

Early Help Scrutiny Panel Report

Visits to Local Authorities: Learning from Practice

Introduction

As part of the scrutiny panel's work on Early Help, visits were undertaken to two local authorities including Lincolnshire and Sunderland (Together for Children), to examine their models of delivery. Both authorities have taken deliberate steps to broaden responsibility for Early Help beyond the local authority itself, embedding shared ownership across partners and universal services. The learning from these visits provides useful insight for Stockton-on-Tees as it continues to review and develop its own Early Help offer.

1. Lincolnshire

In Lincolnshire, Early Help is firmly rooted in collaboration and shared responsibility across the system. It is not viewed as a single service but as the responsibility of every professional working with children and families.

Early Help is defined as any action that supports children, young people, and families to achieve their potential by preventing difficulties from arising or preventing issues from escalating further.

Key features:

- Shared responsibility: Every professional, regardless of sector or role, is expected to support families and contribute to Early Help.
- Front-loaded support: External agencies are empowered to act as lead professionals for families, coordinating support where appropriate.
- Practical tools: The local authority provides assessments, "Team Around the Family" frameworks, and professional guidance to enable wider partners to deliver Early Help confidently.
- Capacity building: Significant investment has been made in training external professionals to reduce dependency on local authority services.

Impact:

Currently, 80% of Early Help delivery in Lincolnshire is provided by external partners, with only 20% led directly by the local authority. This represents a significant cultural and structural shift from their position 10 years ago, when most referrals were directed into the local authority. The move to an 80/20 model was achieved through sustained work with partners and consistent reinforcement that Early Help is everyone's responsibility.

2. Sunderland (Together for Children)

Sunderland's Early Help model also prioritises partnership and early identification. Like Lincolnshire, they emphasise the role of external professionals and universal services in supporting families at the earliest opportunity.

Key features:

- Partnership conversations: Professionals outside the local authority (e.g. schools, health visitors, voluntary sector) are supported to take an active role in delivering Early Help.
- Holistic approach: The service focuses on collaborative discussions about what families need and how those needs can be best met within the system.
- Promoting self-help: Online navigation tools and resources are provided to empower parents to identify and access support themselves. Parents are encouraged to first seek help from universal services such as schools and health visitors.
- Clear gateway: Families do not self-refer except in exceptional circumstances. Instead, a universal professional (e.g. school) coordinates support as lead practitioner, embedding responsibility across the system.

Pilot Programme:

Sunderland has recently piloted a duty system within its locality teams, with a dedicated team manager, assistant managers, and experienced workers operating with reduced caseloads. The model requires:

- Day 5 outcome: Assessment, direct work, home visit, and family network meeting completed.
- Day 10 decision: Determination of where the family is best supported (universal, targeted Early Help, or other provision).

Findings from the first quarter (100 children):

- 62% resulted in no further action, with most signposted to Level 2 universal support.
- 20% remained in Early Help services.
- Overall, two-thirds exited the Early Help system, reducing demand on the local authority and strengthening partnership ownership.

Analysis

The visits to Lincolnshire and Sunderland reveal several common themes:

- Early Help as a shared responsibility: Both authorities have shifted the burden away from the local authority alone, embedding expectations across partners.

- Investment in external capacity: Training, tools, and clear frameworks are essential to equip schools, health, and voluntary partners to hold cases confidently.
- Strong gateways and thresholds: Families are not automatically routed into local authority-led services; instead, universal and community-based support is maximised first.
- Cultural change over time: Lincolnshire emphasised that their current 80/20 model took a decade of sustained effort. Sunderland's pilot reflects the early stages of similar change, testing new models to rebalance responsibility.
- Impact on demand: Both authorities show that increasing external delivery reduces pressure on statutory and targeted services, allowing the local authority to focus on the most complex cases.

Suggestions for Exploration in Stockton-on-Tees

Based on the learning from these visits, Stockton-on-Tees may wish to consider:

1. Measuring partnership delivery – establishing robust data collection to track the proportion of Early Help delivered by external partners.
2. Defining shared responsibility – embedding the principle that Early Help is “everyone’s business” across schools, health, and the voluntary sector.
3. Capacity building for partners – developing a programme of training, tools, and professional guidance to support non-local authority practitioners in holding lead professional roles.
4. Piloting a duty system – testing a Sunderland-style model with dedicated staff to streamline referrals, create timely outcomes, and ensure families are quickly signposted to the right level of support.
5. Promoting family self-help – investing in resources such as online navigation tools to empower families to access early, universal support without needing formal referral.
6. Long-term system change – recognising that moving towards an 80/20 model (like Lincolnshire) requires cultural as well as structural change, and setting realistic timescales for transformation.

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