

Priority, Pace and Purpose

The multi-agency response to children and families who need early help

Summary of key learning for effective practice

Working Together to Safeguard Children defines **early help** as **support for children of all ages** that **improves** a family's resilience and outcomes or **reduces** the chance of a problem getting worse.

A multi-agency audit was undertaken in quarter 3 2024/25 by members of the Performance and Quality Assurance (PQA) subgroup of the Isle of Wight Safeguarding Children Partnership (IOWSCP), considering the circumstance of a number of children and families who had received early help support within the past six months.

What is early help?

- **A system of support**, not an individual service, delivered by the local authority and their partners working together and taking collective responsibility to ensure children and families are provided with the right help at the right time.
- **Universal services**, such as schools and health services (for example GPs, Health Visiting, School Nursing), provide some early help, focussing on prevention/early intervention/health promotion/and ongoing support. Universal services are available to all children and families, regardless of their needs.
- **Targeted early help** is a term used to describe early help services that are co-ordinated by the local authority and their partners to address specific concerns within a family. Examples of this may include parenting support, mental health support, some youth justice services, housing and employment services.
- **Early help** is appropriate for children and families who have several needs or whose circumstances may make them more vulnerable.
- **Early help is voluntary, meaning that children (as appropriate) and families consent to receive the support and services offered.**

- **Early help services and support may be provided before or after statutory children's social care intervention.** This is known locally as 'Stepping up into children's social care' and 'Stepping down to **early help**'.
- **A variety of different professionals** working with children and families can undertake the lead professional role. **This could include, but is not limited to, Health Visitors, Midwives, GP's, School Nurses, Family Support Workers, Youth Justice Workers, Early Years Workers, Housing officers, Educational Welfare Officers, Family liaison officers, School Designated Safeguarding Leads.**

Effective early help relies on us working together to:

- **Identify** children and families who would benefit from early help
- Where appropriate undertake an **assessment** of the need for early help, **taking a family approach**
- Ensure **good communication and information sharing** when we are part of a team around the family
- Depending on our role, **co-ordinate or provide support** as part of a plan to improve outcomes, making sure the **plan is co-constructed with the child and family**, and that it is **updated** as the needs of the child and family change

Children who might need early help may be:

- Disabled or have special educational needs (whether or not they have an EHCP)
- Be a young carer
- Bereaved
- Showing signs of being drawn into Anti-Social Behaviour/criminal behaviour/exploitation
- Frequently missing from home
- At risk of being radicalised
- Viewing problematic or inappropriate content online/developing inappropriate relationships online
- In family circumstances that are challenging – Substance misuse, adult mental health and domestic abuse
- Misusing substances, suffering from mental ill-health themselves
- Have a parent or carer in custody

- Missing education or is persistently absent from school or not in receipt of full-time education
- Experiencing multiple suspensions and is at risk of or has been permanently excluded.

Early help on the Isle of Wight

- There has been increasing demand over time for early help support for children and families.
- The island is one of the fourteen trailblazing local authorities for the Start for Life and Family Hub programme
- 703 early help assessments were completed in 2024 with 714 children open to early help support as of 31 March 2024
- Over a third of early help assessments are step downs from children's social care services
- Poor emotional wellbeing of children, strained relationships at home, boundaries and routines and parental concerns for their own mental health feature as presenting factors in early help assessments
- In terms of children's ages and early help assessments there is a gradual increase until ages 5 and 6 years with a taper until age 14 where there is a smaller increase.
- It is important to note the majority of early help assessments and plans cease due to outcomes being achieved

The **OFSTED Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services** in 2023 noted: "Children and families have good access to a wide variety of early helps services that deliver the right support to families at an early stage. Skilled lead practitioners work effectively with families and other key professionals to support and enable families to make positive changes. Family plans ensure that timely progress is made for children. If concerns escalate, referrals are made promptly to statutory services

Local learning and Effective Practice

“ We need to jump on moments when children and families are open to engaging with us”

- Timely support and intervention works well. This includes making sure meetings happen within reasonable timescales for the family, even if not all professionals can attend, they are able to contribute in other ways, email or a telephone call and a plan of support can begin. Keep the rhythm of early help going as long as it is needed.
- The best health contributions to early help were evident when it had been considered who was the most appropriate health professional to be involved, examples include GPs, paediatricians, occupational therapists, health visitors and school nurses.
- Early help support should continue when a child is referred to children’s social care, unless it is required to stop by the social worker. If a new child in need plan or child protection plan is needed some of the team around the family will stay the same, if the child is to stay receiving early help support the team continues. Either way round there is continuity for the child and family.
- A warm handover works really well, for families stepping down from children’s social care or to a new lead professional, being introduced to the new people supporting a child and family makes a huge difference to engagement.
- The resources available to support practitioners in this area of practice are helpful and this can be seen in plans for children and families. This included
 - [Day in the life tool](#) – versions for pre-birth to adolescent children and for children with additional needs (Neglect toolkit)
 - [Adopting a Family Approach toolkit](#) (considering parent’s needs)
 - [Educational Neglect Advice](#)
 - [Child Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework and guidance](#)
- Where school absences due to a child’s health were seen, GP letters explaining a child’s symptoms and the impact on the child were viewed as helpful to consider appropriate adjustments being made to support a child’s educational engagement.

- Creative and visual practice works well for some children and families, in terms of preparing for what may happen next, or a particular appointment somewhere new or for a family routine or family agreement.
- Using language that cares supports our work with families, avoiding jargon, acronyms and overly professional language all helps to avoid communication and relationship barriers with children and families. Families appreciate the social norms and niceties, it demonstrates value, care and respect.
- The paperwork:
 - Keep the IOW early help team informed of the work you are doing; it is essential to make sure all who need to, know about the support a family may be receiving.
 - Send the team copies of plans and assessments and let them know if a child and family are no longer receiving early help support. This is important in making sure children and families receive the right help at the right time.
 - Keep your goals with the child and family SMART (Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound). Make sure everyone is clear what the changes you all want to see look like.

Remember to use the help, support and advice of the early help team. They are valued by our multi agency practitioners engaged in early help and their training is appreciated too

We want to see more:

- Early years settings and secondary schools identifying children in need of early help and undertaking early help assessments as appropriate
- Consideration of the role of Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary and GPs in early help
- Consideration of the timing of step downs from children's social care, thinking about the availability of the lead professional which is particularly important if it is a school during or just before the long summer holiday.

Supporting Resources

- ➔ [Early Help assessment and information](#)
- ➔ [Inter-Agency Referral Form \(IARF\)](#)
- ➔ The [Hampshire and IOW Threshold Chart](#) for assessing level of risk/concern.
- ➔ The IOWSCP provides a free, multi-agency, [training](#) programme for professionals who work with children and families on the Isle of Wight.
- ➔ Resources to support [working with children with additional needs \(including complex needs and disabilities\)](#)
- ➔ [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)
- ➔ [Day in my life tools](#): individual documents for - Unborn baby, Baby, Preschool child, Child, Child with disabilities, Adolescents - to support gaining an overview of a child's daily lived experience

Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton [\(HIPS\) Procedures](#)

- ➔ [Working Together to Resolve Professional Differences \(Escalation and resolution\)](#)

Hampshire and Isle of Wight Toolkits

Wide range of [IOWSCP toolkits](#) developed to aid professionals to better understand and respond to safeguarding concerns, including:

- ➔ [Safeguarding Adolescents toolkit](#)
- ➔ [Safeguarding Infants toolkit](#)
- ➔ [Adopting a family approach toolkit](#)
- ➔ [Hampshire and Isle of Wight Neglect toolkit](#)
- ➔ [Child Exploitation toolkit](#)
- ➔ [Child Sexual Abuse toolkit](#)
- ➔ [Understanding Unidentified Adults toolkit](#)
- ➔ [Learning from reviews toolkit](#)