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Assessment (REPORT): An examination and analysis of how the 'Early Help' system is signposted to UK families by their local authority website.

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A Comparative Study of Leeds City Council, Norfolk County Council and Staffordshire County Council

1. Introduction

Early Help forms an important part of the safeguarding and family-support system in England. The idea is straightforward: identify difficulties early and offer children, young people and families the right kind of support before problems become more serious. According to the *Early Help System Guide*, Early Help is best understood as a local partnership system rather than a single service. Different organisations work together to spot need and respond in a coordinated way (Department for Education and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022).

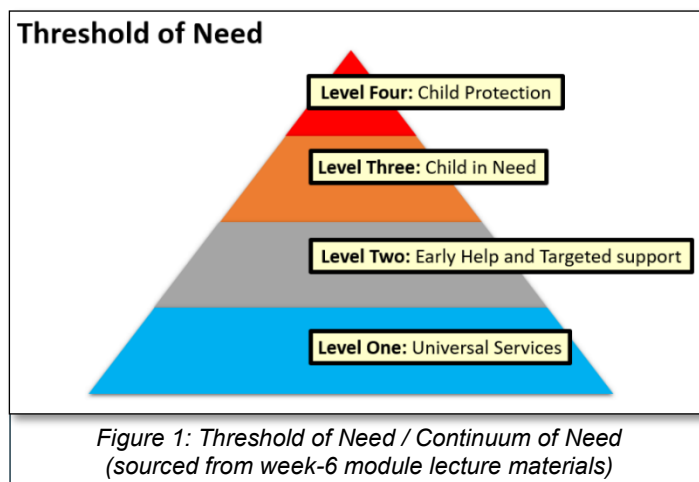
This sits closely alongside safeguarding. Safeguarding is about protecting children from harm, but it is also about promoting their welfare. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 makes clear that agencies share responsibility for identifying need and offering help as soon as problems start to appear (HM Government, 2026). In practice, that means the way local authorities talk about Early Help online really matters. If families cannot easily find or understand the information, the system itself becomes harder to access.

This report looks at how three local authorities – **Leeds City Council, Norfolk County Council and Staffordshire County Council** – present Early Help and wider family support on their websites. The three were chosen because they cover different types of area and have each developed their own approach to Family Hubs and early intervention. The report examines how clear and accessible the information is, compares strengths and weaknesses, and considers which site currently works best for families looking for help.

2. The Early Help System

Early Help is described in the national guide as the total support that improves a family's resilience or reduces the chance of a problem getting worse (Department for Education and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). In reality it is a mix of universal and more targeted services – schools, health visitors, GPs, Family Hubs, community groups, parenting programmes and children's services. The aim is to step in early so that statutory intervention under the Children Act 1989 is needed less often.

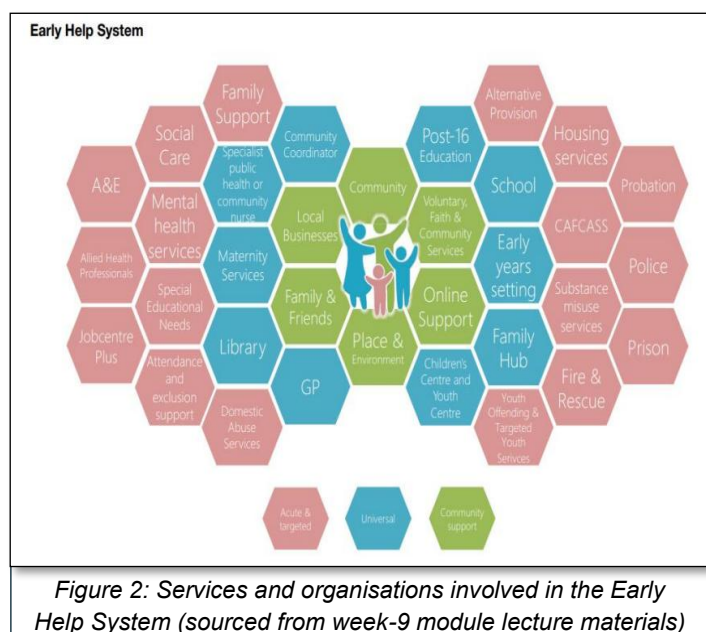
The legal framework supports this. Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 gives local authorities the duty to support children in need, while Section 10 of the Children Act 2004 requires them to promote cooperation between agencies. *Working Together 2026* goes a step further by encouraging a more joined-up Family Help model, bringing targeted early help and Section 17 support closer together so families do not have to keep repeating their story (HM Government, 2026).



In practice Early Help sits mainly at Levels 1 and 2 of the continuum of need (see Figure 1). Level 1 covers the universal services that most families use. Level 2 is more targeted support when difficulties start to show. Levels 3 and 4 move into Children in Need and child protection. It is worth remembering that Early Help is voluntary and

preventative – it is not the same as a statutory investigation.

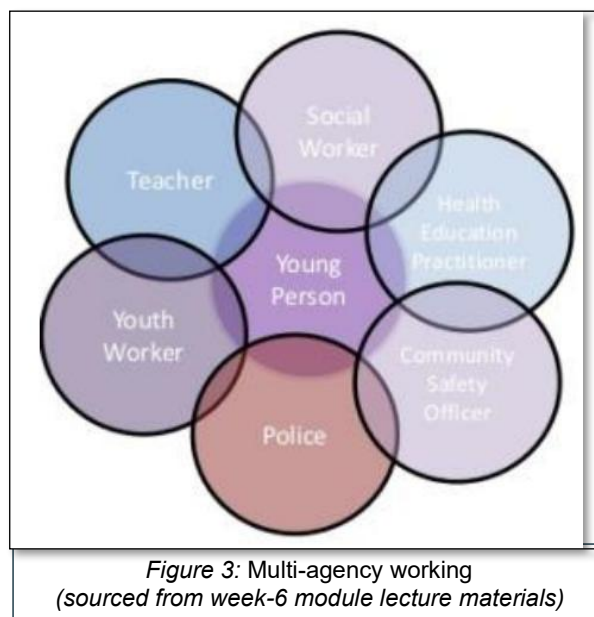
For any of this to work well, families need to be able to find clear information online. They should be able to see what Early Help is, who it is for, what is available locally, and how to ask for help – without having to decode professional language or click through endless pages (Department for Education and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). Figure 2 gives a sense of how many different services and organisations can form part of a local Early Help system.



3. Multi-Agency Working

Multi-agency working simply means people from different organisations working together towards the same goal for a child or family. That can include social workers, teachers, health staff, police, housing officers and voluntary organisations. The reason it matters is obvious once you think about it: no one professional usually has the full picture. Sharing information carefully and planning together is what makes support more joined-up (HM Government, 2026; NSPCC, 2023).

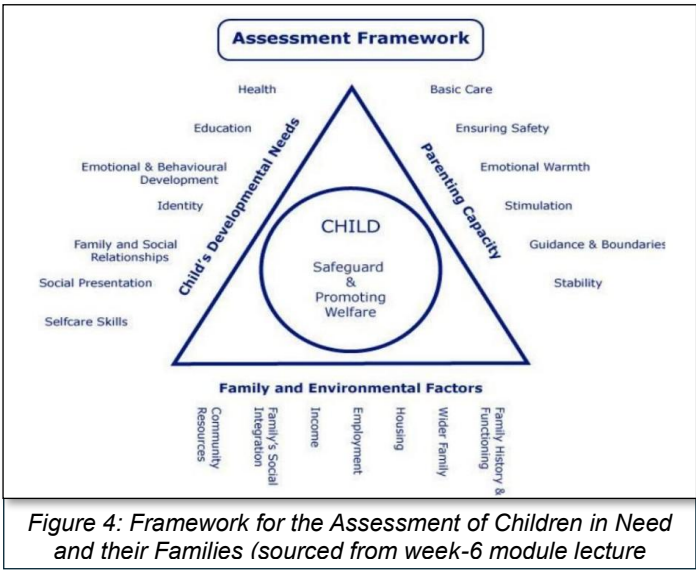
Serious case reviews keep underlining the same lessons. The national review into the deaths



of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson pointed to problems with information sharing, a lack of professional curiosity, and the danger of dismissing concerns from wider family as ‘malicious’ without proper checking (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2022). These are not abstract issues – they show why clear pathways and shared responsibility matter at every level, including the information families see online.

Working Together 2026 restates that the local authority, Integrated Care Board and police share lead responsibility, working with other agencies. It also puts more weight on inclusive practice and the fact that children often face several overlapping problems at once. Websites that explain partnership working in plain language, and that make it easy to ask for help, support this wider system.

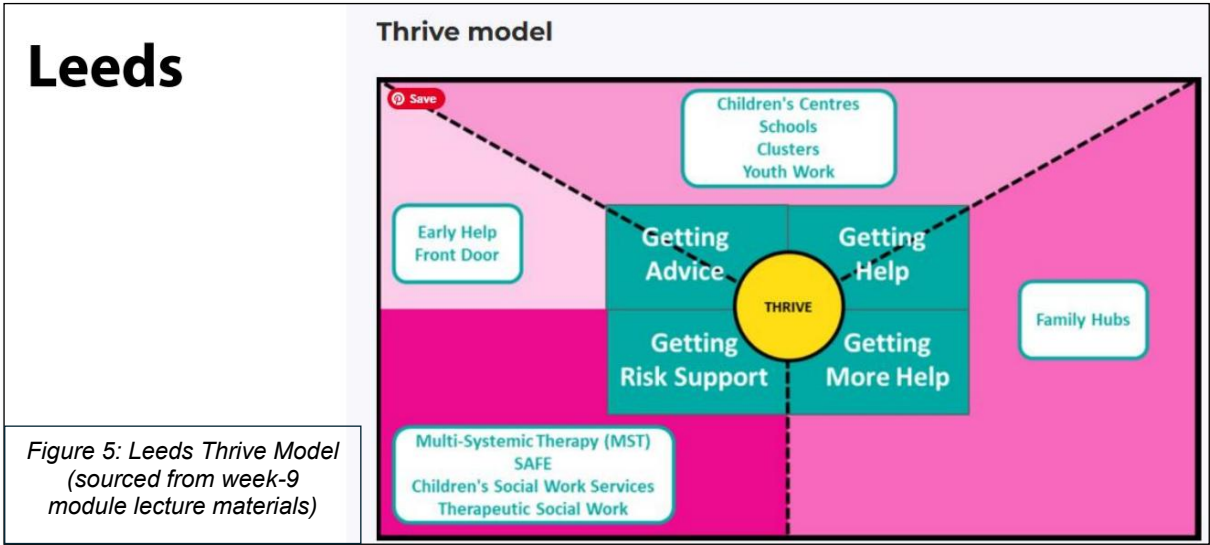
When practitioners do assess need, they are guided by the Framework for the Assessment



of Children in Need and their Families – the familiar Assessment Triangle (see Figure 4). It asks them to look at the child's developmental needs, the parents' capacity to meet those needs, and the wider family and environmental factors. The point is to keep the assessment holistic rather than focusing on only one issue.

4. Leeds City Council

Leeds has put a good deal of energy into its Family Hub and Early Help offer. The hubs are designed as accessible places where families with children and young people (and young people with SEND up to 25) can get advice and practical support from different professionals in one coordinated place (Leeds City Council, 2026). The network has expanded in recent years, which suggests a real local commitment to community-based early help.



One of the clearer strengths is the range of topics covered on the website – parenting, money worries, housing, health, SEND, mental health, domestic abuse and more. That breadth is useful because families rarely face only one problem at a time. Leeds also shows multi-agency working in practice: Family Hubs and local clusters bring schools, health, community organisations and children’s services together in different parts of the city (Leeds City Council, 2025). Contact details for the hubs are reasonably easy to find, and the overall tone feels more supportive than formal.

The main drawback is the sheer amount of information and the way it is spread across different pages. It is not always immediately obvious how Early Help, Family Hubs and the clusters fit together. A more obvious single gateway, with clearer needs-based options, would probably help families who are new to the system. Even so, Leeds still comes across as a relatively joined-up model that links online information to real community support.

5. Norfolk County Council

Norfolk’s Early Help pages are written in a more direct, family-facing style. The site explains that Early Help is about giving information, advice and guidance when things first start to feel difficult, with the aim of stopping problems from growing (Norfolk County Council, 2026). The language is plain and avoids unnecessary jargon, which helps to make the idea of asking for help feel less intimidating.

A real strength is the online Request for Support option. Families (and professionals) can ask for help without first needing a professional referral. That matches the idea that people should be able to reach out when they themselves recognise a need. Norfolk also connects Early Help to its Family Hubs, so there is a clear link between the digital information and face-to-face support.

The weaker point is that information still sits across several pages and partner organisations. The links show partnership working, but they can leave families unsure where to begin. A simpler needs-based menu – for example ‘I need parenting support’ or ‘I am worried about my child’s mental health’ – would make the route in feel more obvious.

6. Staffordshire County Council

Staffordshire describes Early Help as the information, advice, guidance and support that is offered early to meet the needs of children and families (Staffordshire County Council, 2026). Its strongest feature is Staffordshire Connects, a searchable directory of local services. Families can look for help with parenting, money, domestic abuse, activities, SEND and other issues according to what they actually need, rather than having to search for the phrase 'Early Help'. That is helpful, because most people search by problem, not by service name.

There is also information about Family Hubs and more targeted family support, so the overall offer looks reasonably broad. The difficulty is that the information is split between the main council site and the external directory. Families may have to move between the two before they find what they need. A clearer single starting point that still links into the directory would smooth that journey.

7. Comparative Analysis

All three councils provide useful material on Early Help and Family Hubs, but they do it in slightly different ways. **Leeds** is strongest on linking online information to a network of multi-agency Family Hubs and local clusters. **Norfolk** stands out for its clear explanation of Early Help and the straightforward self-referral route. **Staffordshire** scores well with its searchable directory, which fits how many families actually look for support.

What they share is a degree of complexity. Information is often spread across several pages and organisations. The *Early Help System Guide* is clear that families should not have to understand professional structures in order to find help (Department for Education and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). The Equality Act 2010 also requires public information to be accessible to people with different needs and levels of digital confidence.

Looking at the three together, **Leeds currently appears to offer the most coherent overall approach**. The online material is linked to actual Family Hubs and multi-agency working on the ground. Norfolk's self-referral pathway and Staffordshire's directory are both strong features that other areas could usefully copy. The comparison shows that good signposting needs both clear digital design and a service offer that families can realistically reach.

8. Personal Critical Reflection

Looking at the three websites side by side made me realise how much the way information is presented can either open a door or quietly close it. I expected the main differences to be about the amount of content each council published. What I noticed was more subtle. Norfolk's clear language and 'Request for Support' button felt immediately usable. Staffordshire's directory matched the way I would search if I were a parent looking for help with a specific problem. Leeds had the strongest sense of a joined-up system, but I still found myself clicking between pages more than expected.

This raised a wider point about accessibility. National guidance stresses that Early Help should be easy to find and non-stigmatising, yet even well-intentioned websites can assume a level of knowledge or digital confidence that not every family has. If I found the navigation slightly confusing at times, a parent dealing with stress or limited digital skills might give up before reaching the right support. That gap between policy intention and everyday user experience feels important. A clearer single front door, written in ordinary language, would help without weakening the multi-agency reality behind the system.

9. Conclusion

Early Help is meant to be a preventative part of the safeguarding system – support that arrives early enough to stop problems escalating. It only works well when agencies cooperate, share information appropriately, and make it easy for families to understand what is available and how to ask for it.

Comparing Leeds, Norfolk and Staffordshire shows that all three provide valuable information. Leeds stands out for the way its online content connects to Family Hubs and multi-agency partnerships. Norfolk is particularly clear about self-referral, while Staffordshire's directory responds well to the way families search. All three could still make the route into support simpler and more needs-based. Reflecting on the process also highlighted how small design and language choices can make a real difference to whether families feel able to take that first step.

10. Recommendations

Based on looking at the three websites and the principles in national guidance, the following practical steps would improve how Early Help is signposted:

- **Create a single Early Help gateway** on each council website, with a clear “Get Help” or “Request Support” button that is easy to find from the main children and families pages.
- **Use needs-based navigation** so families can search by the problem they are facing (parenting, mental health, money, housing, behaviour) instead of by professional terms.
- **Make self-referral routes obvious** – online forms, telephone numbers and face-to-face options – and state clearly that families can contact services directly.
- **Keep and promote searchable local directories** that can be filtered by location, age and type of support, building on the strengths of something like Staffordshire Connects.
- **Write in plain language** and check that the site meets accessibility standards so it works for people with different communication needs and levels of digital confidence.
- **Explain multi-agency working in everyday language** so families can see how schools, health, Family Hubs and children’s services actually work together.
- **Ask families for regular feedback** on the website and the referral process, and use that feedback to keep improving accessibility and usefulness.

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