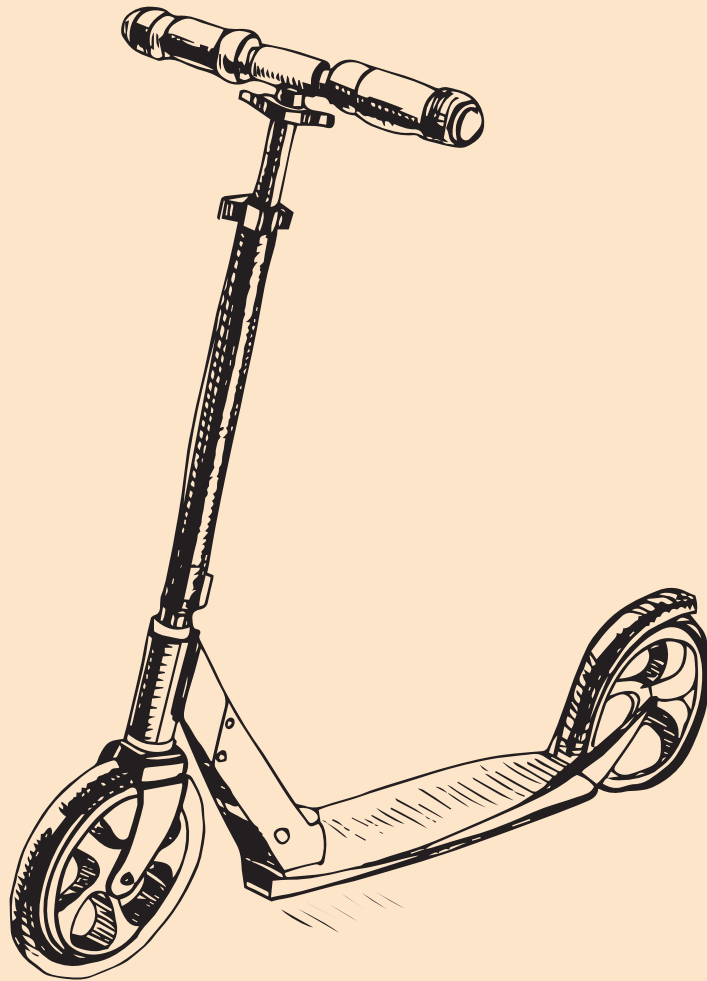


# Early help resource pack



Helping children and young people to fulfil their potential is a key ambition of all councils, but our children's services are under increasing pressure.

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[www.local.gov.uk/bright-futures](http://www.local.gov.uk/bright-futures) | [#gettingthebest](https://twitter.com/gettingthebest)

# Foreword

'Early help' covers a broad range of services and support that are brought in before any formal interventions to help children, young people and families achieve good outcomes. This can be for everyone – such as children's centre services and health visiting – or more targeted at those at risk of poor outcomes, such as parenting support or help with speech and language.

These services are vital. We don't want families reaching a point where formal interventions are needed if it can possibly be avoided. Most families will go through tough patches at some point, and often the right support provided at the right time will be enough to get families back on their feet and able to manage and thrive on their own.

Councils have a responsibility to work with their partners to improve the wellbeing of children in their areas, and that's not a responsibility that is taken lightly – it's hard to overstate the value of supporting children to achieve their potential and giving them the best start in life. But we all know the challenges of providing the kind of multi-agency early help offer we'd all like to.

Despite concerted efforts by councils to protect children's services budgets, increasing demand for children's social care has meant that budgets have not been able to keep up. Councils have had to take difficult decisions about how best to use their budgets to cope with demand, and money has increasingly been diverted from early help to child protection, to protect those children at the most immediate risk of harm.

If we want to make sure all children and families can look forward to a bright future we need the early help we're still able to provide to get the best possible outcomes. This is where good commissioning and the use of strong evidence comes in. If we're spending money on a service, we need to know it's delivering the outcomes we wanted it to. Robust evidence can objectively tell us whether a programme has been shown to work and in what circumstances. Knowing this is an important first step in judging whether it will be likely to work in your local area and guiding commissioning decisions.

This resource pack is designed to help all councillors to better understand their own local offer and how they can look at the role of evidence in developing and improving early help services for children and families. As always, the Local Government Association (LGA) is keen to hear about good practice that councils would like to share, and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) has a range of support available to help councils that want to improve or evaluate what they're doing. Visit [local.gov.uk](http://local.gov.uk) or [eif.org.uk](http://eif.org.uk) to find out more.

**Councillor Anntoinette Bramble**

Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board

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# Early help an introduction

## What is ‘early help’?

‘Early help’ and ‘early intervention’ are terms that are used in different ways in different local areas. Sometimes they are used interchangeably. There are, however, clear differences between the two.

‘Early help’ refers to all support available to children, young people and families before formal intervention (such as when children are placed on child in need or child protection plans, or taken into the care of the council). This includes universal services that are designed to improve outcomes for all, such as children’s centres, open access youth services and health visiting.

While early help is led by local authorities, the local offer usually includes the work of a wide range of agencies, including: the health system; schools; the police; and the voluntary and community sector.

‘Early intervention’ is the part of early help that provides support to children and young people who are identified as being at risk of poor outcomes, such as mental health problems, poor academic attainment or involvement in crime or antisocial behaviour. This support is more intensive than, or additional to, the help available through universal early help services, targeting specific issues to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on before they get worse. Examples of early intervention include: support for children’s speech and language skills; parenting support; school-based programmes to develop children’s social and emotional skills; services that tackle damaging conflict between parents; and mentoring for vulnerable young people.

The **PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies)** preschool curriculum promotes emotional and social competencies, and reduces aggression and behavioural problems in preschool-aged children, while simultaneously enhancing the educational process in the classroom. It uses a group-based delivery model and applies to primary schools, children’s centres and early years settings.

**Triple P Online** is a web-based parenting intervention, which can be used as an early intervention strategy, or as a more intensive programme, for parents with children under 12 with significant social, emotional or behavioural problems.

**REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy)** aims to improve children’s early literacy by teaching parents effective strategies for supporting their children’s learning. It is delivered to preschool-aged children through home visiting, in children’s centres, or early years settings.

In this resource pack, we will refer to ‘early help’ as covering both universal services and targeted interventions. Children and families benefiting from early intervention will also benefit from broader early help services, and there may not always be a clear distinction between the two at service level. We will refer to early intervention when specifically discussing targeted services.

## Early help in context

Councillors will be keenly aware of the challenges facing children's social care budgets. Despite concerted efforts by councils to protect these budgets, increasing demand for children's social care has meant that budgets have not been able to keep up. Councils have had to take difficult decisions about how best to use their budgets to cope with demand, and money has increasingly been diverted from early help budgets to child protection budgets, to protect those children at the most immediate risk of harm. The National Audit Office found that spending on preventative children's services fell to 25 per cent of the total budget in 2017/18, down from 41 per cent in 2010/11.<sup>1</sup> The Government's Early Intervention Grant has been reduced by almost £600 million since 2013 and is projected to decrease by almost £100 million more by 2020.<sup>2</sup> The grant includes funding streams for a variety of services including, but not limited to: children's centres; young offender and crime prevention services; and family support services.

It is often hoped that by investing in early help and high quality targeted interventions, social care departments can save money by reducing the number of children needing more significant support later on, such as avoiding the need to place children in care. Indeed, many councils have raised concerns that by being forced to cut early help services to cope with rising demand for more intensive child protection work, they are simply storing up problems for the future, with families not getting the help they need when future problems could be avoided.

It is true that early help can reduce pressure on children's social care; however, this is more likely in the long term, rather than the short term. The needs of some children can be so entrenched that many early help activities are

unlikely to reverse their negative trajectories within a short period of time. Early help services will need to work with children and their families over months and even years to tackle the risks facing them.

In addition, reductions in service use may not mean that a service can be withdrawn. It may instead free up the time of practitioners to engage in other vital activity, including spending more time with the most vulnerable children.

However, while budget savings may not always arise quickly, we cannot underestimate the human and societal value of early help. Acting early to support children at risk of poor outcomes can build healthier, happier and more productive communities, and produce a range of economic benefits to wider society that significantly outweigh the costs of intervening (for example: higher employment rates, and savings to the health, social care, criminal justice and social security systems).

## What do we mean by 'effective' early help?

When we refer to effective early help, we mean that which is proven by at least one robust study to improve child outcomes. Through rigorous evaluation and testing of early help programmes and approaches, we can establish what is effective. This does not mean that programmes and approaches that have yet to be robustly evaluated are necessarily ineffective, simply that they do not yet have the evidence base required to demonstrate effectiveness. Building evidence of impact takes time and small or newer interventions may need support or resources to robustly test what they deliver.

1 National Audit Office (2019) 'Pressures on Children's Social Care' [www.nao.org.uk/report/pressures-on-childrens-social-care](http://www.nao.org.uk/report/pressures-on-childrens-social-care)

2 Department for Communities and Local Government (2013) Breakdown of 2013/14 Start-Up Funding Assessment, 'Core spending power: visible lines of funding 2017 to 2018'

## The role of evidence

When we refer to 'evidence' here, we refer to the rigorous testing and evaluation that meets the evidence standards of organisations such as the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) and the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care. This goes beyond simple measurement of outputs and outcomes, and identifies the impact that can be attributed specifically to the programme being measured, rather than those outcomes that could be a result of a range of factors including, but not limited to, that programme. Evidence on whether early help is effective can only come from impact evaluations. Without this evidence, you cannot be certain that early help is actually helping local families.

Evidence is important as it tells us whether different early help approaches have delivered the changes they were designed to deliver. There are many programmes that are very popular with both children and families, and practitioners, but that have not yet been tested and do not have evidence of effectiveness. This doesn't mean that they do not work, it means that we do not yet know if they work or not. In light of funding cuts and increased demand, councils should consider evaluating programmes to make sure they're achieving the desired outcomes. This work could be carried out with other areas delivering the same programme to reduce costs.

Evidence is not the only consideration in decisions on whether to commission an intervention; local commissioners also need to consider whether an intervention will fit with the local context and workforce, and the cost of a new intervention. While evidence will not in itself provide an answer on what to do, it matters. On balance, children and families who receive interventions that have been robustly tested are more likely to benefit, and to a greater degree, than those who receive other services.

## What evidence is available for effective early help?

EIF maintains an online guidebook of around 100 programmes that have either preliminary or robust evidence of having improved outcomes for children and young people: <https://guidebook.eif.org.uk> EIF uses a rigorous assessment process to rate the strength of evidence for a programme's impact and relative costs. The guidebook also provides information on:

- the specific outcomes that a programme has been shown to improve (for example, preventing substance abuse)
- how the programme works
- how it is delivered (for example, in the home or elsewhere)
- the conditions or resources that can make a programme more likely to be effective.

Many of the programmes in the guidebook are currently being implemented in the UK.

## Which children and young people can benefit from early intervention?

We have a good understanding of the risk factors that can threaten children's development, limit their future social and economic opportunities and increase the likelihood of problems, such as mental or physical ill-health, involvement in crime, substance misuse, or exploitation or abuse later in life. This helps us to identify the children and young people who are likely to benefit from early intervention.

Risk factors exist at different levels: from the level of the individual child (like premature birth); to the family (such as family income, inter-parental conflict, or poor parental health); to the community (such as community safety or housing quality); to society (such as government policies on social security or access to education). While risk factors can't predict at an individual level which children

will need help, they can help to identify who might be vulnerable and who could potentially benefit from extra support.

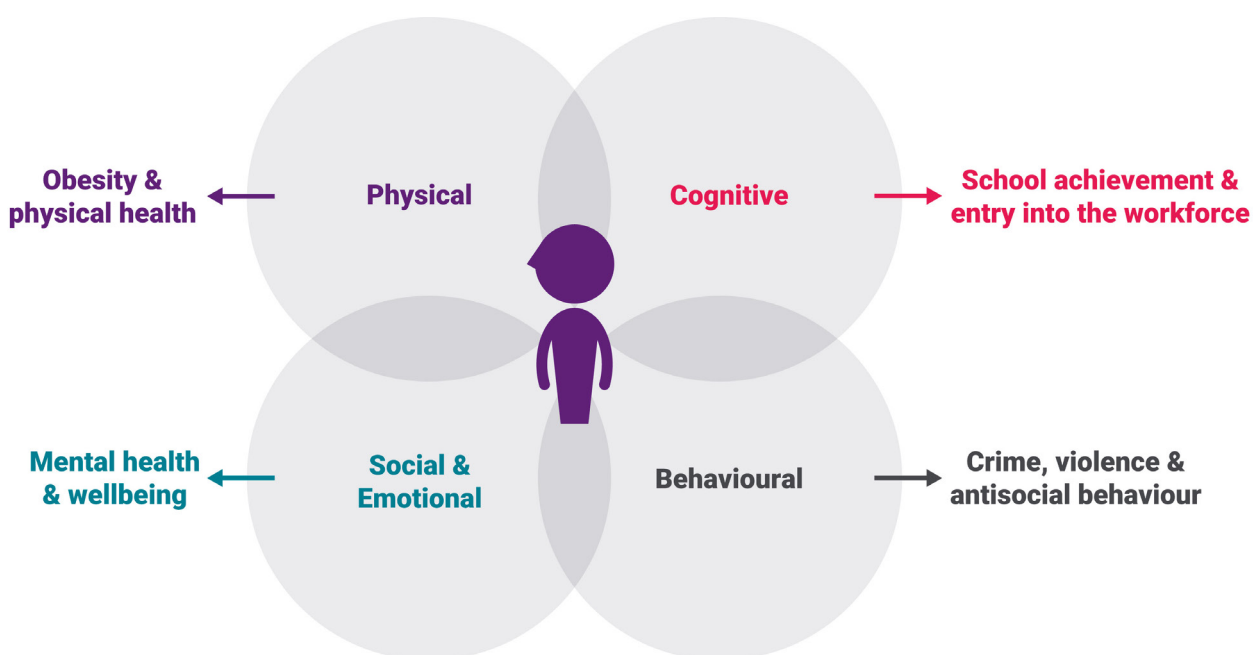
Protective factors are those characteristics and conditions that can mitigate these risks. In many cases, risk and protective factors are two sides of the same coin: for example, poor parental mental health may pose a risk to a child's healthy development, whereas good parental mental health may protect against other negative child outcomes such as poor academic attainment.

Early help works to reduce the risk factors and increase the protective factors in a child's life.

## Do we know where early help can have the biggest impact?

Universal services within early help are vital to provide support to children, young people and families, and in particular to help identify those who are in need of extra, more intensive support.

There are a substantial number of early intervention approaches that have good evidence of improving children's outcomes when they are offered in response to identified risks. These approaches can support the four key domains of children's development: physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social and emotional.





Studies consistently show that short-term improvements within these four areas of child development can lead to benefits throughout childhood and later life. Long-term benefits associated with effective early help include increased income and employment opportunities, reductions in crime and increased life expectancy.

The four key domains of child development, and related outcomes, are:

- approaches that support children's **physical** development are strongly linked to physical wellbeing and reducing obesity
- approaches that support children's **cognitive** development are strongly linked to school achievement and entry into the workforce
- approaches that support children's ability to monitor and regulate their **behaviour** and impulses are strongly linked to the avoidance of engagement in crime, violence and anti-social behaviour
- approaches that support children's **social and emotional** development are strongly linked to the ability to form positive relationships with others, and with a reduced risk of depression and other poor mental health outcomes.

There are also three major threats to children's development which can lead to poor outcomes:

- substance misuse (including drugs, alcohol and tobacco)
- risky sexual behaviour (including early sexual activity or unsafe sexual practices)
- child maltreatment (including physical, emotional or sexual abuse, neglect, or witnessing domestic abuse).
- Short term improvements within these seven areas can lead to measurable benefits during childhood and beyond.

# Legislation and practice

Early help is largely discretionary, however the following pieces of legislation contain relevant elements.

## Children Act 1989

Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 places a duty on councils to safeguard and promote the welfare of 'children in need' within their area – this refers to those children who are unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development without support from the council.

Some early help may be delivered under this section, however many children can and do benefit from early help before reaching 'child in need' status and being assigned a child in need plan.

## Education Act 1996

Section 507B of the Education Act 1996 requires councils in England to, as far as possible, ensure that young people aged 13 to 19 have access to educational and recreational leisure-time activities to improve their wellbeing.

This can include both open access and targeted youth work, which can be valuable elements of early help.

## Children Act 2004

The Children Act 2004 requires children's services councils to promote cooperation between local partners, including district councils, the police and health services to improve the wellbeing of children in relation to:

- a physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing
- b protection from harm and neglect
- c education, training and recreation
- d the contribution made by them to society
- e social and economic wellbeing.

## Childcare Act 2006

Section One of this Act requires councils to improve the wellbeing of young children in their area, and reduce inequalities in relation to issues, including physical and mental health, education and social and economic wellbeing.

Approaches to this will vary according to need and will likely include high level policies to support all families, however there may also be a need for early help in particular localities or with individual children and families to support this.

## Working together to safeguard children 2018

This is statutory guidance on inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. It includes specific guidance on early help, referring to the importance of organisations working together to identify children, young people and families who could benefit from early help services, and outlining key issues around assessment, referrals and thresholds for support.

## Early Intervention Foundation (EIF)

The EIF is part of the Government's What Works Network, which aims to improve the way government and other organisations create, share and use high quality evidence for decision-making.

EIF's mission is to ensure that effective early intervention is available, and is used, to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of poor outcomes. It does this by carrying out and synthesising research, publishing reports to disseminate conclusions and recommendations from this research, and producing resources to translate research into practical guidance and tools. EIF also works with all levels of national and local government, with a particular focus on supporting local decision makers, commissioners and practitioners to use evidence in decision-making.  
[www.eif.org.uk](http://www.eif.org.uk)

## What Works Centre (WWC) for Children's Social Care

Another part of the What Works Network, the WWC for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by helping practitioners and decision makers across the children's social care sector to inform their work with the best possible evidence.

The centre will focus its initial research on safely reducing the need for children to enter care, before looking at supervision and decision-making, the 'front door' (councils' arrangements for responding to safeguarding concerns), and workforce wellbeing, retention and turnover. While the focus here will be on the social care elements of children's services, there are likely to be lessons learnt that are applicable across early help.  
[www.whatworks-csc.org.uk](http://www.whatworks-csc.org.uk)

## Department for Education (DfE) Innovation Programme

The DfE has awarded a wide range of programmes innovation funding to trial approaches to a range of children's social care interventions, some of which cover early help. Each project has been independently evaluated.  
[www.innovationcsc.co.uk](http://www.innovationcsc.co.uk)

# Key lines of enquiry for councillors

## Do we know what early help services the children and families in our area need?

An early help offer should be based on an up-to-date assessment of need in the local area, which can draw on a range of evidence including the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), referrals to children's services and evidence from partners.

This assessment should not only consider what existing needs are, but look at what trends are emerging. For example, are there trends emerging nationally that you need to be mindful of at a local level? Are partners seeing increasing numbers of children and families with a particular need? Issues such as fluctuations in the economy, and national and local policy changes, can accelerate the need for different services as families respond to changing contexts, and it's important that early help services are able to respond to these changing needs.

A good needs assessment should cover all local families, and the sub-set of families who receive early help. It should go beyond describing needs at a point in time, to consider pathways of need, strengths, and patterns of service use. In addition, partners should be involved in assessments, contributing data to improve understanding of local families, and how local activities contribute to their outcomes.

## How are children, young people and families consulted on the early help offer?

The views of children, young people and families are vital when developing your early help offer. What support do they want and need? What are the issues that they're facing? How, where and when do they want to receive services?

Those using services should also have the opportunity to give feedback, and this feedback should be considered as part of ongoing reviews of both individual services, and the wider early help offer. It is most useful if feedback can be compared across different services, to build up a broad picture of the whole local offer; different services should therefore ask for feedback using the same questions as far as possible.

Children's services departments should also work with families when designing referral and assessment processes, and when putting together information to make sure this is easy to access and understand. Are processes in place to engage with children and families in your area, and is this done as a matter of course?

## What are our early help priorities?

Is it clear which issues are your priorities to tackle through your early help offer?

These should be informed by your needs assessment, and agreed with partners so that everyone is working towards the same goals.

It is helpful to work towards a small number of co-produced strategic aims, making sure that everyone understands how they can contribute and being prepared to stop anything that does not.

Your early help offer should be assessed against these priorities, especially as the needs assessment and priorities are updated. For example, if your top priority is supporting parents to deal with behavioural issues in their children, do you have programmes for this? Are they in the right places, and available at the right times? Are there enough spaces to meet the demand? How are partners working together to identify those families who could use this help, and to deliver support? Are existing services reaching the families intended?

## What are the barriers to effective early help in our area?

Delivering effective early help is not easy. It can be difficult to prioritise early help at a time of significant reductions in local government funding and increased demand for child protection services.

It can sometimes be difficult to build the strong partnerships needed to invest in early intervention. The fact that savings will not always be accrued by the agency that made the initial investment can limit incentives. Short-term funding cycles make it difficult to commit to long-term investment, and leave little time to embed new programmes and demonstrate positive impact. The evidence can also be difficult to apply and there are still gaps in our understanding about what works best for some children and families.

Strong local leadership is critical to overcoming some of these barriers. Consider the following local actions:<sup>3</sup>

1. Agree a clear vision that is based on the benefits of effective early help to local communities – the viability of early help at the local level rests in part on local leaders articulating a clear, long-term vision and setting out a strategy that is achievable.
2. Foster a culture of evidence-based decision-making and practice – local investment, commissioning and practice are not always well-aligned with the evidence on effective early help; local leaders must ensure that evidence-based decision-making is an integral part of the vision and culture they create in their area.

## How are we working with partners to develop and deliver our early help offer? Are they sufficiently engaged?

Section 10 of the Children Act 2004 places certain partners under a duty to cooperate with the council to improve the wellbeing of children; this includes the police, the NHS and schools. Are partners fully engaged, for example through sending sufficiently senior representatives with decision-making authority to meetings? Are there good information sharing processes in place, and do staff in different organisations feel empowered to share information where it would be helpful?

In addition, councils will want to ensure that all organisations providing services to children and families, including the voluntary and community sector, are part of an effective early help system.

<sup>3</sup> [www.eif.org.uk/report/realising-the-potential-of-early-intervention](http://www.eif.org.uk/report/realising-the-potential-of-early-intervention)

How are these partners involved in needs assessments and developing and delivering the early help offer?

Are they involved in setting shared priorities, and do they review their services against these?

How do different parts of the early help system work together to provide children and families with the right mix of support, at the right time?

Do partners all know their own role in delivering early help, and when it's appropriate to make a referral for more specialist support?

For example, schools will be expected to provide a certain level of support to children and families, but it is also important that they know when to seek additional help, where they can access it and feel confident in doing so. Do all relevant staff know what signs to look for that suggest a child or family might need extra help, and are there clear processes to follow if that's the case?

A 2019 research report by the Isos Partnership for the LGA<sup>4</sup> looks at the key enablers of an effective local early help offer and identified sixteen enablers grouped under four headings:



The full report is available on the LGA website and outlines further detail in each of these areas.

4 <http://www.isospartnership.com/uploads/files/Early%20help%20report%20final%20for%20publication%2014.03.19.pdf>

## What evidence is there for the programmes that we're currently offering?

Evidence from rigorous evaluation isn't available for all programmes. However you may wish to satisfy yourself that, if this is the case for your programmes, that there is no evidence against the programme, and that alternative, evidenced programmes aren't both available and suitable.

If you are delivering a programme that doesn't have evidence of impact, it is important that you are monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the programme in your local context. This might involve training staff in evaluation techniques or seeking funding to carry out independent evaluations.

## How do we know our early help offer is working?

Your plans for early help should include details on the specific outcomes you want to see – for example, lower childhood obesity levels, a reduction in the number of referrals to child and adolescent mental health services or an increase in the proportion of children reaching the expected levels of development in the early years. Do you know your baseline, and have you set reasonable targets, for example based on the performance of statistical neighbours? How regularly is progress monitored, and are adjustments made where necessary?

Consider who has oversight of the early help strategy. Overview and scrutiny, local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, health and wellbeing boards and others will all have an interest and should be monitoring progress towards outcomes.

## How are we encouraging evidence-based decision-making?

Managers, commissioners and practitioners need to feel confident and empowered to use evidence in their decision-making. This can sometimes be difficult; it can involve recommending a move away from a well-liked programme if that has no evidence of effectiveness, changing methods of assessment to ensure people get the right help in the right way, or spending time on evaluation, rather than on delivery.

Are early help priorities, and the data underpinning these, available to commissioners and practitioners? Is training and support on evidence and evaluation provided to commissioners, and are practitioners given time to learn new practices? Are providers expected to demonstrate evidence of effectiveness when tendering and as part of contract management?

## How does early help work in our council?

For early help to be effective, there needs to be strong working with children's social care and other teams across the council. Do early help practitioners share office space or work closely with children's social workers? What work is done to encourage teams to work together? Do other council teams understand the role of early help in working with families?

It's also important for early help practitioners to be empowered and supported to implement flexible and creative solutions with families. Each family will have its own very individual set of needs, but practitioners should work with them to solve their problems in ways that have the best chance of success. Training and support should be provided to managers and practitioners so that they feel able to work creatively while managing risk within processes and procedures. Consider also how early help staff are supported. They

will often be working with families who are in difficult and complex situations, and peer support alongside effective supervision will be important in supporting staff wellbeing and ensuring they feel able to work effectively.

How do families receive support? Are they allocated a key worker so that they don't have to repeat their story to a range of agencies? And if so, how are caseloads monitored for these key workers to ensure that they have the capacity to work effectively with families?

Is community support considered as part of the early help plan? This can be very effective as part of step down procedures, including letting people know where they can go for low-level support if needed, reducing the need for re-referrals and building community resilience.

## Do we take a whole family, strengths-based approach?

Working with whole families, rather than just the children, will help to build resilience within that family. Ensuring that early help practitioners have sufficient time available to get to know whole families will enable them to identify those issues that may be having an impact on children, beyond any initial issues that were raised.

Strengths-based approaches mean that families can maximise their personal and situational strengths to work towards their desired outcomes, and help them to see the potential already within themselves to improve their own situations. Building on these strengths can empower families to overcome difficult circumstances, and engage them as partners to achieve positive outcomes, rather than treating them as a 'problem' to be 'fixed'. This shift in perspective can help to engage families and encourage them to participate in programmes and plans by appearing less adversarial or threatening. Are your early help practitioners taking strengths-based approaches to assessments, or is the focus more deficit-based?

## What does our 'front door' look like and is it working effectively?

The 'front door' is where an initial contact about a child comes in, where there is a concern for their safety or wellbeing. At the front door, decisions will be made about which pathway to follow – for example, whether a child needs a children's social care assessment, or whether universal or early help services are more appropriate.

There are many models for this, depending on what works best in local circumstances. For example, in some places there will be a multi-agency front door, and in others, different front doors for social care and early help.

ISOS partnership research on developing effective early help offers highlighted the importance of establishing a safe and effective front door to provide a single point of initial assessment for all referrals into early help, wherever these came from. The research also emphasised the importance of speed in decision-making at the front door to take advantage of the window of opportunity to engage positively and productively with families.

Whichever model your authority uses, has this been evaluated recently? Do partners find it easy to know where to make a referral, and can parents self-refer? How quickly do children and families receive services after being referred? Importantly, is the front door team confident in identifying which children would benefit most from early help and which require a statutory response?



# Key resources and further reading

## Case studies

Case studies are available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/early-intervention-into-action-innovation-and-evaluation>

## Guidance on evaluation

HM Treasury, 'The Magenta Book' – guidance on what to consider when designing an evaluation  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book>

This guide explains what to consider when designing an evaluation, how results can be interpreted and presented, and what should be considered during the process. It is mostly used by central government, but is also useful for policy-makers in local government.

Early Intervention Foundation, 'Evaluating early intervention at the local level: five rules of thumb'  
<https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/evaluating-early-intervention-at-the-local-level-five-rules-of-thumb>

This blog offers guidance on evaluation commissioned at the local level.







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