



**Buckinghamshire  
Children & Young  
People's Partnership**

Working together to reach our goals

# **Draft Early Help Partnership Strategy, April 2022 - 2025**

Date: 11 October 2021

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## **Foreword**

This is Buckinghamshire's second Early Help Partnership Strategy and it reflects both the progress we have made together in supporting families and communities, but also the changing context and how we operate within it, in order to effectively meet the challenges faced by individuals and families who have additional support needs. We believe this strategy shows the development of our partnership early help approach and how with increased collaboration and a shared commitment to providing the right support at the right time, we are and can continue to make a real difference to our communities.

The themes from our last strategy – Pro-active, Targeted and Connected – remain our focus, underpinned by the principles agreed across the partnership following a comprehensive review of our early help services. Our evaluation highlighted the success from the point of view of families engaged with early help and the Supporting Families programme and showed the needs of families and the areas we need to concentrate on improving. This self-assessment was wide-reaching across the partnership and has shaped the priorities set out in this refreshed strategy.

Since launching our first early help partnership strategy alongside the introduction of a new, integrated Family Support Service, we have built new and effective relationships with a range of partners. As we emerge from the additional challenges of the Pandemic, we recognise now more than ever that we must build on this positive start, be responsive and flexible in finding the best way to help families at the earliest opportunity to prevent things getting worse and enable them to become more resilient as they move away from longer-term, high cost and statutory services. We believe that this strategy recognises the progress made in the last three years, acknowledges that there remains work to be done and provides direction and focus to enable those in need to easily access appropriate support from partners who work increasingly closely together. This includes sharing skills, knowledge and understanding to support children, young people and families to stay safe, achieve their potential and be more resilient and self-reliant, within supportive communities.

Richard Nash, Anita Cranmer, Robert Majlton

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this strategy is to present what we know about the need for early help, why it is important and what action will be taken to make progress and deliver our vision for children, young people and families in Buckinghamshire. It is jointly produced and owned by the Children's Partnership Board and all its member organisations and sets out what we are already doing and plan to develop together in Buckinghamshire to ensure that children and their families get early help when they need it. This document will steer and enable the priorities detailed in this strategy to be delivered, while also reflecting the priorities set out by Children's Services as set out below.

### **Children's Services priorities for 2021/22:**

Children's Social Care:

1. Service improvement
2. Responding to the growing and unpredictable demand as a result of COVID 19
3. Recruitment and retention of social care workforce
4. Recruitment of in-house foster carers

Education:

5. SEND delivery and improvements
6. Improving education provision and educational outcomes
7. Work with schools to ensure that young people have access to good mental health support
8. Early help

## **Our vision**

Our partnership vision, as set out in Buckinghamshire's Children and Young People's Plan, is:

*To build a better future for all children and young people in Buckinghamshire so that they realise their potential, whatever their starting point is. We will ensure children and young people:*

- *Are safe*
- *Live fulfilling lives*
- *Are healthy*
- *Reach their potential in education and other aspects of their lives*
- *Together with their families are resilient and can identify their own solutions*
- *Make a positive contribution to their community.*

Within Early Help, we want all children and young people in Buckinghamshire to live in resilient families, to be happy, safe and healthy, and to grow up with skills, knowledge and attributes to be confident and independent, ready for adult life. As partners we will work together, including with volunteers and communities to provide a seamless service for children and families. We aim to prevent escalation of need and ensure targeted, timely

interventions that achieve positive outcomes for children and families, supported by effective multi-agency practices.

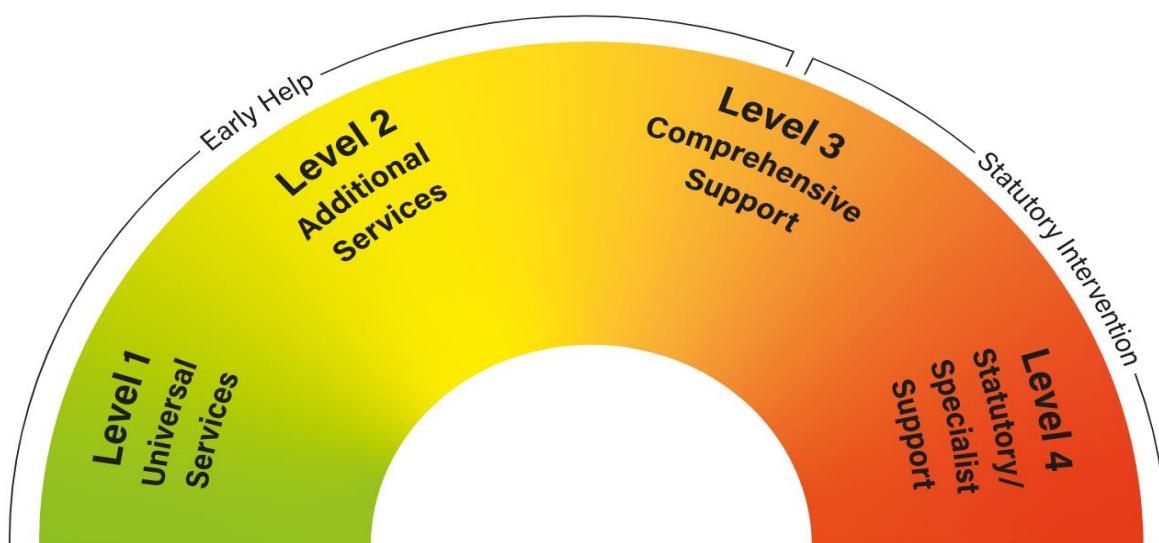
## What is early help?

Early help is an approach that supports the identification of and response to emerging problems that children, young people and their families face at any point in their lives. It is a way of working that supports families to overcome these challenges and avoids things becoming worse and having long-lasting, negative consequences that are harder to resolve. Timely and flexible support is evidently better for children and families, it prevents escalation and is as a result, more cost effective. Early help is provided through a range of different services: universal (which are open to all), targeted provision, and specialist services. It is also embedded in communities where provision is available to families through informal support, local networks and voluntary activity which add real capacity and value to our collective early help offer.

Effective early help relies upon local organisations and agencies working together to:

- Identify children and families who would benefit from early help
- Undertake an assessment of the family or child's needs for early help
- Provide appropriate targeted early help services to address the assessed needs of a child and their family, which focuses on activity to significantly improve the outcomes for the child.

Early help in Buckinghamshire consists of all the support available to children and families at levels 1, 2 and 3 of the Buckinghamshire Children safeguarding Partnership's Continuum of Need document. It also enables children and young people moving away from statutory support (level 4), to sustain the progress they have achieved and promote their increasing independence.



**Level 1** – children whose needs are met within universal services. May need limited intervention to prevent needs arising (universal – available to all)

**Level 2** – children with additional needs identified that can be met through a single agency response and partnership working (early help)

**Level 3** – children with multiple needs requiring a multi-agency coordinated response with a lead professional (targeted early help provision)

**Level 4** – children with a high level of unmet and complex needs or a child in need of protection (statutory intervention).

## **Local context**

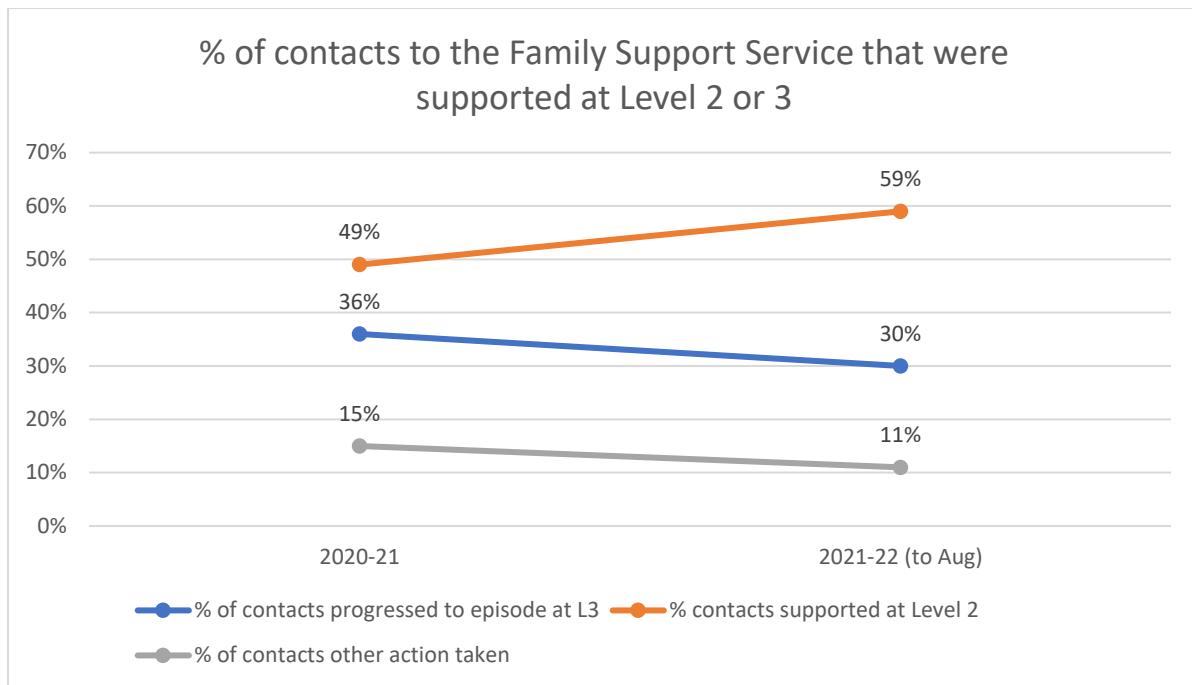
Buckinghamshire has a total population of approximately 545,900. 29% of the population is aged 0-24 years. Figures from 2018 projected that the population will increase by 39,050,200 (7%) by 2043. Approximately 126,400 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Buckinghamshire. This is 23% of the total population in the area. (ONS Subnational population projections – local authorities):

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/datasets/localauthoritiesinenglandz1>

Buckinghamshire is home to an increasingly diverse population. 38% of the pupils attending Buckinghamshire schools in January 2021 were from an ethnic minority (Black and Minority Ethnic or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), compared to the England average of 36% (January 2021 School Census).

## **Demand**

There has been a significant increase in demand for Early Help Services. For example, there were 4781 contacts to the Family Support Service in 2020/21 compared to 3481 in 2018/19. On average 25% of contacts are from schools and while there was a dip in 2020-21, this is likely to be linked to the impact of the pandemic when less children were able to attend, potentially resulting in some early intervention opportunities being missed. If the numbers continue at the same pace as 2021-22 then contact numbers will exceed those seen in 2019-20. More families have been supported at level 2 in 2020/21, reflecting an increased offer of support, including parenting courses, youth groups, wellbeing support for young people, drop-in sessions and targeted 1:1 support. This has meant that families have more opportunity to be supported at an appropriate level and shows a shift towards earlier intervention.



The table below shows the Areas of Concern for Contacts during March/August 2020 compared to March/August 2021. Concerns relating to Education have seen a 119% increase between March/August 2021 compared to March/August 2020. Support for young people demonstrating school avoidance has been introduced to address increased anxieties about returning to schools, as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Area of Concern	Mar-Aug 2020	Mar-Aug 2021	% Change
Home, Family & Parenting	1937	2932	51%
Health	1158	1681	45%
Education	381	835	119%
Affected by Abuse/Exploitation	345	455	32%
Finance	113	115	2%
Crime	84	80	-5%

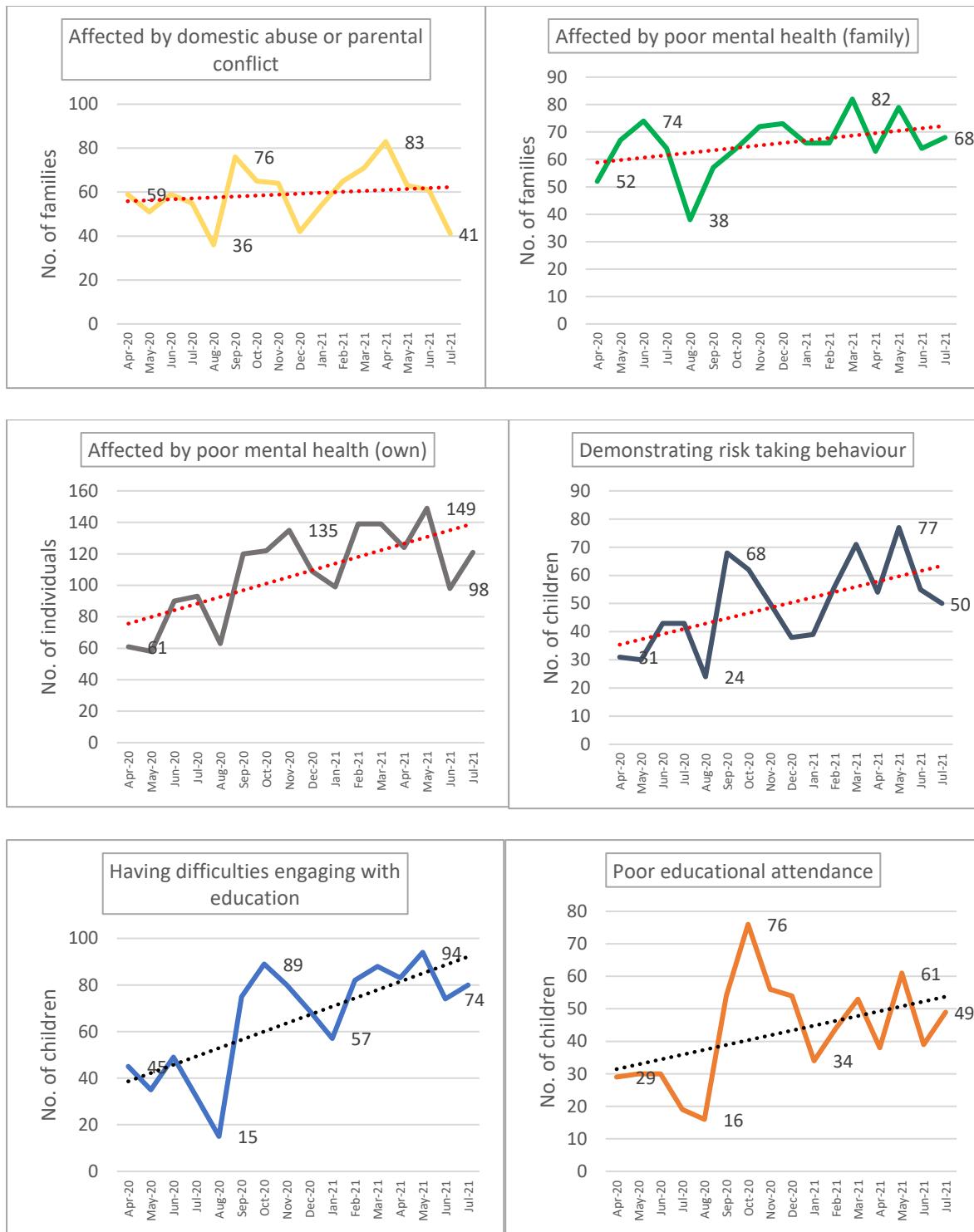
*data extracted from Early Help Module (EHM) data management system 01/09/2021.*

The impact of the pandemic is seen in other areas too. Contacts remain consistently high for:

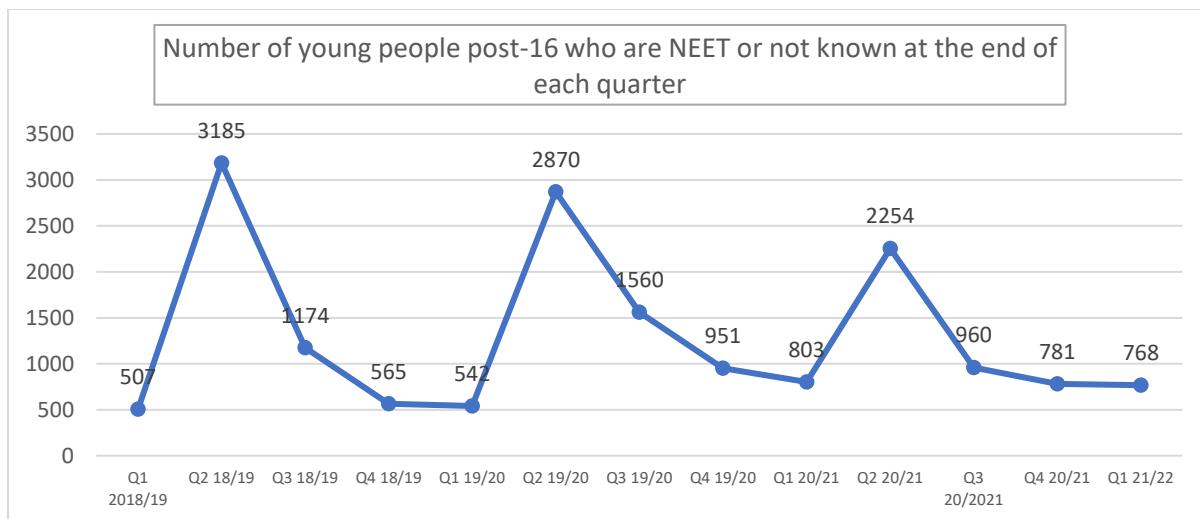
- families and children with a range of health problems
- having difficulty maintaining boundaries and expectations within the home
- having difficulty parenting in a consistent way
- home environment is impacting on the health and wellbeing of the child.

Within Early Help, parenting course requests continue to be in demand particularly in Aylesbury where at least twice as many courses were delivered to parents of teenagers than for primary age, reflecting the impacts from the pandemic as shown above.

While the numbers are lower overall, increases over time evidence potential emerging need in key areas illustrated in the graphs below.



The number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) has remained relatively stable.



Based on the DfE target period of Dec 20 – Feb 21, Buckinghamshire has a higher proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who are NEET or whose activity is not known compared to both the South East and England. It is anticipated that numbers of NEET young people will increase as a result of the impact of the pandemic on employment and training opportunities.

	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21
Buckinghamshire NEET and not known	7.7%	6.9%	6.5%
South East NEET and not known	7.6%	6%	5.7%
National NEET and not known	6.3%	5.2%	4.9%

The increase in demand for Early Help Services is mirrored by an increase in need and requests for statutory services. The volume and complexity of cases in children's social care has increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions and impact of the pandemic has resulted in spikes in demand after restrictions eased. Alongside this, there has been a rise in the complexity in the needs of families requiring an assessment, particularly for families and children with needs relating to mental health, self-harm and sexual abuse which reflect some of the presenting issues seen in Early Help.

## Early help – delivered in partnership

### Buckinghamshire's early help model

Our early help partnership offer is delivered through our integrated network of providers including but not limited to Council services, schools, other education settings, health services and the voluntary and community sector. This partnership approach adds strength and variety to the early help offer and enables flexibility in our approach to supporting families.

We are committed to using our network of 16 family centres to support the identification of emerging needs and provide informal and peer support at a universal level. Teams across organisations provide direct, practical support for children, young people and families and/or advice, guidance and signposting. Lead practitioners coordinate agreed support plans that are developed through a clear understanding of the family context, needs and support priorities. By working together with the family, we all contribute towards achieving the outcomes agreed with the families we are supporting.

Our early help offer aims to be timely and responsive, available to those in need, when they need it. By building on our partnership approach we will continue to increase our ability to work together for the benefit of the children and families who need our support.

## **Governance**

The governance and oversight of Buckinghamshire's Early Help Partnership Strategy recognises that the delivery of our offer is not the responsibility of a single agency but is owned by all partners that work with children, young people and families. Governance is provided by Buckinghamshire's Children's Partnership Board, via the Early Help Operational sub-group. Scrutiny and challenge are provided by Buckinghamshire's Safeguarding Children Partnership. Membership of each of these Boards is broad and involves statutory, voluntary and community sector partners. Organisations and services currently represented on these boards include:

- Buckinghamshire Council
- Public Health
- Aspire
- Families and Carers Together (FACT) Bucks
- Leap
- Thames Valley Police
- Action4Youth
- Oxford Health
- School representatives
- Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust
- Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue
- Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust

In Buckinghamshire, early help is a collaboration between Council services and the wide range of organisations who work with children and families. Early help services cannot be viewed in isolation, but instead as a complimentary, constituent element of the continuum of support, from universal services through to statutory or acute provision (where required), all of which are focussed on improving the lives of children at the earliest opportunity.

The delivery of our early help strategy is founded on a joint commitment to shared outcomes, which will evidence the impact we make for families by intervening early and providing the right support at the right time, enabling sustainable outcomes and building family resilience.

A critical ingredient to successful working is the partnership with families, and their commitment to make changes in their lives. All our work is child and family-centred, consent-based and focussed on working collaboratively with families to overcome the issues they face, build their resilience and leave them better able to manage future challenges.

## Our principles

The early help partnership has adopted the following shared principles:

1. **Work to families' strengths** – recognising and developing existing strengths of children, parents and carers and take the time to understand their needs fully.
2. **Focus on preventing problems** before they occur and offer timely, flexible and responsive support when and where it is required.
3. **Build the resilience** of children, young people, parents and communities to support each other.
4. **Work together across the whole system** aligning resources to best support families to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.
5. **Base all that we do on evidence of what works**, what is needed and what will be effective for families. We must be brave enough to innovate and honest enough to stop things that are not working as well as we want.
6. **Be clear and consistent about the outcomes** we expect and measure our performance against them.

## Achievements since 2019

The Covid 19 pandemic impacted on delivery, however all services contributing to early help, adapted and maintained provision in a range of ways to ensure families continued to be supported wherever possible. Achievements since 2019 are numerous and include the following examples.

Together with health partners we have:

- continued to deliver the Healthy Child Programme and supported those in care to have their health needs met
- delivered health advice clinics in secondary schools, providing support on a range of topics
- engaged parents of children under 2 in Walk the Talk activities to reduce isolation and provide support to new parents.

Together with the voluntary and community sector we have:

- delivered a comprehensive youth offer, including for those with SEND. This has included programmes supporting employability, wellbeing, transition to adulthood and has included the National Citizen Service, DofE Award, and the Inspiration programme
- identified more young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) who have then been supported to re-engage
- Worked with Heart of Bucks to provide financial support for families and Care Leavers who suffered hardship due to the pandemic.

Together with education partners we have:

- engaged 565 families with parenting provision and supported 72% of families to achieve sustained positive outcomes following targeted support
- provided school link workers to all schools within the county, helping to provide appropriate support to children and young people when they need it
- expanded our Mental Health Support Teams, building on the success of an initial pilot enabling families to access multidisciplinary support in schools
- delivered prevention programmes including activities for young people open to Youth Offending
- increased our trainee and apprenticeship offer, enabling more young people to access employment.

Together with statutory services we have:

- worked collaboratively in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub to ensure children received the right support at the right time through allocating the appropriate level of intervention and escalating to Social Care as appropriate to needs
- developed a pilot using Family Group Conferencing to support families experiencing parental conflict which was impacting on the child's mental health
- developed closer working and integration between statutory and non-statutory services to provide the right support to families.

## **Refreshing our strategy**

An extensive period of engagement has taken place to ensure that our Early Help Strategy (2022 - 2025) is co-designed. The engagement process allowed for a significant period of reflection; we wanted to fully understand where our previous Early Help Strategy (2019-2022) had taken us, what it had achieved and, most importantly, what life is like for those receiving support in Buckinghamshire in 2021. We also needed to understand the full extent of our collective resources and strengths. The principles that were developed for our first strategy remain relevant and will continue to drive our approach to Early Help over the next

three years. This strategy builds upon and further develops the good work which resulted from the 2019-22 Early Help Partnership Strategy.

## **What are children, young people and families telling us?**

Families using early help services generally give very positive feedback about their experiences and feel they have been supported to resolve concerns, overcome issues and cope with their own personal circumstances. Comments have included:

*"Overall great, helpful course, helping to change our lives to positive and well-being."*

*"Great facilitators who ensured a safe and open space for the attendees to open up. Provided useful tips, advice and empathy...The format is very good."*

(Parents of children with SEND attending a nurture parenting group)

Children and young people who have attended courses and groups have found them engaging and fun, creating an environment in which they felt safe and listened to and therefore able to learn.

*"I really enjoyed the sessions and I started to open up with the help! It was and is the highlight of my week and I'm going to miss seeing everyone!"*

*"I have learnt helpful coping mechanisms to deal with my anxiety and know that help is available should I need it."*

*"My self-esteem and confidence boosted drastically in such a short amount of time."*

(Young people commenting on Family Support Service courses)

Families have also identified areas where they would like to see more provision or receive more support. These areas include:

- support for new parents: "I don't know what to expect my child to be doing, I haven't had the chance to discuss their development or compare to other children, which is difficult as he is my first child."
- support for parents/carers of children returning to school following closures due to the pandemic, so they know how best to support those who are finding the return difficult.
- Support for parents/carers of children with SEND. A parenting course specifically for this group was successful and feedback suggested more were needed: "Definitely

been worthwhile. It's a shame there isn't an opportunity for more parents to attend."

- Opportunities for parents/carers with shared experiences to meet to support each other.

Parent/carers have also fed back the need to promote the early help offer more widely, including promotion to young people: "I wish I'd known about the early help offer and support a year ago" and "Young people need to know what support is available and how to access for themselves when they need it."

This engagement and consultation together with our self-evaluation and data analysis have enabled us to identify our key partnership priorities for the next three years.

## **Our priorities for 2022 - 25**

**Priority 1: Strengthen multi-agency strategic governance and joint ownership of the Early Help Strategy by:**

1. Establishing an operational sub-group with key stakeholders (including representatives of children and young people). This group will provide reports on progress to the Children's Partnership Board who steer, support and challenge the partnership in order to achieve the aims of the strategy.
2. Improving planning, coordination and oversight of all organisations and services contributing to the early help offer to ensure provision is comprehensive, cohesive and gaps are identified and responded to.
3. Ensuring data on the impact of the support provided is routinely collected, collated, analysed and shared so achievements across Early Help can be quantified and used to inform future developments.

**Priority 2: Further develop the Early Help offer to include a targeted response to the increased risk of long-term disadvantage for children, young people and families due to the Covid-19 pandemic, by:**

1. Providing support for those children, young people and families who have increased vulnerabilities. This may include those who are:
  - a. not in employment, education or training (NEET)
  - b. are home educated, excluded, or are not receiving education
  - c. are vulnerable to exploitation.
2. Developing a support offer for new parents/carers whose early parenthood experience has been altered by the pandemic, resulting in increased anxieties, greater isolation from peers and reduced access to help and support to address any developmental delays in their children.

**Priority 3: Work together to provide effective Early Help in line with our strategic objectives and Early Help Partnership Action Plan, that supports children, young people and families to easily access support. We will do this by:**

1. Regularly reviewing need, demand and location of services to ensure families in all areas are able to access suitable provision and be effectively supported.
2. Building on current good practice, identify additional opportunities for joint working to improve the experience of families, provide timely and appropriate services and reduce the need for unnecessary statutory or clinical intervention.
3. Further developing our practice and maximising our capacity to work together as a partnership using the lead agency model to meet the needs of families in complex circumstances, who need the coordinated effort from all sectors, working together towards the agreed outcomes for the family.
4. Creating a consistent and jointly owned Early Help training and support offer for front-line practitioners e.g. trauma informed practice, responding to presenting needs.
5. Reviewing pathways in partnership with families to ensure they are clear and easy to navigate, improving the user experience and timely access to support.
6. Seeking engagement of Primary Care Networks in the health liaison meetings and wider early help engagement to further enable an holistic approach to supporting families.
7. Identifying additional opportunities to co-locate early help services and further develop Family Centres into community hubs, ensuring spaces are fit for purpose for all age groups.

**Priority 4: Develop a common understanding of Early Help across the partnership and promote a cohesive Buckinghamshire offer, by:**

1. Increasing the visibility of all aspects of the Early Help offer in Buckinghamshire to ensure all families and partners are aware of and able to access the right services to support them.
2. Identifying opportunities to share practice and collaborate across organisations and services to further embed a shared understanding of Early Help at all levels (tiers 1-3).
3. Generating a sense of purpose and belonging as a provider delivering early help in Buckinghamshire, to maximise the availability and collective impact of a broad range of support, service and intervention.
4. Recognising and engaging new partners to add breadth and capacity to our partnership and expand our network, providing clear and well understood pathways to appropriate support.

## **Outcomes and measuring success**

An Early Help Partnership Action Plan, owned by an Early Help Operational Sub-group will be developed to detail the activity required to meet the 4 partnership priorities. This Action Plan will include performance measures and success criteria so that the Children and Young People's Partnership Board can assess and challenge progress against this Strategy. The Plan will be a living document with appropriate governance, updated to reflect changing priorities.

In addition to the Partnership Action Plan the Board will receive reports and provide oversight of performance management information provided by all those who directly deliver early help. Utilising approaches used in Supporting Families and across the partnership the sub-group will develop a 'Families Outcomes Performance Framework' to collate and report on:

- Identified need, enabling provision to be jointly planned
- where early help interventions have been successful in enabling families who have multiple and complex needs to sustainably improve their lives and step away from formal support.

The Action Plan and the Framework underpin the implementation of this strategy and are intended to evidence sustained and significant progress against the priorities.

## **Appendix 1: Interdependencies**

- Start Well Report 2021
- Children and Young People's Plan
- SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2021- 2023
- Education and Skills Strategy 2019-2022