

An Examination and Analysis of How the 'Early Help' System is Signposted to UK Families by Their Local Authority Website

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1. Introduction

Timely, rightful support has the potential to change the life of adversity-stricken families. The Early Help system is a formal provision in England, to offer such support before challenges reach crisis levels. Local authorities have a duty of making Early Help services available and visible and their websites are often the first point of contact to families requiring help. This report evaluates and analyses the way in which three local authorities in England Nottinghamshire County Council, Leicestershire County Council and Staffordshire County Council share information on Early Help with families via their websites. It assesses the availability, ease and understandability of the Early Help offer of each of the websites, and then compares and contrasts their strategies. A conclusion is made on which one of the local authorities conveys the information the best and as well as suggestions on how it can be improved.

2. The Early Help System

The Early Help is a preventative process that is integrated into the child welfare system in the UK. The Early Help System Guide (Department for Education, 2023) defines Early Help as support available to children, young people and families at any point during the lifetime of a child, as soon as an issue arises, instead of delivering support once a situation has reached a statutory threshold. The Guide clarifies that Early Help is not just a service but a multi-agency framework of coordinated interventions to meet the needs in a holistic manner before they become established.

The legal framework of Early Help is established by Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 (HM Government, 2023) which imposes an obligation on local authorities and their partners to provide and encourage effective Early Help services. The guidance highlights that local authorities should locate children who would be benefited by Early Help and make services accessible, publicized and combined between agencies. According to the document, Early Help assessments are to be conducted by a lead professional relying on the input of various agencies such as health, education, and voluntary sector providers (HM Government, 2023).

Early Help is a continuum of need. The basis is universal services, i.e., GPs, schools, health visitors. Once families are found to be going through hardships that can not be covered by universal provision, they can be referred to Early Help services. The families will only be referred to the statutory children's social care when they are complex in their needs or when a child is at risk of serious harm

(Department for Education, 2023). This level model highlights the significance of families having access to and ability to access Early Help without shame or difficulty.

3. Multi-Agency and Inter-disciplinary Working

One of the key features of Early Help is that it relies on the successful multi-agency cooperation. The expectation of local authorities, NHS organisations, schools, police, and voluntary and community sector organisations to collaborate under strategic safeguarding partnerships to provide a coherent Early Help offer is explicit in Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 (HM Government, 2023).

The significance of multi-agency working is properly established in literature. Fragmented professional responses were found by Munro (2011) to be a systemic obstacle to effective child protection, and subsequent reform has put joined-up working at the heart of the safeguarding policy. In Early help, in particular, the contributions of various professionals make it possible to take a holistic view of the strengths and needs of a family. Frost and Dolan (2012) also believe that inter-disciplinary practice needs structural coordination, but a shared language, mutual trust between agencies, and understanding of roles, which should be communicated to both families and practitioners.

The Early Help System Guide (Department for Education, 2023) also emphasizes the fact that the model of Family Hub is becoming a central element of multi-agency delivery, which means that services provided by health visiting, children centres, and voluntary organisations become centralized under one roof or a point of coordination. To families, it minimizes the hassle of going through various referral pathways. In the case of professionals, it helps in joint evaluation and identification of a lead professional to organize child and family plan. The degree to which this joined-up approach is reflected and communicated through the local authority websites is quite varied, as is shown in the analysis below.

4. Evaluation of Local Authority Websites

4.1 Nottinghamshire County Council

The Early Help content of Nottinghamshire County Council is presented on a range of different pages on the website. The primary family services webpage (Nottinghamshire County Council, 2025a) gives a good introduction to the Early Help support targeted, enumerating a variety of presenting concerns that the service can tackle, such as school attendance, homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse, and behavioural problems. This breadth of coverage is obvious strength, since it enables the self-identification of need of families under various circumstances.

Contact information of the Early Help Unit - a telephone number (0115 804 1248) and email address, as well as a link to an online referral form is also present on the page. It is explicitly recognized that contact can be made by members of the public and not just by professionals which is a significant accessibility feature. There is also

a specific page about early years and family hubs on the site (Nottinghamshire County Council, 2025b), which describes universal and targeted support offered between conception and the age of 19, which is something the Family Hub model promoted in the Early Help System Guide (Department for Education, 2023).

But the pieces of information are scattered. A beginner user might not find it easy to find all the necessary information on the site, where Early Help is mentioned in the area of children social care, early years and safeguarding. No one landing page that brings together all the information about Early Help to families. The language used on certain pages is slanted towards the professional audience instead of lay audiences, which can pose a challenge to families who have no previous experience with the system. Also connected as a PDF file is the Early Help Development Plan, which is cited to Working Together 2013, an out-of-date version, implying that certain information has not been revised to be in line with the 2023 statutory guidance (Nottinghamshire County Council, 2025c).

4.2 Leicestershire County Council

Leicestershire County Council offers a relatively well-organized strategy of communicating Early Help. The primary Help for Children and Families page (Leicestershire County Council, 2025a) is well placed on the site, being placed in the Education and Children section, and the language is easily understandable by an average reader. Of particular interest, the council has renamed its Early Help offer as a Family Help, which is a targeted early help service that takes action with families who are facing challenges which, according to the council, cannot be addressed by universal services, like schools or GPs on their own. Such a rebranding can enhance the understanding of families that are not well-informed about the official terminology of Early Help.

The acknowledgement of the multi-agency partnership working is a major strength of the Leicestershire web site. According to the Leicestershire Children and Families Partnership page (Leicestershire County Council, 2025b), the Leicestershire Early Help Partnership is a multi agency organization dedicated to enhancing the outcomes of families, and connects to the Early Help Strategy. The site mentions Family Hubs as an important tool in service delivery, which makes it a direct link to the First 1001 Critical Days model - proving consistent with the current knowledge of the evidence-based practice and governmental advice (Department for Education, 2023).

There is also a direct link on the site to a Request for Services online form, which families may use, and a Multi-Agency Referral Form, which professionals may use to access the site. There is a contact number and the support available, such as parenting programmes, one-to-one support and the enhanced intensive intervention, is explained in an easily understandable language. In July 2024, Leicestershire was judged to be of an outstanding standard of Ofsted and this is evident in its clear efforts to be transparent and open. There is a slight weakness that the rebranding of Family Help can be confusing to the extent that families will only search directly using the keywords Early Help but internal linking typically suffices.

4.3 Staffordshire County Council

The Staffordshire County Council site has its Early Help page, with the title easily readable as: Early Help — Helping Children and Families Early (Staffordshire County Council, 2026), being updated in March 2026. Interestingly, this page is part of the Family Hubs section, which indicates the structural integration of Early Help into the Family Hub framework. The page begins with an inclusive, de-stigmatising introduction: Everybody needs help sometimes which could assist the families in approaching the service without feeling embarrassed or scared.

The page states that there are a lot of services providing Early Help and refers families to Staffordshire Connects a searchable list of local services, where they can find information relevant to their particular needs. This is a good quality, and it makes families empowered to make self-referrals and have a wide scope of provision instead of being guided through a single channel of referrals. Families First service (Staffordshire County Council, 2025) is another service described on the site and it covers 19 geographical patches and involves professional people of the multi-agencies in order to create a joined-up response. The Staffordshire Families Strategic Partnership page also puts Early Help into further context in the broader context of safeguarding and outlines the vision of family support in an accessible language.

One of the most prominent advantages is the fact that the Early Help Strategy 2022-2027 can be downloaded as a document, and families and professionals can receive clear information about the strategic direction of the council. The website of Staffordshire also effectively separates levels of need and various referral pathways - such as when to refer to the Staffordshire Families Integrated Front Door (higher-tier concerns) - which is also well-aligned with Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 (HM Government, 2023). One weakness is, though, that the core Early Help page is quite short and does not provide much detail as to what kind of support families can get, as much as it uses signposting to the external directories and other pages.

5. Comparative Analysis

On the three websites of the local authorities, a number of themes and differences can be identified. All three councils show interest in multi-agency working and have invested in Family Hub infrastructure, which is in line with the national policy direction in the Early Help System Guide (Department for Education, 2023) and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 (HM Government, 2023). The clarity, accessibility and coherence with which such information is conveyed to families do differ significantly, however.

Leicestershire and Staffordshire are better off than Nottinghamshire when it comes to accessibility. The use of plain English, well-written descriptions of the services, and an easy online referral form by the families makes Leicestershire relatively easy as a lay user to know what kind of assistance they can receive and how to do it. The inclusionary language and application of the Staffordshire Connects directory attest

to the desire to minimize barriers at Staffordshire. Although it has detailed content, Nottinghamshire lacks cohesiveness and is more professional on certain pages.

In terms of detail, the list of presenting concerns is the most comprehensive in Nottinghamshire, and it could allow families with non-standard or complicated situations to find what they need. Leicestershire provides the clearest explanation of the model of support on offer such as parenting programmes, regular and increased interventions and attributes this to its strategic partnership framework. The site of Staffordshire has been updated recently and it has high structural compliance with the Family Hub model, however, the primary Early Help page lacks substantive information in comparison to similar pages of the other two councils.

Staffordshire and Leicestershire are, on the question of conformity to statutory guidance, very strong in comparison with Nottinghamshire. Staffordshire specifically refers to the existing Early Help Strategy and Working Together 2023, whereas Leicestershire Partnership page shows the knowledge of the First 1001 Critical Days and the existing evidence base. The mention of Working Together 2013 on one page, in relation to Nottinghamshire, is a huge jump, implying that not everything has been examined in the context of new statutory directions.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the Leicestershire County Council has the most successful story of communicating Early Help information to families. Its web site has an easy to understand and accessible language, a clear and well organized description of its services, clear information on its multi agency partnerships and a straightforward route on how families can seek aid. The newly-acquired Outstanding Ofsted status is another testimony to the fact that the council is not just presenting its early help strategy but has the quality of practice behind it. Staffordshire comes in at a very close second, especially due to its inclusive tone, modernization, and strategic transparency.

The recommendations below are provided in the three local authorities:

- Nottinghamshire needs to move Early Help information to one page, easily signposted landing page to families, in plain English. Any mention of statutory guidance ought to be amended to include Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023.
- Leicestershire can enhance the discoverability of its Family Help service by maintaining a visible connection or page within the search term of Early Help so that families that use this term are not misled.
- Staffordshire needs to add more information to its main Early Help page to include more information on the specific categories of support it offers to families and avoid depending on external Staffordshire Connects directory to get the most basic information.
- Short and easy-to-understand case study examples or what to expect guides would be beneficial to all three authorities as research indicates they can help to reduce the stigma involved in seeking help by a significant margin (Featherstone et al., 2018).

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