides the most extensive professional guidance but is the least accessible for families (Canario, *et al.*, 2022). Middle and Welch, (2022) explain that fragmented information and procedural language create barriers for users seeking simple, quick support, which is evident on Nottinghamshire's site. The limited use of visuals and lack of translated materials further reduce accessibility for families with diverse communication needs. Introducing a single Early Help landing page and simplified language would significantly enhance usability (Chadwick, *et al.*, 2013). Overall, Tower Hamlets is the most effective website due to its clarity, coherent structure and inclusive design, demonstrating how well-designed digital services facilitate access to support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report evaluated how three local authorities present Early Help information online. Tower Hamlets offers the strongest digital presence because it utilises clear language, inclusive resources and straightforward navigation. Norfolk offers a wide range of support, but its complex structure and limited visual guidance reduce accessibility. Nottinghamshire provides extensive professional information but lacks a coherent, family-centred approach, presenting Early Help across multiple pages, which can be confusing for families.

To strengthen online signposting, local authorities should develop a single Early Help landing page that is easily accessible from the homepage. Information should be written in an accessible language and supported by clear visuals and translated materials. Referral routes must be simple and clearly displayed. Websites should ensure that family resources are clearly separated from practitioner documents to avoid confusion. Improving mobile responsiveness would further increase accessibility for families who rely on phones to access services.

Clear and accessible online information is essential for helping families understand what Early Help is and how to access it. When websites are well-structured, they contribute to greater transparency, help families feel confident in seeking support and encourage earlier engagement. Enhanced digital signposting supports multi-agency collaboration and strengthens community engagement. As digital communication becomes increasingly central to public services, local authorities must treat their websites as central components of the Early Help system. Investing in user-friendly, inclusive design is therefore essential to ensuring that families receive timely and effective support.

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