

Report to Health Scrutiny Sub-Committee

Update on development of Early Help

Portfolio Holder:

Cllr Amanda Chadderton,
Cabinet member HR and Corporate Reform

Report Author: Bruce Penhale, Assistant Director Family Connect
Ext. 4196

16 March 2021

Purpose of the report

The report provides the Health Scrutiny Sub-Committee with an update on the development of the early help offer for children and families in Oldham, and the connections to other areas of activity including place-based working. It also highlights linkages to a range of other work relating to prevention and early intervention in the Borough.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to note the update on the developing approach to the multi-agency early help offer, and to contribute views on how to further strengthen this.

Development of Early Help

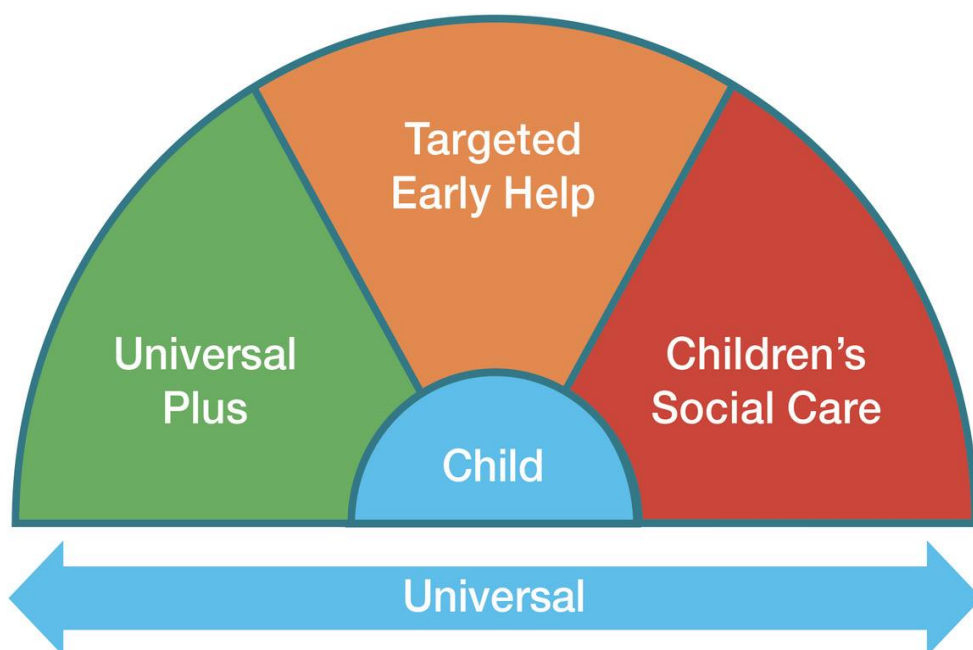
1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1 This report provides the Health Scrutiny Sub-Committee with an update on the development of the early help offer for children and families in Oldham, and the connections to other areas of activity including place-based working. It also highlights linkages to a range of other work relating to prevention and early intervention in the Borough.

2. Early Help

- 2.1 Working together to safeguard children (2018) is the statutory guidance for inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. This recognises that providing early help is more effective than reacting later in promoting the welfare of children. It defines early help as *“providing support as soon as a problem emerges, at any point in a child’s life, from the foundation years through to the teenage years.”* This includes addressing parental issues such as poor mental health, drug and alcohol misuse and domestic abuse which impact upon the lives of children in the family.
- 2.2 Working together highlights the need for local organisations and agencies to work together to:
- Identify children and families who would benefit from early help;
 - Undertake an assessment of their need for early help;
 - Provide targeted early help services to address the assessed needs of a child and their family which focuses on activity to promote outcomes for the child.
- 2.3 The safeguarding partners need to publish a document which sets out the local criteria for accessing help and services. The Children’s Safeguarding Partnership continuum of need document for Oldham has recently been refreshed, and was relaunched from 1 February. There have been a series of briefing sessions to support this with partners. The full document is available from the Safeguarding Partnership website at: <https://www.olscb.org/cms-data/depot/hipwig/Oldham-Update-CON-FINAL-SCP-approved-Jan-2021.pdf>
- 2.4 There is an early help offer at all levels of need. However, intervening and providing support earlier and at lower levels of need, is crucial in reducing the impact of adversity on children’s lives and the likelihood of problems escalating. Key principles of delivery are:
- Early Help is everybody’s business – It is not just a designated team, it is the way that everyone works together to support families.
 - The Voice and lived experience of children and young people is central to everything we do
 - Providing the earliest possible help - when people need it, by the people best placed to provide it

- Better outcomes are secured by practitioners from different disciplines working collaboratively in partnership, rather than as single agencies
- Building relationships with children and families, working with them to support change



2.5 The levels are:

Universal – Children’s needs are met by universal services such as schools, healthcare services, leisure and community services which are readily accessible to all, as well as the love, care and protection from parents and carers. This is the level of support for children and young people who are making good overall progress in all areas of development. These children receive appropriate universal services, such as health, care and education. They may also use leisure and play facilities, housing or voluntary sector services. They may have a single identified need that can be adequately met by a universal service. If further additional needs are identified, further support should be considered within Universal Plus “Earliest Possible Help” commencing with a partner led Early Help assessment.

Universal Plus “Earliest Possible Help” – At this level children may have unmet or complex needs that require multi-agency support through an early help response involving two or more agencies. This is led by one agency and the aim is to build a plan of support around the child and family to work together to respond to needs. Key features are:

- “Earliest possible help” is a consent based collaborative approach;
- Support can cover a range of work and services working together focussing on problem solving and supporting families, commencing with a partner led Early Help assessment;
- Focus on proactive engagement – working with families and connecting the right people at the earliest possible point. Work will typically be led by organisations such as schools which already work with the family and know them well;

Targeted Early Help - If universal plus earliest possible help has not been effective in working with families to achieve change, contact should be made with the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) to request consideration for escalation to Targeted Early Help. Targeted Early Help is appropriate when children have multiple and complex unmet need requiring a targeted Early Help response. These unmet needs may be complex and could be impacting on the child and family's daily life. The Targeted Early Help approach will retain the multi-agency working, but be led by a worker from the local authority or the commissioned service (Positive Steps) targeted early help teams in the District where the child or young person resides. After assessing the child/young person's need, they will ensure a robust plan is in place and will make any relevant referrals to specialist services. Where support and progress has been made, there can be a planned return to partner led universal plus or the case can be stepped down universal level support.

Children's Social Care - Children with acute needs requiring statutory, high level intervention. This could be due to safeguarding issues including child protection concerns where there is actual or likely significant harm. This will require children's social care to undertake a S17 Children in Need assessment or undertake S47 enquiries as set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018.

3. Development of Early Help

3.1 There is an ongoing reorganisation of the internal targeted early help teams. This has recently been approved, and is in the process of implementation, with the new structure going live on 31 April 2021. Key drivers for change are:

- Strengthening the multi-agency effectiveness of early help for children and families by ensuring that early help is everyone's business. The multi-agency understanding of organisational roles and responsibilities has been reinforced by the recent refresh of the Safeguarding Children Partnership's continuum of need;
- Establishing integrated multi-agency working arrangements which will deliver the earliest possible help – support at the right time by those best placed to deliver it.
- Preventing the needs of children and families from escalating to higher levels of need, and supporting and empowering families, thus reducing the likelihood that problems will recur.
- Reducing the need for children and families to be transferred between teams, enabling them to build trust with workers and avoiding the need to tell their story many times.

3.2 The proposed reorganisation forms part of the wider multi-agency rollout of a district delivery model across Oldham, with many partners organising service delivery around the five districts. Multi-agency district teams will be able to deliver better outcomes for children and families because:

- They will develop better knowledge of local communities and their needs, as well as the assets, such as local voluntary, community and faith groups, which are available to support children and families.
- Teams will build strong working relationships with other professionals supporting children and families in the area, so that they are able to work more effectively together.

-
- District working arrangements will involve the partners with existing relationships with families - those who are best placed to deliver earliest possible help.
 - Shared use of premises can both support delivery of multiple services to children and families, and better communication between professionals.
 - A district governance model will enable partners to agree shared priorities for improved outcomes for children and families in their districts, and to challenge and support each other to improve performance.

3.3 Key elements of the re-organisation are:

- Creation of an integrated Children's Services MASH team, with children's Social Care and early help staff operating as a single team in triaging all contacts seeking support from children's services. Previously contacts seeking support from children's social care and early help have been triaged separately, with cases passed between teams as required. Under the new model, which went live on 1 February, all contacts are triaged by members of the integrated team, led by a social work manager. This has improved the children's social care oversight of all children's services contacts. As part of this, all early help casework has moved into the Mosaic system used by children's social care, so that it is easier to see the full picture of children's services involvement with families. These changes have improved the timeliness of early help decision making, with cases being passed to early help teams within 2 working days.
- Establishing five district targeted early help teams (the Family Connect Service), each with a team manager, family workers and two early help partnership support officers. This reorganisation simplifies the team structure. The family workers will support families in various different circumstances: prior to social care involvement; delivering family support work alongside social work; and supporting families as part of stepping down from social work involvement. This change will reduce the transfers of children and families between workers, minimising the need for families to tell their story repeatedly to different workers;
- The Partnership Support officers will have a key role in supporting delivery of early help by partners at universal plus level. They will work with schools and early years settings, health professionals and other partners to support them to undertake early help assessments, assist in making multi-agency team around the family meetings work effective and help ensure the quality and effectiveness of early help plans. The Family Connect teams will develop close working relationships with other partners supporting families in districts, helping to collectively improve outcomes for children and families.

3.4 There is also a commissioned all age early intervention service operating in the five districts. This has recently been recommissioned for five years, and Positive Steps is the provider. They work closely with the Family Connect teams and are allocated the less complex cases requiring targeted early help. They also provided early intervention support to adults without children.

4. **Planned developments**

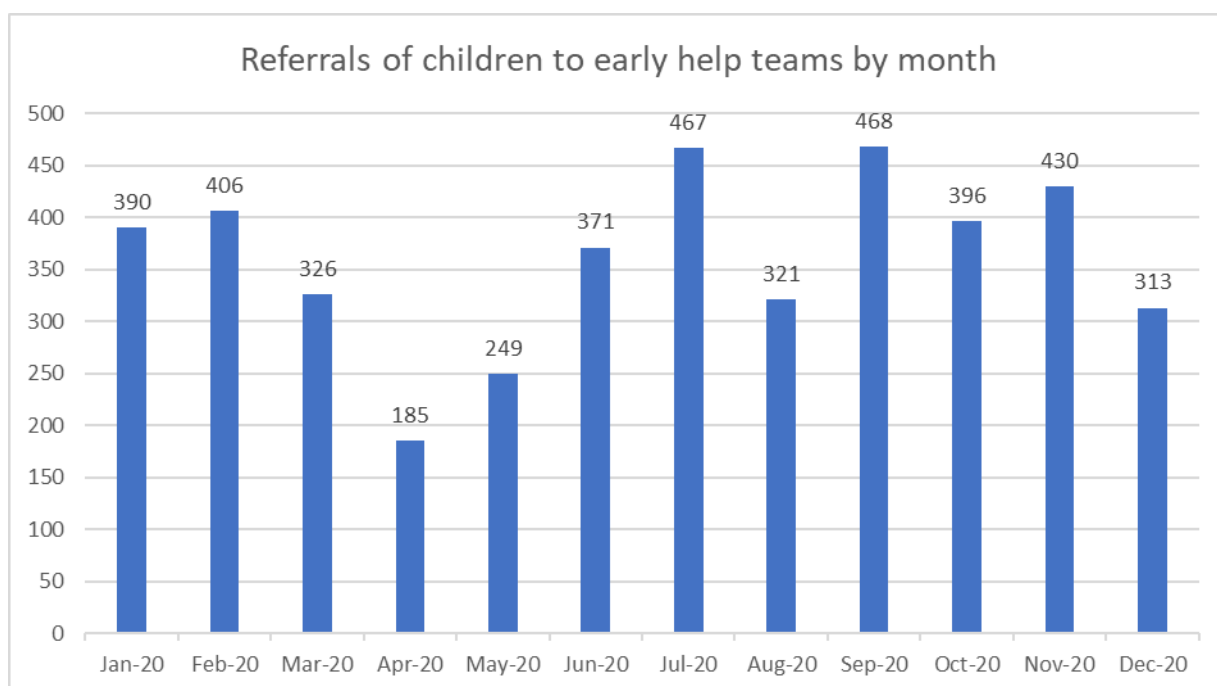
4.1 There is a wide-ranging programme of transformational change within Children's Services, as well as more widely within the Council and across the Partnership. The current restructure is a first stage in the development of the early help offer, and there will be further change over the next two years. This includes exploring integration across early

help, health and early years. There are indicative savings proposals of a further £200k in 2022/23 and £300k in 2023/24. These relate to the wider early help offer and are not restricted to the Family Connect Service budget.

- 4.2 Implementation of the district early help model will commence from 1 April, and there will be a lot of work in embedding this and ensuring the contribution of the full range of partners in delivering earliest possible help. Over time, this is intended to reduce the numbers of children for whom referrals are made into the MASH, because the need for support at higher levels of need will have been met at an early help level.
- 4.3 Work is currently being undertaken to develop proposals around the introduction of an integrated offer for 0-19 year olds. This links to the recommissioning of the service currently deliver by Bridgewater NHS Trust for health visiting and school nursing services and the operation of children's centres, as well as the approach to community health services. It also links to discussions about the future footprint of services of districts, and how these can provide hubs for the delivery of services to children and families.
- 4.4 Work is also ongoing to develop a better co-ordinated parenting offer across Oldham, with clarity about the offer available at different levels of the continuum of need.
- 4.5 A refreshed early help strategy is in development, with a first draft to be produced for late April. This will set out clearly the arrangements for accessing early help, together with a plan for developing and strengthening the offer. A multi-agency partner workshop was held on 11 February which enabled a wide range of organisations to contribute to the developing early help model. This was also supported by survey work with families, front-line workers, senior leaders and community organisations to seek views on how well the current offer meets the good practice identified by the national Troubled Families Unit of what constitutes an effective early help offer. Work will also be undertaken to revise and simplify the early help assessment tool.
- 4.6 To support partnership working around children and families in the five districts, there is a need for governance arrangements which will enable partners to come together to agree priority outcomes for children and families - informed by evidence of need in the area - and to plan how they will work together to address these. It is intended to develop this by adapting the role of the Children's Centre District Advisory Boards.

5. Demand for Early Help

- 5.1 The figure below shows the numbers of children referred to early help teams by month over the last year. There was a drop in demand following the onset of Covid-19 in March but numbers subsequently rose again. There have been clear peaks at the points at which children have returned to school, reflecting the numbers of referrals for support made by schools. It is anticipated that the return of children to school from March 8 will result in a further increase in demand for early help support. Teams are already managing high caseloads, reflecting the pressures on families during Covid-19. During this period early help teams have prioritised continuing to have regular face-to-face contact with families, in order to ensure the visibility of vulnerable children. This approach has applied across all services supporting children and families, with staff in social care, education and health all adopting this approach.



5.2 These figures do not include support delivered by the community hubs during Covid. These have particularly provided support around access to food, but have also addressed a range of other issues. Some staff from targeted early help teams have been supporting this area of work. A lot of work has also been undertaken in partnership between social care, education and health to ensure that professionals have continued to have direct contact with the most vulnerable children.

6 Key Issues for Health Scrutiny Sub-Committee to discuss

6.1 The report has summarised work in relation to the development of the early help offer for children and families, explaining the shift in focus from Oldham Family Connect to the development of the multi-agency early help offer with a strong commitment across the Partnership to make early help everyone's business.

6.2 There are a wide range of inter-connected areas of activity relating to this, including the development of the district model across a range of services. We are now entering a period in which some significant changes have occurred or are on the point of taking place. The Scrutiny Committee may wish to consider how to review the impact of these, and whether they deliver the intended improvements in outcomes for children and families – in particular for those in Oldham's most disadvantaged communities.

6.3 The report has also indicated some ongoing areas of further development. There will be key decisions to make about the approach to this, and the Scrutiny Committee may wish to have oversight of these as plans are developed.

7 Recommendations

7.1 The Committee is recommended to note the update on the developing approach to the multi-agency early help offer, and to contribute views on how to further strengthen this.