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Assignment 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

Early Help is an important part of children's services because it aims to identify and respond to emerging needs before difficulties escalate and require more intensive intervention. Accessible signposting is therefore essential so families can understand what support is available and how to access it. Local authority websites are increasingly important because they provide information about services, referral pathways and community support. However, digital access does not automatically ensure equal access.

This report compares how Early Help and wider family support are signposted through the websites of **Leicestershire County Council**, **Staffordshire County Council** and **Leeds City Council**. It considers clarity, accessibility, range of services, referral routes and evidence of multi-agency working. The analysis is informed by the *Supporting Families: Early Help System Guide* (Department for Education and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022), *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026* (Department for Education, 2026), and research on early intervention, multidisciplinary working, parental engagement and digital inclusion.

The Early Help System

The *Supporting Families: Early Help System Guide* explains that Early Help is not a single service but a wider system involving professionals, communities and partnerships responding to children's and families' needs at an early stage (Department for Education and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). Support may include parenting, education, emotional wellbeing, domestic abuse, financial difficulties, housing, disability and children's behaviour.

Early Help should be proportionate to need and provided before difficulties become more serious. However, the existence of services does not guarantee that families can access them. Sapiets et al. (2022) identified barriers and facilitators affecting access to early intervention, demonstrating that accessibility is an important element of effective Early Help. The Early Help System Guide also emphasises family experience, communities, workforce, leadership and data. Local authority websites should therefore be designed around what families need to know rather than simply reflecting council structures.

UK Legislation and Early Help

Early Help should also be considered within the wider legal framework relating to children's welfare and safeguarding. The Children Act 1989 provides an important legal foundation for supporting disadvantaged children and places duties on local authorities concerning children's welfare. Section 17 statutory mandates compel local authorities to safeguard and foster the

welfare of children in need within their jurisdiction through the provision of tailored, appropriate support. (Children Act 1989). The Children Act 2004 further strengthened cooperation between agencies and placed greater emphasis on improving outcomes for children and young people (Children Act 2004). This is particularly relevant to Early Help because children and families may require support from several services rather than children's social care alone.

The legislation therefore reinforces the importance of coordinated support and effective communication between agencies. Early Help forms part of a wider system in which local authorities and partner agencies identify needs, coordinate appropriate support and aim to prevent difficulties from escalating. This relationship between legislation, government guidance and local provision is important when evaluating how effectively local authority websites communicate Early Help to families.

Multi-Agency Working

Early Help depends on effective collaboration between services, professionals and communities to respond to needs before they escalate (Department for Education and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022). This is reinforced by *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026*, which identifies safeguarding as a shared responsibility involving local authorities, health, police, education and other agencies (Department for Education, 2026). Effective multi-agency working therefore enables families to receive coordinated support across the wider continuum of Early Help and safeguarding.

Multi-agency working is particularly important because families may experience several interconnected needs at the same time, such as mental health difficulties, domestic abuse, financial hardship, SEND or housing problems. No single service is likely to have the expertise or resources to address all these needs independently. Sharing information appropriately and coordinating support can reduce duplication, improve communication and help families access accurate support with zero delay.

This is reflected across the three local authorities, although their approaches differ. Leicestershire links Family Help with social care and safeguarding (Leicestershire County Council, 2026), Staffordshire connects Families First with safeguarding and specialist services (Staffordshire County Council, 2026a), while Leeds uses multidisciplinary Family Hubs to bring different professionals together (Leeds City Council, 2025). These approaches demonstrate how effective partnership working can provide more holistic, family-centred support and reduce the risk of needs escalating.

Theory and Early Help

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is relevant to Early Help because children's wellbeing is influenced by interconnected factors, including family, education, community and professional services (Cherry, 2023). This highlights the need to consider the child's wider environment rather than focusing only on the child. The theory supports multi-agency working, as professionals contribute different knowledge and expertise. The Early Help System Guide reflects this approach by focusing on families, communities, the workforce, leadership and data (Department for Education and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022).

This is reflected in the Family Hub approach, which provides support for areas such as parenting, mental health, domestic abuse, SEND and financial difficulties. Staffordshire's Families First model also links Early Help with safeguarding and specialist services.

A strengths-based approach complements this by focusing on families' strengths and capacity for change. Early Help aims to provide early, preventative and non-stigmatising support to prevent needs from escalating.

Leicestershire County Council



Figure 1: Family Hubs Leicestershire website (2026) *Source: Family Hubs Leicestershire (2026).*

Leicestershire County Council provides a broad range of information about Family Help and support for children and families. Its current website identifies domestic abuse, mental health and wellbeing, SEND, parenting, targeted youth interventions, Family Hubs and an information and support directory (Leicestershire County Council, 2026).

A major strength is the breadth of provision. Families can approach information according to their circumstances rather than having to understand the structure of children's services. The council also provides a direct online request-for-service route. Families do not need to know which specific service to request; they can explain what help they need and what may happen without support (Leicestershire County Council, 2026). This is particularly useful because Sapiets et al. (2022) identify barriers to accessing early intervention.

However, the online request process asks users to provide detailed information and gives them up to 60 minutes to complete the form (Leicestershire County Council, 2026). Although this provides a structured route, it may disadvantage families experiencing stress, limited digital literacy, disability or unreliable internet access. Harvey, Hastings and Chowdhury (2021) identify poor design, access difficulties and differences in digital literacy as barriers associated with digital council services.

Leicestershire also demonstrates a clear relationship between Early Help and safeguarding. Referrals are considered by dedicated social workers in the First Response Children's Duty team to establish whether children are safe and whether social work intervention is required. Families can also request help themselves.

Overall, Leicestershire provides a strong connection between preventative family support and safeguarding, although its detailed online referral process may create accessibility barriers.

Staffordshire County Council



Figure 2: Staffordshire County Council Family Hubs webpage (2026)

Source: Staffordshire County Council (2026b). Staffordshire County Council presents Early Help through its Family Hubs, which provide welcoming spaces where families can speak to trained staff and access free support and activities. The council also provides parenting,

financial, SEND and domestic abuse support (Staffordshire County Council, 2026b). The use of accessible, family-facing language is a significant strength. It avoids presenting Early Help as support only for families experiencing serious difficulties and may reduce stigma around seeking help.

The availability of physical Family Hubs is also important because families can access face-to-face support rather than relying entirely on digital communication. This can reduce barriers associated with digital exclusion (Harvey, Hastings and Chowdhury, 2021).

Staffordshire also provides a Community Family Support Service and a Family Practitioner Service – Early Help Team for families experiencing multiple or complex challenges. Particularly relevant to this report is the Families First model, which connects Early Help Teams with Safeguarding Units, Looked After Children’s Services and Children’s Disability Teams. The model recognises different levels of need, with specialist safeguarding services responding when children are currently facing or highly vulnerable to severe negative outcomes.

The main weakness is that the large number of services and links could make navigation difficult. A simple “Find the Right Help” pathway could reduce this burden.

Overall, Staffordshire provides the strongest integrated family-facing approach of the three authorities. Its Family Hubs offer accessible support, while Families First connects Early Help with safeguarding and specialist services.

Leeds City Council

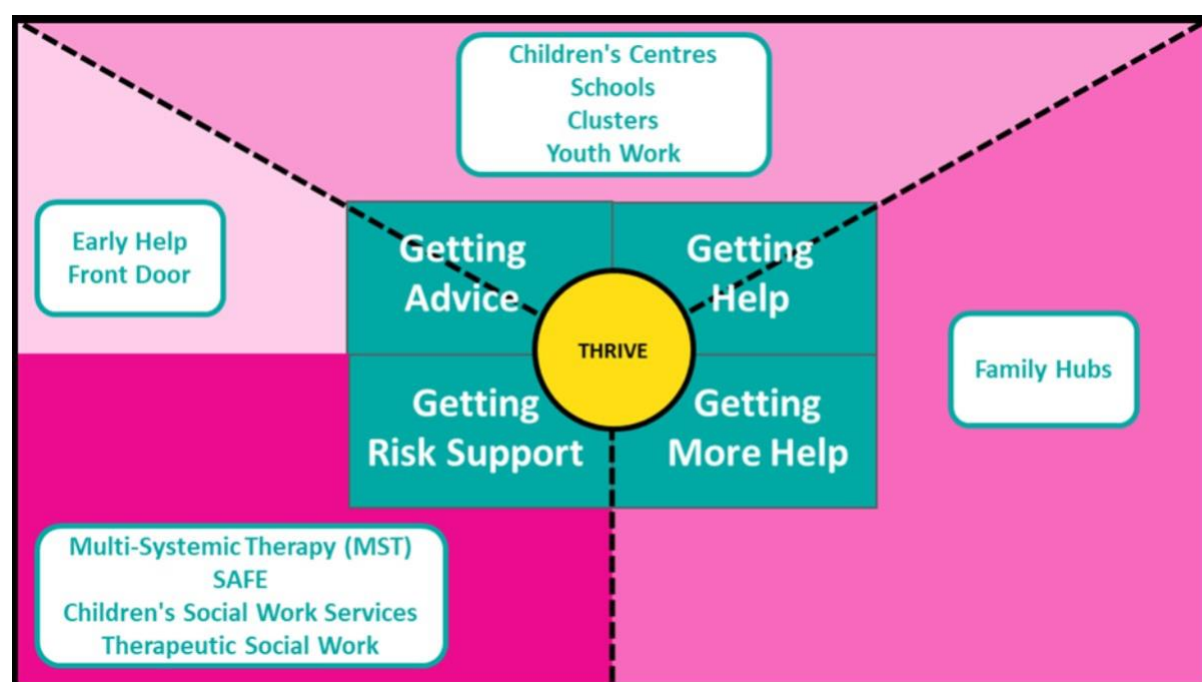


Figure 3: Leeds Family Hubs and Early Help Front Door Team webpage (2025) *Source: Leeds City Council (2025).*

Leeds City Council provides a clear example of Early Help within a graduated system of support. Families can access universal or targeted support first, with more intensive help available as needs increase. The council describes Early Help as “everybody’s business” and uses a graduated approach to match support to need (Leeds City Council, 2026).

A key strength is its seven **Family Hubs**, which act as access points for Early Help. Their multidisciplinary teams include Early Help practitioners, social workers, domestic abuse, mental health and SEND coordinators, a substance-use coordinator and a police officer. The Hubs are described as a “one stop shop”, making it easier for families to access support (Leeds City Council, 2025).

This demonstrates strong multi-agency working, particularly where domestic abuse, mental health, SEND and safeguarding concerns overlap. Leeds also provides a clear pathway for increasing levels of need, with the Early Help Front Door working alongside Social Work Duty and Advice to determine whether concerns require **Early Help** or Children’s Social Work Service involvement (Leeds City Council, 2025; Leeds City Council, 2026).

However, information across Early Help, Family Hubs and safeguarding pages may require users to navigate different sections of the website. Overall, Leeds provides a strong integrated model linking universal services, targeted Early Help, Family Hubs and safeguarding.

Comparative Analysis

The three authorities demonstrate different strengths in communicating Early Help and family support.

Leicestershire provides clear information about the relationship between Family Help, Child in Need services and social care, while its First Response Children’s Duty team makes the safeguarding pathway visible. However, its online request process requires detailed information and may be demanding for some families.

Staffordshire provides the strongest integration between family-facing support and safeguarding. Its Family Hubs offer practical and emotional support, while Families First connects Early Help with safeguarding and specialist services. However, the number of services and links may make navigation more difficult.

Leeds provides the clearest graduated model, showing how support can progress from universal services to targeted Early Help, Family Hubs and more intensive intervention. Its multidisciplinary Family Hubs also demonstrate strong partnership working.

The comparison shows that website effectiveness cannot be judged by the amount of information provided alone. Harvey, Hastings and Chowdhury (2021) highlight how digitalisation can create barriers through poor design, access difficulties and differences in digital literacy. Effective Early Help websites should therefore use clear language, simple navigation, multiple access routes and alternatives to digital-only communication.

Family engagement should also inform website design. Demissie and Pearce (2025) emphasise the importance of parental engagement and responsive relationships, suggesting that councils should involve families when testing information and referral processes.

Overall, Leicestershire is strongest in linking Early Help with social care, Leeds provides the clearest graduated model, while Staffordshire offers the strongest combination of accessible family support, Family Hubs and safeguarding integration. Staffordshire is therefore considered the most effective of the three for this report.

Conclusion

Overall, effective Early Help is fundamental to improving outcomes for children and families by identifying needs early and preventing escalation. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights the importance of understanding children within the wider family, community and professional systems. Across the three local authorities, the Family Hub and Early Help approaches demonstrate the value of integrated, strengths-based and preventative support. Although approaches differ between authorities, they share the common aim of providing accessible, coordinated support that responds to families' needs and promotes sustainable outcomes.

Recommendations

1. Introduce a clear “**Find the Right Help**” pathway based on families' circumstances rather than council structures.
2. Clearly distinguish **Early Help** from safeguarding, including guidance for immediate safety concerns.
3. Provide telephone, face-to-face and **Family Hub** options to reduce digital exclusion.
4. Strengthen multi-agency signposting through an integrated partnership of health providers, social services, law enforcement and the community-based organisations.

5. Involve families, children and young people in testing website information to ensure accessible language, navigation and referrals.

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