



Cover Page

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

For this report, I examined how Leeds, Norfolk and Southwark use their websites to signpost families to Early Help services. I selected these authorities because they represent different contexts. Leeds is a large metropolitan city, Norfolk a predominantly rural county and Southwark an inner London borough.

Drawing on the Early Help System Guide (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities [DLUHC] and Department for Education [DfE], 2023), I established five evaluative criteria: accessibility, clarity, family voice, practical resources and comprehensiveness. Effective website signposting influences whether families seek support before problems escalate.

The Early Help System: What It Is and Why It Matters

Early Help is "support for children of all ages that improves a family's resilience and outcomes or reduces the chance of a problem getting worse" (DLUHC and DfE, 2023, p. 4). It operates as "a system of support delivered by local authorities and their partners working together" (DLUHC and DfE, 2023, p. 5). This matters because families rarely present with single problems, financial stress, housing instability and parenting difficulties often overlap.

The purpose of Early Help is prevention, providing support before problems escalate to statutory intervention. *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (DfE, 2023) describes Early Help as appropriate 'for children and families who have several needs or whose circumstances might make them more vulnerable' (p. 14) and that support should be provided at the 'earliest point' to prevent needs from escalating (DfE, 2023, Section 16). Families must consent to receive support, it is voluntary, not imposed (DLUHC and DfE, 2023, p. 9).

The legal framework for Early Help is established through several key Acts. The Children Act 1989 made children's welfare paramount (s.1) and distinguished between children 'in need' (s.17) and those at risk of significant harm (s.47). The Children Act 2004 introduced duties on local authorities to cooperate, while the Children and Social Work Act 2017 strengthened safeguarding arrangements (Great Britain, 2017). The Equality Act 2010

requires reasonable adjustments (Great Britain, 2010), and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognises children as victims in their own right (Great Britain, 2021) - particularly relevant as families experiencing domestic abuse may need early intervention.

However, Early Help is not without critics. Featherstone et al. (2014) argue that early intervention can mean more surveillance of disadvantaged families. Featherstone (2023) suggests the child protection system has become "broken" in ways that disproportionately harm marginalised families. White and Wastell (2017) worry that Early Help can pathologise normal family stress. Axford and Berry (2017), however, counter that "evidence-based early intervention is essential to effective child protection" (p. 4). This debate reveals that the challenge is not to abandon early intervention but to ensure it is delivered in a genuinely partnership-oriented manner. Research demonstrates significant variation in access, with Lucas and Archard (2021) finding engagement rates ranging from 7.8% in Barnsley to just 0.33% in Richmond upon Thames (p. 82).

Multi-Agency Working: Why It Is Essential

Early Help requires collaboration across professional boundaries. Working Together to Safeguard Children (DfE, 2023) states 'successful outcomes for children depend on strong partnership working between parents/carers and the practitioners working with them' (Section 10). No single professional holds all the expertise a struggling family requires.

Multi-agency working involves practitioners from different organisations collaborating (DfE, 2023). The Team Around the Family (TAF) model requires a designated lead professional to coordinate support (DLUHC and DfE, 2023). However, implementation challenges persist. Purcell, Baginsky and Steils (2024) highlight that failure to share information has been repeatedly identified in serious case reviews. Edwards and Parkinson (2025) found that Early Help Family Group Conferences can prevent escalation to statutory services. Richards (2018) found school staff often struggled to understand social work decisions. McCarry, Radford and Baker (2021) found children living with domestic violence often "slip off the agendas of professionals" (p. 118) because they fall below the threshold for statutory intervention, precisely the gap Early Help should fill.

Evaluating Three Local Authority Websites

Assessment Framework

To evaluate each website, I examined five criteria drawn from the Early Help System Guide (DLUHC and DfE, 2023):

Criterion	What I Looked For
Accessibility	Could I find the information without getting lost?
Clarity	Was the language jargon-free?
Family Voice	Were families shown as being listened to through case studies, testimonials, or participation statements?
Practical Resources	Could families download forms or find contact details?
Comprehensiveness	Did the site cover all aspects of Early Help?

Leeds City Council

Leeds presents family support via Family Hubs in the 'Children and Families' section (Leeds City Council, 2026). Navigation requires approximately three clicks: Home > Children and Families > Services for Families > Family Hubs. As shown in Figure 1, the webpage describes Family Hubs as welcoming spaces where families can access "support, advice, and services in one convenient location" (Leeds City Council, 2026).

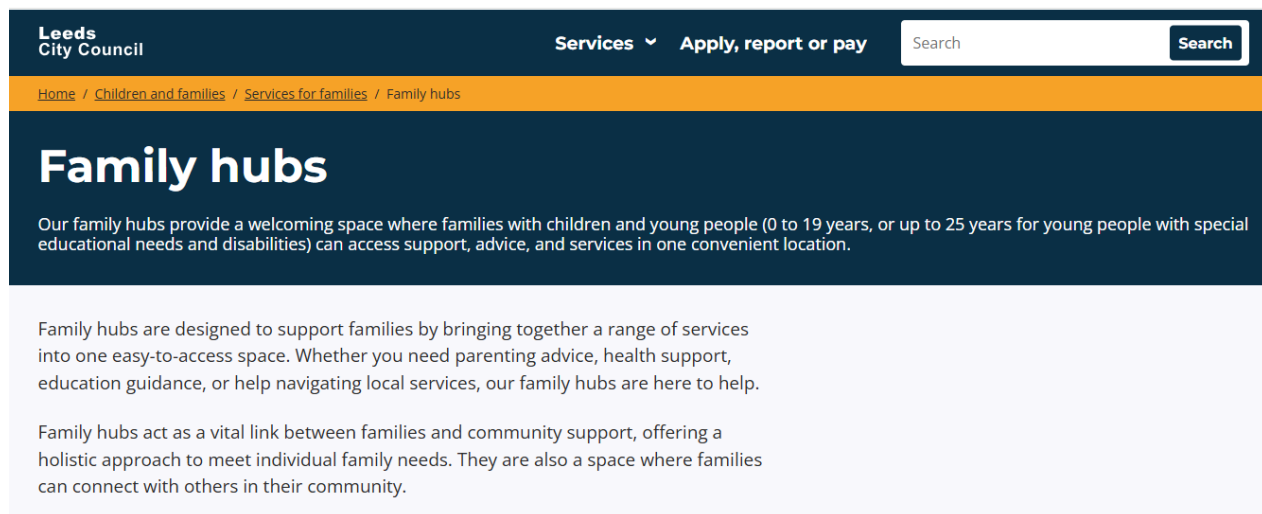


Figure 1: Leeds City Council Family Hubs webpage showing the introduction to family support services and the text-based layout (Source: Leeds City Council, 2026).

Strengths: The language is reasonably clear and emphasises the holistic nature of Early Help. The website explains that Family Hubs provide parenting advice, health support and help navigating local services, reflecting preventative principles (DLUHC and DfE, 2023).

Weaknesses: As illustrated in Figure 1, the information is presented in dense, text-heavy paragraphs with limited visual guidance. For a parent reading on a phone, dense paragraphs are off-putting. There are no downloadable forms or leaflets. More concerning, the site does not clearly state Early Help is voluntary. Without explicit reassurance, families may confuse voluntary support with statutory intervention (Featherstone et al., 2014). Regarding family voice, Leeds provides no case studies, testimonials or evidence that families' views inform service design. This contradicts the partnership principles in Working Together to Safeguard Children (DfE, 2023), which require practitioners to communicate clearly and involve parents in decision making.

Overall: Although Leeds provides comprehensive information, its text-heavy presentation and lack of voluntary reassurance may discourage families from engaging a significant weakness given the Early Help System Guide's emphasis on accessible family-centred communication (DLUHC and DfE, 2023).

Norfolk County Council

Norfolk presents family support through its Best Start Family Hubs webpage (Norfolk County Council, 2026). Navigation is straightforward: Home > Children and Families > Best Start in Life > Best Start Family Hubs. As shown in Figure 2, the webpage uses a clear layout with organised sections directing families to different types of support.

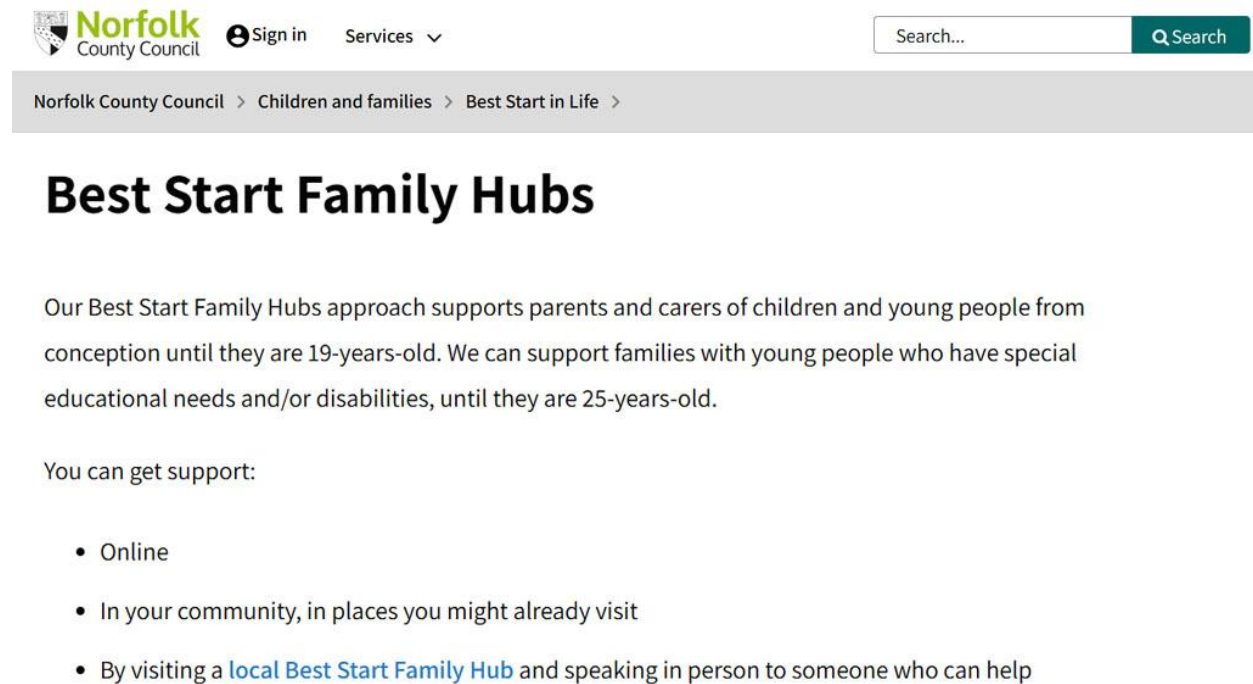


Figure 2: Norfolk County Council Best Start Family Hubs webpage showing the family-friendly navigation and overview of available support (Source:Norfolk County Council, 2026).

Strengths: The webpage uses welcoming, accessible language and explains that support is available from conception until 19 years of age, or up to 25 years for young people with special educational needs. It highlights multiple ways families can receive support, including online, within the community and through local Family Hubs. The page organises information into clear categories such as health, money, childcare, housing and activities, making it easier for families to locate relevant services. This reflects the holistic principles of the Early Help System Guide (DLUHC and DfE, 2023).

Weaknesses: Although visually well organised, it places greater emphasis on Best Start Family Hubs than on Early Help, which may make it less obvious for families specifically

searching for Early Help. The page uses professional language such as "Best Start" without clearly explaining what this means for families. Purcell, Baginsky and Steils (2024) argue that unfamiliar terminology can create barriers, and parents may assume the service is not intended for them. Unlike Southwark, Norfolk provides no explicit statement that support is voluntary, nor does it include family testimonials. This creates a mismatch between the site's audience (families) and its professional framing.

Overall: Norfolk provides excellent resources but presents them in a way that may be more accessible to professionals than to families, potentially excluding the very families the service aims to support.

Southwark Council

Southwark presents Early Help through a dedicated About Early Help page (Southwark Council, 2026). Navigation is intuitive: Home > Children, Young People and Families > Children's Social Care > Early Help > About Early Help. As shown in Figure 3, the webpage provides a clear explanation of Early Help.

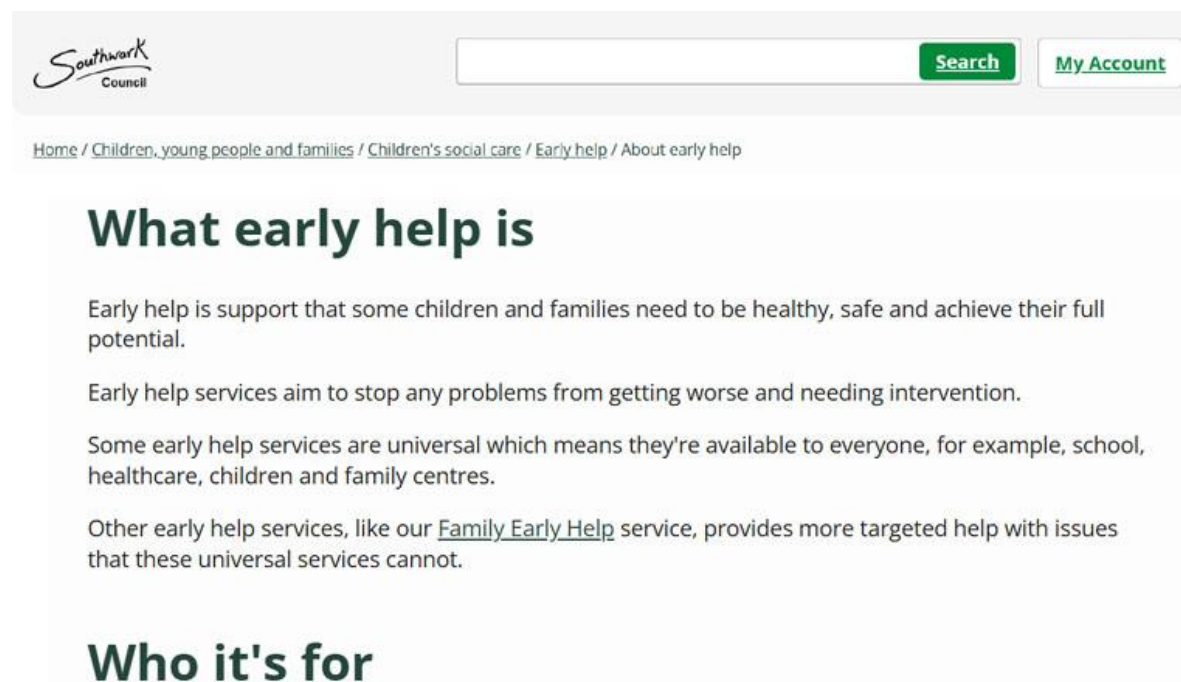


Figure 3: Southwark Council About Early Help webpage showing the explanation of Early Help and the support available for families (Southwark Council, 2026).

Strengths: The language is strikingly clear. The site invites families with: "If you're worried about a child or need help for your family, we're here to listen and support you" (Southwark Council, 2026). No jargon, just straightforward, reassuring invitations that reduce the anxiety associated with seeking help. Even more impressive is the explicit commitment to child participation: "We want children and young people to be actively involved in decisions that affect their lives" (Southwark Council, 2026). This directly reflects the "family voice and experience" principle (DLUHC and DfE, 2023, p. 10) and aligns with Working Together to Safeguard Children (DfE, 2023), which requires practitioners to ensure children are heard and involved in decisions affecting their lives. The site identifies common reasons families may seek support, including parenting difficulties, emotional wellbeing, financial pressures and domestic abuse, demonstrating awareness of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021's recognition of children as victims.

Weaknesses: Although Southwark demonstrates excellent accessibility and family-centred language, the absence of downloadable resources may disadvantage families with limited internet access (Purcell, Baginsky and Steils, 2024). Additionally, while Southwark states children's opinions "influence assessments, plans and services" (Southwark Council, 2026), the website does not provide evidence of how this occurs in practice through case studies or testimonials.

Overall: Southwark does the best job of making Early Help feel accessible and demonstrates closer alignment with statutory guidance than Leeds or Norfolk, though it could improve by providing downloadable resources.

Comparative Analysis

Criterion	Leeds	Norfolk	Southwark
Accessibility	Moderate	Good	Excellent
Clarity	Good	Excellent	Excellent
Comprehensiveness	Good	Good	Good
Family Voice	Moderate	Good	Good
Referral Info	Moderate	Moderate	Good

Source: Author's analysis of Leeds (2026), Norfolk (2026), and Southwark (2026) websites.

The comparison highlights clear differences in how the three local authorities communicate Early Help. Southwark demonstrates the strongest family-centred communication through plain English and intuitive navigation. Unlike Leeds (Figure 1), Southwark uses welcoming invitations and explicit commitments to child participation. Unlike Norfolk, with its professional 'Best Start' framing, Southwark prioritises accessibility for families. This matters because accessibility is not just about finding the page, it is about feeling welcome when you arrive. Southwark's approach reflects the principle that "effective Early Help systems can reduce the need for later, more intensive and costly intervention" (DLUHC and DfE, 2023, p. 6).

Norfolk's practical resources are impressive but the professional framing may exclude families unfamiliar with service terminology. Leeds occupies a middle position, information is comprehensive but text-heavy presentation reduces accessibility. The variation across councils echoes Lucas and Archard's (2021) finding that local authorities lack common protocols. The Care Quality Commission (CQC, 2025) supports this concern, finding that 'some people experienced difficulties in accessing information and advice, found the system complex to navigate or off putting'. Website signposting is a frontline service, poor design creates barriers to help-seeking at precisely the moment families need support most.

Conclusion and Recommendations

All three councils provide necessary information, but presentation and tone vary enormously. Overall, Southwark most closely reflects the principles contained within the Early Help System Guide and Working Together to Safeguard Children because it combines accessible language, child participation and clear explanations of available support. Although Norfolk provides extensive practical resources, its branding around Best Start Family Hubs may make Early Help less visible. Leeds offers valuable services but could improve accessibility through clearer design and stronger emphasis on voluntary engagement. The academic debate between Featherstone et al. (2014) and Axford and Berry (2017) captures the tension, early intervention can be experienced as surveillance or support depending on communication. Southwark's approach suggests a middle path is possible, offering early support without coercion.

Specific Recommendations

1. Leeds should introduce downloadable Easy Read leaflets and clearly explain on the Family Hubs homepage that support is voluntary, addressing the omission identified in this evaluation.
2. Norfolk should clearly explain that Early Help is voluntary and replace professional terminology like "Best Start" with plain English explanations that families can easily understand.
3. Southwark should provide printable guides and multilingual resources, including translated information for non-English speaking families to address digital exclusion.
4. All councils should include short explainer videos demonstrating how Early Help works in practice, featuring family testimonials to provide evidence of family voice.
5. All councils should improve accessibility for people with disabilities by ensuring websites are compatible with screen readers and providing information in alternative formats, as required by the Equality Act 2010 (Great Britain, 2010).
6. All councils should add "Request Early Help" buttons on every relevant page, making it easier for families to take the next step without navigating multiple pages.

Better website design is not simply an administrative improvement, it helps ensure families access Early Help before problems escalate. Without consistent standards, families will continue to experience unequal access depending on where they live.

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