

Strengthening Early Help

NCB's response to the Independent Review of
Children's Social Care 'Call for Ideas'

December 2021



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Introduction

One of the most imperative challenges with evaluating and improving Early Help is the loose language that surrounds it. The terms 'early help', 'prevention', 'early intervention', and 'family support' are often used interchangeably, despite having distinct origins and meanings.¹

While 'early help' describes a general approach of seeking to intervene as soon as a problem emerges, Early Help is a specific framework for multi-agency cooperation set out in the statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children.²

NCB believes that many elements of the approach to Early Help set out in Working Together are fundamentally sound, including:

- The principle that Early Help must be focused on improving outcomes for the child, while looking at this through a whole family lens;
- A central coordination role for the local authority, but a lead practitioner who can be drawn from any service or setting;
- That an appropriate range of services should be commissioned to meet needs early, based on a robust and shared understanding of data.

However, rather than a coordinated approach to meeting needs early across local systems as envisaged by the guidance, in practice Early Help can often be a discrete function of the local authority. Access to Early Help is often managed through threshold documents that unhelpfully frame eligibility in terms of immediate risks to children.³ This is exacerbated by the Working Together guidance which in places conflates the Early Help process with child protection concerns.⁴ This approach prevents, rather than facilitates, access to services at the earliest possible point and weakens the engagement of families.

NCB's vision for Early Help

NCB's vision for Early Help is a multi-agency framework designed to meet babies, children, young people and families' needs at the earliest possible point. It should also be offered to children and families who are being stepped down from 'Child in Need' or 'Child Protection Plans' and are still in need of support from services. Early Help is part of a continuum of support, and in particular needs strong universal services to build relationships and identify children and families who might benefit. To succeed, the Early Help approach must be embraced and embedded across the health, education, SEND, social care, and policing sectors.

Delivery of Early Help requires joint accountability across agencies and improved arrangements for sharing and pooling information. It needs a children's workforce that is empowered to work together with a shared

purpose and feel confident holding risk. Local approaches to Early Help must be co-designed with children, families and communities, and offered in a way that children and families actively seek it out and engage with it. Multi-agency Family Hubs⁵ are a crucial dimension of the Early Help delivery model and this should be factored should into their development.

Good integrated planning and coordination is not enough. There must also be sufficient services to meet the needs of the population at the right time. Jointly commissioning services to meet the needs of children and families at the earliest point must be a common priority across the local health and wellbeing strategy, the arrangements of the multi-agency safeguarding partners, and the wider strategy of the relevant Integrated Care System.



The current context

The coming year brings huge opportunities to strengthen Early Help as an approach, as well as huge risks for children and families if we get this wrong.

- The Health and Care Bill and the creation of Integrated Care Systems mean that multi-agency collaboration is high on the national and local agenda. The Bill also presents us with an historic opportunity to improve the way the NHS and local authorities are able to share information and data that relate to children.
- The development of the Start for Life offer and Family Hubs, both of which include a focus on integrated support to children and families, provide an opportunity to re-vitalise the Early Help approach. The investment in these areas at the 2021 Spending Review will mean additional resources are available to support transformation.

- The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) review will need to address the barriers that preventing children from having their needs met early and as close to home as possible. Early Help is a crucial part of the solution.
- The Supporting Families Programme has a central role in acting as the catalyst for change in local systems. The increased investment in the programme provides an opportunity to continue to drive improvements

Early Help is a golden thread that draws these initiatives together. However, if they fail to align then local systems will be drawn in different directions and implementation will fail.



Eight ideas to strengthen Early help

#1 – Define Early Help in law

NCB believes there is a compelling case for establishing Early Help in law, clearly defining it as a set of multi-agency processes designed to meet the needs of babies, children, young people and families at the earliest possible point. Legislation would create an unequivocal definition of Early Help and provide both clarity and accountability for the roles and responsibilities of local partners. It would signal a renewed national focus on meeting the needs of families by ensuring processes are in place for providing early help across agencies, and deliver an impetus for local transformation.

Equally, we expressly wish to avoid an additional legal duty that creates a further barrier to children accessing their entitlement under s17 of the Children Act 1989. We believe that by defining Early Help as a set of multi-agency processes, rather than a duty owed to an individual child, we will avoid this unintended consequence.

#2 – Invest in the workforce

Like safeguarding, to be effective Early Help must be seen as everyone's business. The Early Help System Guide developed by the Supporting Families programme includes a strong set of recommendations for local systems to consider, including a multi-agency workforce development plan, shared practice models, and a cross-disciplinary commitment to whole family working.

For professionals who are more directly engaged in the delivery of 'family support', there is a role for national government to support improved training routes and qualification levels. It is essential that these professionals are appropriately supported and trained to work with increasing need and complexity, and given the confidence to hold risk. There is a particularly crucial role for government in striking the right balance between ensuring children are protected from serious harm, while trusting professionals to create an environment where children and families actively seek out help. NCB's Experts by Experience reported that strong relationships form the foundations for positive experiences of interventions and this should be a key focus for the Early Help workforce.⁶

As part of the [Living Assessments Programme](#), NCB has three groups of Experts by Experience (Care Leavers, Disabled Young People and Parents). The groups were consulted on issues presented in this response and full minutes of each meeting can be viewed by contacting Ava Berry, Policy Analyst, aberry@ncb.org.uk

Eight ideas to strengthen Early help

#3 – Re-evaluate the evaluation of Early Help

Attempts to systematically evaluate Early Help are hampered by the multitude of the factors at play and the complexity of family and community life. If Early Help is to become systemically effective – that is, effective when viewed as an approach rather than a specific programme or service – priority should be given to funding research that seeks a deeper understanding of what support is most helpful to which families under which circumstances, and this should include meaningful consultation with children, young people and families about their experiences.⁷ Outcomes must be considered across children's social care, health, and education. Significant conceptual work is needed to consider how we can best measure different forms of Early Help and whether they create mutually reinforcing benefits for families. It is crucial to understand the relative importance of each part, individually and in combination with one another.

Any attempt to strengthen Early Help must be accompanied by a rigorous multi-year evaluation. In particular, the evaluation should focus on large linked data sets that assess children and family's journeys through services and explore the outcomes for children and families of different interventions and support over time.

For a detailed exploration of these points see:
NCB (2021) [Supporting and strengthening families through provision of early help – A Rapid Review of Evidence, NCB, 2021](#)

#4 – Put co-production at the heart of Early Help

Systematically embedding and evaluating the participation of children and families in the design of the Early Help approach is a vital component of our vision for Early Help.

We believe that there is too little focus in current guidance on co-producing the Early Help approach with children, families and communities. Early Help will only be sought out by all the children and families who need it when those same children and families have been fully involved in the design of the approach and the services which run alongside it.⁸

Only through open and honest dialogue can we move beyond the binary distinction of child protection on the one hand and Early Help on the other. Approaches to coproduction should consider what works best for children, young people and families and that it may look different for different groups.⁹

Eight ideas to strengthen Early help

#5 – Address barriers to information and data sharing in Early Help

Problems with sharing information and data have been identified over many years as a key barrier to identifying and meeting the needs of babies, children, young people and families as early as possible.¹⁰

Only last month, the House of Lords Public Services Committee, stated in [Children in crisis: the role of public services in overcoming child vulnerability](#):

*"Safeguarding responsibilities were perceived to involve responding to emergencies rather than preventing harm, with the result that information on vulnerable children was often shared when they were already in crisis... Services working with children are unable to match unique pupil identifiers on the national pupil database with children's NHS numbers. This limits the ability of early intervention services to reach the most vulnerable children."*¹¹

Part two of the Health and Care Bill seeks to improve data sharing arrangements between adult social care and the health service. It does this by requiring health and adult social organisations to share information and removes legislative barriers to doing so. Yet the measures to improve the sharing of information and data in the Health and Care Bill only apply to the adult system.

NCB believes that we can take steps now to strengthen Early Help, and the wider children's system, by amending the Health and Care Bill. We believe the Bill should require health and children's social care agencies to share information; make it clear that agencies should share information and data where it is in the best interests of children to do so; and require the government to develop plans for moving towards a single unique identifier for children.

For a detailed exploration of these points see: NCB, Putting Children at the Heart of the Health and Care Bill – Second Reading briefing for the House of Lords (Available on request).

#6 – Embed Early Help in the operation of Integrated Care Boards

The Health and Care Bill creates a powerful opportunity to embed Early Help into the operation of the new NHS structures that will be established by this piece of legislation. The Bill abolishes Clinical Commissioning Groups and transfers responsibilities for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children to Integrated Care Boards (ICBs).¹² ICBs will directly commission a wide range of local primary care services used by children, as well as taking on the role of statutory safeguarding partner for whichever local authorities lie within its boundaries. As well as their crucial safeguarding responsibilities, these new bodies must be supported to understand their role in the Early Help process.

There are many new developments in the health system that, if harnessed, can significantly strengthen the approach to Early Help. Investment in social prescribing, Primary Care Networks, and new approaches to personalised care can all be important contributions to the Early Help approach.

For a detailed exploration of the value of new models of health delivery in Early Help see NCB's report: [Making a Difference to Young People's Lives through Personalised Care: Mental Health Inequalities and Social Deprivation](#)

Eight ideas to strengthen Early help

#7 – Develop a multi-agency accountability framework for Early Help

A joint outcomes framework for multi-agency safeguarding partners would drive delivery of our Early Help vision. It would help define excellence in the system and how it can be measured in practice. Having a range of indicators about the quality of children's social care, measuring what matters to children, young people and families and taking a fully holistic view of individuals, would enable better monitoring of services and the range of different interventions children and families receive.¹³ This framework should be integrated with other outcomes frameworks under development (e.g. Supporting Families; Best Start in Life) and form part of the accountability arrangements for Integrated Care Systems.

Relevant inspectorates should be tasked with scoping out the potential for joint inspection arrangements for multi-agency safeguarding partnerships; the inspectorates should identify synergies with, and learning from, the joint area inspections of SEND carried out by Ofsted and CQC.

#8 – A new commitment to funding services that are accessed through Early Help

NCB welcomed the Independent Review's recent publication on social care spending which highlights the very high costs associated with statutory interventions. Of the £11.8 billion spent on the children's social care system in 2019, £6.5 billion was directly on costs for looked after children and bringing children into care.¹⁴ Spending on Early Help services has seen the most drastic reduction over recent years, in the most deprived neighbourhoods spending has been cut by over 80%.¹⁵ Recent evidence by leading academics has shown that investment in Early Help can have a measurable impact on the numbers of children becoming looked after.¹⁶

The £4.8 billion for councils promised over three years in the 2021 Spending Review is welcome, but it does not go far enough to ensure sufficient availability of early help services for babies, children, young people and families. Family hubs should receive sufficient funding to allow their expansion across communities to enable families to access informal avenues of support and allow professionals to build strong relationships and identify needs early.

We believe HM Treasury should increase funding for local authorities and statutory partners in order to support implementation of the new Early Help duty, factoring in a local authority's level of deprivation. This should be tied to a rigorous multi-year evaluation that relies on large linked data sets and explores the outcomes for children and families of different interventions and support over time (see #6).

Endnotes

1 Edwards, A. Gharbi, R. Berry, A. and Duschinsky, R. (2021). Supporting and strengthening families through provision of early help. National Children's Bureau, University of Cambridge and University of Kent. Available: https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/20210513_Rapid%20Review_Full%20Report%20-%20FINAL.pdf

2 Department for Education (2018) Working Together to Safeguard Children. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/942454/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_inter_agency_guidance.pdf

3 APPG for Children (2017) Storing up Trouble Available. at: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/NCB%20Storing%20Up%20Trouble%20%5BAugust%20Update%5D.pdf>

4 See paragraphs 5 and 7 of Working Together to Safeguard Children.

5 Department for Education (2021) Family Hub Model Framework. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1030245/Family_Hub_Model_Framework.pdf

6 Views of Experts by Experience.

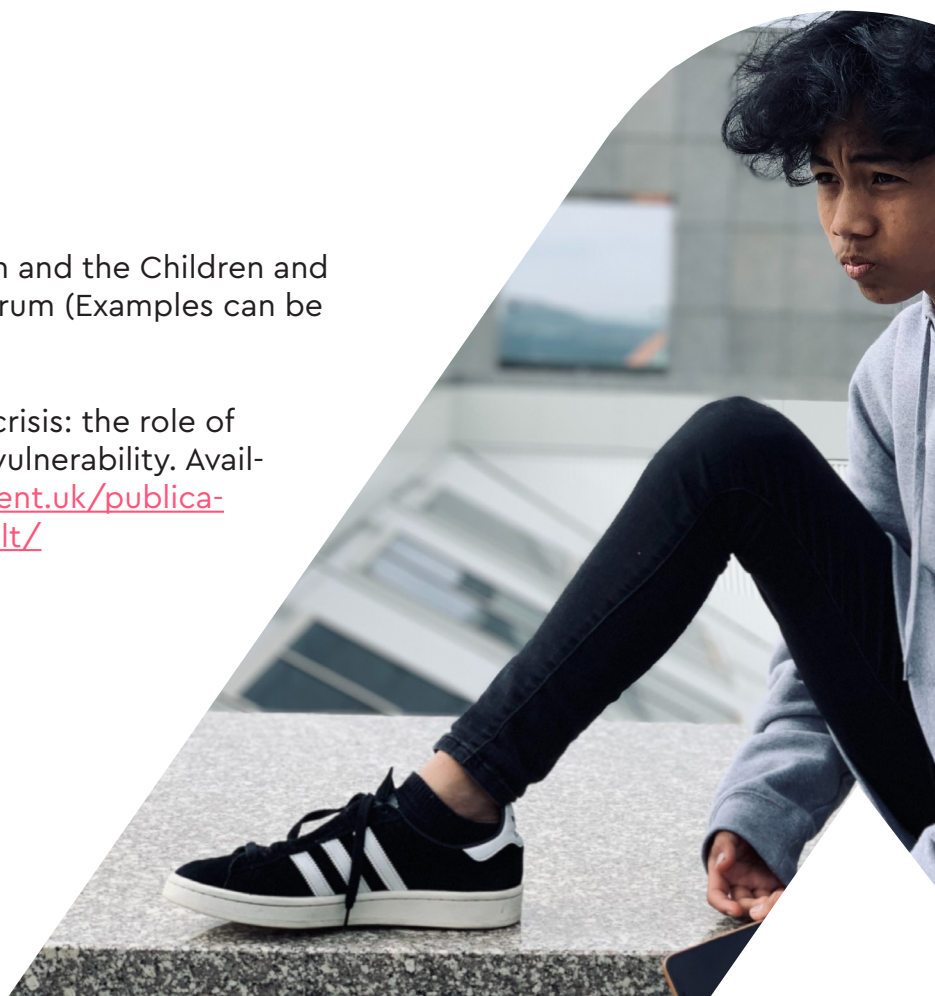
7 Views of Experts by Experience.

8 Views of Experts by Experience.

9 Views of Experts by Experience.

10 See work of the NHS Future Forum and the Children and Young People's Health Outcomes Forum (Examples can be provided by NCB).

11 House of Lords (2021) Children in crisis: the role of public services in overcoming child vulnerability. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/7881/documents/81834/default/>



Endnotes (continued)

12 Section 11, Children Act 2004. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/section/11>

13 Views of Experts by Experience.

14 Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021) Paying the Price The social and financial costs of children's social care. Available at: <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Paying-the-Price.pdf>

15 Max Williams and Jon Franklin, Children's Services Funding Alliance (2021) Children and young people's services: Spending 2010–11 to 2019–20. Available at: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/Children%27s%20services%20spending%202010-11%20to%202019-20.pdf>

16 Bennet et al (2021) Funding for preventative Children's Services and rates of children becoming looked after: A natural experiment using longitudinal area-level data in England. Children and Youth Services Review. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740921003650?via%3Dihub>



United for a better childhood

The National Children's Bureau brings people and organisations together to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood for the UK. We interrogate policy, uncover evidence and develop better ways of supporting children and families.

Let's work together: 020 7843 6000 | info@ncb.org.uk

London: 23 Mentmore Terrace, London, E8 3PN

Belfast: The NICVA Building, 61 Duncairn Gardens, BT15 2GB

