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Protecting and Supporting Families in Health and Car (BMHP5021)

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Introduction:

Early help is an integral part of supporting children, young people, and families before issues arise that could escalate and require intervention by public authorities. Families may face challenges related to mental health, housing, financial difficulties, domestic abuse, parenting, education, substance misuse, or relationships. Accessing appropriate support at an early stage can improve outcomes for children while reducing the likelihood of problems escalating. Therefore, local authorities bear a significant responsibility not only for providing or coordinating services but also for ensuring that families understand what support is available and how to access it.

Government guidance emphasizes a holistic approach to family support and a partnership-based approach. The guidance **Supporting Families: Early Help System** sets out a national vision for effective local early help systems and calls on local partnerships to evaluate how successfully their services identify needs, engage with families, and coordinate support (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Education, 2022). More recently, the report **Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026** highlights the importance of coordinated multi-agency help, support, and protection (Department for Education, 2026).

This report outlines the early help system and multi-agency working, and then critically evaluates how the websites of three local authorities—Leeds City Council, Tower Hamlets Council, and Staffordshire County Council—provide information on early help and related family services. Their websites are compared in terms of clarity, accessibility, the scope of information provided, routes to accessing support, and information regarding multi-agency collaboration.

The Early Help System

Early Help refers to support provided at the first signs of difficulties, rather than waiting for a family situation to reach a crisis point. Guidance on the Early Help system notes that a comprehensive system of this kind is not a single service but a coordinated network involving local authorities and partner organizations (DLUHC and DfE, 2022). Its goal is to improve outcomes by identifying problems early and providing appropriate, coordinated support.

Thus, the concept of "Early Help" extends beyond interventions during a child's early years. Support may be required at any stage of growing up—whether in childhood or adolescence—whenever a need arises or re-emerges. For instance, Leeds City Council (2026a) clarifies that Early Help should begin at an early stage of a problem's development, regardless of the child's age. This distinction is important because the term "Early Help" can mistakenly suggest that these services are intended solely for infants and young children. An effective system must also take into account the interconnected nature of family problems. For example, a child's poor school attendance might be linked to parental mental health issues, financial hardship, or unstable housing conditions. Focusing solely on attendance without considering these broader circumstances fails to address the root causes of the problem. Therefore, working with the family as a whole entails understanding the needs and strengths of all its members, as well as coordinating the activities of relevant services.

Similarly, the "Supporting Families" approach focuses on working with the entire family. Key national-level outcomes of this program encompass areas such as education, early childhood development, mental and physical health, substance abuse prevention, strengthening family relationships, protection against abuse and exploitation, domestic

violence prevention, and ensuring housing and financial stability (DLUHC and DfE, 2022). These areas clearly demonstrate why the effective implementation of an early help system cannot be achieved by children's social care services alone.

It is important to note that early help should generally be based on collaboration rather than being imposed on families. In Leeds, it is explicitly stated that early help is voluntary and requires the consent of children, young people, and their families (Leeds City Council, 2026a). This approach supports person-centered practice, recognizing parents, caregivers, and children as active participants in the process rather than passive recipients of professional support.

However, early help does not supersede obligations regarding child safety and safeguarding. In cases where professionals identify serious threats to a child's safety, it may be necessary to initiate statutory child protection procedures. The Children Act 1989 establishes significant duties regarding children in need and those at risk of significant harm, while the Children Act 2004 strengthened inter-agency cooperation mechanisms. Therefore, an effective early help system requires clear linkages between universal services, targeted family support, and statutory protection measures.

Inter-agency collaboration

Inter-agency collaboration refers to the joint work of professionals and organizations from various sectors aimed at meeting the needs of children and families. Such organizations include local authority children's services, schools, general practitioners (GPs) and other healthcare professionals, the police, housing services, mental health services, youth organizations, as well as voluntary and community groups.

The document **Working Together to Safeguard Children** (2026) defines child safeguarding as a shared responsibility; it sets out statutory guidance for local authorities, health services, the police, educational institutions, and other organizations (DfE, 2026). The 2026 guidance reinforces the concept of "Family Help" by integrating targeted "Early Help" and the support measures provided under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 into a more holistic approach. Particular emphasis is also placed on maintaining robust professional relationships and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Inter-agency practice offers a number of potential benefits. Different professionals hold different information about a family. For instance, a school might note a decline in attendance, a GP might be aware of parental mental health issues, and a housing service might be cognizant of the family's unstable housing situation. Sharing relevant information and coordinating assessments allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the family's needs and helps avoid the duplication of efforts.

However, inter-agency collaboration also presents certain challenges. Organizations differ in terms of professional culture, decision-making criteria (intervention thresholds), information systems, and areas of responsibility. Communication gaps can lead to fragmented support or delays in the provision of assistance. Consequently, an effective "Early Help" system requires clear leadership, proper information sharing, and agreed-upon protocols for responding to concerns about a child's safety.

The **Early Help System Guide** supports this systemic approach by outlining 31 criteria (descriptors) across five areas, enabling local partnerships to assess the maturity of their Early Help mechanisms (DLUHC and DfE, 2022). This demonstrates that the effectiveness of Early Help depends not only on individual professionals but also on the quality of the local system as a whole.

The Leeds City Council Experience

Leeds City Council provides particularly detailed explanations in its "One minute guide: Early help" briefing. A key advantage is the clear, accessible explanation that Early Help should begin at an early stage of a problem's development, potentially averting the need for formal statutory intervention (Leeds City Council, 2026a). The site also clearly states that Early Help is voluntary and acknowledges that parents and carers know their children best. Another strength is the use of a tiered support model. The site outlines the progression from "getting help" to "getting extra help" and, finally, to "getting support in situations of risk." A distinction is drawn between universal services (such as schools and GP practices) and more specialized support, including "Family Hubs" and higher-level services. This helps users understand that family support can be provided at various levels depending on needs, rather than viewing the social care system as the only option.

Leeds has also established effective inter-agency collaboration. Seven local "Family Hubs" provide access to multidisciplinary teams of specialists. Information about the hubs on the municipal website lists specialists such as Early Help staff, social workers, and coordinators for mental health, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), domestic abuse, and substance misuse, while also noting police involvement (Leeds City Council, 2025). This serves as a practical demonstration of the partnership principle outlined in the document **Working Together to Safeguard Children**.

Another benefit is the information regarding the Common Assessment Framework (CAF): it explains how various services can employ a shared approach and common terminology to identify strengths and needs, as well as to coordinate support (Leeds City Council, 2026b). Thanks to this, partnership working mechanisms poor school attendance, parental mental-health difficulties and language barriers. It also explains examples of targeted support such as parent groups and debt and budgeting sessions (Tower Hamlets Council, 2026a). This is useful because families may recognise their own circumstances without needing to understand professional eligibility terminology.

Tower Hamlets also communicates routes into support effectively. Its Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST) acts as a single point of contact for Early Help requests and safeguarding concerns. The team includes professionals from children's services, health, education, police, probation, housing, CAMHS, Early Help, youth services and voluntary organisations (Tower Hamlets Council, 2026a). This closely reflects the multidisciplinary principles in *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026*.

Another important strength is the Best Start Family Hub model. Tower Hamlets has four Best Start Family Hubs and eight Children and Family Centres, offering services including health, family support, employment and training (Tower Hamlets Council, 2026b). The website also provides locality information, opening times and activity timetables. This moves beyond simply explaining policy by showing families where support can actually be obtained.

The distinction between Early Help and safeguarding is also communicated clearly. The website explains how to obtain Early Help while separately directing users towards urgent safeguarding arrangements and emergency services where a child is in immediate danger. A potential weakness is the amount of information distributed across the main council site, Family Hubs, Children and Family Centres and the newer Family Information Hub. Although the information is comprehensive, users may move between several pages. Continued integration into a single family-facing platform would make the pathway even clearer. Nevertheless, the use of plain language, examples and visible contact routes makes Tower Hamlets particularly accessible.

Evaluation of Staffordshire County Council

Staffordshire County Council begins with an accessible explanation: everyone needs help sometimes, and Early Help involves services and professionals providing information, advice, guidance and support early enough to meet children's and families' needs (Staffordshire County Council, 2026a). This is less formal than some professional definitions and may reduce stigma associated with requesting support.

The website provides different forms of help, including groups, professional guidance and one-to-one support. Families are also directed towards local Family Hubs and Staffordshire Connects to identify relevant services. Staffordshire's Early Help Teams provide advice, direct family work, group sessions and school support (Staffordshire County Council, 2026b). Multi-agency working is also visible. The Staffordshire Families Strategic Partnership describes Early Help as being delivered through partner agencies and explains that assessment can result in a multi-agency plan focused on the needs of the child and family (Staffordshire County Council, 2026c). This is consistent with the whole-family approach promoted nationally.

Staffordshire also provides a clear telephone route through the Staffordshire Families Integrated Front Door for families and professionals requiring support. Its Families First pages distinguish Early Help from more specialist safeguarding responses and explain different levels of need.

However, a significant communication weakness is fragmentation. A family may be redirected between the County Council website, Staffordshire Connects, Family Hubs, Families First and safeguarding partnership information. Although each resource may be valuable, moving between platforms could be difficult for users with limited digital confidence or those experiencing stress. The terminology also varies between "Early Help", "early intervention", "Families First", "Integrated Front Door" and other programme names. A clearer single family-facing pathway could improve accessibility.

Comparative Analysis

All three councils demonstrate the core principles of Early Help: early intervention, prevention of escalation, family involvement and partnership working. However, they communicate these principles differently.

Leeds is particularly strong in explaining the structure and theory of Early Help. Its graduated model makes the relationship between universal, targeted and higher-risk services relatively clear. Its multidisciplinary Family Hubs also demonstrate strong alignment with current national policy. The weakness is that detailed information is distributed across several resources and some content appears designed as much for professionals as for families. Staffordshire uses friendly language and provides a wide range of support options. Its local Early Help Teams and integrated front-door arrangements are strengths. However, its information is arguably the most fragmented of the three b

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