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An Examination and Analysis of How the Early Help System is Signposted to UK Families Through Local Authority Websites

Table of Contents

<u>AN EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS OF HOW THE EARLY HELP SYSTEM IS SIGNPOSTED TO UK FAMILIES THROUGH LOCAL AUTHORITY WEBSITES</u>		<u>1</u>
1.0 INTRODUCTION.....		2
2.0 EXPLANATION OF THE EARLY HELP SYSTEM		2
3.0 EXPLANATION OF MULTI-AGENCY WORKING (REVISED AND EXPANDED)		3
4. EVALUATION OF THE THREE LOCAL AUTHORITY WEBSITES		4
4.1 LEEDS CITY COUNCIL.....		4
4.2 TOWER HAMLETS COUNCIL		4
4.3 SOUTHWARK COUNCIL.....		5
5.0 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES		5
6. CONCLUSION		6
7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS.....		7
REFERENCES		8

1.0 Introduction

The research aims to investigate local authority online communication about Early Help services and family support within the national safeguarding framework. Early Help will be considered as a preventative and timely response aimed at helping children and young people and their families before problems become serious enough for statutory intervention. It will be applicable because local authorities have specific safeguarding duties and responsibilities, and therefore, they are mandated by law to make it easy for parents and guardians to access information on Early Help and associated family support services via their internet portal. The three local authorities that will be considered within the research include Leeds City Council, Tower Hamlets Council, and Southwark Council. The research will examine these three authorities and analyze the manner in which they communicate Early Help services and family support services on their internet portals. The research will be based on Early Help System Guide and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023.

2.0 Explanation of the Early Help System

Early intervention and support refer to providing services and assistance for families at the emerging stage of problems, as opposed to waiting for problems to arise and result in requiring formal intervention by statutory social services (UK Government, 2023). Based on the concepts surrounding prevention and intervention, it highlights that there are several challenges such as parenting, behaviour, school attendance, financial problems, and mental wellbeing, that can be dealt with properly with support at an early stage (Rabadán, 2020).

The Early Help System Guide (2021) recommends a whole-family, strength-based approach, with consideration given to addressing needs within a family as a whole and not solely for the child. Early Help services are offered through a series of increasingly nuanced levels based on universal services, targeted services, and specialist services. Perhaps most importantly, Early Help services are voluntary and collaborative, meaning that family members are included as active participants on behalf of and with a voice in planning and decision-making about services.

Empirical evidence shows that Early Help reduces the risk of problems emerging in the long term, as well as reducing family breakdown and the subsequent pressure on front-line services (McCarthy, and Guerin, 2022). By working within multi-agency models, Early Help allows an holistic response that benefits family needs, thus helping improve engagement and outcomes (Betancourt et al., 2020).

3.0 Explanation of Multi-Agency Working (Revised and Expanded)

Multi-agency working refers to the coordinated involvement of professionals from various sectors like education, health, and social care, and housing, early years, and voluntary sectors to address the multiple and interlocking needs of children and young people and their families (Charles, Ewbank, and Banya 2021). It recognizes that no single agency working alone would be capable of addressing safeguarding issues because the needs of children are multiple and range across various spheres. The Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance published in 2023 again emphasizes the importance of safeguarding as a collective and mutual responsibility. It requires child and adult agencies to share information, plan jointly, and work together effectively as a collective response for timely and appropriate action. It emphasizes that difficulties can be prevented from escalating with early recognition and collective action.

Various analyses have pointed out some benefits associated with multi-agency working as follows:

1. Holistic Assessment

Collaborative practice allows specialists to tap into various skills, giving an insightful and detailed understanding of a child and his/her family. For example, schools might identify changes in a child's behavior, while healthcare practitioners might pick up on matters of child development. The combination of these pieces gives an overall and sturdy assessment (Hood et al., 2020).

2. Integrated Support

According to inter-agency working, collaboration among agencies helps with planning and implementation of interventions. This helps with service duplication and reduces inconsistencies and conflicting advice given to families. Working together also reduces the chances of 'falling through the gaps' because some families have multiple needs.

3. Better Outcomes

Engaging with Early Help provision will be achieved once they become more accessible, cohesive, and personalized. It has been shown that a multi-agency approach will have better consequences for emotional, educational, and social factors as well as reduce the risk of intervention for safeguarding services (Baxter, Boydell, and McPherson, 2023). Despite these advantages, there are challenges associated with multi-agency working. Some of these include the use of incompatible technologies that make it difficult to share information seamlessly, different languages and agendas associated with professions, and unclear boundaries associated

with roles within agencies (Charles et al., 2021). Not least, well-designed digital signposting on local authority websites could offer ways to mitigate several of these challenges. Information about referral procedures, agency responsibilities, and levels of need made clear on local authority websites might help professionals and parents make sense of the Early Help offer. Local authorities making procedures clearly visible on their websites could thus help promote multi-agency working and better transition procedures.

4. Evaluation of the Three Local Authority Websites

4.1 Leeds City Council

Leeds City Council presents an excellent and easy-to-understand articulation of Early Help on its own website. Early Help is described as “help offered to families as soon as problems arise,” and its focus rests within preventative and strength-based intervention. Its website centers on early referral, voluntary participation, and ongoing support offered to families with dependent children from conception and beyond (Leeds City Council, 2025).

Strengths

- A clear definition for Early Help is easy to access and consistent with current statutory guidance.
- Leeds offer “One Minute Guides” that provide brief and easy-to-understand information on Early Help, the role of Family Hubs, and professional responsibilities.
- Effective paths for navigation lead people to referral sources, cluster contacts, and professional assistance.
- It clearly records collaborative efforts in the fields of education, health, and early years.

Weakness

- There are some documents that are available only in PDF form. It might affect accessibility.
- Information targeted at youth will be less detailed compared to that targeting parents and professionals.

On a whole, Leeds displays a clear and well-organized Early Help service page that integrates with national models and research emphasizing the value of early and clear communication with family members.

4.2 Tower Hamlets Council

Tower Hamlets describes the Early Help as a structure that focuses on the objective of “supporting families to prevent problems from becoming more serious,” an objective achieved

via Family Hubs and Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST). MAST acts as a single and streamlined referral entry, involving professionals with expertise from the health sector, social care, and education, as well as the police and housing departments, working together at the front door itself (Tower Hamlets Council, 2025).

Strengths

- Offers a detailed and comprehensive understanding about Early Help provisions and who is eligible to receive benefits from Early Help.
- The MAST configuration perfectly illustrates collaboration among multiple agencies at the very first stage of contact.
- Referral routes are clearly set out, including any referrals relating to Early Help assessments.
- Specifically, it focuses on specialized services for emotional well-being, parenting, and housing needs.

Weakness

- Requires more steps compared to Leeds, which might be a challenge for less digitally competent families.
- Some parts rely on technical vocabulary with inadequate explanatory statements.

Overall, Tower Hamlets presents a good and joined-up model for Early Help Coordination, but it might improve access with easier-to-understand information for families who need it.

4.3 Southwark Council

Southwark provides Early Help services via its Family Early Help Service, otherwise known as FEH. It aims to support these families who have needs that are not met by universal services. According to the FEH pages, these services include holistic and whole-family working which focuses on parenting, youth, mental health, and then schools and the voluntary sector (Southwark Council, 2024).

5.0 Comparative Analysis of Strengths and Weaknesses

A comparative analysis reveals various methods for signposting Early Help online for three local authorities. The main factors that have been identified as influencing these online methods include signposting for Early Help information, multi-agency working, and referrals. All these factors align with national guidance.

Comprehensibility of Early Help Statement

- Leeds presents the most lucid and family-friendly explanation.

- Tower Hamlets has a very clear and easy-to-understand description, and some pages have a more technical approach.
- Southwark describes the service well but contributes relatively less towards an emphasis on the Early Help philosophy.

Presentation of Multi-Agency Working

- The Tower Hamlets borough shows the strongest representation of multi-agency working within the MAST framework.
- Leeds focuses on inter-disciplinary cluster working but with fewer operational specifics.
- Southwark promotes multi-agency working but talks about it less explicitly.

Navigation and Accessibility

- Leeds is the most intuitive and accessible.
- Tower Hamlets involves working across several sub-pages.
- Southwark: clear but no strong visual structure.

Referral Paths

All three authorities offer accessible referral processes. - Tower Hamlets has a distinctive single point of access. - Leeds and Southwark have more clearly structured pathways but are less integrated compared with Tower Hamlets. Alignment with National Guidance - All three have an alignment with the Early Help System Guide and Working Together guidance, with Leeds having the most direct alignment in relation to Family Hubs and prevention. Overall Conclusion Leeds does Early Help communication most effectively for families. Tower Hamlets shows the greatest degree of multi-agency working. Southwark represents an efficient and less overtly integrated model.

6. Conclusion

It can be seen from the above analysis that all three councils offer information about Early Help that meets national safeguarding needs and complies with the drivers outlined within Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023). However, at the same time, there appear significant discrepancies among all three sites regarding the importance they assign to communication efficacy and the ease with which they make services accessible. It seems that Leeds City Council fares better among all three and presents Early Help information very clearly via a set of 'One Minute Guides' and easy-to-understand concepts. The manner in which Leeds presents information about Early Help would appear to make early engagement more efficient and

stress-free for parents and guardians as they would be better able to understand exactly what Early Help is and, more importantly, how they might access these services.

On the other hand, Tower Hamlets LBC provides an extremely developed level of multi-agency integration, most notably via its Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST), which represents a single point of access for Early Help referrals. Specifically, this arrangement fits well with national requirements in relation to coordinated safeguarding practice. Nevertheless, whilst its level of collaborative working might be highly sophisticated, it would appear that its website could be more parent- and carer-friendly, with very heavy text and several levels of navigation which might reduce accessibility, particularly for less digitally competent people or people who have English as an additional language.

A comprehensive and well-structured Early Help offer is offered by Southwark Council with its Family Early Help service. Although it contains factual information consistent with an Early Help approach, Southwark's website contains relatively fewer visible indicators and direct statements about multi-agency working compared with Leeds and Tower Hamlets. As a result, it might be difficult for families to grasp inter-agency working and what can be expected from an Early Help response. Moreover, some external links are not given any contextual background, potentially creating ambiguity about what role various agencies have within the overall safeguarding framework. Overall, it would appear that all three authorities have met with government criteria but that there are some variable standards as regards the dissemination of Early Help that is clear, accessible, and confidence-inspiring. Leeds leads on user-centric communication, Tower Hamlets leads on multi-agency working, and Southwark leads on service information but needs more clarity and clearer articulation of joint working.

7.0 Recommendations

To make Early Help communications more accessible and efficient, it would be very beneficial for the three authorities to make more streamlined use of language on their respective websites so that low literacy level or EAL families can fully grasp the information given. Leeds and Southwark could particularly improve on presenting a more centralized gateway similar to Tower Hamlets' Multi-Agency Support Team, which presents a structured single entry approach for referrals and initial contact. At the same time, it would be beneficial for Tower Hamlets and Southwark authorities to make simpler and more consistent links on related Early Help pages on their website so that vital information can be obtained more readily.

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