

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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Module name: Protecting and Supporting Families in Health and Care

Module code: BMHP5021

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Introduction

Early Help or support is part of the safeguarding and support that children, young people and families can receive in England. Early Help is offered as soon as possible in order to deal with problems before they become more serious and require a statutory response. The Early Help System Guide (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Education, 2022) states that Early Help is not a single service but a system of services, processes and professional relationships that support children, young people and families at the earliest opportunity.

This report has explored the websites of Leeds City Council, Leicestershire County Council and Tower Hamlets Council and analysed the information presented to families regarding Early Help and other family support services. The report also analysed the quality of the information presented, the accessibility of the information, contact with services and the range of support presented to families through multi-agency working. The report concludes which local authority presents the most effective and accessible information online for families.

Explanation of the Early Help System

Early Help is delivered before problems become serious. It is described by the Early Help System Guide (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Education, 2022) as the total support that improves family resilience and outcomes or reduces the likelihood of a problem becoming worse.

Support for whole families – not just children and young people – who are experiencing a variety of problems at the same time. A family may be experiencing problems with, for example: financial management; domestic abuse; parental conflict; school attendance of children and young people; parents'/carers' mental health; parents'/carers' housing circumstances; parents'/carers' use of substances. Support can be offered at any stage of these problems emerging. Support can be of universal nature or more targeted and of an intensity to meet specific family needs.

The five key elements for a mature Early Help system as described by the Early Help System Guide for the Early Help System for Children, Young People and Families are: family voice and experience, the workforce, communities, leadership and data. This means that families must be able to access information on local services and receive help when needed.

There are a number of changes to the function of Early Help, and its interface with other safeguarding measures as outlined in the updated Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 guidance. In particular, the provision of Family Help has been updated. Previously, children and young people with additional needs and their families received a range of targeted support through services and provision offered on an Early Help basis. This support

was offered within the remit of Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, in order to help children and young people to achieve their full potential, within their family and community.

Therefore the best Early Help is provided by local authorities that offer the best information on support that is available to families in need.

Multi-Agency Working

Multi-Agency Working: This refers to professionals and organizations from various sectors working together to provide support and services for children and families. These can include children's social care, schools, early years settings, health services, police, housing, youth services and mental health services as well as voluntary and community organizations.

Multi-agency working is important because different professionals can have access to different information about children and families. By working together, professionals can gain a fuller understanding of the situation of a child or family and coordinate support.

Early Help forms part of a mature system where public services work together through place-based or hub-based arrangements and recognize whole-family working as everyone's business (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Education, 2022).

Early Help has matured as a way of providing support to families, and therefore, local authority websites must now clearly detail how different services can link to support families. These websites must provide clear signposting to schools, to health services, to the local Family Hubs, to children's social care services and to community organizations and others who can provide support to families.

Evaluation of Leeds City Council

Early Help is offered early in the life of a problem and is voluntary. Families can access support from universal services and where necessary, from more targeted and intensive support, with the consent of children, young people and families.

Offering the right amount of support using a range of support using a graduated approach between universal, targeted, Family Hubs and specialist services of varying intensity is another strength of the way that Early Help is delivered through services offering support. The support can be offered on an individual basis, or to families as a whole, and can be delivered through a single service, or a combination of services.

Around issues to do with families, children and young people, Leeds City Council's website for information around children's and young people's emotional wellbeing, around parenting, around children and young people's additional needs and around other family issues around support through Family Hubs. The Family Hubs and Early Help Front Door service supports families who are in need of Early Help. Information around the different Family Hubs around for support through these services for families and professionals alike is also included on the website.

Positive Points - Information on Multi-Agency Working. Leeds have clearly outlined Early Help as "everybody's business" and set out the roles of schools, health services, children's centres, youth services and many, many more organizations and services that can support families in need of support using Early Help.

Supporting families through the process of referral to social care and involving them in the Early Help process from the outset are key factors in delivering a positive experience for all families using Early Help services.

However, within the Early Help section of the website there are far too many pages detailing different aspects of Early Help. There are also far too many pages detailing the work of different Family Hubs. There are also far too many pages detailing the work of the Family Information Service and finally there are far too many pages detailing the work of the safeguarding partnership. All of these could be collated onto one page detailing how to access support in each of the areas listed above.

Clearly explaining the work of Early Help, the graduated approach of support offered through Early Help and how a variety of services and organizations work together to support families.

Evaluation of Leicestershire County Council

Early Help in Leicestershire: In order to access information regarding Early Help, families must navigate through the Leeds-style website provided by Leeds City Council for Leeds's Family Help service. This targeted support is offered using a variety of methods in addition to universal services provided by schools and GPs, amongst others. Early Help addresses difficulties that cannot be dealt with by these universal services on their own. Problems that require support of some sort, either in the form of advice, information, practical assistance, etc. that the family in question can use in order to overcome their problems.

This is particularly useful because parents may not initially identify their situation as an "Early Help" issue. For example, a parent experiencing financial difficulties or struggling with a child's behaviour may search for the specific problem rather than the term Early Help. Listing different areas of support makes the website more accessible.

As already mentioned on this site the help provided through Early Help for children and families is in addition to universal services provided by schools and GPs for example. In the

majority of cases families will receive support that they would not receive from universal services alone.

However, for some families the process of referral could be too demanding. In particular problem for parents with very limited digital skills, those who speak very limited English and those who are not confident filling out lengthy forms for a variety of reasons.

My evaluation of online information about Leeds services has highlighted a couple of issues. first that there is reliance on the term 'Family Help' when referring to services within the Early Help offer. Early Help was the main focus of the Early Intervention Strategy in its early days and therefore services were developed as part of the offer of Early Help. Today however increasing focus is being placed on developing Family Help and the increasingly integrated nature of services for families with children of all ages. Therefore it would be helpful for families who already have some knowledge of services for children and their families and are aware of the offer of Early Help to have this clearly explained and the relationship between the two terms clearly described.

A review of the information provided by Leicestershire County Council for families and children of school age, it appears that Leicestershire have provided all of the required information about services available for families and children of school age. However the online referral process for families and children of school age could be more accessible for some families.

Evaluation of Tower Hamlets Council

Tower Hamlets also clearly outline what they mean by 'Early Help' (from the home page of their website) Early Help, sometimes called early intervention, is 'support for children, young people and families at the earliest point when difficulties occur, to prevent problems becoming more serious'.

Tower Hamlets have outlined on their web page who Early Help is for. This includes families with children from pregnancy through to young people aged 19, or up to 25 for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Furthermore they have listed examples of when families may require targeted support, i.e. when there are issues in families such as parental conflict, when a child has a Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND), when there is poor school attendance, when there are issues in relation to parental mental health, when there are communication issues and when there are other issues within families that may affect them.

Early Help Services Information Provided by Early Help Service: telephone information and referral; referral arrangements; out-of-hours safeguarding information; Early Help service contact details for advice and guidance; information about Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST) process for support requests.

There are a number of terms and services that are delivered through Children's Services, therefore these are included within the Early Help section of the website. The detail provided within each of the services would cause confusion to parents with limited knowledge of children's services and how they are delivered through Children's Services.

For additional information regarding children's services available within Tower Hamlets, please refer to the Council's website, outlining the range of services and how they work with individual families and children (Department for Education, 2015).

Conclusion & Recommendations

The comparison of local authorities' websites in this report demonstrates the extent of information currently available to families and professionals about early intervention services and how they are working in partnership with other services.

Out of the three local authorities reviewed this report Tower Hamlets' website is the most effective online information for families regarding Early Help. The information outlined in the Early Help section of the Tower Hamlets website provides simple information on what Early Help is and how families can access it. Families can find out who can receive support through Early Help and also read examples of family difficulties that may be addressed through targeted support. Families can also find out about the Best Start Family Hubs and the Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST) process.

For these reasons, as well as other minor observations (for example, a requirement for families to give details about their query) there are several areas in which the websites could be improved. Most importantly, a single Early Help/Families Help landing page would support the national Early Help vision. Above all, families should be given a clear understanding of what happens after they have asked for help. In this respect, both online and telephone routes for accessing services should be offered.

A third area of contribution would be to develop effective online signposting of families to access appropriate help early. The early years' vision for the new Early Help system as outlined in the Early Help System Guide (2024) identifies families' ability to access and navigate services and receive appropriate help as one of the key characteristics of a mature Early Help system. This would be in line with the new Family Help system being outlined in the 2026 Working Together guidance, which is intended to be more seamless and multidisciplinary in nature.

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