

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION, ADULT AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

TO:	ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SERVICES & EDUCATION COMMITTEE		
DATE:	7 NOVEMBER	AGENDA ITEM:	17
TITLE:	READING'S EARLY HELP STRATEGY		
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Providing 'Early Help' means intervening as soon as possible to tackle problems emerging for children, young people and their families. Intervention may occur pre-birth and at any stage in a child's or young person's life. Reading's Early Help Strategy sets out the vision and areas of development across the range of services that provide early help for families in Reading, broadly covering those services below the threshold of Children's Social Care or other specialist interventions.
- 1.2 This report provides details of the consultation completed on the draft Strategy (as agreed by the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee on 1st July 2013) and presents the final version of Reading's Early Help Strategy for endorsement. It also outlines the planned next steps to implement the actions identified in the Strategy, including the development of a Delivery Plan that will set out a realistic level of activity matched to reducing resource levels.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 To endorse the final version of Reading's Early Help Strategy and request annual updates on progress in implementing the Early Help Strategy to the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Reading's Early Help Strategy is produced in the context of a number of national studies, reports and reviews that reinforce the effectiveness of Early Help in promoting the welfare of children. This includes the Munro Review of

Child Protection, which recommended that “The Government should place a duty on local authorities and statutory partners to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young people and families.”

- 3.2 The Government has accepted some of Munro’s recommendations, and published the ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’ guidance in March 2013 as a new guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children that sets out the legislative requirements and expectations on individual services.
- 3.3 In relation to Early Help, the ‘Working Together’ guidance includes the need for local agencies to have effective systems in place to identify emerging problems and unmet needs for individual children and families, and the provision of an ‘early help offer’ where their needs don’t meet the criteria for receiving children’s social care services.
- 3.4 The Evaluation Schedule for the Ofsted Inspection of Arrangements for the Protection of Children in 2013 included a requirement to have “an early help offer that reflects the needs of the population and is accessible”.

4. EARLY HELP STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

- 4.1 Work to produce an Early Help Strategy began in March 2013. The strategy is structured around five priority areas, which reflected the then Ofsted framework for the Inspection of Arrangements for the Protection of Children (noting this has now been succeeded with a new framework):
 - Early Identification and Assessment of Need
 - Effective Early Help for Children and Families
 - Supporting the Most Vulnerable and Sustaining the Change
 - Listening to and Involving Children and Families
 - Quality of Practice
- 4.2 Each section sets out Reading’s current early help offer, and identifies the key actions to take forward further improvements, and the outcome measures that will be used to monitor progress.
- 4.3 The strategy is informed by the analysis of demographic, needs and performance data; national best practice; and feedback from stakeholders - including over 200 interviews with local parents as part of our ‘Transforming Early Years’ project.
- 4.4 A number of key stakeholders across Reading Borough Council and other partners in health services and the voluntary sector were involved in shaping the draft version of the Early Help Strategy, which was endorsed for wider consultation by the Adult Social Care, Children’s Services and Education Committee in July 2013.
- 4.5 The Let’s Talk Early Help consultation ran from 8th July to 27th September. The consultation was aimed at a range of internal and external partners (Reading

Borough Council staff, schools, statutory and voluntary sector agencies) and parents, carers and young people.

4.6 The consultation was carried out through a range of methods, including:

- Publication of the draft Strategy and a summary version on the RBC website, along with an online questionnaire.
- A summary leaflet made available in community settings such as children's centres, including a short questionnaire.
- Promotion of the draft Strategy and consultation to a large number of partners through a RBC press release, on the Reading Voluntary Action website and to members of partnership groups.
- Discussion at a number of partnership meetings, including the Children's Trust Board, the Local Safeguarding Children Board, and the Health and Wellbeing Board.
- Opportunities for RBC staff to share their views through staff lunchtime sessions and discussions at team meetings.
- Tailored consultation events for health staff and voluntary sector representatives.
- Focus groups for parents arranged at children's centres in each locality (North, East, South, West), promoted through the children's centres and to families using services in the Children's Action Teams (CATs).
- Discussions with young people at Youth Service events such as Youth Clubs and summer events.

4.7 Overall, respondents to the consultation were broadly happy with the vision and the priorities identified in the draft Early Help Strategy. In particular, there was support for actions that would make it easier for families to access services, such as the development of Family Support Hubs at some children's centres.

4.8 Some respondents felt that the Strategy needed greater emphasis on the work of Early Help services to identify and support those families in greatest need, so as to prevent escalation of problems and reduce the demand on Children's Social Care. The Strategy emphasises that at a time of reducing resources, the effective targeting of Early Help services is even more important. The inclusion of a priority for 'Early Identification and Assessment of Need' highlights the importance of working with the most vulnerable families as early as possible to have the greatest positive impact.

4.9 There was a concern from some respondents that the proposed action to create a Parents Forum would only allow a limited number of parents to participate. The final Strategy has been updated to underline that the introduction of a Parents Forum would only be one of a wide range of methods used to hear the voice of service users and receive feedback - and that listening to the child and family remains an integral element of all assessment and work with families.

4.10 Some respondents commented that the Strategy did not sufficiently highlight the significant role of Reading's Voluntary and Community Sector in supporting

children, young people and families. The final version of the Strategy contains a list of services that voluntary sector organisations are contracted to deliver, but also highlights the wide-ranging engagement of children and families by the VCS through community-based activities such as youth groups, and the considerable expertise in providing support to certain groups, such as families with children with learning difficulties, or strengths in reaching communities and families that might not choose to engage with local authority services.

- 4.11 As a result of the feedback received in the consultation, the draft Strategy has been updated to reflect the comments. Following sign-off by the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee, the final Early Help Strategy will be published.

5. NEXT STEPS

- 5.1 Following publication, a Delivery Plan will be developed to underpin the Strategy and set out how the key actions identified will be implemented, identifying lead officers, resources and timescales for the delivery.
- 5.2 The Delivery Plan will align with work to implement the strategies that run parallel to the Early Help Strategy, such as the Reading Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- 5.3 Progress against the Delivery Plan and evidence of the impact achieved through the identified outcome measures will be monitored by Reading's Children's Trust Board/ Health and Wellbeing Board. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board will also receive reports on the progress in delivering the Strategy, to fulfil their role in scrutinising the effectiveness of Early Help services.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 6.1 The Early Help Strategy is aligned with Reading Children's Trust 'Children & Young People's Plan' as well as other strategies covering Special Educational Needs, Edge of Care and Early Years.
- 6.2 The Early Help Strategy is closely aligned with the strategic priorities in the Reading Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2013-16, which includes a goal to "increase the focus on early years and the whole family to help reduce health inequalities".

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 A wide range of partners and parents, carers, young people and families accessing Early Help services were engaged in the development of the Strategy, and it is our ambition to maintain this as the Strategy is implemented and the action plan is developed. The work to develop Family Hubs at some children's centres is a good example of a piece of work that will need to engage local people and partners to ensure that this meets their needs.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment for the Early Help Strategy is attached.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are a range of statutory duties relevant to Early Help services including:

- i) Section 10 of the Children Act 2004 requires each local authority to make arrangements to promote cooperation between the authority and relevant partners to improve the wellbeing of all children in the area, which includes protection from harm and neglect.
- ii) Section.17.1(a) of the Children Act 1989 sets out that local authorities have a duty to 'safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need'. A child is 'in need' if their health, or physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development, will be significantly impaired without the provision of services by a local authority, or if they are disabled. Local authorities can provide a range of services to support children in need and their families and a key route to Reading managing its duty is through the provision of the CAT teams. Children in Need are also supported through Children's Social Care and this is determined by their level of need as set out in a 'thresholds document'.
- iii) The Childcare Act 2006 imposed duties on local authorities to improve the well-being of young children in their area and reduce inequalities between them, and to ensure that early childhood services are provided in an integrated way - to improve access and maximise the benefits of those services to young children and their parents. It also placed duties on Primary Care Trusts, Strategic Health Authorities, and Jobcentre Plus (as statutory 'relevant partners') to work together with local authorities in achieving this.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 A key focus of early help services is to prevent an escalation of needs, and therefore costs, and to reduce demand for higher tier services. The Strategy is set in the context of reducing resources across the public sector, and the even greater need to focus on working together with partners to combine resources and ensure effective targeting to have the greatest impact for the most vulnerable children, young people and families. This includes making the very best use of voluntary and community sector organisations, whether commissioned by Reading Borough Council or not.

10.2 The Delivery Plan sitting beneath the high-level strategy will include greater detail on the use of resources to deliver the identified actions, including a resource plan that sets out a realistic level of activity in the context of reducing resource levels.

10.3 Implementation of an outcomes-based performance framework as detailed in the strategy will start to evaluate the local impact of services - both for individual families and in terms of service impact more widely. There is currently no national benchmarking information available on the effectiveness of early help services. However, nationally as part of the Troubled Families programme, the Government is developing a secure system to collect a range of monitoring information on a minimum of 10% of each authority's 'Troubled Families' cohort. A national model is also being developed to capture both cost avoidance and cost savings resulting from interventions and this could be applied across early help services.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' guidance

11.2 The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, a child-centred system

11.3 Ofsted Evaluation Schedule for the Inspection of Arrangements for the Protection of Children

11.4 'Early Help Strategy' report to the Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Education Committee, 1st July 2013