Early Help Northamptonshire
Practice Manual

Because Early Help Builds Strong Families

www.northamptonshirescb.org.uk
1. Introduction
   a. Early Help Northamptonshire – Context 4
   b. What is Early Help? 4
   c. Critical Features of effective Early Help 5
   d. Whose responsibility is Early Help? 5

2. Identifying children and families who need early help
   a. Signs to look for – thresholds and pathways 7
   b. Levels of need 7
   c. Risk profiling 7

3. Assessing early help needs
   a. The Early Help Pathway 9
   b. Early Help Assessment 11
   c. Early Help at the end of social care involvement 13
   d. Team around the Family 13
   e. Lead Professionals 15

4. Meeting early help needs
   a. Who delivers early help? 17
   b. Early help services and interventions 17
   c. Accessing early help services and interventions 18

5. If early help doesn’t go to plan
   a. Early Help Support Service 20
   b. Complex Case Discussion 20
   c. When needs escalate 20

6. Early help information sharing and consent
   a. Information sharing 23
   b. Dealing with consent 23

7. Early Help practice excellence
   a. Where to get skills, training and professional development 25
   b. Where to get information, advice, guidance and support 25

8. Voice of the Child 27
Introduction
1. **Introduction**

This document is for front line practitioners and their managers to help deliver Early Help in Northamptonshire.

Practitioners can use it to help them with all aspects of Early Help delivery and to help get the right early help to children, young people and families when they need it.

**Context**

Over the last two years the Council has been working with partners, stakeholders and users of services to re-design our approach to early help and prevention. The adopted approach is based on the principle that prevention is better than cure. Reports released by a range of bodies and individuals (for example Graham Allen MP and Frank Field MP) support the principle that prevention and early help can both reduce service costs and also improve outcomes for people.

Based on this consensus, Early Help Northamptonshire has a single goal: to enable children and families to access appropriate support as early as possible, to help them maintain their quality of life, prevent any problems getting worse and reduce the demand for specialist support services.

The Northamptonshire Early Help Partnership champions the vital importance of helping children and young people at the earliest point to provide them with the best opportunity for the future. Through effective early help, we will also divert families from statutory high cost services.

We must target our early help where the likelihood is that problems will spiral and become more damaging for children and families and more costly for children’s services and other public services to address. Reducing demand for these high cost services will deliver better outcomes for children and families as well as reduce expenditure.

Northamptonshire’s early help offer recognises the crucial role that all family members, not just mothers and fathers, but step parents, grandparents, siblings and other extended family members and carers, play in influencing what children experience and achieve as well as the consequences when families are in difficulty.

**What is Early Help?**

Early help means ‘providing support as soon as the problem emerges, at any point in the child’s life from the foundation years through to the teenage years.’ Working Together (2015).

This is what Early Help in Northamptonshire aims to deliver through its Early Help Partnership and the wide range of partners and professionals who are delivering early help in a variety of settings and organizations. Early Help Northamptonshire describes how we all identify children and families who need help as soon as the problems start to emerge, or when there is a strong likelihood that problems will emerge in the future.

The Early Help Offer in Northamptonshire is not just for very young children as problems may also emerge at any point throughout childhood and adolescence. The Early Help Offer includes universal and targeted services designed to reduce or prevent specific problems from escalating or becoming entrenched.

Early Help Northamptonshire describes how we all identify children and families who need help as soon as the problems start to emerge, or when there is a strong likelihood that problems will emerge in the future.

Northamptonshire’s Early Help Offer echoes this ethos. The aim of the Early Help Partnership is for everyone working with children and families to identify families in need of early help as soon as problems start to emerge, or when there is a strong likelihood that problems will emerge in the future.
Critical Features of Effective Early Help
Working Together to Safeguard Children (2015) describes the critical features of effective Early Help as:

- A multi-disciplinary approach that brings a range of professional skills and expertise to bear through a "Team around the Child" approach.

- A relationship with a trusted lead professional who can engage with the child and their family, and coordinate the support needed from other agencies.

- Practice that empowers families and helps them to develop the capacity to resolve their own problems.

- A holistic approach that addresses the children's needs in the wider family context.

- Simple, streamlined referral and assessment process.

- Where a child and family would benefit from coordinated support from more than one agency (e.g. education, health, housing, police) there should be an inter-agency assessment.

- These early help assessments, should identify what help the child and family require to prevent needs escalating to a point where intervention would be needed via a statutory assessment.

This is what Early Help in Northamptonshire aims to deliver through its Early Help Partnership and through the range of partners and professionals who are delivering early help in a variety of settings and organizations.

Northamptonshire has an Early Help Strategy which you can find at www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/earlyhelp

Whose Responsibility is Early Help?
Every person working with children and families, regardless of organisation, status or position, has a responsibility to help deliver early help. Without shared responsibility – cross sector – we run the risk of missing an opportunity to get help to children and families quickly.

We have the highest aspirations for all children and young people in Northamptonshire and want them to make a positive journey into adulthood. Ideally, there would be no need for early help and specialist services but clearly additional needs will continue to arise.

Our Early Help offer puts the responsibility on all professionals to identify emerging problems and potential unmet needs for individual children and families, irrespective of whether they are providing services to children or adults. Professionals working in universal services are often best placed to identify children and families who are at risk of poor outcomes.

When we identify need, our job - as a professional community of practitioners – is to support children and families back on a positive trajectory as soon as possible. At all times, we must aim and get children, young people and families to a safe and strong position where they can be effectively supported by universal services.

It is important that we all have a shared conceptual model of how our collective workforce supports Northamptonshire’s children, young people and families, so that we understand our role – and that of our organisation as well as our partners – and how we need to work with other services in order to support families with additional needs.

In short, early help is never ‘someone else’s problem’ in Northamptonshire.
Identifying Children and Families Who May Need Early Help
2. Identifying children and families who need early help

It is everyone’s responsibility to be alert to the signs that a child, young person or family might need early help. Northamptonshire operates the ‘4 level triangle’ to help practitioners identify those needs as early as possible.

Signs to Look For – Thresholds and Pathways

The Thresholds and Pathways document is essential to helping practitioners decide whether a child or family is in need of early help.

If you work with children, young people and families, Thresholds and Pathways will help you to:
- identify levels of need
- identify and assess risk
- understand procedures for information sharing.

You can find the full thresholds and pathways document here

Levels of Need

The levels of need triangle is a useful guide to what early help looks like in practice. In Northamptonshire, early help services are defined as operating across levels 2 and 3.

If early help is working, children and families would stay towards the bottom of the triangle. Only those families with highly complex needs would reach the top of the triangle.

However, it is important not to be rigid in how the ‘triangle’ is applied in practice. Some services described as early help or targeted support are also used by children open to social care (for example children in need or children on child protection plans). Children ‘stepping down’ from social care may also benefit from ongoing support through early help.

Risk Profiling

Early Help Northamptonshire is building on the risk profiling approach used in Troubled Families to create a risk profiling tool we can all use. This is coming soon and further details will be on

www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/earlyhelp
Assessing Early Help Needs
3. **Assessing Early Help Needs**

### The Early Help Pathway

This is the simple pathway for you to follow if you are working with a child or family and have a concern:

- **Safeguarding or Early Help Concern**
  - Professionals working with children or families not open to social care
  - Members of the public

- **Contact MASH**
  - Early Help Coordinator (MASH) MASH screening consultation within 24 hours
  - May lead to Early Help response after screening or statutory assessment

- **Consent Not Given**
  - Hypothetical consultation
  - Safeguarding concern identified
  - Consent to be gained
  - No further action
    - Does not meet threshold for statutory intervention
    - Can be supported in universal services
    - Referrer advised and signposted
    - Outcome recorded

- **Consent Given**
  - Safeguarding concern agreed
  - Screening required
  - Early Help Needed
    - Does not meet threshold for statutory intervention
      - Single agency response can meet needs
      - Referrer supported to complete EHA and signposted to Early Help Support Service
      - Outcome recorded
    - Early Help Needed
      - Does not meet threshold for statutory intervention
      - Multi agency response needed
      - Referrer supported to complete EHA and signposted to Early Help Support Service
      - Outcome recorded

- **Safeguarding concern agreed**
  - Does meet threshold for statutory intervention
  - Pass to relevant social care team
  - Referrer advised
  - Outcome recorded

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**Early Help in the Locality**
If the MASH considers that early help is needed, you can then continue with these steps (if you are confident that the child or family needs early help, you can choose to start here without going through the MASH):

**Early Help in the Locality**

**Contact Early Help Support Service** for help, advice, guidance or support at any point during the process.

- **Concern about a child, young person or family**
  - Talk to child and family
  - Complete Early Help Assessment (EHA)

  - Identified needs can be met by my own agency
    **SINGLE AGENCY RESPONSE**
    - Submit EHA to Early Help Support Service
    - Deliver Support and Services
    - Review
      - Needs met – no further action
        - Contact Early Help Support Service to close EHA

  - We need to involve another agency
    **TEAM AROUND THE FAMILY RESPONSE**
    - Contact Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)
    - Work with the Early Help Support Service to develop a Team around the Family approach (including referral for early help support/intervention)
    - Deliver Support and Services
    - Review
      - Needs met – no further action
        - Contact Early Help Support Service to close EHA
What is the Early Help Assessment (EHA) process?

The EHA is a simple way to help identify needs of children and families and make a plan to meet those needs. It is designed to be a shared tool which can be used by all agencies in Northamptonshire who are delivering early help. It is a standardized approach so that all children and families have the same experience of exploring their needs, strengths and challenges.

The EHA replaces the previous Common Assessment Framework (CAF).

The EHA can be used to support children and young people between 0–19 years, including unborn babies and can also be used with consent up to the age of 24 where a young person has a learning difficulty or disability.

You need consent from the parent or young person (if Gillick competent) to do an EHA.

There are five main stages of an EHA process:

1. Identifying Need
2. Assessing Need
3. Planning to meet need
4. Reviewing what’s changed
5. Closure

This handbook works through each section in turn, with examples and guidance.

Support for Practitioners

We want to make sure you have as much support as you need to make the process of early help assessment as simple and straightforward as possible.

Web-Based

You will find a wide range of support information, guidance and materials on the Northamptonshire County Council website, including our EHA Handbook.

You can find a copy of the Thresholds and Pathways document that will help you assess needs here:

Telephone and Face to Face

The Early Help Support Service is available by telephone or email or you can ask for a face-to-face meeting. You can access information, advice, guidance and support from the team about a range of early help issues, including early help assessment, support to create a team around the family (including finding out what other agencies may be involved with the child or family you are supporting) and access to services and interventions.

You can either:

Contact the Early Help Support Service

25 May 2015
If you are unsure whether your family needs early help (for example if you aren’t sure whether it is a safeguarding concern or whether it meets the threshold for statutory child protection) you can:

**Contact the MASH**

This will take you through to the MASH where an adviser will help you with your concern. Early Help Support Service staff are also located in the MASH, so if your family needs early help you will be signposted to the service.

The Early Help Support Service does not case manage or key work, but will provide you with information, advice, guidance and support to help you through the process.

Key points to remember about the EHA are:

- **Collaborative**
  
  You are working together with the child or young person and their family to find solutions
  
  Often they will know better than you

- **Listening to the Child or Young Person**
  
  An assessment should never be done without them or without talking to them

- **Voluntary**
  
  EHA should is designed to help a family work out what to do next. If the child, young person or family member doesn’t want to take part, you can’t force them

- **Not Social Care**
  
  This is not a statutory assessment

- **Focussed on Strengths**
  
  This is a chance to talk about what a family does well, not just about their challenges

- **Leads to a Plan**
  
  An assessment should lead to an action plan that helps a child, young person or family

- **Transparent**
  
  The child, young person or family should know what is happening at every point and have given their consent

If at any point you are concerned about the safety or welfare of the child or young person, seek immediate advice at the end of the discussion using your organisation’s safeguarding procedures or by contacting the MASH

Having a discussion about difficult issues can be challenging for the child, family and practitioner. If you feel you would benefit from further training or support to have those conversations, contact the Early Help Support Service or see the early help pages here [www.barnardos.org.uk/btc-northamptonshire](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/btc-northamptonshire). There is an early help practice excellence framework coming soon – details will be on the above websites.
Making it Child and Young Person Friendly

The word ‘assessment’ can be intimidating for a child or young person and their family. There are ways to make sure your assessment is child and young people focussed.

The ‘My Life My Way’ provides a useful framework for helping you make your assessment work for a child or young person. You can find it at www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/MyLifeMyWay There are more suggestions in section 8 ‘Voice of the Child’ of this manual.

The EHA at the end of social care involvement

The EHA can also be used as a tool to help children and families ‘stepping down’ from social care.

If a child or family needs some continued help at the point when support from a social worker is coming to an end, this should be organised through an Early Help Assessment. Support for children, young people and their families should be a seamless transition for all concerned, ensuring that needs continue to met.

The decision to move from social care to early help

There are a number of points in the Social Care process when a child or young person may transfer into the EHA process:

- At the end of an assessment
- At any point in a Child in Need plan when Social Care no longer have a role
- Where a Child Protection Plan is no longer required and statutory duties on behalf of social care have come to an end.

Making the move from Social Care to EHA

If the case has been a Child in Need (CiN) case, the Social Worker arranges the transfer to EHA including identification of agencies to be included in the Team around the Family (TAF) and Lead Professional and convenes the first TAF meeting, which will also be the final CiN meeting.

With consent the social worker supplies the following documents to the TAF:

- Recent assessment
- Social work Closure Summary

Following a statutory assessment the social worker will similarly identify agencies to be included in the (TAF) and Lead Professional and, with consent, will share the following documents with the TAF.

- Recent assessment
- Social work Closure Summary.

The EHA Lead Professional takes over responsibility for co-ordination at this point.

Where there is no consent

In those cases where the social worker has not been able to gain consent from the parent/carer or young person, the social worker will inform the Lead Professional that there while there are outstanding concerns, consent has not been gained to start the EHA.

In these cases, those working with the family should continue to offer support outside the EHA process.

Team Around the Family Meetings

The TAF brings together a range of different practitioners to support the family following the EHA. The purpose is to bring people together, often with specialist knowledge or expertise, to work out how best to work together to help support a family.
The family and child or young person should attend too and it is important to engage with them throughout the process.

Remember this is a voluntary process – you can’t force the family to attend or take part. If the family doesn’t want to have a TAF meeting, but you still think other professionals need to be involved you can call the Early Help Support Service for advice.

Team around the Family Meetings Pathway

Think about which professionals should attend – who is already involved and who should be involved

Talk to the child, young person or family about a team around the family meeting
Explain what it is, what it is for, who will be there and why it might help
Obtain signed consent if you haven’t got an EHA
If they don’t want a TAF meeting STOP

Identify a meeting place, date and time

Plan the practicals:
• Who in the family will be included in the meeting
• Whether there are any communication needs in the family and how you might meet them
• Any particular needs minority ethnic families or families with disabled or additional needs children might have
• What the timescales are
• What help, and support you might need as the person chairing the meeting
• Plan the agenda

If you are arranging the first TAF yourself:

Invite the family
Use the TAF meeting template to invite professionals
http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/earlyhelp

If you need help arranging the first TAF:

Use the online TAF request form here
www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/taf
or call 0300 126 1000 option 1 then option 2

Hold the TAF meeting
Agree actions
Record the outcome on the EHA review form
If a practitioner from another agency cannot attend a meeting it is important to give them a copy of the EHA and find out if they can provide details about what support they can offer the family; this can then be discussed at the meeting.

Everyone who attended the TAF takes responsibility for delivering their part of the agreed actions.

**Lead Professional**

A Lead Professional in early help is someone who acts as the point of contact for a family. They play an important role in the early help pathway. They coordinate the work taking place with the child and family and build up a trusting relationship with both the family and the practitioners supporting them.

The role of Lead Professional can sit with any agency. Discussion should take place with the child and family as to who is best placed to take this role. There is a range of criteria that can help inform the decision, based on the predominant needs of the child or family; the wishes of the child or family; or a previous or potential ongoing relationship with the child.

The Lead Professional is the worker most likely to complete an EHA.

You can find more information about the lead professional role in [Thresholds and Pathways](#).
Meeting early help needs
4. Meeting early help needs

Who delivers early help?

A wide range of agencies deliver early help, often without realising it. For example, the work of a pastoral support worker or police community support officer or health visitor can all be described as early help. Their work helps a child or family to make changes in their lives and prevents problems getting worse. Agencies like schools for example will often commission early help services – like counseling or anti-bullying programmes – to deliver to their pupils. These are often referred to as ‘Level 2’ services.

The vast majority of early help is delivered by these types of services and agencies.

Sometimes a more targeted early help service or intervention is needed. These are often services for children and families experiencing more complicated or severe problems. These are often referred to as ‘Level 3 services’.

It is all early help – just a different type of early help depending on the needs of individual families. Practitioners will need to work with the family, and with the other agencies involved with the family, to work out the right service or intervention needed. The Early Help Assessment will also help indicate what early help is needed.

Examples of services delivering early help at level 2 and 3 as part of their day-to-day work include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s Centre Services</th>
<th>Children’s centre services across the county are already providing a wide range of essential early help services to children aged under 5 and their families and enable a range of organisations (such as health services, job centre plus etc) to access and provide support to families in that area.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools, further education and early years providers</td>
<td>Schools and colleges in Northamptonshire are working constantly to address the emerging problems of their pupils, whilst in school and problems in their family life that may be impacting on their disposition to learn, and helping to ensure that appropriate early help services or interventions are available to them. Early years providers similarly are close to young families who may be in need of early help, and are delivering support in their settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health services</td>
<td>A range of health services at primary, secondary and specialist levels, are providing valuable early help support to children and families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>Police and PCSOs have a strong connection to local communities and are often close to the problems that a family are experiencing. The work of our police force is providing essential early help, and particularly in identifying those families who might benefit from early help interventions and services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private and Voluntary Sector</td>
<td>A wide range of interventions and services are provided in the voluntary sector across Northamptonshire some purchased by agencies like the County Council and schools, some delivered through charitable organisations.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Early Help Services and Interventions

There is a suite of early help services and interventions available that have been commissioned (or purchased) to help meet the needs of families who may need a more intensive targeted form of early help. This list is regularly updated.

For the latest information see the Children and Family Service Finder

Accessing Early Help Services and Interventions

The way we make referrals to interventions and services in Northamptonshire is changing. More information will follow and will be available here www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/earlyhelp

25 May 2015
In the meantime if you feel you need help to engage other professionals or services to help you help the family, or if you feel you need to make a referral for an intervention or service, contact the Early Help Support Service.
If early help doesn’t go to plan
5. If early help doesn’t go to plan

The Early Help pathways with their assessments, services and support should benefit the majority of children, young people and their families who may be in need of early help. However there will be times when the process doesn’t seem to be delivering the intended outcomes or when needs and risks have escalated. This section provides guidance on what to do when that happens.

If an Early Help Assessment or work with the family seems to be ‘stuck’

If an EHA or your working with the family seems to be ‘stuck’ it could be for one of the following reasons:

- The family isn’t engaging
- Disguised compliance from parents/carers
- Other professionals or partner agencies aren’t engaging
- Lack of availability of resources or services
- The child, young persons or family’s needs have increased, changed or become more complex

In these instances the Complex Case process has been designed to help you.

If this happens there are two options you can try:
- Discussion with the Early Help Support Service
- Complex Case Discussion.

Discussion with the Early Help Support Service

This should be your first option. The Early Help Support Service are a team providing information, advice, guidance and support on early help. You may find it useful to talk through a case with them, and can do this anonymously. Contact the Early Help Support Service.

Complex Case Process

This process is designed to help practitioners find solutions to cases which are either ‘stuck’ or are proving complex to resolve. The process is led by the Early Help Support Service.

A complex case process is a group talk amongst key professionals to examine a case, and identify possible options. In some local areas this is known as a professionals discussion. The core membership of a complex case panel are:

- Early Help Co-ordinator
- Educational Psychologist
- Early Help for Disabled Children Senior Co-ordinator
- Early Help and Prevention Senior Practitioner
- Social Work Senior Practitioner.

To have a complex case discussion, you need consent from the parent or carer. It is the responsibility of the professional requesting the discussion to secure that consent. If you have consent to an Early Help Assessment this is
sufficient. If you haven’t got an Early Help Assessment, you must obtain signed consent. **Anonymous cases cannot be brought to a Complex Case Process.**

In many cases, there will not be a need for a formal face-to-face meeting. The Early Help Coordinator will gather views and guidance from the panel members and feed back to the person who referred the case.

In some cases, a face-to-face discussion is needed. In these cases, the person who referred the case will be invited to attend the next available complex case meeting. These take place every 2 weeks.

A discussion is expected to take no more than 20 minutes.

To refer a case for a complex case discussion, you can complete an online form here:

**When needs escalate**

If the needs involved in the child or family’s lives escalate, or if at any point you are concerned that the child or young person is suffering, or is at risk of suffering, significant harm, contact the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Telephone 0300 126 1000 and then choose one of the following options:

- Select Option 1 from the main menu, then:
- Option 1 if the child has a social worker
- Option 3 if you need to seek advice or discuss a possible child protection concern about a child without a social worker

You may be asked to complete the online MASH referral form which can be found on the Reporting a concern page for professionals
Early help information sharing and consent
6. Early help information sharing and consent

Information Sharing
Sharing information safely is critical to effective early help. Many information sharing protocols and agreements underpin our early help work. Where practitioners have to make decisions about sharing information on a case-by-case basis that are not clearly covered by statute, the decision to share or not to share information must always be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Based on professional judgement</th>
<th>In accordance with legal, ethical and professional obligations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supported by governance information sharing guidance</td>
<td>Informed by training and experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a wealth of information about information sharing, including the 7 Golden Rules of Information Sharing, in Thresholds and Pathways here: [www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/thresholdsandpathways](http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/thresholdsandpathways)

If you are unsure about information sharing and early help, talk to your line manager in the first instance and follow your organisation’s information sharing procedures.

Dealing with Consent
You should seek consent wherever possible and respect the wishes of those who do not consent to share confidential information. You may still share information without consent if, in your judgement on the facts of the case, that lack of consent can be overridden in the public interest.

You do not always need consent to share personal information. There will be some circumstances where you should not seek consent, for example, where doing so would:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>place a child at increased risk of significant harm</th>
<th>place an adult at increase risk of serious harm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>prejudice the prevention, detection or prosecution of a serious crime</td>
<td>lead to unjustified delay in making enquiries about allegations of significant harm or serious harm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For early help assessments, team around the family and complex case discussions, written consent must be sought (except in the circumstances described above). You can find more information about consent in Thresholds and Pathways here: [www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/thresholdsandpathways](http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/thresholdsandpathways). If you are unsure about consent and early help, talk to your line manager in the first instance and follow your organisation’s consent procedures.

25 May 2015
Early Help Practice Excellence
7. Early Help Practice Excellence

Where to get skills training and professional development
A skilled and confident early help workforce, whatever agency they work in, is the foundation of effective early help. There is a wide range of training, professional development and skills building opportunities available. You can find more information here www.barnardos.org.uk/btc-northamptonshire. There is an early help practice excellence framework coming soon – details will be on the above websites.

Where to get information, advice, guidance and support
To help you deliver effective early help, three services are now in place to offer you support.

Early Help Support Service
The newly formed Early Help Support Service brings together CAF Coordinators and Troubled Families Co-ordinators into one new team.

Its role is to help early help professionals to get the right support to children and families as early as possible to prevent crisis. The team provide mentoring, advice, information, guidance and support to professionals about children and families needing early help, and about the early help pathway and processes. This includes receiving contacts direct from professionals and receiving requests for early help support from the MASH. The team also undertakes outreach to professionals working with Northamptonshire families most at risk of vulnerability.

The service is staffed by a team of 11 Early Help Coordinators. There is at least one Early Help Co-ordinator for each locality in the county.

Contact the Early Help Support Service

Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

The MASH is a partnership arrangement that includes over 60 colleagues from a range of agencies who work together to ensure a timely and appropriate response to safeguarding children concerns.

The function of the MASH is to create an environment where sensitive information can be shared securely through the co-location of the statutory child protection agencies: Social Care, Education, Police, Health and Early Help Co-ordinators.

The co-located MASH team shares and analyses information from a wide range of sources, so that decisions on the level and nature of interventions with the families are timely, proportionate and evidence based.

Contact the MASH
8. Voice of the Child

Early help is meaningless unless it champions the voice of the child. Needs cannot be met, nor situations improve, without listening to what children have to say and acting on it.

Every agency listens to the voice of the child or young person is a different way. Practitioners should follow the guidelines used by their organisation which will be age and situation appropriate.

There are many toolkits and guides available to help you as a practitioner to listen to the voice of the child, including:

- Listening to Young Children
- My Life My Way

Make sure whatever part of the early help process you are following, you capture and record the voice of the child and most importantly take action on it. This is particularly important in the early help assessment process.