

Let's Talk Early Help - Consultation Report

Background

In Reading there are a range of services below the threshold of Children's Social Care or very specialist interventions that aim to provide 'Early Help' to families - intervening as soon as possible to tackle problems emerging, or to prevent existing needs worsening for children, young people and their families. This can take place pre-birth or at any stage in a child's or young person's life.

Reading is publishing its first Early Help Strategy to set out the overarching vision and key actions for how we aim to strengthen joint working and consistency across these services, to ensure that we identify needs and support children, young people and their families at the earliest possible stage, improving outcomes and reducing costs.

Work to produce an Early Help Strategy began in March 2013. It was agreed to structure the Strategy around five priority areas:

- 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

In each section, the detail on Reading's current Early Help offer is set out, alongside the key actions needed to further develop and improve these services, and the outcome measures to be used to monitor progress.

The strategy is informed by the analysis of demographic, needs and performance data; national best practice; and feedback from parents and young people. A wide range of managers across Reading Borough Council services and partners in health and the voluntary and community sector have helped to inform a draft document.

What We Consulted On

Following the publication of a draft Early Help Strategy, we consulted more widely on the contents of the document - asking if we had identified the right priorities and actions, and for anything people felt was missing.

More specifically, we wanted to know:

- Views on the proposed vision and the priorities
- Any suggestions for additional priorities and/or actions to be included
- Ideas from partners on how they felt they could be involved in work to deliver on the strategy objectives
- What experiences young people, children and parents had with Early Help services, and their ideas on how access to timely support could be improved

How We Consulted

The “Let’s Talk Early Help” consultation was launched on 8th July 2013, and ran for 12 weeks 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), parents, carers and young people.

The Strategy was made available on the Reading Borough Council website, alongside a summary version and an online questionnaire for people to submit their feedback. This was promoted to a large number of stakeholders through routes such as Reading Borough Council internal communication methods, press release, the Reading Voluntary Action (RVA) website, and email to members of Reading Children and Youth Voluntary Sector (RCVYS). A leaflet was produced to promote the consultation and made available in community settings such as children’s centres. The leaflet also contained a short questionnaire that people could complete.

The consultation was discussed at a number of partnership groups and other meetings, including:

- Reading’s Children’s Trust Board
- Local Safeguarding Children Board
- Health and Wellbeing Board
- School Cluster meetings
- CAT (Children’s Action Team) team meetings

Specific consultation workshops and lunchtime meetings were organised for RBC staff, health staff and voluntary sector representatives to be part of the consultation.

Young people were consulted at Youth Service activities across the borough, such as Youth Clubs and summer events. Parents were invited to attend focus groups across the four localities in Reading, and were also involved in the consultation while attending events at children’s centres.

Feedback

Parents

- Parents were generally pleased with the support they received from services, such as the Children's Action Teams and Health Visitors. Many parents talked about positive relationships with professionals - they felt that they really cared about their needs and took time to provide support in a non-judgemental way. Generally, parents were comfortable about asking for advice, and confident that these workers would be able to help them to access a wide range of support as needed.
- For some parents, there were times when they felt their children did not get support early enough - while on the waiting list for Children & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for example, or waiting for a referral to be made to Speech and Language Therapy.
- A few parents felt it would be better if they could contact services such as Family Workers directly for support, rather than waiting for a referral to be made. There was also a concern that some families would be scared of asking for help in case they were seen as doing anything "wrong" and Child Protection issues were raised.
- There was broad support for continuing to be able to access children's centres as children got older, as a local place to access support and meet with other parents.
- Parents who had accessed parenting courses had found them useful, and felt more confident about parenting and learning from others as a result.
- Some parents felt there should be more for older children and teenagers to do.
- For some parents in North Reading it was felt communication could be better so that a greater number of families were aware of all the activities going on in the area.
- Parents also had ideas for additional support that would be helpful, such as more sessions like adult learning when crèche facilities are available, or specific support for older first-time parents.
- Parents commented on the relationship with schools and, while some were positive about how they had been well supported, others felt that they had not had enough contact or support from the school when problems had arisen.

Young People

- Young people attending activities such as Youth Clubs value the support they get and the opportunity to meet friends and learn new skills
- Most young people would talk to their friends or family about any problems they had, but those who had a good relationship with a Youth Workers would feel comfortable asking for help and support if needed too.

Voluntary, Community & Faith Sector (VCFS) organisations

- VCFS representatives felt that the Strategy should have a stronger focus on the role of the VCS in providing Early Help; not only where services are commissioned from Reading Borough Council, but the much wider support provided.
- It was felt that there are many strengths in the Voluntary & Community Sector that could be used to improve support for families and children. The development of a Resource Directory is one way to improve awareness of what is available, but opportunities for networking and promoting services through events for front-line workers, for example, are also important.
- It was felt that links between teams and services could be improved, particularly making sure short-term interventions were linked seamlessly to longer-term or ongoing support. There was support for roles like the Parental Mental Health worker who can be a connection across different teams.
- Parent and Toddler groups run by the VCS were identified as a key group that is not currently well-networked into other support for families, and a Forum to address this has been established.
- Literacy was felt to be a key issue that impacted significantly on a child's development and that targeted support within schools was as important as the work in the Early Years.
- It was felt important to recognise the role that VCS organisations have listening to and representing the voice of the families they work with.

General comments

- There was support for using the Outcome Star as a shared approach to working with families and measuring impact, as long as training was provided to make sure it was used properly. Being able to aggregate improvements across families was seen as a positive.

- There were concerns that Parent Forums would only engage a small group of parents and there need to be a different ways to capture the voice of families more widely. Some respondents felt that the Strategy didn't highlight that capturing the voice of the child and family is already a core part of assessment and work with families.
- Several partners, particularly schools, commented that the CAF process was sometimes a barrier to accessing support for families, and there was support for the planned actions to simplify referral routes.
- GPs and Schools were identified by many as key settings that have contact with families and that need to be able to provide support or signpost to other services in the easiest way possible- again supporting plans to simplify access to services.
- Some respondents were concerned about families needing high-end Early Help support, particularly where families were below the threshold for Children's Social Care but didn't fully engage with the Children's Action Teams. Some people also highlighted the gap in Specialist Parenting programmes for families who needed this.
- There was broad support for the plans to develop Family Hubs, particularly as a place for families with older children to access a range of support. There were some concerns that the staff at these centres will need to have increased knowledge to be able to offer this service, however.
- Some respondents questioned how the Strategy would be delivered as the resources of the Council and other partners reduced; it was recognised that increased targeting would become more and more important.