

Cabinet

4 June 2024

Early Help Strategy 2024-2026

Ordinary Decision



Report of

John Pearce, Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Service and Chair of Children, Young People and Families Partnership Board

Councillor Ted Henderson, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People's Services

Electoral division affected:

Countywide.

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To present Cabinet with the updated Early Help Strategy 2024-2026 for endorsement.

Executive summary

- 2 The review of the current Strategic Partnership Approach to Early Help commenced in 2023 involving a range of stakeholders and has now concluded.
- 3 The newly titled County Durham Early Help Strategy 2024-2026 (see Appendix 2) is based on evidence about the needs and wants of children and their families living in County Durham and from what partners across the early help system feel collectively they can achieve.
- 4 The strategy is also based on the priorities of the Prevention and Early Help Partnership which are underpinned by the national Supporting Families Programme, the Family Hub and Start for Life programme and the Reducing Parental Conflict programme and specifically reflects how County Durham can improve early help support offered to families. It also seeks to reflect the Government's direction of travel for family help and social care set out in Stable Homes Built on Love.
- 5 A Strategy Development Group was established to oversee the development of the strategy, including the coproduction process and to

ensure local partners, voluntary and community sector (VCS) representatives, children, parents and carers were involved in its development.

- 6 Coproduction sessions took place with children, parents and carers to develop the new strategy which is based on what is important to those who use and need early help support. Data and intelligence have also informed the strategy about what we know are the needs of the wider population and what our priorities should be over the next 3 years.
- 7 It is planned to launch the strategy in June 2024 by children and Durham's Family Hub Parent and Carer Panel.
- 8 The new strategy will run from June 2024 until the end of March 2026 to align with the timescales for the revised Growing Up in County Durham Strategy 2023 – 2026.
- 9 The strategy includes what we intend to deliver through the Family Hub and Start for Life programme. Additionally, as school attendance is a high priority both locally and nationally and with the Attendance Alliance aspirations being integral in supporting children to achieve in all areas of life, this is a key focus of the Early Help Strategy: supporting children to regularly participate in learning that meets their needs and supporting their aspirations as they transition into adulthood. It is recognised within the strategy the contribution effective early help have on supporting children and families with a range of multiple and complex needs in helping to address and mitigate these needs before the need for statutory social. Where social care interventions have been required, a range of early help support can also be provided during and after social care intervention ensuing children and families receive the range of help that builds safety and resilience.

Recommendations

- 10 Cabinet is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the work on developing the new Early Help Strategy and
 - (b) receive and endorse County Durham's Early Help Strategy 2024-26.

Background

- 11 The Prevention and Early Help Partnership supported the review of the current Strategic Partnership Approach to Early Help in March 2023 and through a partnership group the following was agreed:
- (a) The strategy is based on evidence about the needs of children and their families living in County Durham, which can be found on [Durham Insights](#).
 - (b) Coproduction sessions with children, parents and carers and a range of partners to develop the strategy in order to base it on what is important to those who use and need early help support, building on families own strengths and those of communities.
 - (c) The strategy would have a refresh based on key principles informing the approach, style and format:
 - (i) Application of County Durham Approach to Wellbeing Principles.
 - (ii) Early Help support delivered using an i-Thrive Model (a graduated approach to meet family need).
 - (iii) Co-production with children, parents and carers.
 - (iv) The strategy to be short and succinct and written in a way that is easily understood by a young person/ family member.
 - (v) Avoid duplication of information that can be found elsewhere but for the strategy to reference and link appropriately.
 - (d) The wider context of County Durham's Early Help Strategy 2024-26 references other strategies where common themes and issues were identified, to avoid duplication.
 - (e) The new strategy will run from Spring 2024 to March 2026 to align with the timescales for the review of the Growing Up in County Durham Strategy.

Consultation

- 12 Consultation has taken place throughout the development of the strategy at 3 key stages:
- (a) **Stage 1** – March 2023 to July 2023 – coproduction sessions with children, parents, carers and partners to establish the vision for the strategy and the priority areas that the strategy should focus on.

- (b) **Stage 2** – October 2023 – December 2023 – Prevention and Early Help Partnership consulted on the proposed vision statement, approach, commitments and priorities which were informed by the coproduction sessions.
 - (c) **Stage 3** – January 2024 – February 2024 – further consultation on the proposed strategy document was carried out through a public online survey which also went to all stakeholder groups involved in stages 1 and 2 of the consultation. The survey was based on the presenting draft strategy, giving stakeholders the opportunity to feedback before final approval of the strategy by the Prevention and Early Help Partnership and Starting Well Partnership in March 2024.
- 13 Following the analysis of results from stages 1, 2 and 3 of the consultation, the new County Durham Early Help Strategy 2024-26 is attached at Appendix 2. Details of the consultations can be seen in Appendix 3.

Focus of the new strategy

- 14 The new vision for the strategy is: “We will support children and families at the earliest opportunity to help them thrive”.
- 15 Children and families identified a range of ways in which they want early help to be offered, which the strategy highlights.
- 16 Some key government drivers are identified within the strategy, for example, the new Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023, Supporting Families Programme, Family Hub and Start for Life Programme, Reducing Parental Conflict and the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care. The Early Help Strategy includes five high level commitments that identify the key areas of work which the Prevention and Early Help Partnership will focus on and where they can add value to improve outcomes for children and their families.
- 17 Underpinning these high-level commitments are six key priority areas that will be owned by the Prevention and Early Help Partnership and subgroups of the Starting Well Partnership who will develop detailed action plans to deliver the Early Help Strategy.
- 18 The strategy identifies eleven key measures that will be used to know if we have been successful in helping families and delivering on the strategy.

Equality Impact Assessment

- 19 Implementation of the strategy will have a positive impact on a number of protected characteristics, for example, relating to age – the development of a network of Family Hubs will provide a range of local support and services to parents from pregnancy to children as they grow from babies into young adults. Also, relating to disability/SEND, including mental health and

emotional wellbeing, children and families will be offered support that is accessible and delivered in a way which meets their needs. In terms of gender, the approach is likely to have a greater beneficial impact overall for women who are more likely to be the main carer in families. There are also specific targeted measures to improve the involvement of men (male carers and dads) which is positive.

- 20 County Durham's Early Help Approach is founded on a relationship based culture, building valued and trusted relationships with families and amongst services and organisations supporting children and families. Our approach is to tailor support to individual families as all families are unique and this in turn underpins an inclusive approach.
- 21 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken and is attached at Appendix 4.

Conclusion

- 22 The development of the updated County Durham Early Help Strategy has been led by the Prevention and Early Help Partnership supported by a partnership strategy development group. Children, parents, carers and partners have been involved from the start in shaping the strategy and a robust consultation process has been in place throughout the development of the strategy. Communication and relationships will be maintained with children, parents, carers and partners across the lifespan of the strategy through to adoption and monitoring of outcomes.

Background papers

- None

Other useful documents

- None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 outlines that local organisations and agencies should have in place effective ways to identify emerging problems and potential unmet needs of individual children and families. Local Authorities should work with organisations and agencies to develop joined-up early help services, which can be delivered through a Family Hub model where they exist, based on a clear understanding of local needs. The safeguarding partners should publish a threshold document, which sets out the local criteria for action and should include the process for early help assessments, and the type and level of early help and targeted early help services to be provided under sections 10 and 11 of the Children Act 2004.

Finance

A range of local and government funding focusses on the delivery of Early Help including Supporting Families Grant, Family Hub and Start for Life and Reducing Parental Conflict funding in addition to partners' responsibility to provide effective early help as part of their duty / contracts. Resource considerations continue to be a challenge due to the high pressure on all public finances which may be significant in coming years.

Consultation

Details of the consultation are provided in this report. Partners, children, parents and carers have been provided with an opportunity to shape the direction and the content of the strategy and will continue to be involved throughout the lifetime of the strategy.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

An Equality Impact Assessment (attached Appendix 4) has been undertaken as part of the process for developing the new County Durham Early Help Strategy 2024-26 and there are no protected characteristics that are negatively impacted by the strategy.

Climate Change

The new strategy contributes to the current priorities within the Climate and Emergency Response Plan which focuses on climate change.

Human Rights

There are no adverse implications.

Crime and Disorder

Crime prevention and tackling crime, including anti-social behaviour, is a Headline Outcome in the County Durham's Family Outcome Framework which is the evidence base for the national Supporting Families Programme. This is a key component of the Early Help Strategy.

Staffing

Any necessary staffing resources will be agreed, and the Prevention and Early Help Partnership and Family Hub Implementation Group will guide resource decisions and priorities.

Accommodation

There are no accommodation implications.

Risk

A clear strategy is vital to ensure the right early help support is offered to Durham families at the earliest opportunity.

Procurement

Commissioners will take account of County Durham's Early Help Strategy 2024-26 when procuring services aligned to children and families.

Appendix 2: County Durham's Early Help Strategy 2024-26

Attached as a separate document.

Appendix 3: Consultation – Stages 1, 2 and 3

Consultation - Stage 1

Taking a whole family approach, a programme of coproduction sessions were arranged with children, parents and carers via the Strategy Development Group (SDG). These sessions took place during March and July 2023 and feedback from these sessions was incorporated into the strategy.

A range of consultation activity also took place with partners from across the Early Help System using a variety of bespoke consultation workshop sessions.

Collectively the views of children, parents, carers and partners informed the development of the following:

- a vision for the Early Help Strategy for all County Durham’s children and families
- the ‘approach’, how partners should, in their practice, deliver the strategy

Activities included work with the Youth Council, Family Hub Parent and Carer Panel, a range of children, families and parent/carer groups which incorporated children and parent/carers from different backgrounds via Voluntary and Community Sector groups, Youth Groups, One Point (LA Early Help Service), Harrogate District Foundation Trust (0-25 Family Health Service), Family Hubs, Gypsy Roma Traveller Communities and Harbour.

Engagement has also taken place with partners from across the Early Help System via Prevention and Early Help Forums, the Prevention and Early Help Partnership, VCS Alliance, Education Safeguarding Partnership and Education’s Designated Safeguarding Lead Networks.

In total, 16 different workshops took place with children, parent, carers and partners during stage 1 of the consultation with the views of approximately 230 being obtained, the youngest child was 6 years old.

Feedback from these sessions was analysed during August/September 2023 to identify common themes and issues which could be incorporated into the strategy.

Following the feedback analysis, and together with evidence and the input of the Strategy Development Group, a draft vision and approach were identified.

The themes emerging of how children, parents and carers wanted partners to deliver County Durham’s Early Help Strategy, the ‘approach’ to delivering support to families, were as follows:

- Accessible – support for all families
- Right support at the right time – early help support we know works, offered to the ‘whole family’ at the earliest opportunity
- Environment – support delivered in a place families can access, feel comfortable, welcome and safe
- Working together – families and partners working in partnership to improve outcomes for children and families, families not feeling ‘done to’ and partners sharing information and coordinating support effectively
- Choice for families - how families want their support delivered to them
- Listening to families – the voice of children, parents and carers to inform the individual support they receive and also help shape the design and delivery of the early help offer
- Partner’s behaviour – partners to be honest, respectful and non-judgemental of families
- Strengths based approach – building on what is working well for families

Consultation - Stage 2

The second stage of the consultation took place between October and December 2023 and involved the Prevention and Early Help Partnership and LA Senior Managers reviewing the feedback from stage 1 of the consultation. It was agreed that the ‘approach’ to early help for families, as identified above, needed to be accompanied with identified commitments and priorities for the next 3 years. The Prevention and Early Help Partnership commitments were already well understood due to the self-assessment that was undertaken as part of the National Supporting Families Programme in July 2023 using the Early Help Systems Guide. Key areas of work could be identified under the following **five** themes:

- Leadership
- Workforce
- Families
- Communities
- Data and Information

During this second stage of consultation there were a number of priorities identified however there was a consensus that this Early Help Strategy was to be focussed on those that the Prevention and Early Help Partnership were leading and not duplicate the priorities of other strategic/partnership groups. The agreed priorities for the next 3 years were identified as:

- supporting children’s mental health and emotional wellbeing
- supporting good school attendance

- co-producing and embedding the Family Hub and Start for Life offer
- promoting healthy family relationships and protecting children from the harm of domestic abuse
- promoting positive and nurturing parenting
- promoting financial stability

The Prevention and Early Help Partnership was also further consulted on the vision for the Early Help Strategy and agreed to obtain feedback in the final stage, stage 3 of the consultation on the then proposed vision of:

“We want to support children, young people and families at the earliest opportunity to help children thrive”

Consultation - Stage 3

The draft strategy was consulted on with the general public and wider stakeholders, during stage 3 of the consultation process, which ran from 19 January 2024 to 16 February 2024, via an online survey. The survey was promoted by stakeholders through their networks and channels established in stage 1 of the consultation.

The consultation asked:

- Is the vision clear?
- If no (the vision is not clear), how can it be clearer?
- Are the statements outlined in the Early Help ‘approach’ clear? If no, how can they be clearer?
- Is there anything missing (in our approach)? If yes, tell us what is missing?
- Are our commitments right? If no, what would you change?
- Is there anything missing (in our commitments)? If yes, please tell us what is missing?
- Are our key priorities right? If no, what would you change?
- Is there anything missing (in our priorities)? If yes, please tell us what is missing?

There were 76 responses to the survey, which were, in the majority, positive and supportive of the vision, approach, commitments and priorities.

The following is a breakdown and a selection of comments highlighting the key responses to the questions asked which have been incorporated into the final Early Help Strategy.

Question	Yes %	No %
Is the vision clear?	93	7

If no, how can it be clearer? Comments included:

- The only comment is why the support is for children, young people and families and the thriving part is only applied to children? The vision could be more inclusive if it was, 'We want to support children, young people and families at the earliest opportunity to help them all to thrive'.
- Possibly saying 'we will' rather than 'we want to.'
- In the foreword first/opening paragraph it mentions babies and children - we know that the majority of people see early help for babies and children and not for teenagers, and this reinforces that view. The remaining paragraphs do talk about young people – I think we need to change the opening paragraph, if we are going to say babies then we should say teenagers or we just say children?

Question	Yes %	No %
Are the statements outlined in the Early Help 'approach' clear?	92	8

If no, how can they be clearer? Comments included:

- Less words

Question	Yes %	No %
Is there anything missing (in our approach)?	12	88

If yes, please tell us what is missing? Comments included:

- Education, this needs to be before people have children i.e., education at school. Parenting skills are vitally important and should be complete from a young age not when a child is born, but prior, to educate people how to be a good parent and what impact 'bad' parenting has on a child.
- Some statements give intent and justification, some intent only. Could condense but the content is good and agree.
- Use 'Doctor' rather than GP as some people don't know the term GP.

Question	Yes %	No %
Are our commitments right?	97	3

If no, what would you change? Comments included:

- Not "incorrect" but I feel the text under leadership its sensible, and a good approach. However, I wouldn't define this as "leadership" as its more 'everyone's business'.
- No mention of 'time frames' and commitments not SMART.

Question	Yes %	No %
Is there anything missing (from our commitments)?	11	89

If yes, please tell us what is missing? Comments included:

- Working with all members of the family and actually listening to their views even in cases of broken families.
- Parents and families need to be mentioned more - their responsibility.
- Reducing Parental Conflict bullet – could we state that parental conflict is conflict which occurs within an equal relationship (no imbalance of power) to differentiate it from domestic abuse which is described later in the document, we have had many examples where the two agendas have been confused so think it would be helpful to make this really clear within the strategy.
- Shared resources under leadership - co commissioning opportunities to avoid silo working.
- Data and information - perhaps needs something about gathering data from a variety of sources to enable better outcomes for children as opposed to just making better use of.

Question	Yes %	No %
Are our key priorities right?	97	3

If no, what would you change? Comments included:

- Education, how to become a parent needs to begin in school. Unfortunately, some children do not have the correct role models and require outside intervention at a young age. Children need to have an awareness of how their parenting impacts upon their children. This needs to be done at school not when they are pregnant or have had a child, a more proactive approach is needed.
- Yes but 'promote' has been used a lot, could possibly change up and include terms that are similar i.e., support and actively encourage etc.

Question	Yes %	No %
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Is there anything missing?	25	75
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If yes, please tell us what is missing. Comments included:

- Criminality needs to be included somewhere.
- A much earlier proactive approach is required to educate young people before they have a baby or enter into a relationship.
- I don't like 'good' attendance at school, I think it could read better something like, 'to assist with breaking down the barriers towards school attendance' or 'promote positive and successful attendance'.
- Promoting children with SEND getting the best start in life, with the right help at the right time and being part of the community.
- A suggestion would be to include a priority linked to children and young people achieving their goals and aspirations as they transition into adulthood - not essential as think it could be covered under 'financial stability' but maybe a reference to this somewhere? There is plenty of data to support this need or maybe just a reference to the NEET figures in terms of the current situation and why we need early help?
- Priority 4 Needs to be more explicit that children are victims of domestic abuse in their own right.
- CAPVA – needs to be written out fully – Child Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse (CAPVA)
- SEN support for families.
- As well as promoting good school attendance, should there be something about supporting sustained progression into post-16 learning?
- Consider additional wording: promote CYPs mental health and emotional wellbeing, add to supporting text the 5 ways to wellbeing - keep active - take notice – connect - keep learning – give, because not everyone will know what they are.
- Co-produce and embed our Family Hub and Start for Life offer. In the supporting text change 'the early antenatal period' to pregnancy so pregnancy and until your child is two/2yrs.
- Ensuring very basic needs are met, food, shelter, warmth etc i.e., physical needs.
- Reference to suitable and appropriate housing.
- Missing references to older children including no reference to offending/reoffending figures (including ASB).
- Don't use the word 'neglectful' under 'nurturing parenting'.

The comments from the consultation were analysed and used to update the content of the final Early Help Strategy 2024-2026. Some of the changes that were made as a result of feedback from stage 3 include:

- The decision was taken to refer to 'children' and families throughout the strategy with the intention of being fully inclusive of babies, young people and teenagers but avoiding the strategy becoming 'too wordy'.
- The vision was changed to 'we will', rather than 'we want to' and amendments to reflect the vision to support all families to thrive, not just children.
- The Early Help 'approach' statements were reduced in words, where possible, without losing the meaning of what children, parents and carers told us as part of consultation stage 1.
- There is agreement that education in schools to children looking at parenting skills is vital however, it is felt that education's Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) already supports this.
- The term 'GP' has been changed to 'Doctor'.
- Where feedback referenced commitments and priorities not being SMART, there is a detailed delivery plan that underpins the Early Help Strategy therefore, to keep the strategy concise, the decision was made not to include timeframes other than the overarching 2024-2026 timeframe given for the strategy.
- The feedback relating to working with the whole family, 'even broken families' and more responsibility to be put on parents' is felt to already be included in the strategy through the improved engagement of Dads and Male Carers and through the Signs of Safety/Wellbeing practice model.
- Reference to the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme was expanded to support the differentiation between this and Domestic Abuse.
- The 'Leadership' commitment was reworded to reflect collaboration and integration which would include co-commissioning opportunities and the 'Data and Information' commitment reworded to state data and intelligence would be used 'from a variety of sources'.
- Where suitable, a variety of words, other than 'promote' were used for the strategy's priorities.
- 'Crime Prevention and Tackling Crime' (including anti-social behaviour) is one of the 10 Headline Outcomes within the County Durham Family Outcome Framework providing the partnership framework to evidence how effective the Early Help System is in supporting families achieve positive and sustained outcomes. This, coupled with the initial principles of how the development of the new strategy would be undertaken to avoid unnecessary duplication with other strategies, it was decided not to have 'reducing crime' as a key priority outlined in the Early Help Strategy albeit the actions of the Prevention and Early Help Delivery Plan will contribute to this.
- Consideration was given to using the term 'good' education, however a decision made to keep this reference as it is a familiar phrase

which is commonly used nationally and also stated in the County Durham Family Outcome Framework Headline Outcome 1.

- References to supporting children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) were unchanged as it was felt that the Early Help Strategy 'approach' was inclusive of all children and families including those with SEND.
- Changes were made to the priority to 'promote financial stability', to reflect the feedback of explicitly referencing supporting children's aspirations into adulthood which would include those not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- Appropriate references to Domestic Abuse (DA) were reworded to reflect the new 2021 DA definition with children being victims of DA in their own right.
- Acronyms, including CAPVA (Child and Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse), were written out in full to aid understanding.
- The 5 ways to 'wellbeing' were outlined in full within the Early Help Strategy priorities (connecting with others, being active, taking notice of surrounding, keep learning and giving to others).
- References to the 'early antenatal period to pregnancy' were changed to 'pregnancy and until your child is two/2yrs', to aid understanding.
- Within the Early Help 'approach' and within the Strategy's 'financial stability' priority, an emphasis was made on ensuring basic needs were met and what this could include e.g., food, warmth (fuel bills).
- Consideration was given to explicitly reference 'appropriate housing' in the Strategy however, due to a commitment to keep the strategy succinct and avoid duplication and for the same reasons outlined for not explicitly referencing crime and anti-social behaviour, it was felt that 'appropriate housing' is captured within the Family Outcome Framework under Headline Outcome 9, 'Secure Housing'.
- The term 'neglectful' was removed albeit references to 'neglect' remain within the strategy.

Appendix 4: Equalities Impact Assessment

Attached as a separate document.