Strategy for Early Help in Birmingham

2019-2022
Introduction

Birmingham is a young city with a population of over 287,000 children and young people. We believe that children are best supported to grow and achieve within their own families. The majority of children and families are strong, resilient and have good networks and resources to meet their needs. However, we recognise that some families will experience difficulties from time to time and need assistance.

Birmingham’s strategic partners and stakeholders agreed and published the first Early Help Strategy in 2015. The work on the strategy unified partners, improved our understanding of both need and what works and has increased the confidence of partners to provide support.

This new strategy describes how we will continue to work together to protect children’s social, emotional, health and educational development and avoid family breakdown by intervening early. Effective Early Help has the potential to transform the lives of vulnerable children, empower families to regain control of challenging circumstances and, thereby, prevent problems escalating into statutory services.

Our ambition for Birmingham

All partners in Birmingham have signed up to shared ambition:

“Our ambition is that all children and families in every part of the city achieve their full potential and are supported by a confident workforce with a common core of knowledge and understanding about children’s needs and a consistent approach to practice.”

Achieving our ambition will mean Birmingham is a great place for all children to grow up in and will lead to the following outcomes:

• Healthy, happy and resilient children living in families
• Families (especially parents, but also young people) take responsibility for their wellbeing
• Children and young people able to attend, learn and maximise their potential at school
• Young people ready for and able to contribute to adult life
• Children and young people protected from significant harm.

Guiding Principles

This strategy is guided by Birmingham’s Right Help, Right Time (RHRT) framework.

RHRT principles are the way we expect each other to work with children and families.

We will:

• have conversations and listen to children and their families as early as possible
• understand the child’s lived experience
• work collaboratively to improve children’s life experiences
• be open, honest and transparent with families in our approach
• empower families by working with them
• work in a way that builds on the families’ strengths
• build resilience in families to overcome difficulties.

RHRT sets out how we should all work together, putting the child and the family at the centre, building on strengths and providing effective support to help them.
What is Early Help?

Early Help means taking action to support a child, young person or their family early in the life of a problem and applies to any problem or need that the family cannot deal with or meet on their own. Problems may emerge at any stage in a child’s life, from pre-birth through their childhood and adolescence to adulthood. Early Help seeks to meet the need, resolve the problem and prevent it becoming entrenched reducing the need for statutory or specialist interventions.

Delivering Early Help is everyone’s responsibility requiring children, families, communities and agencies to work together. It also works best where there is a ‘whole family’ approach.

The experience of children and families tells us that it can be daunting asking for help and they would like to be supported by the first person they approach – this is often someone already known to them. By working together, we are committed to making every contact count.

Early Help as part of a continuum

Families, communities, universal, targeted and specialist services must all work together to meet children’s needs at the earliest point to prevent their needs escalating. Fundamental to this is placing the child at the centre of all we do and recognising that each child and family member is an individual and each family is unique.


Universal - a range of services such as maternity services, health visitors, school nursing, GP practices, early years, school and education settings, housing and youth services are provided as a right to all children including those with universal plus, additional and complex needs.

These services are well placed to recognise and respond when extra support may be necessary either because of the child’s changing developmental, health and wellbeing needs or because of parental or family circumstances.

Children with Universal Plus needs are best supported by those who already work with them such as health professionals, children’s centres, school settings, organising additional support with local partners as needed. This can be through an Early Help Assessment and a Family Plan.

For children with Additional Needs a co-ordinated multi-disciplinary approach is usually best led by a professional already known to the family. This lead professional will engage the family and other professionals to co-ordinate support through one plan. Where the support needed is more than a lead professional can organise effectively, the Family Support/Think Family services can work with the family in a more intensive way.

Complex/Significant Needs are those where statutory and/or specialist intervention is required to keep children safe or to ensure their continued development.

The RHRT framework has been adopted by partners across the city. This Birmingham way of working has been rolled out through training to frontline practitioners in all agencies: in a survey in June 2018, 96% of practitioners confirmed they were aware of RHRT and 80% said they were ‘very confident’ or ‘confident’ assessing children using the approach. RHRT will continue to be a
key part of the city’s multi-agency training offer. Effective understanding and application of these levels across the system will ensure that children receive help early in the life of the problem.

We recognise that needs are complex and multi-factorial and the support offered by Universal Services remains crucial even when more specialist services are working with the family. The National Troubled Families Programme is delivered locally through our Think Family approach: this is part of our early help offer, extending the offer of statutory and voluntary sector partners to a whole family approach that delivers improvement against the Government’s key outcomes.

**Recognising Vulnerability and Identifying Need**

It is crucial that practitioners and managers in all agencies are able to recognise need and ensure an appropriate initial response.

National guidance (*Working Together 2018*), acknowledges that any child might benefit from early help but advises that professionals should be mindful of the needs of particular groups of children who may be more vulnerable. This includes a child who:

- is disabled and has specific additional needs
- has special educational needs (whether or not they have a statutory education, health and care plan)
- is a young carer
- is showing signs of being drawn in to anti-social or criminal behaviour, including gang involvement and association with organised crime groups
- is frequently missing/goes missing from care or from home
- is at risk of modern slavery, trafficking or exploitation
- is at risk of being radicalised or exploited
- is in a family circumstance presenting challenges for the child, such as drug and alcohol misuse, adult mental health issues and domestic abuse
- is misusing drugs or alcohol themselves
- has returned home to their family from care
- is a privately fostered child.

Other areas to consider include a child who is:

- at risk of being made homeless
- at risk of forced marriage or honour-based violence.

The impact of neglect on children is often gradual and therefore there is a risk that agencies do not intervene early enough to prevent harm. These children require practitioners and their managers to identify signs of neglect at an early stage of partnership involvement.

We also plan to take steps to better identify the extent of need in the city. Our previous strategy included a needs assessment of Birmingham’s children. We plan to complete a comprehensive update of this following the publication of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. In the meantime, the diagram on the next page provides an overview of the prevalence of many of these risk factors in our city. Improved information will be used to inform our partnership work, particularly the development of our Early Help implementation action plans. It will also be used to help us evaluate the impact of our work on outcomes and the quality of life for children, young people and families.
Birmingham Early Help – Key Facts

31% of Birmingham’s children live in poverty. There is considerable deprivation in Birmingham; the most deprived wards are predominantly in the inner-city areas [PHE fingertips].

86,000 children are under the age of 5. 78% of our under 5s live in 40% of the most deprived areas.

Birmingham is a super-diverse city. Around 42% of residents come from a minority ethnic group (national average 14%), with about 50 languages spoken in the city [ONS Census 2011].

6.9 children per 1,000 are homeless. 12.4% of households in Birmingham are overcrowded [2016-17, National average: 2.3%].

40.5% (England 34.3%) of children at age 11 are obese and overweight, higher than the national average. 23.6% (England 22.4%) & of children are obese and overweight at age 5 [NCMP 2017/18]

86,000 children are under the age of 5. 78% of our under 5s live in 40% of the most deprived areas.

6% of 16-19 year olds identify as a Young Carer.

1836 families are supported by Family Support / Think Family

31,155 Children have Special Educational Needs, higher than the national average. 6,780 have Statements or EHCPS and 88% are educated in mainstream schools [DfE, Statistics: SEN: January 2017].

Birmingham has a 36.5% Youth re-offending rate—lower than the national average of 40.1% [Ministry of Justice, July 2016—June 2017].

28% of Birmingham residents have no qualifications - higher than the national average of 22.5%. 7.4% of families have an unemployed adult. 10.2% of young people are not in education, employment or training [England 6%]. 6% of the population claim JSA, compared with a national figure of 3.7%.

The population is expected to grow by 14.9% over the next twenty years. This growth will have an impact on public services, such as Education, Housing and Health.
Our Early Help Offer

There are many excellent examples of Early Help working across Birmingham. Since the adoption of our first strategy, the Early Help and Safeguarding Partnership has:

- supported the roll-out and training of the city’s Right Help, Right Time (RHRT) approach
- agreed a shared ambition which is articulated on our ‘Plan on a Page’
- adopted the principles of the ‘Signs of Safety and Wellbeing Framework’
- developed and embedded the ‘Early Help Assessment’ and ‘Our Family Plans’
- agreed an overarching data protection agreement (inclusive of General Data Protection Regulations) that will enhance information sharing.

Partner agencies have also recognised the impact of supporting children and families early to prevent costly alternatives and have increased their Early Help offer and training. Examples include:

- The expansion of the Children’s Advice and Support Service (CASS), incorporating Early Help Advisors from across partner agencies to assist Lead Practitioners in their work with families.
- Neighbourhood police officers based in the Children’s Trust to work alongside ‘Think Family’ services.
- Forward Thinking Birmingham has recruited 30 new Early Help staff aligned to Schools, Early Years and Family Support services.
- Birmingham City Council Early Years, Childcare and Children’s Centres Service have introduced two dedicated Early Help posts.
- Designated Schools Grant funded staff have provided intensive training to school Safeguarding Leads and Pastoral Staff, increasing the early help offered by schools.
- Birmingham Education Partnership has introduced an Education and Emotional Wellbeing strategy group to support schools to promote inclusion positively.
- Birmingham’s SEND Pathway has introduced a graduated multiagency approach that is child-centered and addresses their education, health and social support needs.
- The new Early Help offer from Forward Thinking Birmingham (0-25 Mental Health) provides specialised support and treatment for those children and young people who previously would not have met the guidelines for specialist intervention.
- Ongoing training and support for our 13 Family Support teams who work with families with additional needs along with commissioned Think Family specialist and intensive family support teams who focus on priority areas.

Overall there has been a reduction in the number of requests for support in CASS that have lacked appropriate consent from the family. This demonstrates that, in line with our agreed RHRT principles, agencies across the city are increasingly working with parents as partners.

More information on our current early help offer is available in a separate document: Birmingham’s Early Help Offer (April 2019).

Our Priorities

Our priorities for the next three years build on our existing work and include the areas for improvement identified by Ofsted in their inspection of children’s social care services in December 2018. We have also considered, and deliberately incorporated, the themes for Early
Help Transformation from the national Troubled Families Programme. This will ensure that all our Early Help development work is managed in a single place and that all relevant partners are engaged in the work of this strategy.

Our priorities can be grouped into five areas. These are summarised below and more detailed actions are included in our Early Help Implementation Plan.

1. **Strengthening our System Leadership**

   Establishing effective leadership, partnership working and governance was a key priority in our previous Early Help strategy and we have made significant progress in this area. We plan to retain this focus on strengthening our system leadership of Early Help.

   This will include:

   - Continuing to build shared trust between local chief officers and moving to a model of shared risk where investment is based on need and demand and the cumulative impact of our actions is considered.
   - Further embedding our ‘Right Help, Right Time’ approach with all partners to ensure it is consistently and repeatedly applied, and ensuing there is ownership of Early Help responsibilities by all partners across the city. We are aware that we work within a complex and dynamic system and that issues, such as staff turnover, require us to continually update and reinforce messages.
   - Improving the links between our work / activity and other strategies in the city to maximise impact. This will include actively participating in the development of Birmingham’s approach to contextual safeguarding and neglect, ensuring Early Help is a key strand within these strategies.
   - Continuing to align and integrate our workforce where this will support better outcomes for children and families

2. **Supporting our Workforce**

   Any Early Help offer is dependent on the people who deliver it. While those working in the city are committed to providing children and their families with the help they need as early as possible, Ofsted noted that some of our Early Help work requires improvement. For example, they highlighted the need to improve the overall quality of Early Help Assessments completed by partner agencies to ensure children receive a consistent response as early as possible. They also observed that families would benefit from Family Support Plans being clearer on the desired impact, timescales for change to take place and outcomes for the child. Re-referral rates also suggests that some children would have benefited from ‘step down’ to Early Help rather than their cases being closed.

   One of our priorities is, therefore, to provide general and focused support to both Lead Practitioners and front-line professionals to ensure they are all equipped to deliver Early Help and they have the knowledge, tools and support they need to be effective.

   This will include:

   - Reviewing our processes and procedures to ensure we give our workforce the tools they need to provide Early Help. For example, we plan to streamline our existing Early Help Assessment template and develop a toolkit for Lead Practitioners.
• Supporting our workforce by offering high quality support and training. We will continue to provide training around our ‘Right Help, Right Time’ framework. We also want staff from all partner agencies to be confident to use Early Help Assessments and plans, and to understand how to report them. In particular, we want to ensure there is an improved understanding of the role of the Lead Practitioner and everyone working with children understands when to ‘step up’ and ‘step down’ between early help and statutory services/social care.

3. Connecting our Communities and Sharing our Early Help Offer

There is a lot that communities can do themselves to prevent the need for external help. We plan to do more to help families connect with each other to build this community resilience. When families do need help, we aim to make it easier for them to know who to contact.

Within our multi-agency arrangements, we will also do more to ensure that professionals working with these communities know what Early Help services are available to draw on and understand how colleagues in other organisations can assist. We have already undertaken work to map and disseminate information on services but know we can do more. Over the next three years we will promote more effective working between professionals by enhancing their understanding of each other’s role, responsibility and organisational culture and values.

This will include:

• Creating on-line directory of both community assets and services across the city and in each locality to enable the public and professionals to access the right services in their area.
• Organising new opportunities for professional networking.
• Supporting both universal services and new initiatives that build community resilience.

4. Sharing our Information to Improve our Offer

We have made some progress to improve the sharing of data between public sector partners in order to allow shared intelligence and informed planning. For example, the Birmingham Children’s Collaborative Working Data Sharing Agreement has been developed to allow personal data to be shared between organisations for the purpose of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people and their families. We have also developed a multi-agency Outcomes Framework to monitor the quality and effectiveness of our Early Help work.

However, we know there are more ways we can use data and technology to enhance Early Help services and we will develop these over the next three years. Improved information sharing will help us better understand our families, identify who is missing and tailor our offer to help families achieve better outcomes.

This will include:

• Continuing to develop and refine our multi-agency Early Help Outcomes Framework to ensure we have an effective city-wide offer and our partnership systems are able to understand the impact of our work.
• Disseminating learning and actions from our Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.
• Reviewing the potential of our data warehouse to increase our intelligence and analysis of the needs of our families, including identifying hidden need. This should also help us
further develop a shared understanding of the effectiveness of quality and practice across the early help system.

- Reviewing the impact of the Family Outcomes Star in engaging families and understanding and aggregating need and outcomes with a view to adopting it across the partnership.
- Increasing learning from school surveys and social media.

5. Managing demand through locality-based services and targeted support for our most vulnerable children and families

While we have made considerable progress since the launch of our first Early Help strategy, we know that we can do more to manage demand for our Early Help services, from building community resilience and supporting universal services to co-ordinating where need is best met by public service partners. Over the next three years we plan to develop locality-based services where all relevant professionals are empowered to work together and in partnership with communities and families. We will also continue to build on our ‘Think Family’ approach to intervene early and co-ordinate support for families with identified risk factors, offering support to our most vulnerable children based on identified need.

This will include:

- Looking at options to develop integrated community-facing teams and commissioning for outcomes based on population needs.
- Providing targeted support for our most vulnerable children and families with a particular focus in our first year on reducing exclusions (especially with primary school pupils), identifying children who are persistently absent from school, and broadening our understanding and collective approaches and responsibilities for improving these outcomes.
- Using the information collected for our online directory to inform the development of our strategic approach that will allow us to co-ordinate where need is best met by public service partners in the city.

Making our Priorities Happen

Governance and Accountability

Delivering Early Help is not a single agency responsibility. It requires a whole family approach, owned by all stakeholders, working in partnership with families. This includes schools, health, police, probation, children’s social care, services for adults, private, voluntary and community organisations and the wider public.

Birmingham’s Early Help offer, and the implementation of this strategy, is overseen by our multi-agency Early Help and Safeguarding Partnership. This group is jointly chaired by Birmingham Children’s Trust and West Midlands Police meeting bi-monthly to:

- develop consistent and family-focussed early help and safeguarding practices
- encourage new ways of working based on relationship-based practice and evidence of what works
- shape partners commissioning for early help and safeguarding
• ensure that tools, policies, processes and systems across agencies are congruent with our ambition and guiding principles
• monitor and review our performance.

It also regularly reviews the Children’s Advice & Support Service (CASS) and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and provides oversight of our Think Family programme.

The Early Help and Safeguarding Partnership reports to the Children’s Strategic Partnership Executive which provides strategic oversight and ensures alignment with other work.

Measuring Success and Monitoring Impact

It is important that measures of success are established and agreed. We have developed a multi-agency Outcomes Framework and will monitor a set of key performance indicators to monitor the quality and effectiveness of our Early Help Work. We will continue to develop and refine this to ensure we have an effective city-wide offer and our partnership systems are able to demonstrate the impact of our work.

Taking this Forward

This strategy covers a three year period. For each year we will develop a detailed implementation plan that identifies the actions we will take and the outcomes we expect these actions to deliver. Our Early Help and Safeguarding Partnership will monitor and review these action plans to ensure we are making progress in each of our priority areas.

Supporting Documents

This Early Help Strategy should be read in conjunction with the following key documents:

• Right Help, Right Time: Guidance for Practitioners on Delivering Effective Support for Children and Families in Birmingham
• Birmingham’s Early Help Offer (April 2019)
• Multi-agency Early Help Outcomes Framework
• Early Help Implementation Plan, 2019-2020