

Warwickshire County Council and
Warwickshire Local Safeguarding
Children Board

Early Help peer review

13th to 15th November 2017

Summary Report

1. Scope and Focus

In undertaking this bespoke peer review in Warwickshire, we agreed the following areas of focus with the County Council who commissioned the review on behalf of partners across the county and the Warwickshire Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB):

- Governance and leadership of Early Help in Warwickshire
- Do partners fully understand the part they play in safeguarding children and young people at the earliest opportunity?
- Does the local 'Thresholds for intervention' document support partners in their decision about where a child, young person or family's needs are best met?
- Further development of Early Help going forward.

The review looked at the work of partners and how they interface with one another, and with children and families, to provide effective Early Help and support to reduce the need for more intensive social care and ensure better outcomes for children and families. Specifically, it was intended to gather partner's perceptions of what is working well, but also the barriers that may need to be addressed and the further support required to improve the effectiveness of Early Help across Warwickshire.

The intention of the review was for the peer team to work with partners across Warwickshire in identifying potential solutions to the challenges and issues they face. In producing this summary report, the team have focused on the key challenges and potential next steps, rather than a diagnosis of current strengths and weaknesses. These are largely understood as a result of the Ofsted inspection in May 2017 and Warwickshire County Council's own case audits and reviews. The peer team looked at the overall system and approach, rather than the detail of individual cases.

2. Summary of the peer review approach

The fundamental aim of each peer review is to help councils and their partners reflect on and improve the impact of services for children and young people. It is important to remember that a peer review is not an inspection; it provides a critical friend challenge to the council and their partners in assessing their strengths and identifying their own areas for improvement and potential solutions.

This review adapted the general principles of peer review to provide a bespoke review of Early Help across Warwickshire. The following elements to the review process were agreed:

- A survey of partner's perceptions of the Early Help offer across Warwickshire, undertaken in advance of the review by the County Council. This provided the team with some initial insights, to be explored further during the on-site phase.
- A review of key documentation and data.

- On-site work over three days (from 13th to the 15th November 2017) including individual interviews and focus group discussions to understand the issues and develop potential solutions.
- Initial feedback and discussion of findings with partner representatives at the end of the on-site phase (15th November), to be followed by this summary report.

The peer team

Peer reviews are delivered by experienced officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the review. Peers were selected on the basis of their experience and expertise in Early Help and were agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer review in Warwickshire were:

- Lucy Butler, Director of Children, Education & Families, Oxfordshire County Council
- Sue Lingard, Area Social Care Manager, Oxfordshire County Council
- Andrew Wolverson, Head of Service - Early Intervention, Wolverhampton City Council
- Isabel Vanderheeren, Strategic Lead – Early Help, Walsall Council
- David Armin, LGA review manager.

3. Main Findings – key issues and challenges

3.1 Context

There is a widespread recognition of the importance of Early Help across partners in Warwickshire. The County Council has invested significant resources in the Early Help offer, with a view to preventing the need for more intensive social care support and to reduce resources required in the longer term and improve outcomes for children and families. It has established an Early Help Team of 13 early help officers, led by an early help operations manager. These are deployed across the county and in the MASH to advise and support the provision of Early Help to families, both through the Council's own staff and other key partners.

Notwithstanding this, the Ofsted inspection of services to children in need of help and protection; children looked after and care leavers; and the LSCB in May 2017 found that Early Help services needed to be improved. Recommendations in this regard were made in the inspection report dated July 2017. In particular that the Council should 'ensure that all children and families have access to good quality early help services as soon as they need them and that the early help strategy is fully understood and delivered in partnership with all agencies'. It also recommended that the WSCB 'complete a review of the effectiveness of the early help offer without delay'.

There is a clear desire across partners to work together to enhance Warwickshire's Early Help offer. The commissioning of this peer review demonstrates this and an openness to external challenge and willingness to learn from practice elsewhere.

At the time of this peer review, Warwickshire had just completed a review of its Children's Centres (with a report having gone to the Council's Cabinet on 9th November). It is also reviewing structures across the Children & Families Business Unit – to create 'One Team' across children's social care, family support and youth services, including bringing together the teams responsible for early help and safeguarding. A multi-agency Partnership Transformation Board has been established to oversee this process. It also intends to develop a new Early Help strategy. Along with these wider changes, this provides a real opportunity to strengthen the Early Help offer across Warwickshire and tackle the challenges identified in this report.

3.2 Partner survey

In advance of the peer review, Warwickshire undertook a survey of partners' perceptions of the Early Help offer including what is working well, the potential barriers and where further support may be required.

The survey was conducted in September 2017 and a total of 87 responses were received. Of these, 71 were from education staff. This is indicative of positive engagement of schools with Early Help and the results should give good evidence of the experience of education staff. However, the sample size across other partners is rather smaller. The Council should endeavour to achieve more responses from a wider range of partners in any future survey on experiences of the Early Help offer.

The survey was intended to provide some initial insights for the peer team into partner perceptions around Early Help. These were explored further during its work

on-site. Warwickshire is in a position to undertake further analysis of these survey results should it wish to do so. A summary of some of the key findings is provided in the table below.

Results of partner survey re Early Help, September 2017	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I / my staff are clear when an early help assessment should be completed	34%	33%	18%	8%	6%
I / my staff are clear how an early help assessment should be completed	41%	28%	14%	10%	7%
I / my staff found the multi-agency training* by the Early Help team useful	24%	40%	21%	13%	2%
I / my staff find the guidance on Early Help useful	16%	33%	37%	10%	3%
The Early Help team have assisted when I / my staff experienced a lack of interagency co-operation / engagement in completing an assessment	24%	21%	33%	19%	4%
I / my staff find the MASH consultation process** helpful	30%	37%	23%	8%	3%
I / my staff are clear when to make a referral into the MASH	51%	26%	12%	3%	8%
I / my staff find the Locality Panels*** helpful	19%	33%	24%	14%	10%
I / my staff are clear about the step down procedure from social care to early help	22%	15%	24%	21%	17%

Notes

* 72% of respondents had attended the multi-agency training provided by the WCC Early Help team

** 92% of respondents had used the MASH consultation process

*** 24% of respondents had used a Locality Panel

**** 56% of respondents said they were making a group response on behalf of their organisation

From the survey results, it appears that partners (at least in education who made up the great majority of respondents) are generally clear when and how an Early Help assessment should be completed. The multi-agency training provided by the county's Early Help team is regarded as helpful. However, there is a more mixed picture regarding the guidance provided regarding Early Help, and the assistance provided by the Early Help team when there is a lack of interagency co-operation in completing an assessment. People are clear when to make a referral into the MASH and find the MASH consultation process helpful. Relatively few respondents had used a Locality Panel to help develop solutions around early help, and the experience of those which had was mixed. The results suggest a lack of clarity around the step-down procedure from social care.

3.3 Governance and leadership

There is a widely shared recognition that Early Help in Warwickshire needs to be further improved, and a commitment across partners to do so. However, a simple plan needs to be developed and communicated clearly. In its desire to drive forward Early Help, the County Council's approach has given rise to a perception among some across the partnership that Early Help is something that is 'done to them' rather than 'with them'. The Council needs to ensure that it continues to engage with the evident goodwill across the partnership.

The strategic governance of Early Help needs to be clear and strengthened. Partners across Warwickshire need to agree where this best sits. This could be with the Partnership Transformation Board, in conjunction with the Health & Wellbeing Board. This governance mechanism needs to engage strategic leadership across the partnership. The strategic leadership then needs to agree a joint vision for change across the whole system, so that Early Help is suitably integrated into wider change including that in children's social care and other Council services supporting vulnerable children and young people. Partners should therefore have a clearer sense of the strategic direction.

Partners in Warwickshire are clear that the WSCB does not have executive responsibility for Early Help. However, it does have a key responsibility in holding partners to account for its effective delivery. The appointment of a new Chair for the WSCB provides the opportunity to re-energise the Board and to review membership and expectations of both the WSCB and its Sub-Committees. The Board and its members should be able to provide constructive challenge and support to one another. Partners need to invest the time and capacity in the WSCB to enable it to meet the Ofsted recommendation to review the Early Help offer without delay, including the understanding and application of thresholds. Maintaining engagement with an LSCB can be a challenge. In Oxfordshire, an annual summit (jointly with the Safeguarding Adults Board) to explore a key issue has proved effective in engaging senior leaders.

Warwickshire has recognised the need to develop and agree an Early Help strategy and intends to do so. The current document 'The Early Help Support Offer' seems to fall between being neither a guide to Early Help nor a strategy that lays down where Warwickshire wants to be and how it will get there. As Warwickshire reviews the

Early Help offer, its needs to be clear about the purpose of supporting documentation and ensure these are simply written to achieve their objective.

3.4 Understanding of Early Help

There is a need to develop a clear and consistent understanding of what Early Help is across Warwickshire. People understand and are committed to the basic principles of early help – that of support and prevention to prevent problems escalating to the point where more intensive social care is needed. But they are less able to articulate the Early Help offer in Warwickshire – the respective roles of partners, the pathway and support available etc. There needs to be greater clarity about the offer - what is Early Help, what falls to social care and the interface between the two. The pathway and associated processes then need to be explained in simple terms. Leeds City Council's 'One minute guides' [<http://www.leeds.gov.uk/residents/Pages/One-Minute-Guides.aspx>] provide an example of how guidance can be shared effectively with busy practitioners.

The pathway needs to be simplified and made clearer, with consistent terminology used. For example, many partners still talk in terms of CAFs (the Common Assessment Framework) which has now been replaced by the Early Help Single Assessment (EHSA), about which people appeared rather less familiar. There appears to be confusion arising from the use of similar but different terminology in various documents – such as the stepped approach to demand management (as in the One Organisation Plan) and the tiers of need in respect of the spectrum from universal services through Early Help to statutory social care services.

Within the thresholds document, there may be confusion arising between the 'windscreen' diagram showing the EHSA addressing both additional and complex needs, and the tabulation showing tiers of intervention where the term 'Early Help' is applied to Universal and Additional Support at tiers 1 and 2. Within Tier 3 (Targeted support), a multi-agency referral form is recommended which may then give rise to either Early Help or a statutory child in need response.

It will be important to create a system which incentivises Early Help. Currently there is a perception that Early Help is just an assessment and bureaucratic process rather than offering real support to families. This approach was introduced with good intentions – so that the EHSA could be readily updated to a social care assessment if need be (the principle of single assessment) and to give partners a way of measuring the impact they were making. Moreover, Warwickshire recognises the importance of proportionate assessment. An assessment will be acted upon if the relevant, key information is provided and not returned simply to have blank but less important fields completed. However, the result is a system which now seems to be focussed on process and over complex.

The review team also question the need for pre- and post-Early Help plans. The latter were reported to be required when an Early Help plan runs for over 6 months or it becomes difficult to maintain engagement of other partners. It would seem more important to maintain such early help in place until the agreed outcomes are achieved, or step-up to social care if necessary. These perceptions may derive from a misunderstanding of the system, but are further indications of a system which has become too complex. More attention needs to be given to direct support and

outcomes rather than oversight and monitoring, with Early Help being centred around the needs of children and families.

The support offered by the Early Help officers is well regarded. They have a good knowledge of the services and support available across partners, and this should be the focus of their work rather than the management oversight of cases. Warwickshire should review their roles to ensure consistency and maximise the support available to the lead professionals who are managing individual cases.

There is a need to develop a better understanding of the demand for Early Help, what this consists of and the resources needed across the partnership to respond. The Partnership Board should agree the resources partners will make available to support the Early Help offer. The work being done on the JSNA (Joint Strategic Needs Assessment) may assist with this, including potential unmet need arising from disability or ethnicity. This needs assessment should inform both the priorities in the Early Help strategy and content of Early Help training.

3.5 Thresholds

There is a need to ensure consistency across the pathway. Sufficient information about decision making needs to be provided by the MASH to the referrer. This feedback should include the rationale for decision making (reflecting and referring to the revised thresholds guidance) and the actions being taken. This should help to educate the system (ie. practitioners across the partnership) on the appropriate use of those thresholds. Escalation procedures should be seen as a positive opportunity for a constructive dialogue to test and understand decisions around thresholds, but should not be a substitute for the consistent application of appropriate thresholds.

As noted above, thresholds and responsibilities at Tier 3 need to be clarified with partners. Partners feel that they are being asked to be professional lead in situations which go beyond their experience and capability. For example, schools reported occasions when they were asked to manage parenting issues and parental mental health or undertake safe and well visits. In the experience of the review team, schools in Warwickshire are taking on more than would normally be expected and their willingness to do so is evidence of real commitment to Early Help.

Whilst this is positive expectations of schools should be realistic, otherwise they will not be sustainable. The language used to describe the complexity of cases could also be revised and simplified. Use of terms such as 'complex'; 'high complex' or 'intense' may be giving the impression to partners that the underlying issues are more difficult to address than in reality they are.

The MASH and its consultation service is generally a well-regarded aspect of the Early Help system. But there are still some opportunities for further improvement. The benefits of providing better feedback to those making referrals has been noted above. In the view of review team, the MASH should seek assurances that appropriate consents are being sought at the point of referral, not simply to confirm the legal basis for information sharing across agencies but in preparation for next steps in terms of providing Early Help. There is a need for greater clarity around the RAG system for triaging referrals, in particular the use of the Amber category. The use of Red for safeguarding referrals, and Green for Early Help is understood, but

Amber is less clear, with the outcome at this level being decided following an internal discussion. It is felt this could be made clearer, and therefore easier to communicate to partners if Amber defines the need for a social work (child and family) assessment and that a re-ragging system is used if the need is escalated or de-escalated following a MASH discussion.

The Locality Panels are a potentially useful forum for accessing advice and developing solutions with partners in delivering Early Help. However, they appear to be underused. There needs to be clarity as to whether these panels are to discuss specific named children (for which prior consent would be required) or a broader discussion about potential barriers to a plan progressing which may remove some of the barriers to attendance. Partners need to understand how they relate to other meetings such as the weekly allocation meeting, Family Matters etc. and consideration should be given to rationalising this meetings structure.

4. Moving forward – opportunities to develop the Early Help offer

Having explored the key challenges facing effective Early Help in Warwickshire and potential solutions, it is important to briefly re-state and summarise some of the existing strengths of the system and the opportunities to enhance the Early Help offer.

The value of Early Help is widely recognised. Partners are engaged and demonstrate a high level of commitment to enhancing Early Help for children and families. Early help is well resourced and local knowledge available via the Early Help team is valued. Warwickshire needs to ensure it makes best use of this resource, with this knowledge still accessible by locality based staff. There are a range of good, evidence based interventions available, such as Triple P and PACE. The MASH is a source of valued advice as well as the Early Help Officers.

There are a number of opportunities now to help Warwickshire take forward its Early Help offer across the partnership. New governance structures can be used to oversee and accelerate work in this area. The appointment of a new WSCB Chair gives the opportunity to revitalise the Board and membership. There is an intention to develop an Early Help strategy for the partnership. The move to a new model for Early Help, including the changes to Children's Centres and wider children's transformation gives the opportunity to redesign the whole system with partners. The recommendations made in the next section of this report are intended to help Warwickshire build on these strengths and opportunities to take forward the Early Help offer.

5. Recommendations

Quick wins – early actions to improve the effectiveness of Early Help:

- a) Feedback and discuss implications of the survey undertaken in advance of the peer review with key partners, and consider how to achieve wider partner engagement in any future Early Help survey
- b) Identify Early Help champions across the partnership
- c) Have a group of senior managers across partners ‘walk through the system’ from the family’s perspective
- d) Agree definitions around Early Help in simple language and simplify guidance notes to staff and partners
- e) Warwickshire Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB) to document agreed expectations of different partners
- f) Draw a simple flowchart to describe system to share with partners
- g) Review arrangements in MASH (multi-agency safeguarding hub) to:
 - ensure a feedback mechanism so that those making contacts / referrals are aware of rationale and actions being taken, using thresholds document as a reference point
 - seek assurance that appropriate consent is being sought at point of referral
 - have a clear RAG rating system to remove potential confusion, particularly around the use of the Amber rating

Longer term development of the Early Help system across the partnership:

- h) Determine governance of the Early Help strategy
- i) Engage senior leadership across the partnership through this governance mechanism
- j) Establish strategic intent around Early Help
- k) Realign priorities, including those of the WSCB as necessary, to this agreed intent
- l) Use the WSCB to hold partners to account to ensure effective delivery of Early Help
- m) Review membership / expectations of WSCB and Sub-Groups
- n) Consider a WSCB ‘Annual Summit’ to maintain engagement with the Board and the Early Help offer
- o) Ensure the investment of time and capacity to enable WSCB to deliver Ofsted’s requirement to ‘review Early Help offer without delay’

Longer term development of the Early Help system, to be led by Warwickshire County Council working with partners:

- p) Simplify and rationalise Early Help system – paperwork, meetings, entry and exit points
- q) Make ‘One Team’ a reality, bringing as many Early Help resources as possible into Locality Teams
- r) Use Children’s transformation work to engage partners to design the new pathway
- s) Develop your understanding of demand across Early Help – what this consists of and the resources needed across the partnership to respond
- t) Shift emphasis, including consideration of allocation of resources, from oversight to support the achievement of outcomes
- u) Embed the principles of Early Help as being ‘family led’ rather than a process.

6. Next Steps

The Local Government Association would be happy to discuss how we could help you further through the LGA’s Principal Adviser for the West Midlands, Helen Murray (helen.murray@local.gov.uk or tel. 07884 312235) and the Children’s Improvement Adviser for the West Midlands, Claire Burgess (claire.burgess23@gmail.com or tel. 07854 407337). Members of the peer team have indicated their willingness to provide further advice to Warwickshire and share examples of good practice if this would be helpful to you.

Thank you to everyone involved for their participation and for engaging so constructively with the diagnostic. In particular, please pass on thanks from the peer team to Jenny Butlin-Moran, Anita Lehki, and Rebekah Dryhurst for their help prior to the review and during the on-site phase.