

Scrutiny Review of Partnership Working in Early Help

People Select Committee, December 2025

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Forward

Following the People Select Committee's review of Partnership Working in Early Help, we are pleased to present the Committee's final report.

It is important to provide help, support, and services to families at the earliest opportunity to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people and aim to prevent situations escalating to a point where statutory intervention may be needed. The review examined how Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and its partners deliver Early Help services and considered where partnership working can be improved so that families receive the support they may need from the most appropriate service, when they need it.

Our recommendations seek to begin to embed a culture of Early Help being everyone's business within partner organisations, including the voluntary sector, schools, and public bodies, by strengthening governance structures, improving communications, and investing in joint training and professional guidance.

We would like to extend our thanks to Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Officers, Family Action, Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust, Cleveland Police, and Catalyst for their contributions to the review. We would also like to thank those who attended the Focus Group at Billingham Family Hub along with Stockton Parent & Carer Forum for sharing their views and experiences to inform the review.

Cllr Marilyn Surtees, Chair



Councillor Marilyn Surtees

Chair – People Select Committee



Councillor Paul Weston

Vice-Chair – People Select Committee

Original Brief

Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?

Early Help focusses on support and interventions for children and their families when needed most therefore this review will contribute to priority one – the best start in life to achieve big ambition. In particular it will contribute to the following key moves:

- Giving children and young people the best possible start, in an inclusive community where everyone can thrive
- A safe community for all children and young people

The review will also contribute to priority two – health and resilient communities, key move ensuring happy and healthy lives for all.

What are the main issues and overall aim of this review?

Early Help (EH) offers support to children and their families who require help with a range of presenting issues including behaviour, family relationships, problems at school, budgets or debt, children's routine or other difficulties they may be experiencing.

The Department for Education have recently published Families First Partnership Programme (FFP), which is the start of the National reforms and expectations on Local Authorities.

The vision of the programme

The FFP programme will support safeguarding partners to bring together targeted early help, child in need, and multi-agency child protection into a seamless system of help, support and protection. This includes services and workforces, such as family support workers, social workers and other specialist and alternatively qualified practitioners, coming together to support families.

By targeted early help, child in need and child protection, we mean:

- Targeted Early Help: children and families with multiple and/or complex needs that require a plan to be in place and a lead practitioner appointed;
- Children in Need (Section 17, Children Act 1989): a general duty for local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need or are disabled, and promote the upbringing of such children by their families by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs;
- Child protection (Section 47): the duty on the local authorities to investigate where they have reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm.

This review will aim to gain a greater understanding of the effectiveness of the partnership and Early Help offer across the partners

The Committee will undertake the following key lines of enquiry:

- Are families getting the right support at the right time to prevent escalation of needs?
- Consideration of No Further Action (NFA) rate from Statutory Assessment

- What is the local authority's and partnership offer across EH?
- What is the demand on external partnerships to deliver EH interventions?
- How effective and strong is the partnership offer?
- How accessible are services?
- How clear is the offer for both professionals and families, and how easy is it to navigate?
- How effective are information sharing protocols across the partnership?

Provide an initial view as to how this review could lead to efficiencies, improvements and/or transformation:

This review will contribute to greater understanding of interventions and approaches which are effective at supporting children and families at the earliest opportunity. The review will also identify where partnership working can be improved.

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the Committee's review of Partnership Working in Early Help. Early Help ensures that families receive help and support at the earliest opportunity to improve outcomes for children and young people. It seeks to prevent situations reaching crisis point, that may then result in statutory interventions.
- 1.2. The Department for Education (DfE) published the Families First Partnership Programme (FPP) in March 2025, which is the start of national reforms and expectations of Local Authorities. The programme supports safeguarding partners to bring together targeted Early Help, child in need, and multi-agency child protection into a seamless system of help, support, and protection. This includes services and workforces, such as family support workers, social workers, and other specialist and alternatively qualified practitioner, coming together to support families. Statutory interventions and protections will remain with and be provided by the Council. Increased partnership working, with Early Help being everyone's business, will be an improved offer for families ensuring they are receiving the right support earlier.
- 1.3. The aim of the review was to gain a greater understanding of what Early Help is in Stockton-on-Tees, as well as identify where partnership working can be improved, and identify key actions to improve and deliver Early Help. Contributions have been received from officers in Early Help, Social Care, and School Support services within the Council as well as several partners, namely Cleveland Police, Family Action, Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust, Catalyst, and Stockton Parent and Carer's Forum. A Family Hub focus group was utilised to hear users' views and experiences of accessing Early Help. Additionally, Members attended two of the Children and Young People Partnership Workshops, which is focused on co-producing an Early Help Strategy, taking a partnership approach to working with families across Stockton-on-Tees. The Committee also received feedback from officer visits to two Ofsted Outstanding rated Local Authorities, Lincolnshire County Council and Sunderland City Council.
- 1.4. The Council's current Early Help offer includes a wide range of universal and targeted support for families via a range of services including School Support, the Children's Hub, or Social Workers. These include:
 - Family Hubs are offering a range of support for families with a focus on prevention to reduce the need for statutory intervention. Programmes are reviewed every six weeks to ensure they fit the needs of the community.
 - Family Solutions support families with complex and multiple needs, carrying out comprehensive assessments and tailored intervention planning, and using the Team Around the Family (TAF) model of working.
 - The Therapeutic Team offers services to children and families who are already active to Children Services
 - Family Group Conferencing is a family led decision making process which enables children and their families to find solutions to their difficulties and challenges.
 - Targeted Youth Support works with families with children aged 11-17, taking a Whole Family Approach and provides additional support to Social Care.
 - Youth Support works with Children aged 11 – 18 years old who experience low level difficulties, as well as providing an Appropriate Adult service and Missing From Home conversations.

- The Turnaround programme works with children who are arrested but not charged, providing them with better skills to manage problematic situations.
- School Support offer a range of Early Help services, with resources aligned to where they are most needed. This includes providing information, advice, and signposting to services as well as leading on Team Around the School approach bringing together partners to identify children and young people that need support and provide interventions early.

1.5. The offer demonstrates a strong commitment to prevention and early intervention.

1.6. In addition, Early Help services are being provided by a wide range of organisations including health colleagues, the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, and other partners. This ranges from universal, preventative, and targeted support and include, but not limited to:

- Family Outreach Service provided by Family Action which is delivering a range of support such as practical and emotional support, family routines, debt management, budgeting, housing and benefit processes, accessing grants, building self-confidence, reducing social isolation etc.
- Community engagement projects.
- Health Visitors.
- School Nursing.
- Public Health initiatives e.g. Growing Well, Growing Healthy
- Youth United Stockton Alliance (YUSA), a collective who deliver youth provision and ensure there are targeted and focused interventions to support children and young people.

1.7. Arrangements with different organisations include the strategic partnership held with Family Action as well as commissioning services such as the Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust 0 – 19 services, both of whom gave evidence to the Committee for the review, along with Catalyst, the strategic infrastructure organisation for the VCSE sector. It has been highlighted the borough of Stockton-on-Tees is an inclusive area to work with and that partners have good working relationships not only with Children Services and the Family Hubs but also with other partners across the Borough.

1.8. The Committee believe the Family Action strategic partnership is a good example of a partnership approach to service delivery. It has allowed for improved information sharing through the use of shared information systems and a mutually shared risk-register. There is also a focus on joint planning and implantation, avoiding duplication of services, and ensuring that the right guidance and support is offered to families. This benefits the outcomes for families, preventing delay and duplication in information gathering. Other benefits include Family Action's status as a national charity and their connections with the wider community enabling them to access funding the Council cannot apply for and seek out other support opportunities for the families they work with.

1.9. Family Hubs are seen as accessible by both service users and partners, therefore an important way of providing information and support for families when they need it. The co-location of services in Billingham Hub is working well, which includes midwife, health visiting, and school nursing services. The online offer from the Hubs can be improved with issue-based information and links to professional services on the Facebook page.

1.10. Multiagency working, including Team Around the School services and Team Around the Family, bring together all professionals to offer a comprehensive support system for families, providing support/interventions at the earliest opportunity.

- 1.11. The high level (66.2%) of No Further Action taken following Social Care Assessments suggests that clarity is needed on the triage process at the front door to ensure that referrals are forwarded to Early Help services rather than Social Care. Professionals who are already working with families and have built up relationships with them may be best placed to offer advice and support without the need to refer to the Children's Hub (Chub). Training and support are needed to ensure that professionals have the confidence to lead on Early Help. PiTstop, a multi-agency early intervention to triage referrals screened and assessed by Cleveland Police as not meeting Social Care thresholds and share information from the Police with partners, has shown measurable success in reducing the demand on statutory services and improving outcomes for families.
- 1.12. Inconsistent communication, duplication in services, and gaps in data sharing protocols have been reported, which hinder the effectiveness of partnerships and lead to partners working in silos with the same families. The Committee believes that a greater understanding of the different services available along with a more joined up approach and access to information systems between services is therefore an area for improvement. This could include one joint assessment form, a shared platform for data sharing, joint accountability framework and responsibilities, shared service impact and evaluation review, and joint training. Expanding outreach groups such as fathers and families with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is also critical.
- 1.13. Visits to Lincolnshire County Council and Sunderland City Council by officers supported this view, highlighting how Early Help can be a shared responsibility with external partners e.g. "Early Help is everyone's business", with investment in training tools, and clear frameworks to equip partners to confidently lead on and support children and families. In these Authorities, increasing external delivery has reduced pressure on statutory and targeted services, allowing the local authority to focus on the most complex cases. It is acknowledged that this is a cultural change that has taken a long period of time to embed in the Authorities.
- 1.14. Positive feedback from families endorses the value of the services currently provided, but raised areas of growth such as better signposting, more inclusive programmes and improved online resources. The offer for SEND families has been highlighted as an area for improvement, with training needed for professionals to understand the needs of SEND children to better equip them to offer the right support, as well as ensuring that support is offered earlier, and there is increased and purposeful communication between families and services, making sure this is well co-ordinated.
- 1.15. The review has provided a comprehensive understanding of the Early Help landscape in Stockton-on-Tees. The review's recommendations focus on strengthening governance structures, improving communication and accessibility of services, and investing in joint training and shared systems. By embedding the principle of shared responsibility across partners and continuing to co-produce strategies with families and partners, including the VCSE sector, Stockton-on-Tees can build a more integrated and responsive Early Help system that ensures children and families receive the right support at the right time. This will contribute to the broader goals of fostering resilient communities and giving children the best possible start in life.

Recommendations

- 1.16. The Committee recommends that:

1. A culture of shared responsibilities across the partnership is promoted to ensure that the principle of Early Help being "everyone's business" is embedded within schools, health, and the voluntary sector.

2. The re-design of the front door to Children's Services embeds an Early Help focus, enabling timely outcomes and ensuring families are able to access the right support at the right time.
3. Advice and training are developed for schools and other partners referring to the Children's Hub, to ensure families who could be better supported by Early Help services are forwarded to the most appropriate service for help and reduce demand on the front door.
4. A programme of training, tools and professional guidance is developed to support non-local authority practitioners in holding lead professional roles with children and families.
5. The design of a multi-agency data impact assessment, combined privacy notice, and data sharing systems to ensure effective and timely communication between the Council and its partners is supported.
6. A robust data collection system is established to measure partnership delivery of Early Help services.
7. The updated online offer is relaunched, promoting it to partners, schools, and residents. Self-navigation tools should also be introduced to empower families to access early, universal support without needing formal referral.
8. Partners are encouraged to utilise Family Hubs, basing and/or providing services in the venues where appropriate to ensure that these are accessible to children and families.
9. Further support is provided for partners to understand the needs of SEND families to enable them to offer appropriate Early Help service to these families.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1. This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the People Select Committee's scrutiny review of Partnership Working in Early Help.
- 2.2. Early help ensures that help and support is provided to families at the earliest opportunity to improve outcomes for children and young people and prevents situations reaching crisis point that may then require a statutory response and intervention. Research in Practice, 2022, notes that "The broad concept of Early Help is to act early to improve the lives of children, young people and families now and in the future."
- 2.3. The review aimed to gain a greater understanding of the current effectiveness of the partnership working and Early Help offer within and across our partnerships. It considered where partnership working can be improved to deliver Early Help, and the Committee's work forms part of the preparation and development for the Families First Partnership (FFP) Programme reforms.
- 2.4. The Committee undertook the following key lines of enquiry:
 - Are families getting the right support at the right time to prevent escalation of needs?
 - Consideration of No Further Action (NFA) rate from Statutory Assessment
 - What is the local authority's and partnership offer across EH?
 - What is the demand on external partnerships to deliver EH interventions?
 - How effective and strong is the partnership offer?
 - How accessible are services?
 - How clear is the offer for both professionals and families, and how easy is it to navigate?
 - How effective are information sharing protocols across the partnership?
- 2.5. Contributions were sought and subsequently received from several Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) department including Family Hubs, Youth Support, Social Care, and Education. Contributions were also received from several partners including Cleveland Police, Family Action, Harrogate & District NHS Foundation Trust (HDFT), Catalyst and Stockton Parent and Carer Forum.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 The legal framework for Early Help is covered by several Acts, which include:
 - Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) places a duty on states to protect children from all forms of maltreatment or exploitation and to provide support to children and their carers to prevent and/or reduce the incidence of maltreatment.
 - The Children Act 1989 is the foundation of child welfare policy and practice in England. (amended).
 - Section 17 – 'child in need' - reinforced coordination of work with agencies engaged in preventative and supportive work with children and families
 - Children Act 2004 set out legal framework for multi-agency 'cooperation to improve well-being'.
 - Working Together 2023 –Independent Review/Family Help Reforms. Children's Well-being & Schools Bill in Nov 24.
- 3.2 The Department for Education (DfE) published the Families First Partnership (FFP) Programme in March 2025, which is the start of national reforms and expectations of Local Authorities. The programme supports safeguarding partners to bring together targeted Early Help, child in need,

and multi-agency child protection into a seamless system of help, support, and protection. This includes services and workforces, such as Family Support Workers, Social Workers and other specialist and alternatively qualified practitioners, coming together to support families. Statutory interventions and protections will remain with and be provided by the Council, and increased partnership working, with Early Help being everyone's business, will be an improved offer for families ensuring they are receiving the right support earlier.

- 3.3 The programme comprises three key reform strands: implementing Family Help, Multi-agency Child Protection Teams, and Family Group Decision Making (FGDM). Within the Family Help strand there are four elements: Multi-disciplinary Family Help Team, Family Help Lead Practitioner (FHP), Family Help assessments and plans, and Front Door Arrangement/moving towards an integrated front door (IFD).
- 3.4 The Council has set up an implementation programme, with governance in place and a Stage One delivery plan submitted to the DfE. A needs assessment has been completed to understand current and future needs of children, young people, and families to inform all aspects of service design and reshaping. It identified that the greatest need for family help and support is during pregnancy and the first year of a child's life and at age 10 – 15 years. The next steps are the design of delivery models for the Integrated Front Door, and Multi Agency Child Protection team. A detailed stage two delivery plan was due to be submitted to the DfE outlining the implementation of the reforms and spend in December 2025.
- 3.5 Further background information in relation to this topic includes:
 - Early Help System Guide <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-families-early-help-system-guide>
 - Families First Partnership Programme <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/families-first-partnership-programme>
 - Scrutiny review of Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment <https://moderngov.stockton.gov.uk/documents/s8755>Select%20Committee%20Report.pdf>

4.0 Evidence

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Early Help Offer

- 4.1 Referrals to Early Help come in from multiple sources, including schools, GP's, Police, Voluntary Services, and parents themselves to the Children's Hub (CHUB) which acts as a "front door" for all referrals. The CHUB is a joint service between Stockton-on-Tees and Hartlepool Borough Councils. A decision was made at Cabinet in June 2025 to bring this service in-house, and work is being carried out to deliver this service via the Powering Our Future Transformation Programme, aligning with the FFP reforms to move towards an IFD.
- 4.2 Discussions take place with the referrers and families and then referrals are triaged to determine the most appropriate support, either to Universal Services, Targeted Early Help Services in house, or partner agencies. In some cases, advice and guidance is given.
- 4.3 The service received 1,311 referrals between November 2024 – January 2025. Of these, 708 referrals were received and processed by Family Hubs and School Support, with 312 external referrals processed by the Early Help front door and 311 by CHUB. This includes those referrals given advice and information or signposted to the most appropriate agency or service for support,

as well as those being supported. The services receive slightly higher requests for support around pre-school holidays.

Family Hubs

4.4. There are four Family Hubs in the Borough offering a range of support for families with children aged 0 – 19 with a focus on prevention to reduce the need for statutory intervention. They aim to:

- Be a place parents can come to seek support or signposting to other services.
- Be a one stop shop.
- Enhanced integrated working and co-location.
- Empower families to access support.
- Be accessible support regardless of need.
- Develop trusting relationship with parents/carers.

4.5. The Family Hub offers a broad range of evidence-based parenting programmes, which are listed at **appendix 1**. The Nurturing course is the most popular programme provided. Other courses include: the Antenatal Nurturing, which is additional to the midwife led antenatal course however a midwife attends the Family Hub session on the final week; and the Empowering Parents Empowering Communities (EPEC) programmes that Parent Volunteers help to deliver bringing their personal experiences. The Hub facilitates and hosts an 'All Together For You' session held at the Family Hubs once a month, rotating between the four venues, bringing together all the partners to give advice and information to families. This allows families to receive all information and advice in one space at the same time.

4.6. Families can attend as many programmes as they wish at the Family Hubs and may enrol on one programme after completing another. Similarly, they may choose to attend a course when their child is younger and need specific support, then return for different support, advice, and programmes when their child is older. The time that families receive services from the Family Hubs therefore is dependent on their needs.

Family Solutions

4.7. There are three Family Solutions Teams co-located within the Family Hubs to support families with multiple needs. They work with other services to co-ordinate a package of support around the family's identified needs, carrying out comprehensive assessments to understand need and tailoring bespoke plans to ensure those needs can be met. There is emphasis on holding regular Team Around the Family (TAF) meetings, to ensure that progress can be reviewed and aligned, dependent on family need and changes. The team can provide support with a range of needs, including:

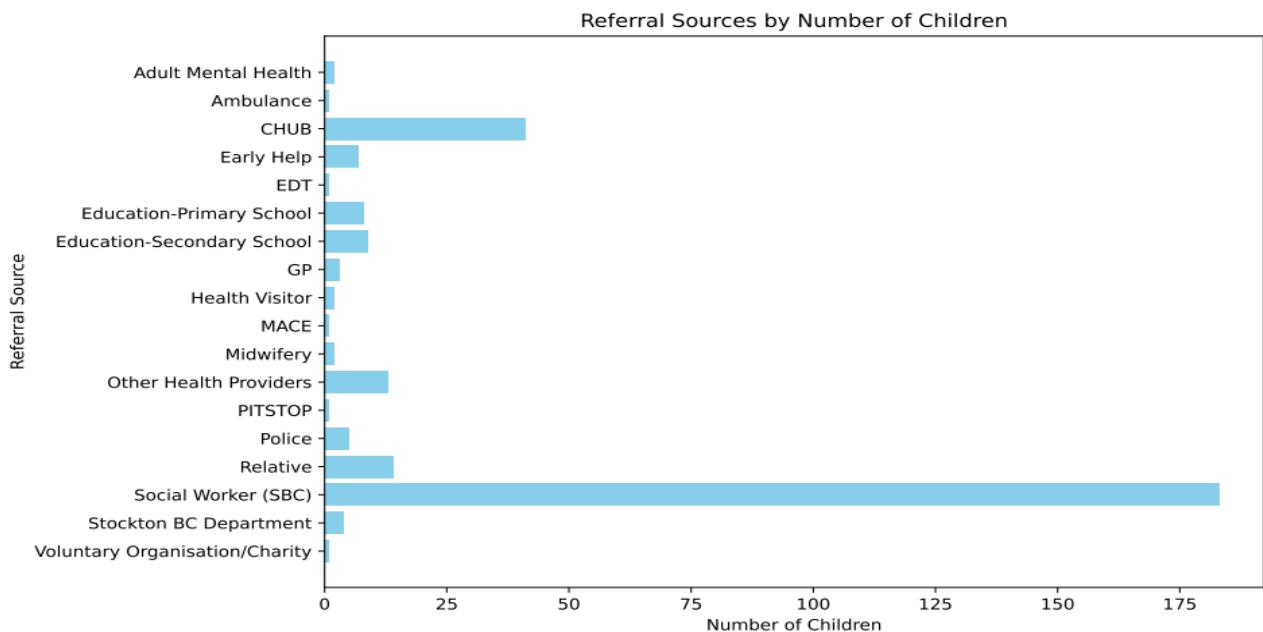
- Routines and boundaries
- Safe parenting
- Home conditions
- Drug and alcohol misuse

- Domestic abuse
- Housing
- Debt
- Behavioural management
- Parental conflict
- Family Network
- Educational support/exclusion

4.8. Close review of family circumstances happens during supervision, to ensure that the most appropriate support is in place and if a family's circumstances change and needs escalate, discussions are held with Social Care to ensure that the most appropriate service is identified to support the family.

4.9. In June 2025 there were 357 children, and 173 families open to the three teams. On average there have been 91 new children opened each month across the teams over the last year.

4.10. As noted in the table below, referrals to Family Solutions come from a variety of sources, however the majority are received from Social Workers within the Council who, following their involvement with a family, have assessed them as being in a position to step-down to Family Solutions. The second biggest referrer is the CHUB, who may deem that a referral they have received for a Statutory response requires a lower-level intervention.



Therapeutic Team

4.11. The Therapeutic Team offers a range of therapeutic intervention to children and families who are already active to Children Services, which can support and compliment other interventions in place. Over the 12 months beginning June 2024 the team received 216 referrals and worked with 148 children, young people, and adults. Not all referrals are considered appropriate for the team and in such circumstance advice and support is provided as well as signposting to alternative provision

with the local area. In June 2025 there were 24 children, young people, and families on their waiting list.

Family Group Conferencing (FGC)

- 4.12. Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is a family led decision making process which enables children and their families find solutions to their difficulties and challenges in a relaxed and creative way, building on family's strengths and networks.
- 4.13. The team work with families from across Children's Social Care and Early Help, with many preparation visits undertaken to ensure the family understand the concerns raised, providing them opportunity to consider how they can support. The team then bring the family and their network together to identify how they will manage the risks/concerns as a family moving forward. Research shows that families are much more invested with the plan as they have been central to developing this.
- 4.14. Over the 12 months beginning June 2024 the team successfully worked with and supported 97 families to create family plans, which from start to finish takes approximately 6-8 weeks to complete.
- 4.15. This is similar to the FGDM required in the FFP reforms.

Targeted Youth Support

- 4.16. Targeted Youth Support work with families with children aged 11 – 18 years to reduce children's vulnerability to harm outside the home, for example exploitation and carrying knives. The team also educate both parents and children on online safety and effective communication in managing the risks. In June 2025, the team were working with 50 children (43 families).
- 4.17. The team takes a Whole Family Approach and co-ordinate a Team Around the Family meeting to bring together professionals. They work with children with complex needs, carrying out assessments and planning for intervention, and co-work with children open to Social Care to provide additional support when required.

Youth Support

- 4.18. Youth Support work with children aged 11 – 18 years old who are experiencing difficulties such as low self-esteem, carrying out brief assessment and planning for intervention. Their work includes staying safe, peer influences and emotional regulation.
- 4.19. The team provides an Appropriate Adult service from Monday – Friday's 9am – 5pm. An Appropriate Adult is a designated person who supports and safeguards the rights and welfare of children or vulnerable adults during police procedures, as defined under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) in England and Wales. It also has responsibility for Missing From Home (MFH) conversations, which every child reported missing requires to understand the reasons for the missing episode. The team conduct between 70-90 conversations each month, identifying interventions to prevent the child going missing again if required. As part of these conversations the team ensure the home they are returning to is safe and any concerns are escalated to the appropriate service.

4.20. In June 2025, the team were working with 62 children and 57 families.

Turnaround

4.21. The Turnaround programme is attached to the Youth Justice team and funded by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) until March 2026. It works with children who are arrested but not charged, when there are no other support workers or agencies involved in supporting the child.

4.22. The programme is based on voluntary engagement and provides children with better skills to manage problematic situations by giving advice on the criminal justice process, engaging them in positive activities, and other intervention work to address concerns. There is also a focus on education, training, and employment.

4.23. The team has successfully worked with 98 children between January 2023 – March 2025, one more than the MOJ's target of 97. In June 2025, the team were working with 20 Children. Quarterly returns are forwarded to the MOJ to build an evidence base and evaluation showing the effectiveness of the programme.

School Support Services

4.24. The School Support team offers a range of services including facilitating Team Around Families, hosting half termly solution circles to discuss low level concerns and challenges, providing information, advice and signposting, as well as stepping-in as Lead Professionals on complex cases and case reviews for families who are deemed 'stuck'. They strengthen links with key school staff when children and young people have in-year transfers, plan and deliver the summer transition programme "Be Kind to Your Mind" and bring services to school via their links with the community including Holidays Are Fun and Family Hubs.

4.25. The team work with all schools across five cluster areas of the Borough: Billingham, North Stockton, Central Stockton, Thornaby and Ingleby Barwick / Yarm / Eaglescliffe. The number of pupils on roll receiving Free School Meal (FSM) is used as an indicator to identify and align resources where they are most needed. Thornaby is the cluster with the largest number FSM (49% of pupils on roll), followed by North Stockton (44%).

4.26. When schools have safeguarding concerns they submit a SAFER referral into the Children HUB, and there may be multiple SAFER's made for one child, these are known as contacts. In the year 1 January 2024 – 31 December 2024 there had been 1,768 contacts in to the Children's HUB from schools, and this was 13.4% of all contacts received. 758 of these contacts converted to a referral into the Assessment Team which was 42.8% of the total referrals submitted to the CHUB.

4.27. In June 2025 there were 83 active external Early Help Assessments monitored by the cluster School Support Advisors and the team are developing a portal to allow all external episodes to be recorded by the system to improve reporting and dashboards.

Team Around the School Service

4.28. The Team Around the School Service (TASS) is a multi-agency approach bringing together schools, School Support Advisers, local community groups, health representatives, and other

partners to offer a comprehensive support system for families. It aims to identify children that need support and provide intervention and access to services at the earliest opportunity.

- 4.29. This collaboration and partnership approach will ensure that the data and intelligence is shared for planning and targeting those children at risk. Therefore, the FOCUS dashboard is to be further developed to include additional data identifying pupils with attendance levels less than 95% and not known to services, understanding gender versus year group, identifying those entitled to FSM/Pupil Premium, Year 6 admissions and their attendance, involvement with other internal services including careers and Youth Justice Team, and destination data from post 16. The information on the child and the support they receive will therefore 'follow the child' and be shared with schools/colleges when they transition, building a better picture of the family's needs. The post 16 outcomes will be helpful for schools, putting in place the learning and future measures to prevent their former pupils becoming Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET).
- 4.30. There are several outcomes TASS want to achieve for children which include that they attend school and are ready to learn. They want children to receive the right support at the right place and time, and communication with school staff improved. Children will therefore feel supported and heard, able to ask for help and are part of the plans to support them. Finally, they want to improve knowledge, access, and participation in community-based activities.
- 4.31. The outcomes of TASS want to achieve for schools are improved attendance, reduced suspension and permanent exclusions, and improved communication with pupils and parents/carers. Staff should feel empowered, have the training to give them the tools to respond, and feel informed about who else can help outside of school.
- 4.32. TASS aspiration is to reduce demand and escalation into statutory services, improve the emotional wellbeing of children and families, and to see children and young people thrive, achieve, and be in employment, education, or training at the end of Year 14.
- 4.33. The level of support for schools is a graduated offer, agreed with the individual schools, which enables resources to be deployed based upon needs and therefore providing a responsive approach. Schools receiving universal support will have a duty advisor available to guide professionals, while schools with preventative support will have an advisor based in school for up a half day or full day per week, and schools with targeted support have an advisor based in school for up to two days per week.
- 4.34. The biggest barriers to achieving the purposed outcomes are attendance and communication with schools and parents/carers. Raising aspirations of children is also key. The team work with individual schools to set their targets for attendance and best practice from schools both within and outside the Borough is shared. It is vital to ensure that the importance of attending school and education is understood from primary school. Improving attendance is a five-to-ten-year plan, and it is acknowledged that Covid has had a significant impact on schools' academic attainment and attendance, which needs to be reversed.

Social Care Assessment and Response

- 4.35. Members considered the Statutory Assessments and Outcomes. Assessments are carried out by the Social Care Assessment Team when a referral is received from the CHUB regarding concerns with safeguarding.

4.36. The Social Worker has up to 45 days to complete an assessment, however many are completed sooner. Outcomes of the assessment include:

- A Child in Need Plan meaning the family require further support
- A Child Protection Plan put in place, via a child protection conference
- Child taken into Local Authority care
- There may be a “step down” to Early Help service
- Step-Down into another service
- No further action

4.37. When a referral is made under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, which places a general duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need within their area, parental consent is required. This is because the referral is focused on providing support and services to improve outcomes for the child and family. However, if a referral is made under Section 47 of the Act, which initiates a Child Protection inquiry, consent is not required. This typically occurs when there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm (e.g. a child presents with unexplained injuries or discloses abuse). In such cases, the local authority has a statutory duty to investigate and may proceed without parent consent to ensure the child’s immediate safety and protection. Despite this, the Council remain committed to working in partnership with parents, wherever possible, promoting transparency, collaboration, and trust throughout the process.

4.38. A weekly average of 71 referrals were received in May - June 2025 and of these only 33.8% proceeded to action. The remaining 66.2% of referrals resulted in no further action (NFA) taking place, and there are several reasons for this, including that the referral may be considered inappropriate for assessment or not meeting the threshold for assessment. This does not necessarily mean referring the child/family was not the right course of action, as there may have been short term actions or services offered within the 45-day period that resolved the family’s issues. Another reason for NFA could be that the parent does not give consent for the assessment and/or the social worker has been unable to make contact. Often referrals from the Police come through without consent, and the CHUB have not been able to contact parents. However, if there is a significant concern then a decision can be made via a strategy meeting to override the requirement for consent.

4.39. The high number of NFA referrals might also be due to the threshold for action being too high, or the bar for referral too low as well as a lack of information or poor quality of a referral. Alternatively, there might be a misunderstanding between referral expectations and actual outcome.

4.40. Several steps could be implemented to ensure that referrals from the CHUB are sent to the right place, i.e. Early Help rather than the Assessment Team, and these include refining and reviewing the referral criteria, giving frequent referrers training, guidance and support in referring, implementing triage or screening steps, tracking data weekly for trends and improvements, implement training to upskill, and support partners, and increase partnership responsibility. This will improve efficiency and ensure families get the right support.

Family Action

- 4.41. The national charity Family Action has a Strategic Partnership arrangement with the Council to deliver and coordinate a range of support for families. This includes the Family Outreach Service which works with the whole family unit providing Early Help support including practical and emotional support, family routines, debt management, budgeting, housing and benefit processes, accessing grants, building self-confidence, reducing social isolation, and attendance at meetings amongst others. They work as “one team” with Family Solutions, Family Hubs, 0-19 services, Social Care, and broader Early Help organisations.
- 4.42. In the year 1 July 2024 – 30 June 2025 they received 284 whole family referrals, five re-referrals of families who had previously accessed support, and referred (“stepped up”) 14 families onto Children’s Social Care. The main reasons families are referred to service are for parenting issues/support, practical support, housing, and both child and parental mental health/emotional wellbeing. The length of time Family Action supports a family can vary dependent on their needs but is usually up to a six-month maximum. Support is not withdrawn until the family feel comfortable.
- 4.43. Family Action also carry out volunteering and community engagement work. This includes recruiting and supporting volunteers in family focused activities at the Family Hubs, and different sessions held there, as well as engagement with communities not routinely accessing universal services and delivering Holidays Are Fun programmes. Family Action also provide opportunities to be involved in community projects with partner organisation such as Stockton Arc, Tees Valley Museums, Shape the Play and more.
- 4.44. The vision of the Strategic Partnership is to bring together a clear offer of support from across the system, avoiding duplication, and ensuring that the right guidance and support is offered without having to meet eligibility levels, being referred to different services, and long waiting times. It also aims to offer a range of support to help reduce inequalities in child development and wellbeing as well as strengthen community resilience. The partnership allows flexibility in the delivery of the support to respond to needs and demands.
- 4.45. Due to being a charity, Family Action has access to funding that the Council cannot apply for. They also had connections with the wider community therefore seek out other support opportunities for the families they work with. The length of the partnership contract, 5 years starting in 2022 with a 5-year extension period, means that they can deliver change in services.
- 4.46. Being a strategic partner, they have shared information and recording systems with the Council, and this has made a huge difference when working with families. Information gathered on the family is kept with them when they move from different services and Family Action can step up families to Social Care, and families are stepped down to the service.
- 4.47. The Strategic Partnership has also led to a mutually agreed and reviewed risk register, a focus on continuous improvement planning and implementation including a joint auditing process, and collaborative planning of jointly aligned initiatives. It is believed that it has generated a social value of £72,000 in 2024/25 as well as embedded a smoother transition for families across the Early Help system.

Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust 0 – 19 Services

- 4.48. Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust (HDFT) provided 0 – 19 services within Stockton-on-Tees which includes support to children, young people and families comprising of perinatal care and mental health care, parent support, safe sleep, child development, and healthy lifestyle

promotion. They provide this via Health Visitors, School Nursing, and Public Health initiatives such as Growing well Growing Healthy. In addition, they provided specialist support and support with transition to primary school, secondary school, and adulthood.

- 4.49. The service referred 252 families of 0–5-year-olds to targeted single agency support and 278 families of 0–5-year-olds to multi-agency support. For families of 5–19-year-olds, they were referring 90 to targeted single agency support and 42 to multi-agency support (figures reported in September 2025).
- 4.50. The service provides programmes from the Hubs, and Health Visitors signpost new and expectant parents to their local Hub. HDFT have a good working relationship with the Family Hubs. The 0 - 19 services are co-located across all Family Hubs and this is really valued for strengthening integrated working. Billingham Hub is identified by staff as having particularly strong integrated working and learning from this will be replicated across all areas.
- 4.51. HDFT believe that Stockton-on-Tees is an inclusive area to work with, they have positive working relationships with Family Action and feel included in the Team Around the Family meetings when invited. They also felt that the concept of SMART Teams, a multi-agency approach to triaging and providing Early Help, promoted partnership working.
- 4.52. However, duplication between the HDFT service and Family Hub offer has been highlighted, and a greater understanding of the different services along with a more joined up approach will be beneficial. HDFT felt there is scope for them to lead more on services and support for a family. There are also times when HDFT feel services are working in silo's helping the same family and communication along with access to information systems between services could be improved.
- 4.53. HDFT also highlighted that some of their programmes only receive short term funding, and therefore they are unable to offer support that has proven to be beneficial. This is a national, rather than regional issue.

PiTstop Cleveland Police

- 4.54. PitStop is a multi-agency early intervention in Stockton-on-Tees, chaired by the Police, designed to share information across partners to ensure that need, harm and possible risk is identified and support provided to families. Partners include:
 - Children's Social Care
 - Adult Safeguarding Team
 - Early Help
 - Cleveland Police
 - Health – HDFT 0 – 19 Integrated Public Health Nursing
 - Education
 - Housing – Homeless Solutions
 - Change Grow Live
 - Youth Justice
 - Harbour
- 4.55. It aims to reduce the demand on CHUB by diverting Police referrals that are screened and assessed as not meeting the Social Care threshold, but there is still a concern, to PiTstop.

Proportional and relevant information is then shared with the most relevant partner to provide support, thereby leading to better informed decisions to ensure earlier and/or preventative interventions are put in place. Cases considered for PiTstop can include a child concern, a vulnerable adult, or domestic abuse, and are Medium Risk or Standard with Children but not open to Social Care. Where the cases are open to Social Care, the information is shared directly with them. Pooled knowledge from safeguarding partners help to identify hidden need, harm, and risk, and hidden victims are identified through third-party reporting.

- 4.56. Referrals into PiTstop decrease during school holidays and increase when schools return, and it is believed that this is due to the school having oversight of the families. Information between the police and schools has improved since the initiative started. Schools are now able to monitor and support families when they are informed by the police of incidents regarding anti-social behaviour, neighbourhood disputes etc., ensuring they are receiving support as early as possible and avoiding escalation in the support that a family needs.
- 4.57. There is no correlation between the calls received and deprivation and referrals are coming from all areas of the Borough.
- 4.58. The number of police referrals to the CHUB since PiTstop started operating in March 2024 has decreased by 25.90%, showing that it is working to decrease pressure on the CHUB. The number of re-referrals into PiTstop was low, showing that the service is working to ensure families are receiving the interventions and support they need.

Catalyst

- 4.59. Catalyst is a strategic infrastructure organisation for the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Stockton-on-Tees. It has a vision of a coherent and single sector, working together in partnership with public bodies and private businesses to deliver services to communities in the Borough and Tees Valley. Catalyst provides set up and development advice, funding support, training, and disburse funding. They circulate e-bulletins, have social media presence, hold forums and networking events for the sector, offer one-to-one support, and hold an annual conference.
- 4.60. They believe that partnership working is strong in Stockton-on-Tees and there are both formal and informal partnerships in place. There is a strong reputation for collaboration, and the sector feels supported.
- 4.61. Catalyst represents the sector on boards and groups across the borough including Team Stockton, Family First Partnership Board, Child Poverty Network, Teeswide Safeguarding Adults Board and many more. They also encourage VCSE organisations and individuals who are delivering services on the ground to join different meetings and working groups to ensure their voices are heard.
- 4.62. Examples of successful partnership working highlighted include:
 - Youth United Stockton Alliance – a collective of key partners who deliver youth provision to support the sustainability of high-quality open access youth provision as well as ensuring that there are targeted and focused interventions to support children and young people.
 - Community Mental Health Transformation (Wellbeing Hub) – a one-stop shop for advice, guidance, and support relating to any wellbeing issues which had over 1,000 walk-ins in the first month of opening
 - Warm Welcome – weekly social events which evolved from the warm spaces project following the recognition that this type of event is required year-round and not just in the winter months

- Holidays Are Fun (HAF) project – providing activities for children and young people during school holidays. While Catalyst no longer delivers the project, they still have involvement
- Sport England – working with Tees Active to access Sports England funding

4.63. The VCSE sector has experience and expertise to deliver a wide range of services and should not be seen as a reduced offer. However, the real cost of delivery should be considered when commissioning and/or partnering with the sector, including administrative and utilities costs. Qualitive outcomes of services should be valued as much as quantitative outcomes and it should be given realistic timescales when information is requested from the sector.

4.64. The Stockton Information Directory has been highlighted by Catalyst as an area for improvement, ensuring that it is accessible and the information on the directory relevant. They also highlighted developing a VCSE Chater as well as relaunching the Senior Leaders Forum to create clear pathways to report back from the different groups and boards. Consultation with the sector needs to be carried out to confirm that a Forum is something that it wants and then shape it as a space for the sector with speakers from partners invited to attend.

Children and Young People Partnership Workshops

4.65. Four workshops have been held with partners, which aimed to co-produce an Early Help Strategy. Members of the Committee attended the third workshop, that focused on the priorities for Early Help and the self-assessment tool taken from the Department for Education (DfE) Early Help Systems Guide, and the fourth workshop that focussed on action planning.

4.66. There was a clear theme from the third workshop that the issues within Early Help not only lie with governance but also infrastructure and there is a need to have joint data sharing protocols in place. Partners can be working with the same families but doing so in silo and therefore need to work smarter with a shared platform for data, shared responsibilities, and shared evaluations. This will ensure more effective use of resources across the partnership.

4.67. It was suggested that the Family First model be built on with one assessment, regardless of this being completed by the Local Authority or a partner, to promote the family telling their story once and the assessment can be built upon if a higher tier of invention is required. This will then build one family plan, to be used by all partners for each family. The need for joint training across partners was highlighted, along with using the same language between services. The workshop discussed working within the principles of a whole family approach to ensure all the children in a family are supported and therefore do not require the same help and support as their siblings at a later date. Utilising Artificial Intelligence to support this activity was also discussed.

4.68. Effective coordination and communication for promoting information is a key area as was measuring how useful the information is for families, rather than just how many people were accessing the information. There are lots of people working in the community, whether it be paid work or in a voluntary capacity e.g. leading social activities and sporting clubs, and it would be useful for them to have information on services available to signpost to when needed.

4.69. At the fourth workshop partners identified the main priorities of governance, data, communication, and schools and agreed tangible actions to reform these. Actions included:

- **Governance:** establishing good representation on boards, terms of references, and building relationships with partners

- **Data:** designing multi-agency data impact assessment, a combined privacy notice, and data sharing system, as well as undertaking a mapping exercise to understand the data sets produced
- **Communication:** simplifying the online offer for both families and professionals, relaunching the offer, and carrying out training across partners
- **Schools:** carrying out training across schools and working with Ofsted regarding exclusions.

4.70. The key officers and partners that need to be involved have been identified and those who attended the workshop have agreed responsibility for taking the actions forward.

Family and User Feedback

4.71. The Committee wished to gain an understanding of how accessible Early Help services are, how clear the offer is for families, how easy the system is to navigate, and are families getting the right support at the right time.

Focus Groups

4.72. A focus group of Billingham Hub service users was held in August 2025, which included parents who have completed the EPEC and Nurturing courses, baby courses, and SEND support groups. A Family Action parent volunteer also attended the focus group. The purpose of the focus group was to understand if families are getting the right support at the right time, if services are accessible, and how clear the Early Help offer is, both in person and online.

4.73. Several parents had been signposted by their Health Visitor and believe they had good support from the Health Visitor. Other parents, however, were signposted by Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), by friends and family, or already knew about the service from having older children. Two parents noted that the Family Hub Worker had offered to visit them in their home after making first contact to encourage them into the Hub, and a Family Hub Home Visit for all new parents was suggested. It is felt that this needed to be timed right, and a three-month visit is felt to be the right time to ensure that the parent is not overwhelmed but before they feel isolated. All the parents felt it is daunting when first attending the Family Hub but are encouraged by staff to come back. A “buddy” or “Hub Champion”, whereby parent volunteers chat to new parents when they first attend will help with making parents feel welcome.

4.74. The staff at the Family Hub were praised, being approachable and offering lots of support, and one parent said that staff have called her on regular occasions when they know she has been struggling. Events at the Hub were also praised, as was the Home Safety course, and it is felt that this course should be advertised for expectant parents who will not only benefit from the knowledge given during the course but also by coming into the Family Hub and getting to know the services and courses on offer.

4.75. Parents feel that services like Red Balloons, an adult mental health charity which held sessions from the Hubs for the parents including walks and talks, are really important. Getting midwives back in the Hub is seen as a benefit to the service, and parents would also like to see the Health Visitors in the Hubs more. Parents are happy with the Family Action volunteers but feel Family Action need to be present in the Hub and consistent in their approach. A new member of staff has been employed by Family Action which should help with this.

- 4.76. It is felt that there is not enough information readily available for families with SEND and parents need to seek out help rather than being signposted to the Hubs and Early Help. It is also felt that dads are missing from the Family Hub offer, as they need support and to talk to other dads too. A dads stay and play session is suggested along with linking up to Andy's Men Clubs (which is offered at Redhill Family Hub) and Men Sheds.
- 4.77. Parents are using the Facebook page to find out what is happening and other generic information. More issue-based information, with links to professional services will be useful on Facebook. A "meet the team" area on the Facebook page/online will also be helpful.

Early Help Services Feedback

- 4.78. The Early Help Service note that feedback they receive is positive, with service users stating how helpful the support and advice has been. Some of the comments highlighted to members from the service include:
 - "She was very friendly and a pleasure to work with, she made us feel relaxed in a difficult situation" (from a family member)
 - "We appreciate the support and empathy you have shown us through the pregnancy and birth of our gorgeous little girl. You have made things easier for us and all we want to say is thank you so much. We will miss you" (from a parent)
 - "He is always very welcoming and kind to everyone. He is brilliant with the children when we come in to use the Family Hub" (from a mum)
 - "You make me happy by coming to see me every 2 weeks, you are the best ever." (from a child)
 - "The Family Group Conference is beneficial and positive. It gives you a neutral place to meet and you can be open and honest and say what you feel." (from a parent)
 - "My son and I had a great relationship with our Turnaround worker. If we had a problem, we knew we could contact her at anytime"
 - "These sessions have really helped me turn my life around and put me back on track." (from a young person)
- 4.79. A case study was also presented from the perspective of a baby whose family were supported by a Family Group Conference:

"When my mummy was having a hard time, my auntie – my mummy's sister – took me in and started looking after me. She already has children of her own but she made space in her heart and home for me too. My daddy's family and other relatives from my mummy's side wanted to be part of my life as well. But they hadn't met each other before I was born, and there were some mixed messages that made things a bit uncomfortable. The Family Group Conference team helped everyone come together. They helped my families talk openly and honestly about what was best for me. Together, they made a plan so I could spend time with all the people who love me. Now, I get to see my daddy's family, and my other relatives from mummy's side help my auntie take care of me. Both my mummy and daddy also spend time with me, with family members there to help. I'm surrounded by lots of people who care about me and want me to feel safe and loved."

Stockton Parent Carer Forum

- 4.80. Views were sought from the Stockton Parent Carer Forum regarding their experience of the Early Help offer, how they think partnerships are working, and if they feel involved in the planning of Early Help and services are co-produced. The Forum is a volunteer service representing parents and carers of children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) within Stockton-on-Tees, being the recognised voice of the 2,000 families who are members of the Forum. While there were only 19 responses, the Forum felt it reflected the opinion they have heard from parents and carers over the last four years.
- 4.81. The response received from the members of Stockton Parent Carer Forum was negative with the majority stating that the Early Help offer is poor and they are not involved in the planning of Early Help. Experiences were reported of professionals not understanding the needs of SEND, not offering adequate support, and not offering support early enough. The report also commented that the service often looks via a safeguarding lens rather than a specific SEND 'meeting needs' lens.
- 4.82. Areas of improvement highlighted include better and purposeful communication, not only between families and the service but also between services, building relationships, accountability, trust, and transparency. Other areas for improvement highlighted were training for professionals on SEND, and more practical support such as, but not limited to, help to understand diagnosis, and following through with actions that will have a positive impact on families.
- 4.83. However, it is acknowledged that Stockton Parent Carer Forum are now involved with the Families First Partnership reforms, attending the meetings and board where these are being discussed and shaping their implementation. They therefore recognise that the partnership is wanting to do better for families and while SEND is a smaller part of the system it is important and needs its own understanding.

Learning from other Local Authorities

- 4.84. Officers fed back to the Committee key learning from visits to two Ofsted Outstanding rated Local Authorities, Lincolnshire County Council and Sunderland City Council, who's Early Help delivery models prioritise shared responsibility, partnership working, and system-wide cultural change.
- 4.85. Lincolnshire is a Pathfinder Authority, with Early Help firmly rooted in collaboration and a shared responsibility across all professionals working with children and families. They define Early Help as any action that supports children, young people, and families to achieve their potential by preventing difficulties from arising and preventing issues from escalating further. The key features of their approach are:
 - **Shared Responsibility:** professionals in all sectors are expected to contribute to Early Help
 - **Front-Loaded Support:** external agencies are empowered to act as lead practitioners
 - **Practical Tools:** Local Authority provides assessments, "Team Around the Family" frameworks, and guidance to enable partners to deliver Early Help confidently
 - **Capacity Building:** Significant investment in training external partners
- 4.86. As a result, 80% of Early Help delivery in Lincolnshire is provided by external partners. This is a cultural shift achieved over a decade, reducing reliance on local authority services, achieved through sustained work with partners and consistent reinforcement that Early Help is everyone's responsibility.

4.87. Sunderland's Together for Children model also prioritises early identification and partnership-led support, emphasising supporting families at the earliest opportunity. The key features are:

- Partnership Conversations: external professions (e.g. schools, health visitors, voluntary sector) are supported to take an active role in delivering Early Help
- Holistic approach: collaborative discussions to identify families needs and how to meet these
- Promoting self-help: online tools empower families to seek support independently
- Clear Gateways: Universal professionals (e.g. school) coordinates support as lead professionals, families do not self-refer

4.88. Sunderland has recently piloted a duty system within its locality teams, with dedicated teams operating reduced caseloads. The model has structured timelines of:

- Day 5: Assessment, direct work, home visit, and family network meeting
- Day 10: Decision on appropriate support level

4.89. In the first quarter the pilot has resulted in 62% of cases signposted to universal support and "no further action", 20% remaining in Early Help services, and overall, two-thirds of cases exiting the Early Help system, reducing demand on the local authority and strengthening partnership ownership.

4.90. The visits revealed several common themes across both local authorities including that Early Help can be a shared responsibility with external partners, shifting the burden away from the local authority alone, and embedding expectations across partners. They also invested in training, tools, and clear framework to equip partners to confidently lead on cases. They have strong gateways and thresholds, so families are supported through universal community-based services first. These are long-term cultural changes; however, they have shown that increasing external delivery has reduced pressure on statutory and targeted services, allowing the local authority to focus on the most complex cases, and ultimately improves outcomes for families.

5.0 Conclusion

5.1. The Families First Partnership reforms are designed to promote partnership working to ensure that families receive the support and protection they need, as well as focusing on the importance of family networks in decision-making to achieve the best outcomes for families and children. It is recognised that partners are delivering a wide range of services to families, building up relationship with them and, therefore, given the right support and resources, are best placed to support a family rather than referring to Social Care for an assessment. While statutory interventions and protections will remain with and be provided by the Council, increased partnership working, with Early Help being 'everyone's business', will be an improved offer for families ensuring they are receiving the right support earlier. It will also relieve some pressure from social care, so that they are more able to concentrate on providing targeted and complex support.

5.2. The Committee's review has highlighted the strengths and challenges of current partnership working in Early Help across Stockton-on-Tees. The Borough demonstrates a strong commitment to early intervention through a wide range of services and partnerships with health, police,

education, and VCSE organisations. These services are working collaboratively to support families, helping to prevent escalation into statutory services and improving outcomes for children and young people.

- 5.3. Evidence gathered throughout the review from partners and service users shows that families value the support they receive. Multi-agency approaches like PiTstop and Team Around the School have proven effective in reducing demand on statutory services and promoting early intervention. Feedback also reinforces the importance of trusted relationships, co-location of services, and flexible support models that adapt to the changing needs of families.
- 5.4. However, the review also identified areas for improvement, particularly around inconsistencies in communication, data sharing, service duplication, and the clarity of the Early Help offer for families and professionals. The high rate of No Further Action following statutory assessments suggests that referrals may not always be appropriately triaged, and that professionals need more confidence and clarity in navigating the Early Help system.
- 5.5. The need for more inclusive and better coordinated support, particularly for those with SEND, has also been highlighted. There has been calls for improved signposting, more targeted programmes, and greater involvement in service planning.
- 5.6. The Committee recognises the importance of learning from other Local Authorities where cultural change and shared responsibility have significantly enhanced Early Help delivery. These models demonstrate that empowering external partners to lead on Early Help, supported by clear frameworks and training, can reduce pressure on statutory services and improve outcomes for families. Stockton-on-Tees has already begun this journey and continued investment in partnership development will be key to sustaining progress.
- 5.7. The review has, therefore, provided a comprehensive understanding of the Early Help landscape in Stockton-on-Tees. The review's recommendations focus on strengthening governance structures, improving communication and accessibility of services, and investing in joint training and shared system. By embedding the principle of shared responsibility across partners and continuing to co-produce strategies with families and partners, including the VCSE sector, Stockton-on-Tees can build a more integrated and responsive Early Help system that ensures children and families receive the right support at the right time. This will contribute to the broader goals of fostering resilient communities and giving children the best possible start in life.

Recommendations

- 5.4 The Committee recommends that:

1. A culture of shared responsibilities across the partnership is promoted to ensure that the principle of Early Help being “everyone’s business” is embedded within schools, health, and the voluntary sector.
2. The re-design of the front door to Children’s Services embeds an Early Help focus, enabling timely outcomes and ensuring families are able to access the right support at the right time.
3. Advice and training are developed for schools and other partners referring to the Children’s Hub, to ensure families who could be better supported by Early Help services are forwarded to the most appropriate service for help and reduce demand on the front door.

4. A programme of training, tools and professional guidance is developed to support non-local authority practitioners in holding lead professional roles with children and families.
5. The design of a multi-agency data impact assessment, combined privacy notice, and data sharing systems to ensure effective and timely communication between the Council and its partners is supported.
6. A robust data collection system is established to measure partnership delivery of Early Help services.
7. The updated online offer is relaunched, promoting it to partners, schools, and residents. Self-navigation tools should also be introduced to empower families to access early, universal support without needing formal referral.
8. Partners are encouraged to utilise Family Hubs, basing and/or providing services in the venues where appropriate to ensure that these are accessible to children and families.
9. Further support is provided for partners to understand the needs of SEND families to enable them to offer appropriate Early Help service to these families.

Appendix 1

What a Family Hub offers in Stockton

GWGH
Growing Well Growing Healthy

Daisy Chain

PARENT LED CBT PROGRAMME

changingfutures
Nurturing relationships • Strengthening communities

Foster with NORTH EAST

arch
Sexual Violence Services in Teesside

ROC GROUP
EXTENDING HELP HOURS 0800-20:00 7 days a week

STOCKTON PARENT CARER FORUM

Impact on Teesside

CAMHS
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

Stockton & District Advice & Information Service

harbour
working for better communities

afraid
are you a woman afraid of someone you live with or someone you know?

Glossary of Terms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CAMHS	Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CHUB	Children's Hub
DfE	Department for Education
EPEC	Empowering Parents Empowering Communities
FFPP	Families First Partnership Programme
FGC	Family Group Conferencing
FGDM	Family Group Decision Making
FHLP	Family Help Lead Practitioner
FSM	Free School Meals
HDFT	Harrogate and District Foundation Trust
IFD	Integrated Front Door
MFH	Missing From Home
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
NEET	Not in Education Employment or Training
NFA	No Further Action
PACE	Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
SPOC	Single Point of Contact
TAF	Team Around the Family
TASS	Team Around the School Service
VCSE	Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise