

# Early Help for Sandwell Children and Families

## Strategy 2022-2024

Working together to provide



the **right support**



in the **right place**



at the **right time**



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# Foreword

Early Help is the support we all offer to potentially vulnerable children, young people, and their families. The purpose of Early Help is to put in the right support, at the right time, so that the additional vulnerabilities and needs that families may be facing are addressed and are less likely to escalate to a point where intrusive statutory interventions are required.

I am confident that this revised strategy will bring more clarity to the way we talk about Early Help, as we have sought to simplify terminology. Equally we wanted a smoother process and enhanced collective understanding about how we can deliver the right support at the right time. We believe the new Strategy does this and our great local partnerships will continue to connect people together across all sectors, with a focus on building relationships between professionals, volunteers and their local communities. Localised resilience and intelligent timely responses are the key to supporting children and their families across Sandwell at their earliest point of need. Our refreshed Early Help Strategy has been endorsed by all key stakeholders and signed off through their governance structures.

We have seen people and communities pull together during the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years and the importance of knowing that someone is on hand to help with even the smallest problem or even just to lend an ear. We understand that sound, clear information and easy access to support is vital when life is not going so well. There are now more families than ever that need Early Help and we trust that this new Strategy will help us to meet needs more effectively.

I would like to thank the countless dedicated Sandwell agencies, organisations, families and individuals, as well as our Early Help Partnership Steering Group, who have all contributed to this revised Early Help strategy; this strategy belongs to us all.

Together we are stronger.

## Jon Grant

Chair, Sandwell Early Help Partnership

Voluntary and Community Sector Strategic Lead and CEO of Krunch



# Our Ambition for Children and Families in Sandwell

All children and young people growing up in Sandwell deserve the best possible start in life. Wherever possible, and with our support where necessary, we want children to remain with their families and to have a wide range of opportunities to grow and develop into healthy, happy individuals and active citizens within our community.

All children and young people should be supported to be **healthy**, to understand how to maintain their emotional, mental and physical wellbeing through making good life choices. Children and young people should benefit from positive role models and learn the skills they need to thrive and become healthy adults.



All children and young people should be supported to **stay safe**. They should be protected from harm and neglect and helped to grow up able to look after themselves. Those around them, including family members, organisations, institutions and members of the public should all play their part in safeguarding our children and young people.

All children and young people should be given chances to **enjoy and achieve**. This means getting the most out of life, with opportunities for leisure time, fun and friendship. They should be supported to develop the life skills that they need for adulthood.



All children and young people should have opportunities to make a **positive contribution** within their local communities and society. This means giving them opportunities to engage with others in their local community and to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens as they grow up.



All children and young people should be supported to achieve **economic well-being** by gaining the skills and confidence they need for the future. They should benefit from help to inspire them and to develop positive ambitions and aspirations for their future. With appropriate support young people can be helped to overcome disadvantages that they face and can be motivated to strive to achieve their full potential in life.

**Families** play a central role in nurturing children and young people to become self-confident, happy and capable individuals as they grow up and in later life. But however loving and committed parents and carers are, this important role can be difficult, complicated and very challenging at times. Parents and carers should have access to the information and support that they need to develop the parenting skills and tools that



are vital to meet their children's needs, and which help them to feel valued. It is also important that we play our part in identifying when a family may be struggling and need help - that we understand the root causes of their problem, and that we build on their strengths, intervene at the earliest possible point and empower them to meet their own needs within their own communities.

# What do we mean by Early Help?

Early Help means that if we know of children and families with unmet needs who need additional help, we are all responsible for intervening and making sure that they get help and support to meet these needs. Identifying unmet needs and intervening with the **right support, in the right place, at the right time**, at the earliest possible opportunity when problems emerge is **not optional and is non-negotiable**. It is a guiding principle and a responsibility for all of us who work with children.





Everyone is involved in the delivery of Early Help, including, communities, voluntary groups, police, GPs, schools, health and targeted support services. Without this shared, cross-sector responsibility – whether public, private, voluntary or community – we run the risk of missing opportunities to get help to children and families quickly.

Early Help means providing support as soon as the problem emerges, from the early years in a child's life and right through to their teenage years (or up to 25 years in the case of young people with Special Education Needs and Disabilities). Early Help is effective in preventing issues and problems becoming acute, chronic and costly to the child, young person, the family and the wider community. Reducing the need for intrusive and more expensive statutory services is also key to help sustainably manage resources across all partner agencies. Early Help requires a whole-family approach, involving both children's and adult services.

Early Help is therefore a collaborative approach, **not** a service.

# Why do we need Early Help?

## National context

For a long time now, Early Help has been recognised as an essential element in helping and supporting children and families, to prevent needs and risks increasing. Since 2013 it has been clearly referenced within **Working Together 2018** and in 2015 Ofsted published a **thematic inspection** of how local partnerships were delivering Early Help. It estimated that two million children in the UK are currently living in difficult family circumstances. These include children whose family lives are affected by parental drug and alcohol dependency, domestic abuse and poor mental health.



There is an increasing range of research to show that intervening early benefits families, more recent examples are below:

- [Early Intervention Foundation: Planning early childhood services in 2020: Learning from practice and research on children's centres and family hubs](#)
- [NSPCC: Early help \(or early intervention\)](#)
- [Early Intervention Foundation: How do we know it works?](#)
- [House of Commons Library: Early Intervention: Policy and provision](#)

Therefore, making sure that there is a well-coordinated Early Help system across local areas is key to identifying needs at the earliest possible point. This means investing and developing a systemic approach to how all partners work with families and how the wider children's workforce responds to identified needs, vulnerabilities and risks.

## Local context

With 327,378 residents, Sandwell has the third largest population in the West Midlands Combined Authority area and is the 34th biggest local authority in Great Britain. It is predicted to grow faster than the West Midlands and the national average.



We have a young and diverse population with more than 40% residents under the age of 30, compared to around 30% across the UK. Almost 40% of residents are from an ethnic minority, making us more diverse than the regional and UK average of 18.8% and 14% respectively.

However, Sandwell performs below the national average on many indicators relating to children and young people.

A third of our children are not ready for school and, although children make progress when they are in school, this early underachievement has an impact throughout their school lives where attainment at both KS2 and KS4 are below the national average.



Childhood obesity and infant mortality are also significant issues within the Borough. For children and young people in Sandwell with special educational needs and disabilities, we need to ensure that the right support is in place at the earliest opportunity. This will ensure that all children achieve their aspirations for a healthy, ordinary life through meaningful employment and fulfilling relationships within the community of their choosing.

We want every child to have a successful life but the impact of poverty on children is significant in terms of their life chances. Sandwell's average deprivation score worsened slightly in 2019 and it moved from 13th to 12th place in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).

These specific needs show why Early Help is so critical for our children and families.

The following table presents data about our Social Care Children's Trust services which shows that there is more that our Early Help Strategy can do to identify and prevent children and families' needs from escalating and requiring a statutory service.

	The Issue	The Scale of the Issue
<p><b>Front Door</b></p> <p><b>Data Source:</b> Liquidlogic Children's Social Care System &amp; Early Help System</p>	<p><b>Many children are inappropriately referred into the 'front door' but do not progress to Social Care</b></p>	<p><b>In 2021, 80.94% of all 'front door' contacts resulted in no further action</b></p> <p><b>The contact to referral conversion rate was only 16.27%</b></p> <p><b>Of the total Social Care referrals in 2021, 61% resulted in no further action or they stepped down for Early Help support</b></p>
<p><b>Social Care</b></p> <p><b>Data Source:</b> Liquidlogic Children's Social Care System</p>	<p><b>We have high numbers of children in care in Sandwell – above national and statistical neighbour averages</b></p>	<p><b>At 31st March 2021, there were 885 children looked after in Sandwell. This amounts to 107.0 children looked after per 10,000 children, while statistical neighbours averaged 94.9</b></p>





	The Issue	The Scale of the Issue
<p><b>Social Care</b></p> <p><b>Data Source:</b> Liquidlogic Children's Social Care System</p>	<p>The rate of children with child protection plans is now in line with comparator authorities; the number with child in need plans is slightly higher comparatively</p>	<p>At 31st March 2021, there were 478 children who were the subject of a child protection plan in Sandwell. This amounts to 57.6 per 10,000 children, our statistical neighbours average was 57.3</p> <p>48.5% of children on a plan were receiving support as a result of neglect</p> <p>At 31st March 21, there were 3411 children who were identified as children in need. This amounts to 411 per 10,000 children; our statistical neighbours average was 382. 78.8% of this group of children had neglect as the key presenting issue, hence the need to work collaboratively to identify need as early as possible</p>
<p><b>Social Care</b></p> <p><b>Data Source:</b> Liquidlogic Children's Social Care System</p>	<p>Many children in Social Care are exposed to domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse in their families, and to mental health issues in their families</p>	<p>Number of episodes with assessment factor information 2020/2021:</p> <p>68.42% - domestic violence as an assessment factor 49.44% - drug/alcohol misuse as an assessment factor 55.88% - mental health as an assessment factor</p>
<p><b>Early Help</b></p> <p><b>Data Source:</b> Liquidlogic Early Help System</p>	<p>Lead Professional take up in the Partnership is low</p>	<p>In January 2022 there were 1024 children open to Early Help on a Team Around the Family Plan (TAF). The Strengthening Families Services (SCT) act as Lead Professional for 52.64% of all open families. Children's Centres provide Lead Professionals for 27.05% of cases, Schools 4.98%, and 0% Health and Voluntary Organisations. School remain the highest referrers into Early Help with 40.11% of all families referred into Early Help in 2021</p> <p>School remain the highest referrers into Early Help with 40.11% of all families referred into Early Help in 2021.</p>



	The Issue	The Scale of the Issue
<p><b>Early Help</b></p> <p>Data Source: Liquidlogic Early Help System</p>	<p>Many families closed to Early Help are re-referred within a 12-month period</p>	<p>In 2021, 22.83% of all families closed to Early Help were re-opened within 12 months.</p> <p>In 2021, 12.85% of all families stepped down to Early Help from Social Care were re-referred to Social Care</p>
<p><b>Early Help</b></p> <p>Data Source: Liquidlogic Early Help System</p>	<p>Many families receiving Early Help are exposed to financial exclusion and mental health issues</p>	<p>Number of families in Early Help with issues identified 2021: (taken from Supporting Families initial screening)</p> <p>74.98% of all families are reliant on benefits or are at risk of financial exclusion 69.15% of all families have mental health issues identified</p>
<p><b>Youth Offending</b></p> <p>Data Source: ChildView Youth Offending system</p>	<p>Many children in Sandwell enter the Youth Justice system</p>	<p>In 2020 there were 77 first time entrants into the Youth Justice System in Sandwell. This amounts to 200 per 100,000</p> <p>Sandwell are the second highest of our statistical neighbours. The lowest being Dudley with 149 and the highest being Birmingham with 267 per 100,000</p>
<p><b>Youth Offending</b></p> <p>Data Source: ChildView Youth Offending system</p>	<p>There are a higher number of looked after children in the Youth Justice system in comparison to children open on other plans</p>	<p>73 children open to Youth Offending service in December 2021:</p> <p>15.07% - Looked after children 4.11% - Child protection plans 1.37% - Early Help 0% - Child in need plans</p>



# What Early Help means for families

One Sandwell mum has shared her experience of working with a Children's Centre family support worker and the impact it has had on her family

Mum of four Amy lives in with her husband Steve and her children Abigail, Charlotte, Jack and Ava in Wednesbury. In 2007, an accident at work left Amy's husband Steve severely injured and unable to walk. During this time, Amy worked night shifts whilst also taking on childcare duties during the day: "I would often work, take the children to school, and fall asleep in the car when it came to pick them up. Then at night I would be back at work. The kids were sometimes late for school, sometimes unkempt, but that was just life."

In the following years, the financial strain took its toll on the family as their reduced income had to meet the growing needs of a family of six. Amy says "Even though we both worked, there were years where we slept just on mattresses on the floor. The kids all slept in one bedroom with blankets on the windows because we couldn't afford the heating. The money was just never enough to make ends meet."

As their financial situation began to steadily improve, Amy suffered a huge knockback when she lost her supermarket manager's job after 13 years. This had a devastating impact on her mental health, bringing back the negative emotions, fears and anxieties of the previous years. The family were under huge financial strain and Amy's mental and physical health deteriorated and she had a flare up of her Fibromyalgia.

It was at this point that Amy was referred to Children's Centre family support practitioner, who has improved family relationships by helping the family communicate with one another more effectively, stabilised their tenancy by clearing the garden, provided help with gas and electricity bills and enabled them to access to food banks

"She's been a massive support for my kids, and they're really confident with her. She's helped me with CBT and talking therapy, and now I'm starting DBT. I didn't tell Steve about what I was experiencing at work, so he didn't understand why I was angry all the time. She's broken down that barrier, and I've become stronger."

"It sounds silly, but it's the little things like that which makes life so much easier. Just having that skip [to clear the garden] has made a huge difference. There are families that don't know where to start, and things like that have a massive impact."

Now, with Jack, Charlotte and Ava all seeing improvements in their schoolwork, the future is looking brighter. "Now, we no longer need to have the meetings with the school - the children are doing fine, they're above achieving, and Jack is set to get As and Bs for his GCSEs."

Of the continued support they have received, Amy says "Without our family support worker we'd be in a much worse situation than we are now. I wouldn't have had the communication with my husband and children the way I do now, and I'd still be living on a knife's edge. Our support worker has broken that out of me, and she's helping me to become a better person."



Here are some quotes from children, young people and families explaining the impact that Early Help has had on their families. The quotes are taken from feedback to a Children's Centre, Sandwell Children's Trust Targeted Family Support Service and Sandwell Parents of Disabled Children.

Wanna thank you for everything you have done for me and kids took a lot of stress off, kids are safe and loving their new beds and my washer not spilling water at us anymore lol the cooker is great I dunno what I would have done without your help.

D's behaviour has 100% improved he is now like a different boy; his behaviour is a lot better and he is now working as an apprentice scaffolder.

The service was very helpful and supporting. N reassured me that the help is there if our circumstances will change and what I need to do to keep myself and children safe. She pointed out on helpful services such as Sandwell Advocacy and Beam Sandwell for children in order to support their wellbeing and BCWA for support for myself if needed. N made a referral to the Murray hull for the boys to have support in school when they go back in September. She praised me on my good work and advised on potential job's search and future development.



All I can say is I'm really glad that even though Mom shut the door in your face that day, you still kept coming back. I'm happy now to be back at school and feel better knowing that we are all getting on better at home. Mom is no longer always shouting at me and I occasionally do what I'm told!

I think you did a good job with mum and dad. I liked that you brought us toys and liked the money jar session. My brother's behaviour has improved at home. You helped my mom to be calm

March 2020 was every parent's worst nightmare, let alone the added pressure of my child having additional needs. All vital services like schools, activity groups, routine was just taken away! Not only did it affect O, but it had a really bad impact on all the family. We felt trapped, but our caring role got more intense, sleepless nights due to O's pacing did not stop, behaviour and aggression became more intense, so much that myself and his sister were at breaking point. We had to find new routine, new boundaries and keep busy which was made so much easier by Sandwell Parents for Disabled Children. The packs that we received through lockdown were amazing, well thought out and really were prepared with love!





# The Early Help model

Early Help is 'everybody's business' and is delivered by all organisations and sectors – health, education, social care, police, housing, adult services and the voluntary sector – collaborating under the statutory guidance Working Together 2018. It is important that this 'system' of assessment and interventions works together effectively so children and families can access the appropriate help to meet their needs. Families should be able to access different types of support quickly and easily, preventing more intrusive interventions from statutory services.

Most children's needs are met by their family and support networks or universal services available to everyone. All children have a right to access services that ensure their needs are met. Where a child or family has an additional need, their needs can be assessed, and an offer of additional support may be provided by a single organisation through a single agency plan.



For children and families whose needs and circumstances make them more vulnerable and who have more than one unmet need which requires input from more than one organisation or agency, a coordinated multi-disciplinary approach should be adopted. This means an Early Help assessment should be undertaken, with an identified Lead Professional who works closely with the child and family and other professionals to implement a Team

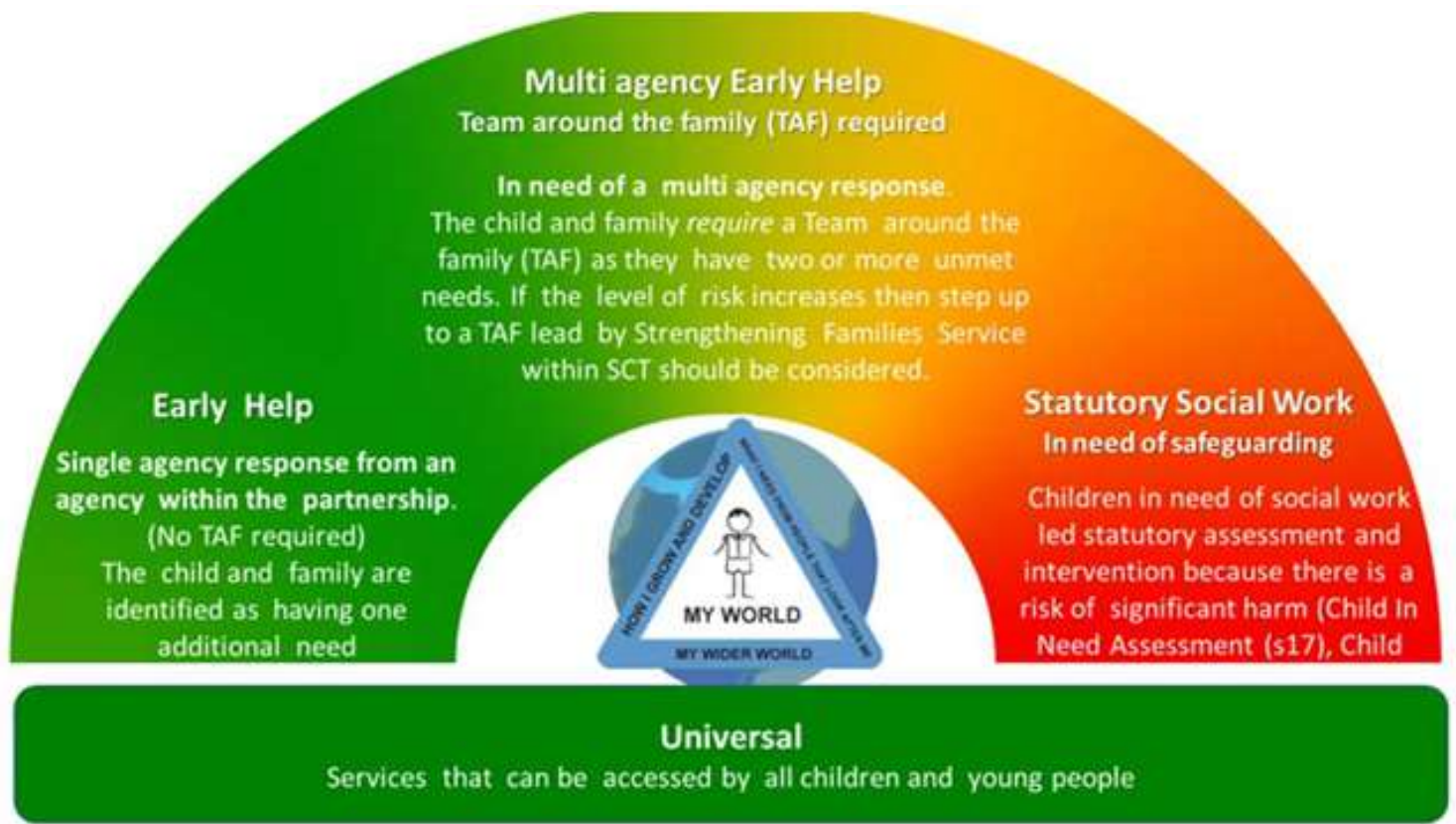
Around the Family (TAF) Plan. The purpose of the TAF plan is to ensure the family receives all the support they require. The Lead Professional of the TAF plan should be the practitioner who has the closest relationship with the child or family.

Where it is judged that a family's needs are multiple and complex but not yet at a point of requiring statutory Social Care services, the Lead Professional role may be taken by Sandwell Children's Trust's Strengthening Families Service.

It is important that we understand where Early Help support fits within Sandwell Safeguarding Children Partnership's continuum of support. The following model shows this.







The continuum of support model is also important as it sets out a shared language which we all need to adopt to help us communicate clearly about Early Help across Sandwell and ensure that children and families are receiving the **right help at the right time in the right way**:

- **Universal Services:** All children have access to universal services to help them to be healthy, safe, enjoy life and achieve their potential, e.g. nurseries, schools, GPs, health services etc. They are available to all children and families, whether or not they require any additional support.
- **Early Help:** Many children will have identified additional needs that can be met by one partner agency. For example, a child may have additional educational needs, or specific health needs, which would lead to these needs being addressed through established processes and support services. In these circumstances, an Early Help assessment would not be necessary, the relevant agency would record and monitor the impact of intervention through using their internal recording system/processes
- **Multi Agency Early Help:** Children at this level are clearly vulnerable and have two or more unmet needs that need to be addressed by more than one agency. In these



circumstances' practitioners will need to obtain consent from families to commence an Early Help Assessment (EHA) and gather and share information with other relevant agencies. The responsibilities of the Lead Professional should be undertaken by the practitioner who has identified the originating concerns for the child and family until the point where a team around the family (TAF) meeting is convened. Any decision to change the Lead Professional role should be based on who has the most significant relationship with the child and family.

Some children, young people and families will have identified unmet needs that are more complex and without co-ordinated Early Help across the partnership these needs would increase and more intrusive statutory interventions may be required. A number of different partners are likely to be involved, who will support and enable them to address the difficulties they are experiencing in order to prevent them escalating.



- **Statutory Social Work** - this level of support identifies the point at which Sandwell Children's Trust Children's Social Care will become involved with children and families.

It is important to note, that families can move up and down the continuum of support and when this happens a smooth transition between the support offered is key to ensure children and families receive the **right support, in the right place at the right time.**

We have agreed a shared language for describing our approach to Early Help, however we recognise that different agencies describe levels of support and how services are organised in a range of ways. We have set some of these out in the following diagram:



# The 'tiers' of intervention – what do they mean?



## Who delivers Early Help?

Early Help is delivered by all agencies in Sandwell, working as single agencies or collaborating with each other. Partnership is a strength in Sandwell and this strategy will build on the effective work with families and the effective interagency relationships that already exist.

Locality working is at the heart of partnership working in Sandwell and is about improving the quality of life within the community and the way in which services are provided within the community. It is critical that we create resilience within local communities for children, young people and families. Many of the services available in Sandwell are locality based, with some services offered borough wide. Services such as Sandwell Childrens Trust's Strengthening Families Service, Adult Services and neighbourhood teams are co-located, which enables agencies to effectively work together to deliver the **right support, in the right place at the right time.**

Sandwell is committed to strengthen this collaborative approach further through the creation of a network of family hubs which will act as a 'front door' and public-facing access points for families requiring Early Help, providing access into all the services





required to meet their needs. Sandwell Children's Trust have already moved to a 'locality working model which will complement this vision.

# What have we achieved already?

These are some of the key Early Help developments in Sandwell over the course of the first Early Help Strategy:

- The Sandwell Early Help Partnership was established in 2017 as a cross-sector network of local organisations committed to working together to deliver Early Help to Sandwell families. It takes an asset-based approach, building on existing provision, aiming to support, enable and facilitate its members in their joint working. There is a tiered membership structure to which members sign up. Since 2017, Early Help Partnership activities have engaged hundreds of local agencies and have included:
  - Running town networking events to bring organisations together around local issues and brokering shared approaches to how these can be tackled
  - Facilitating borough-wide themed events such as 'Food and Finance', 'Partnerships and Possibilities' and 'Supporting our most Vulnerable Children' which share insight and best practice and strengthen relationships
  - Establishing the [www.SandwellFamilyLife.info](http://www.SandwellFamilyLife.info) website, listing over 400 local universal Early Help activities for children and families, and marketing the site at public events
  - Working closely with schools, promoting local support to families
  - Sharing regular information with Partnership members through briefings, bulletins and spotlights on local services
  - Supporting local work helping families facing difficult challenges, to ensure that families and professionals understand the range of local universal Early Help options available to them



- The Early Help Partnership has been overseen by the Early Help Partnership Steering Group, which is supported by SCVO and their Early Help Co-ordinator and funded by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and Sandwell Children's Trust.
- In summer 2021, the Sandwell Safeguarding Children Partnership (SCSP) adopted Early Help as a strategic priority. A workshop involving over 50 participants from health, education, Social Care, police and voluntary organisations was held in September 2021 to refresh the next iteration of the Early Help Strategy.
- There is an embedded Early Help training programme covering three key areas: The Early Help Module, Lead Professional and Integrated Working. This has enabled the training of over 1,110 practitioners across the partnership. We now need to see this translate into practice with an increase of TAFs and Lead Professional roles being undertaken by a variety of partners.
- Neglect has also been identified as an area of priority for the SCSP and a subgroup has been established with a mandate to take ownership of and be accountable for the delivery of this priority.
- A portal for families with information relating to universal services already exists ([www.sandwellfamilylife.info](http://www.sandwellfamilylife.info)) and now a targeted Early Help Portal for practitioners is in its final stages of development. This is being developed by SCVO and will provide information for professionals on services that provide Early Help.
- Sandwell MBC has provided £1.1m Covid Emergency Funding to support voluntary organisations to meet the demand for emotional wellbeing services for children. This programme is being administered by SCVO and is funding additional capacity in the areas of counselling, mentoring and sports-related activities. The aim of the programme is to meet the increasing demand for emotional wellbeing and mental health support and prevent needs from escalating into more specialist mental health services.





# Putting our strategy into practice 2022-2024: Our key principles and priorities

This strategy highlights how Early Help in Sandwell spans across levels 2 and 3 of our Safeguarding Partnership's continuum of support, and in line with the principles we've signed up to, children and families are at the centre of our Strategy. This means all partners need to work closely with a focus on making the support journey the best it can be.

At a workshop attended by over 50 practitioners and managers drawn from health, education, Social Care, police and the voluntary sector in September 2021, we reviewed our approach to Early Help and identified the issues our refreshed strategy needed to address. The feedback and discussion at the workshop informed the development of a set of Early Help principles, set out below, which underpin our new strategy 2022 - 2024.

We will develop our Early Help work based on the following underpinning principles:



# Our Early Help principles

- Children, young people and families will receive the **right support, in the right place, at the right time** – providing help when they first need it will achieve the greatest impact.
- In Sandwell, Early Help is 'everyone's business' (professionals, businesses, volunteers, citizens) and is delivered through working together.
- Early Help will be delivered through a family and community approach, with the aim of developing a stronger support network around the family.
- Support for children and families will be shaped by their voices and lived experiences.
- Partners will work in a strengths-based and solution-focussed way, providing Early Help in collaboration with families, not 'doing to them'.
- Early Help services will be accessible and will ensure families do not feel labelled or stigmatised
- Partners will nurture and strengthen collaboration and partnership to create a clear and effective Early Help approach that works for children and families, ensuring that they do not fall between the gaps in services.
- Partners will work from a position of mutual respect and trust across the partnership, valuing the contribution made by each agency.
- Partners will continue to develop strong universal provision to identify and respond to needs as early as possible.
- Partners will promote community resilience so that families receive support from their communities.
- Partners will promote effective and timely communication between agencies and professionals.
- Partners will undertake to record, and evidence all multi-agency Early Help undertaken across the partnership.

The workshop also informed the development of four overarching strategic priorities:



## Priority 1: Foster a strong culture of collaboration and ownership of Early Help across the partnership

We will ensure that Early Help is a key priority across Sandwell agencies and that all partners sign up to our Early Help strategy approach. We will strengthen the governance around Early Help through this strategy and through the development of a clear action plan which is regularly monitored and reviewed. We will ensure that we understand the impact of our strategy and have a clear measurement framework in place. We will share our strategy with parents and carers through a family-friendly version.

## Priority 2: Improve identification and response to children in need of additional support across the partnership

We will review the 'continuum of support' in partnership with the Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership to ensure that we are effectively communicating when and how partners need to intervene to improve children's outcomes. We will continue to focus on developing and embedding a common language around Early Help. We will review our tools and processes (such as the Early Help Assessment and MARF) to ensure they are fit for purpose and we will update our training, information and guidance resources for professionals and ensure that training and awareness translates into more TAFs and lead professionals from a variety of partners and improved recording on the Early Help Module. We will actively support the wider Partnership data maturity journey and share information with each other in the best interests of the child and family within appropriate data protection guidelines and data sharing agreements.

## Priority 3: Increase universal and community capacity to support effective Early Help delivery

In line with our principle of delivering Early Help through a family and community approach and strengthening support networks around families, we will continue to promote universal and Early Help services to families and create networking opportunities for professionals to develop their knowledge of local services and strengthen practice. We will promote volunteering and mentoring schemes to enhance community capacity.

## Priority 4: Develop the workforce across the partnership

We will improve the consistency of response to parents through shared practice principles and use of a shared practice model. We will update and clearly communicate our training offer and will strengthen practice and understanding of impact by developing a partnership wide quality assurance framework.

An action plan to implement the strategic priorities has been developed by a multi-agency Task and Finish Group at is set out at Appendix 1. The action plan will change and evolve over time as priorities and actions are further defined.



# Governance and oversight

Whilst it's the commitment, knowledge, passion and expertise of our many Early Help providers that makes the difference for families, it's also partnership working that makes them, collectively, even more effective. We recognise that building strong partnerships takes time, that relationships are not always easy and that the world around us is constantly changing, so our Early Help Partnership needs support to really achieve its potential.

That support comes in the form of the Early Help Partnership Steering Group. This reports formally to the Children and Families Strategic Partnership and the Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership. It includes representation from providers across different sectors – including the voluntary sector, schools, health, police, Sandwell Council and Sandwell Children's Trust.

The Early Help Partnership Steering Group will be accountable for overseeing the effective delivery of The Early Help Strategy and Action Plan. Its terms of reference have recently been refreshed to include all Early Help activity from universal through to targeted, and its key roles are:

- Developing and taking ownership of a Delivery Plan which outlines activities by which the ambitions of the Early Help Strategy can be realised.
- Ensuring there are effective links between universal, targeted and specialist services, and addressing any issues or barriers which undermine productive relationships between agencies.
- Supporting the growth in membership of the Partnership and acting to nurture good relationships between Partnership members.
- To share strategic information, insight and best practice around partnership delivery so as to influence commissioners and strategic leads.
- Working to ensure that children, young people and families' voices and lived experiences are listened to and reflected in strategic and service developments.



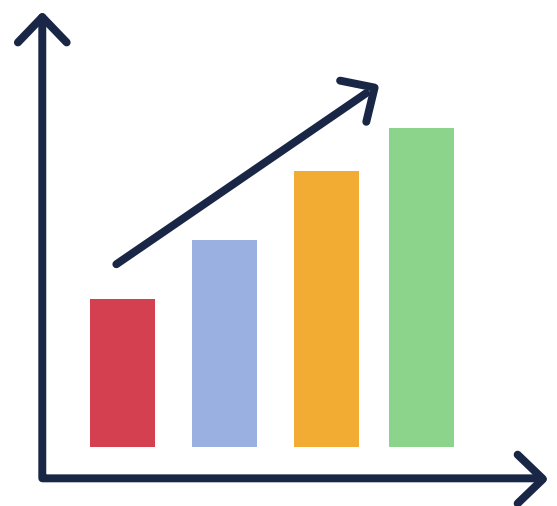
# Understanding the difference we make

A key responsibility of the Early Help Partnership Steering Group will be to develop an Early Help performance framework which enables the Partnership to understand whether the Strategy is having an impact and improving outcomes for children and families. This will include a dashboard which is likely to include the following measures:

- The number of Early Help Assessments submitted, broken down by organisations
- The number of active Lead Professionals within provider organisations
- The number of quality and evidence-based MARF referrals received into Sandwell's MASH
- The number of MARF referrals received which result 'in no further action' or where there is no evidence of Early Help'
- The number of support cases that have been passed into the Strengthening Families Team from Social Care that do not then return to Social Care
- Families that are supported to access Early Help support by the Strengthening Families Team and do not then return for multi agency early help
- Web usage and user statistics for Early Help Portal and Sandwell Family Life Portal
- Numbers of networking events and number of participants

Other, more qualitative data will form part of the framework, for example:

- The quality of Early Help Assessments received, and evidence base on which these are made.
- Perceptions and insight on partnership connectivity and improved relationships
- Insight from children, young people and families on the issues they are facing and their experience of services





# Links to other strategies and plans



## **Sandwell Neglect Strategy 2022 – 2024**

The vision of Sandwell's multi-agency Neglect Strategy is to build understanding of neglect, ensure that all agencies are able to recognise neglect at the earliest opportunity and provide timely appropriate response, with the intention to evaluate our practice, building on good existing practices and identifying gaps in service delivery and provision.

Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews identified the need for a tool to assist professionals in the identification and grading of neglect to ensure that

[Click here to download the Neglect Strategy.](#)

appropriate referrals were made, and action taken. Professionals needed support to recognise, record and monitor early signs of neglect with a tool to give a common language across all disciplines – this led to the implementation of GCP2 tool that is a consistent neglect assessment tool that practitioners can use to understand the level of care a child is receiving.

Within Sandwell we have a network of organisations such as schools, community groups, police, fire, youth services, health and others who have representatives who have been trained in GCP2, to assist in the early identification of neglect. It is important for organisations to work together to improve support for children young people and families.

## **Supporting Families**

In 2020, the Early Help System Guide self-assessment exercise (which included data maturity) was undertaken through the Early Partnership Steering Group. Documentation for the new Early Help System guide will be shortly available from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the exercise will be once again undertaken through the Early Help Partnership Steering Group and will continue to inform our action plan.



## Reducing Parental Conflict

There is a large body of evidence that shows that parental conflict which is frequent, intense and poorly resolved puts children's mental health and long-term outcomes at risk. Destructive conflict behaviours include aggression, non-verbal conflict or the silent treatment, lack of respect and emotional control, lack of resolution and in their most extreme form domestic abuse. Financial difficulties impact on parents' mental health which can increase parental conflict. This in turn can impact on parenting and children's outcomes. Interventions which focus solely on supporting the parent-child relationship (such as parenting programmes) in the context of parental conflict are unlikely to improve outcomes for children.

As part of a consortium with other **Black Country authorities** training has been offered in Sandwell across the Early Help spectrum at differing levels

- **Basic awareness**
- **Practical Training** – including a toolkit for working with parents
- **Level 3 Relationship Training** run by Tavistock Relationships for four key management posts in Targeted Early Help and Children's Centres



Working with the Early Intervention Foundation the Black Country Authorities will be conducting research over the next 12 months to evaluate the learning, behaviour change and results of the approach. The progress of the research and feedback on practice to date will be channelled through the Early Help Partnership Steering Group.

## Sandwell Joint Carers Strategy

The Draft Joint Carers Strategy 2022-26 sets out the strategic framework for the support of carers. All partners to this Strategy – Adults, Childrens, Health and Voluntary Sector Carers Organisations have a responsibility to work to our Commitment to the people of Sandwell, through 9 Promises, is: to work together to do all we can for better lives for Carers in Sandwell, so that they and their families thrive for longer. The 9 promises were developed in response to the feedback from local carers in Sandwell, who use carers support services, and feedback from carers to Sandwell Healthwatch.



Each promise has a key outcome which will be delivered from date of approval to 31 March 2026. The promises are around improving:

- Information, advice and assessment
- Developing the workforce
- Managing and reducing the risk of crises
- Employment and Financial Wellbeing
- Supporting Young and Parent Carers
- Carers Health and Wellbeing
- Awareness and Diversity
- Living well in the Community
- Building on best practice, innovation and feedback from carers

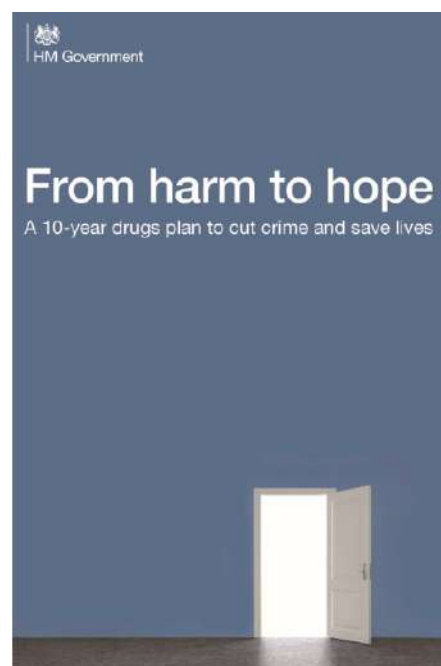
## Substance Misuse

The National Drug Strategy was released December 2021. The Strategy comes with renewed commitment and additional resources for local areas to bolster their work on tackling drug supply and enhancing local treatment support service provision.

The Sandwell Strategic Drug & Alcohol Partnership (SDAP) shall be producing a local Substance Misuse Strategy in 2022 to ensure a systems approach that will prevent and reduce the harms caused by substance misuse (inclusive of alcohol as our most problematic substance in the Borough).

Links between local strategies such as this one and the Early Help Strategy are vital to ensure we can coordinate efforts and add value to on-going work. In particular, work areas that will ensure a whole systems response across the Early Intervention landscape include areas such as:

children of dependent parents, support for those affected by someone's substance misuse, and the substance misuse training offer for partner wide professionals.



[Click here to download the National Drug Strategy.](#)



## Sandwell Community Safety Strategy 2022 - 2026

The Sandwell Community Safety Strategy is currently under development and aims to ensure that **'the communities of Sandwell feel safe, protected and confident in their homes and neighbourhoods'**.

The three key priorities are: Prevent Violence and Exploitation; Reduce Offending, Reoffending and Serious Organised Crime and Prevent and Reduce Crime and Anti-social Behaviour.

Each of these areas has a workplan overseen by the Boards three subgroups. Early Help straddles all these areas and it will be important to align objectives and work collaboratively on issues such as youth offending, child exploitation, violence where victims and offenders are under 25 and County Lines.

### Domestic Abuse

Sandwell is currently developing a Domestic Abuse Strategy following the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The Act contains a wide range of provisions including a new statutory definition of domestic abuse to include coercive control, emotional and financial abuse and controlling behaviour. Children witnessing domestic abuse are also included within this enhanced definition. The Act further outlines the requirement for support services to include a range of services namely: advocacy, prevention, advice, specialist support for both adults and children, counselling and therapy. The Act also places a duty on relevant local authorities, including Sandwell Council, to support survivors of domestic abuse and their children in safe accommodation. The key priorities of the strategy will be:

1. Early intervention and enhanced survivor and family support;
2. Joint working and partnership focus;
3. Safe accommodation.

It will important to establish links between the Early Help Strategy and the Domestic Abuse Strategy and identify areas of joint focus and co-operation. The Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership is also developing a **Sexual Abuse and Assault Strategy** which will have a children and young people's workstream.



## Youth Justice Partnership Board (YJPB)

YJPB to ensure the borough can articulate its diversionary activity to prevent children being involved in crime or ASB, and what efforts are made to divert children into more suitable child focused systems.

## Multi-agency Child Exploitation Strategy 2019 – 2022

This is currently being updated and links with the Early Help Strategy will be established as part of the refresh.

### Working together to provide



the **right support**



in the **right place**



at the **right time**





# Appendix 1: Early Help Strategy Action Plan

## Priority 1: Foster a strong culture of collaboration and ownership of Early Help across the partnership

No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
1.1	Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership (SCSP) and the Children & Families Strategic Partnership (CFSP) to agree the refreshed strategy and action plan, and all partners to sign and agree within their own governance structures	Mar 22	EH leads in partner orgs	Evidence that strategy is on agenda and formally signed off at SCSP, CFSP and partners internal governance structures	Strong, joint ownership and commitment to refreshed EH Strategy and action plan
1.2	Develop a family friendly version of the strategy and plan		EH Task and Finish Group	Family friendly version available on SCSP website, on partner websites and available for practitioners to share with families	Families have a clear understanding about what EH is in Sandwell and how they access support
1.3	Early Help Strategy and action plan to be reviewed and updated annually	Mar 23	SCSP and CFSP	Q1 meetings have EH strategy and action plan on agenda	There is regular scrutiny and oversight of progress and the plan is updated to reflect any changing needs or circumstances



No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
1.4	Develop a performance framework and data dashboard that sets out how impact of Early Help will be measured and understood	April 22	SCSP Data Analysis	Data dashboard available and monitored regularly at EH Partnership Steering Group meetings and reported to SCSP and CFSP quarterly	Data and intelligence are used effectively to monitor how much EH is delivered, how well it is delivered and what impact it is having. There is a shared understanding of effectiveness, needs, demand, commissioning issues and training impact

## Priority 2: Improve identification and response to children in need of additional support across the partnership

No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
2.1	Review of the continuum of need to ensure clarity across the partnership of when is the right time and circumstances to intervene to support children and families	April 22	SCSP	A new continuum of available on SCSP website and within the threshold document  Training on the new continuum of need included in relevant partnership training	A clear continuum of need that is owned, understood and utilised across the partnership
2.2	Clearly communicate our EH offer and approach on the SCSP website and link to other Sandwell websites as appropriate	April 22	Early Help Partnership Steering Group	The offer is clearly displayed on the SCSP website	One website for practitioners and families to refer to understand EH in Sandwell



No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
				Increased understanding across practitioners in Sandwell of the EH offer	
2.3	Review Early Help Assessment and ensure it is fit for purpose	March 2022	SCSP	Barrier such as cultural, capacity, confidence, understanding, lack of alignment with own systems removed  Increase in number of partner agencies undertaking EHA's	EHA form and process that is smooth, efficient and enables all partners to complete an EHA, as appropriate
2.4	Review the MARF to ensure it is fit for purpose and all partners understand when to use it	April 22	SCSP, SCT – MASH HOS	Reduction in the number of MARF's received by MASH with the outcome of NFA	Children and families receive the right level of support without unnecessary contacts to statutory Social Care
2.5	Ensure that there is clarity across the partnership of when a multi-agency Team Around the Family (TAF) is required	May 22	EH Task and finish group	Increase in number of partner agencies undertaking LP role  Monthly data set in place to capture all TAF's held throughout the partnership on EHM	A clear understanding of barrier to taking up LP role and recording on EHM across the partnership and measures taken to address them
2.6	Understand barriers to partners undertaking LP role and recording on Early Help Module. Consider 6-week pilot with key partners where all TAF meetings are recorded to understand issues and barriers.	May 22	EH Task and Finish Group	Increase in TAF meetings being recorded on EHM	Clear understanding of barriers to partners undertaking LP role and recording on



No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
					EHM including the issues and positive of partners recording multi-agency mtg on EHM. This will allow us to roll out to the wider partnership. Exploration of double-recording issues
2.7	SCT and SCSP training offer to be reviewed to ensure it is relevant and effectively communications the new EH offer.	April 22	SCT and L&D Sub group	Increase in training attendance in relation to EH Clarity across the partnership of the EH offer	Clear and coherent training offer available across the partnership
2.8	Review of the SCSP Early Help section on the website that evidences training available to practitioners working in the field	May 22	SCSP	Increase in training attendance in relation to EH	Clear communication and marketing of what training is required for practitioners
2.9	Increase professionals' awareness of targeted Early Help services through the development of a Targeted EH Portal	Jan 22	Early Help Partnership	Number of practitioners accessing the portal	Targeted Early Help portal to be 'live' and promoted to the partnership for regular use.
2.10	Develop links with other key strategies in Sandwell through relevant governance structures to ensure that they are joined up	June 22	Early Help Partnership	Number of boards/steering groups attended	EH as golden thread through all local strategies



No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
2.11	Participate in cross partnership activity to improve and utilise information and data across Sandwell MBC, Sandwell Childrens Trust, Statutory Services, and wider Partnership	June 22	Early Help Partnership	Agreed data agenda in place	Improved service delivery and commissioning of services for Sandwell citizens

## Priority 3: Increase universal and community capacity to support effective Early Help delivery

No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
3.1	Increase awareness of universal Early Help amongst members of the public and providers through further development of the Sandwell Family Life portal	Ongoing	Early Help Partnership/ SCVO EH leads within all partner organisations	<p>Web stats to show how much and how the website is used.</p> <p>Numbers of/ increase in services listed on the website</p> <p>Sample/ checks amongst partners and communities of use of portal and awareness of services – portal becomes part of ‘normal’ working</p> <p>Qualitative feedback on user experience of website</p>	<p>Greater understanding of local services. Comprehensive view of universal provision</p> <p>CYP and families increasing engagement in support</p> <p>Greater understanding of local demand</p> <p>Greater understanding of gaps in capacity/ what and where</p>
3.2	Promote Early Help services to families and providers through a range of networking and information sharing and themed events, websites etc.	Ongoing	Early Help Partnership/ SCVO EH leads within all partner orgs	Evaluation of delivering engagement events and producing communication resources to	Increased understanding of local provision





No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
				<p>ensure consistent messages are disseminated – working through common language</p> <p>Surveys/ feedback assessing quantity and effectiveness of joint working between agencies</p> <p>Case studies to understand the family 'journey' through support from difference agencies</p>	<p>Increased trust and confidence between partners which encourages and enables joint working</p>
	<p>Continue to develop networks that help strengthen practice at universal level</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Early Help Partnership</p>	<p>Case studies from families, including those which have accessed a service for the first time</p> <p>Evaluation feedback from staff and volunteers following engagement/ networking activities</p> <p>Reduction in access to services which may not meet needs and/ or reduction in Multi-agency Early Help support</p> <p>Increasing communications resources such as cartoons, video briefings etc to promote EH messages across agencies</p>	<p>Staff confidence in available universal support is increased</p> <p>Support and safeguarding practice in CYP and family support is improved</p>



No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
3.4	Consider opportunities for developing volunteering and mentoring schemes to enhance community capacity so that communities are better able to support families	Ongoing	Early Help Partnership/ SCVO	<p>Increasing number of volunteering opportunities supporting families or open to young people to volunteer listed on websites such as <a href="http://www.letsgosandwell.info">www.letsgosandwell.info</a></p> <p>Case study/ feedback from EH partners indicating positive growth in volunteering involvement and community/ family support</p>	<p>More residents participating in voluntary activities that supports young people and families.</p> <p>Greater understanding of how young people can be supported through voluntary activity or engaged to participate in it</p>

## Priority 4: Develop the workforce across the partnership

No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
4.1	Develop a set of practice principles across the partnership to ensure consistency of approach	Dec 21	EH Task and Finish Group	High level sign- up to strategy; On-going audits	Consistent approach to delivery of EH
4.2	Agree use of a shared practice model across the partnership (Signs of Safety?)	April 22	QPPA Sub Group?	Sign-up through SCSP ongoing audits	Consistent approach to delivery of EH
4.3	Review and refresh the 2018 EH Workforce Learning and Development Offer 2018/19	April 22	SCSP Learning and Development Sub-group	Revised offer available through updated EH Workforce L & D Offer document	All partners understand the EH L&D offer and can access the training they need, whatever level the continuum they are operating at



No.	Actions	By When	Delivery Lead	Performance Measure	Outcome
4.4	Update the current EH training modules to reflect the new continuum of need	April 22	EH Task and Finish Group	Updated training modules being delivered	Partners receive consistent and clear information about EH practices and processes
4.5	Develop a robust marketing and communications plan for the L & D offer	April 22	SCP Learning and Development Sub-group	There is an EH page on SCP website outlining the EH L & D offer, with links to other websites where appropriate. Increased numbers accessing training	There is one central place where practitioners can identify and access L & D
4.6	Review opportunities for improved integrated working by linking into the locality restructure of SCT services and the development of family hubs	Ongoing	Children & Families Strategic Partnership (CFSP)	Audits	Improved integrated working; seamless services for families
4.7	Use the EH portal to promote the sharing of good practice	March 22	SCVO	Evidence of good practice examples on EH portal	Shared understanding of what 'good' practice looks like
4.8	Develop a partnership wide quality assurance framework to help develop consistent practice and understand impact	June 22	EH Partnership Steering Group and QPPA Sub-group	Framework signed off and monitored through EH Partnership Steering Group; number of EH audits taking place	There is a shared partnership understanding of quality issues and audits inform improvement activity



# Appendix 2: Tools and Processes to Support Effective Early Help

Below is an overview of tools and local arrangements in place to support Early Help work.

**Early Help Module (EHM)** – is the system where all partners record multi-agency Early Help

**Child Exploitation risk assessment tool** - is used by professions to refer a YP to the Horizons team. It is to be used in partnership, to gather information regarding the vulnerabilities and the risks for the YP into 1 document, to detail the concerns, both evidenced and suspected in relation to exploitation and to help explore the concerns further also

The tool is submitted to the Horizons team who then review the information with the police; information around the exploitation and the also the contextual intel known around the YP is then considered in line with the threshold for the team

**Early Help Assessment** - is a common form of assessment of the child/ young person within the context of the family and community. It helps practitioners and the family to gain a better initial understanding of the child/ young person's needs and provides a structure for recording information. Using the established process reduces multiple assessments for young people and their families; the outcomes of the assessment can be shared with consent

**Strengthening Families Teams** – Sandwell Children's Trust, town-based teams, bring together professionals from a range of different agencies along with community representatives to review and consider more complex family situations. This can lead to a targeted early help support being offered. Organisations providing Early Help support are welcome to request help, support and advice around a child and family situation through their local Strengthening Families Team.





**Lead Professional** - This role refers to someone who takes the lead to co-ordinate support and acts as a single point of contact for a child and their family when a joined-up arrangement between a range of services is needed. The Lead Worker needs to be someone who the child, young person and family can rely on and trust

**Multi-Agency Referral Form (MARF)** - A MARF is a referral form to be used when someone working with a child believes that there is a Child Protection issue. Where a child already has an allocated Social Worker no Multi Agency Referral form is required. Once submitted, MARF's are looked at by staff within the MASH, where the case will be risk assessed and acted upon accordingly

**Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)** - The MASH is a multi-agency team formed to protect children and families who may be at risk of harm including domestic abuse. It enables information to be shared securely between agencies so that the needs of a child about whom concerns have been raised can be understood. The MASH identifies a full picture of the known risks affecting the children and their family and then ensures timely and relevant actions to address these issues. MASH can be contacted for support and advice around children's issues and safeguarding to members of the public or local agencies

**Outcome Star** - Outcome Star provides a visual tool to help families to identify their strengths and areas where change is needed. Practitioners across the partnership may use the Outcome Star to inform the Early Help assessment or as a tool to help families to work out how to achieve the 'safety goal' identified through Signs of Safety for their children. The My Star in particular helps to ensure we hear the voice of the child and consider their views as part of the planning and support process. The outcome star should be revisited on a regular basis so that families can see visually where progress has been made

**Referral** - A referral is when someone makes a request for support from an agency that could be best dealt with by another organisation. For example, this could be when someone comes to an Advice Centre with a housing enquiry and is referred to Shelter. In this example, the Advisor actively helps the person to access Shelter by phoning or emailing their details to Shelter and in some cases by arranging the appointment for them



**Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership (SCSP)** - This is a statutory board which has been set up as part of Working Together to Safeguard Children 2015. Sandwell CSP ensures that all organisations that work with children work together to keep children and young people safe from harm

**Sandwell Family Life** - This is a web-based directory of local universal Early Help services which is searchable, enabling individuals and agencies to identify and access a range of Early Help support across Sandwell. [www.sandwellfamilylife.info](http://www.sandwellfamilylife.info)

**Signs of Safety** - Signs of Safety is a recognised approach used across the UK and internationally. All agencies across the Partnership have access to this training. The approach enables the worker and the family to arrive at an agreed 'worry statement' and 'safety goal' – which describes the concerns that we may have about the family (and in particular the concerns faced by the children) alongside a description of how we want things to be. The approach is embedded throughout processes and used in all meetings such as TAF's. It is important that in using this approach we are alert to the views and needs of the children and keep this at the centre of our thinking whilst working with families

**Targeted Early Help portal** - Targeted Support Information Portal which will primarily be for Practitioners working with CYP and families. The portal lists in detail targeted support services across the borough and includes all relevant details around contact, service offer, referral process, staff qualifications etc. The Early Help website includes a number of additional pages which will focus on information for agencies using the site, and will include news updates, service spotlights, relevant guidance and information, video guides supplied by local agencies which can be used with young people and families, and video introductions of local service providers, aimed at building knowledge and confidence amongst local agencies to signpost into those organisations. (link to be included once launched)

