

The Early Help Strategy for Blackpool 2021-2023

*The right help, the right time,
the right place, the right people*



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Foreword

The Children and Families Strategic Partnership Board is pleased to share Blackpool's new Early Help Strategy which sets out our approach and plans for developing the way that we work with children, young people and families as early as possible to improve their outcomes.

This strategy will support our ambition to increasingly work with families early in the life of a problem and move away from over-dependence on statutory and specialist services. This approach is morally, ethically and financially the right thing to do and fits well with embedding the Blackpool Families Rocks model of practise, and restorative approaches to the way we work with our children, young people and families. Fundamentally, Early Help should be seen as everybody's business and part of what we all do.

We have a wide range of services and provision in Blackpool and there is a strong ambition to support children, young people and families to aspire and achieve. We need to capitalise on our partnerships and the enviable funding streams that Blackpool is able to attract, to be creative and embed an effective early help system, with a multiagency approach.

We are excited at the possibilities that working early with our children and their families presents and look forward to working with you.



Cllr Lynn Williams
Leader of the Council



Vicky Gent
Director of Children's Services

Purpose

All children in Blackpool have the right to live and grow up in a safe environment in which they are protected from harm, nurtured to build their resilience to adversity and supported to achieve their aspirations. Some children, and their families, will need additional help and support to achieve this.

When we talk about children in this document we mean all children from conception to 19 years of age or up to 25 years old for those with SEND needs.

Responding early to emerging need is a key feature of our work in Blackpool, the golden thread of how we want to support and work with our children and families and is referred to in many other documents, in particular our Neglect and SEND strategies:

'The purpose of this [Neglect] strategy is to ensure that those children in Blackpool who experience neglect are identified and receive the timely help and support they require to mitigate the impact of their neglectful experiences'

and

'Preventative and Early Help responses - These are critical to avoid issues from escalating and children experiencing further harm

Blackpool Neglect Strategy 2019 – 2022

'Blackpool is committed to early intervention and prevention, providing early help in a timely way so that the needs of local children and young people do not increase. Making sure that we identify needs early and provide the right support, is key to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND'

Blackpool SEND strategy 2019 -2021

This document sets out our approach in Blackpool to early help and our overarching strategic aim to respond earlier to the needs of children and their families to prevent the need for higher level of statutory interventions:

***The right help, the right time,
the right place, the right people***



Early help is important

The importance of early help in supporting children and their families is outlined in a number of national reviews and policy documents, such as Working Together 2018, in recognition that effective early help for children and families improves their outcomes long-term:

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 **Chapter 1: Early Help**

1. Providing early help is more effective in promoting the welfare of children than reacting later. Early help means 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. Early help can also prevent further problems arising, for example, if it is provided as part of a support plan where a child has returned home to their family from care.
2. Effective early help relies upon local agencies working together to:
 - Identify children and families who would benefit from early help
 - Undertake an assessment of the need for early help; and
 - Provide 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. Local authorities under s10 Children Act 2004 have a responsibility to promote inter-agency cooperation to improve the welfare of children'

Early help can be offered to any child and their family at any age, but there is much research on the particular importance of responding to needs as early as possible in a child's life. 'The Best Start for Life - The Early Years Healthy Development Review Report – March 2021' explores the importance of support for children and their families in the first 1001 days (conception to the age of two), when the foundations of a child's health, development and wellbeing are set.

The Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP writes in the Chairman's introduction of the report:

'Two is too late! We spend billions on challenges in society from lack of school readiness to bullying to poor mental health to addictions and criminality; and further billions on conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and congenital heart disease. Yet, the building blocks for lifelong emotional and physical health are laid down in the period from conception to the age of two and we don't give this critical period the focus it deserves. Prevention isn't only kinder, but it's also much cheaper than cure – what happens to an infant in the 1,001 critical days is all about prevention'



One of the key issues that the review heard described was (Executive Summary, page7, point 6):

'Not everyone who works with families during the 1,001 critical days implements a plan of support which has been shared and agreed with the family. Sometimes, professionals and volunteers do not know what good joined up services would look like for that family...'

Our early help strategy will support us to respond to long-standing policy guidance and ensure that we are able to respond to new guidance, developments and opportunities.

What do we mean by early help?

Early Help in Blackpool is our approach to working with children and families with a range, or a combination of, social, health or educational needs as soon as problems arise. Families should be supported to understand their children's and their own needs or problems and be provided with advice, guidance, support and services to help them before higher levels of support or services are needed.

It is useful to think of early help as

- The right help*** By undertaking strong assessments with children and their families and using these to understand their needs and planning effectively to support them.
- The right time*** Offering help as soon as needs and problems begin and before any higher levels or specialist services are needed or when a child or family ask for it.
- The right people*** Early help works best when those people who know the family well or speak to the regularly lead on the work but work with a range of people and service to support meeting the needs of children and their families
- The right place*** Working with families in their community or neighbourhood or their home, or where they feel most comfortable.

Early Help can be provided by a single agency (such as a nursery, school or Health Visitor) or by a group of professionals from these agencies working together as a 'Team around the Family', with the family at the centre of the planning and decision making. The views and opinions of children and parents are key to making early help offers successful.



Why do we need early help?

The challenges in Blackpool and the local context

Blackpool is a small, compact local authority (7 miles long by 4 miles at its widest; with 140,000 residents and slightly over 29,000 children and young people aged 0 to 17 years old.). Blackpool has long been Britain's most popular coastal resort, albeit one that has experienced a long term decline in tourism since the 1970s, especially staying visitors, which has had a severe impact on the town and its residents, especially in the growth of cheap, private rented housing and the import of adults with issues from elsewhere in Britain.

According to national measures of deprivation, Blackpool is the most deprived local authority in England and has been so for most of the last decade. To give an idea of Blackpool's relative decline, the town ranked as 31st most deprived in 2000, 12th in 2007, and 6th in 2010 and first in both the 2015 and 2019 indices of deprivation. Deprivation is chiefly driven by low income, low employment (and low paid jobs) and poor population-wide health outcomes – as recently described in the Chief Medical Officer for England's annual report. We have the lowest life expectancy for men in England, the highest proportion of adult benefit claimants and a high proportion of adults are functionally illiterate, with Blackpool in the first decile for literacy vulnerability.

What makes the level of poverty and deprivation in Blackpool so striking and unusual is its concentration: 8 of the 10 most deprived small areas in England are in the centre of Blackpool (up from 3 a decade ago) and a quarter of Blackpool is in the most deprived 1% of areas in England.

Over the past decade pressure on local children's services has grown, as the impact of national trends have hit the town and its family's hard. Rising child poverty; austerity; growing unemployment, welfare reform; reductions to public service funding; and significant importation of adults and families with existing problems have all exacerbated the challenges that Blackpool's children's services, in their widest sense, face.

We know that rising deprivation will lead to rising demand. Research has shown that children in the 10% most deprived areas are 10 times more likely to be in care or on a Child Protection Plan than their peers in the 10% most affluent areas (Bywaters et al). In addition, as noted in the recent report 'The case for change' (McAlister):

"In the majority of cases, families become involved with children's social care because they are parenting in conditions of adversity, rather than because they have caused or are likely to cause significant harm to their children. We have a shared obligation to help families raise their children. Communities can also play a key role in supporting families, in some cases removing the need for statutory intervention. When the state steps in, too often the focus is on assessment and investigation not support".

We strongly agree with this view and know that the past decade in Blackpool provides a striking example of both of the challenges of working with a community with many families in conditions of adversity and the critical role of Early Help and the dangers of excessive statutory intervention.

Given the scale of local need in the town, one would expect support for children and families in Blackpool to be higher than most other parts of the country. However, too often, in the past, the amount of intervention has been significantly higher than other similar areas and has led to Blackpool being an outlier in terms of the proportion of local families in contact with children's social care:

To give an idea of the scale of this involvement/intervention

- In the year 2019/20, Blackpool's children's services received 7,000 requests for support for individual children (not counting multiple requests for support for the same child), of which 3,100 resulted in a social care assessment.
- Looked at over a longer timeframe the picture is even more striking: since April 2019, there have been 11,800 requests for support for individual children, resulting in 5,300 social care assessments

Why do we need early help?

Moreover, over the past decade, the nature of Blackpool Children's Services involvement has tended to escalate to the highest levels, with very significant statutory interventions in a huge number of local families' lives.

- Over the past 10 years, nearly 4,000 children have been subject to Child protection plans in Blackpool, with 3,300 of these children still currently aged under 18 years old – this equates to 11% of the local child population.
- Over the past 10 years, 1,850 children have entered public care in Blackpool and nearly 600 are still in Blackpool's care.

Currently, social care intervention has reduced to levels closer to those in similar authorities, with 9.3% of the child population being supported by Children's Services (7.5% by children's social care, 1.8% by Families in Need)

Stripping this down to a notional average two form entry primary school year group (60 children):

- 22 will be eligible for free school meals
- 10 will be assessed by the school to require 'SEN Support' for their learning
- 4 will have ongoing Children's Social Care Involvement
- 2 will have an Education, Health and Care Plan
- 1 will be in care

However, we do not only exist at the current moment in time. Every child and every family has a history; and for the same group of 60 children, over the past 2 years on average:

- 2 will have been subject to a child protection plan, but
- 24 will have had a request for support made to Children's Services; and
- 11 will have been assessed by a social worker, with 3 being assessed more than once

When reading the section above, it is important to consider that:

1. This is the Blackpool average – in schools serving the most deprived parts of the town, the proportions with social care involvement both current and historic and with other indicators of social need will be much higher still.
2. More importantly, for the town's Early Help strategy, we need to reflect again on the simple truth from Josh McAlister's independent review, i.e. that *'children's social care is involved with families chiefly because parents are raising their children in very difficult circumstances, rather than because the parents have caused, or are likely to cause significant harm to their children'*. The review goes on to note that the response of children's social care is too often to assess, investigate and analyse, rather than to provide support to the family; and that *"we have a shared obligation to help families raise their children. Communities can also play a key role in supporting families, in some cases removing the need for statutory intervention."*

Three important points are being made here:

- Over the past decade children's social care has been pulled into supporting a growing number of families in need, rather than focusing on children at risk.
- Many of the processes and practices of children's social care are ill-suited to supporting such families.
- That such support would be much more effectively provided by other services and the wider community.

What is true for England as a whole is especially true for Blackpool – the analysis above could not provide a clearer example of the points being made by the McAlister review. A deprived area such as Blackpool will have a disproportionately large number of families trying to parent in extreme adversity. It is therefore particularly important for local services to provide the right support at the right time for those local families and it is vital that everyone in the town recognises the shared obligation to help families raise their children; and that support to families be co-ordinated to best effect.

Early Help approach in Blackpool

Our approach to early help is about providing support to children and their families as soon as issues begin to emerge (**the right time**). It is everyone's business and it is expected that any worker from any agency, provider or service will respond to meet those needs, working with others to do so.

To enable this we will:

- Work in neighbourhood areas with all providers delivering services to children and their families
- Use an early help process of 'assess, plan, do, review' to understand and respond to needs early
- Undertake early help assessments that consider whole family's needs but remain child and young person focused
- Support lead professionals from all agencies to undertake early help work
- Work to improve the quality and impact of our work to support sustainable changes with families
- Work within the Blackpool Families Rock model of practice.

Working with, and consent

Early help is about working **with** families **not doing** to families. This begins with families agreeing to, or giving 'consent', to work with services using the early help approach. Children and parents should be central to each stage of the process and be supported to drive their own plans and make their own decisions.



How we put early help into practice in Blackpool

To help us understand how best we should be working with children and families and ensure that the right help is provided, **four levels of need** have been identified. Early help sits across two of these levels:

- **Level 2 needs - Universal Plus and is described as:**

‘Some children, young people and families will need support from people who know them well and have established relationships with them to meet some challenges where advice and guidance has not been enough to help the family achieve change or where a child or young person needs additional support to help them to thrive.’

- **Level 3 needs – Intensive and is described as:**

‘A small number of children, young people and families will experience significant difficulties and will need coordinated support from experts working with them to find sustainable solutions that reduce the impact of challenge on the wellbeing and development of children and young people’.

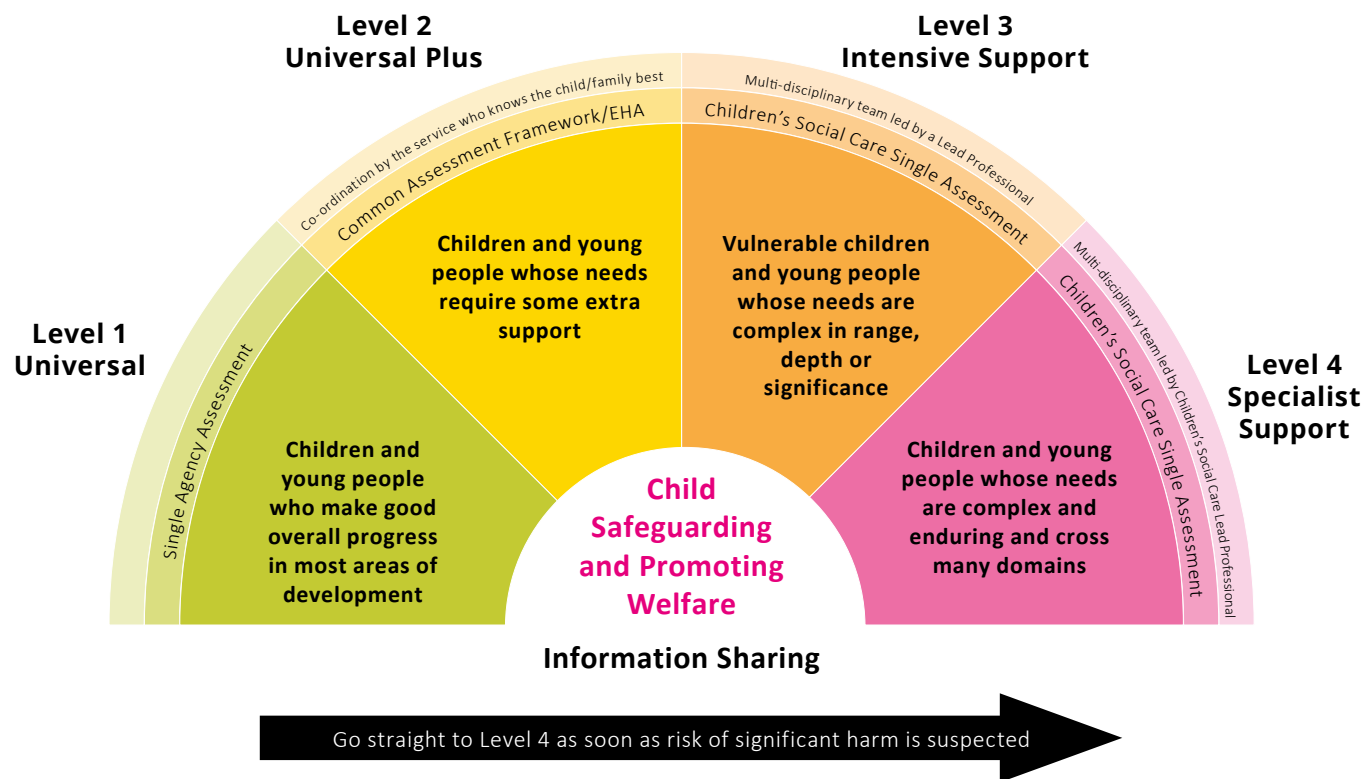
The diagram below gives an at a glance view of the four levels.

It is everybody’s responsibility to identify and, with parental agreement, assess the needs of children and their families through open and honest conversations with them. Other people who know the family should be included in the assessment and planning process.

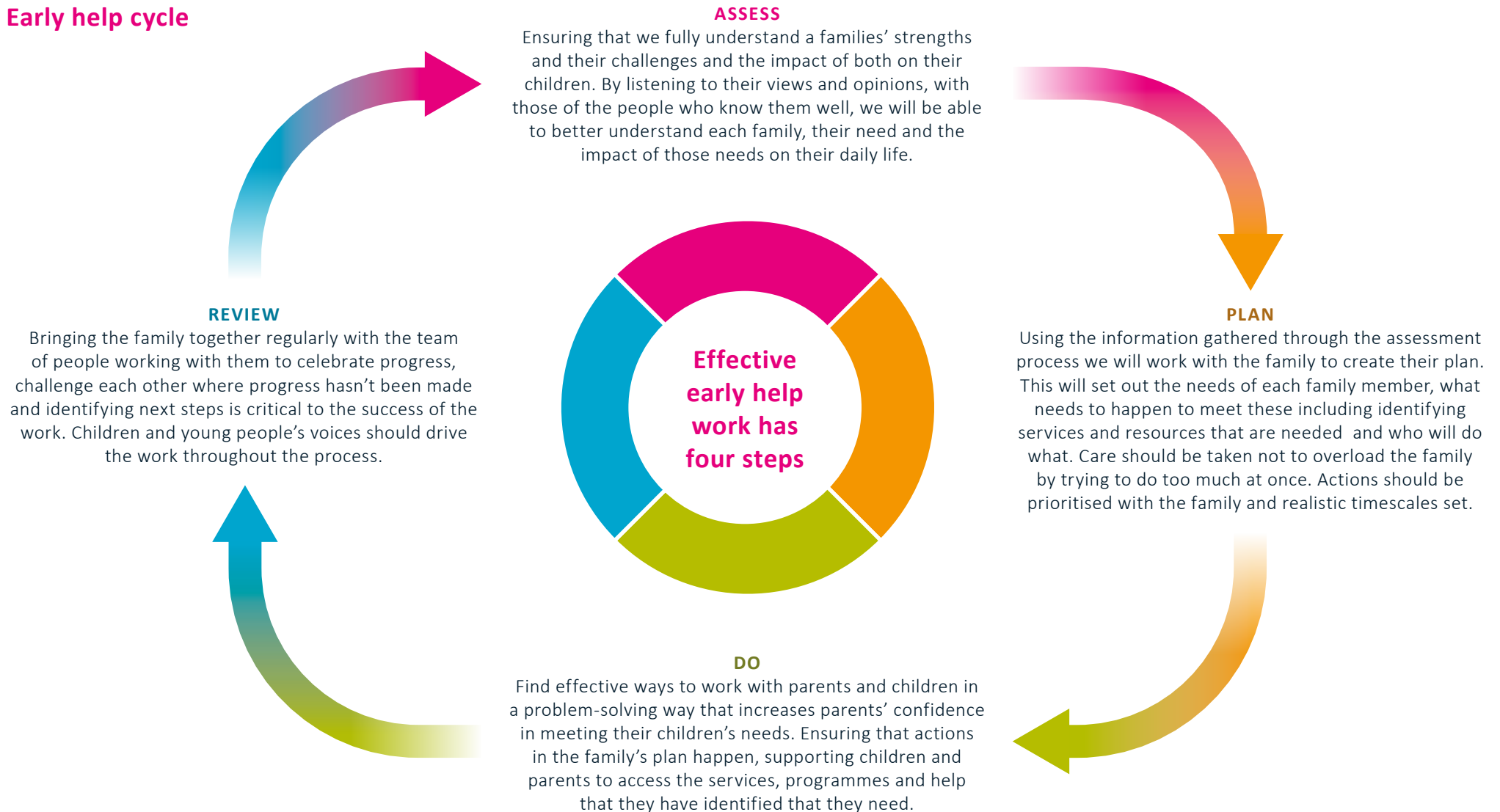
One person takes the role of the Lead Professional, and works to ensure that the early help process is undertaken co-ordinating with the other people who work with the family, also known as the ‘Team around the Family (TAF).

The Children’s Safeguarding Partnership guidance ‘Working Well with Children and Families in Lancashire’ provides more detailed information about consent, the four levels of need, what these look like and the process of moving support between them. <https://blackpoolchildcare.proceduresonline.com/values.html>

Levels of Need - At a Glance



Early help cycle



Our Early Help strategy

Our aim is to respond at the earliest opportunity to meet the needs of children, young people and families before statutory or specialist service are needed. It is everybody's responsibility to work in this way.

To achieve this we will:

- Share our early help strategy and approach, ensure that it is understood across the children and families partnership and make clear our expectation that it is that all practitioners working in early help roles will use the early help process to support children and their families.
- Implement a revised early help assessment tool for all Lead Professionals and Team Around the Family members to use to record their work with children and families. This will be supported by guidance notes that help the development of a common and consistent understanding of what a good early help assessment, plan and review looks like to ensure that all out early help work is of good quality
- Develop a system for collecting all early help assessments and plans in one place, so we can capture data, themes and trends. We will use this information to create a data dashboard to enable us to demonstrate our progress and hold ourselves to account.
- Develop a process to review the quality and impact of early help work to support a continuous learning and improvement approach to the early help process
- Develop our locality or neighbourhood approach to service delivery by reorganising the councils own early help services to work across universal plus and intensive levels of support. From existing resource we will create a Parenting Team, Family Support Team that works at universal plus and one that works at the intensive early help level for each of our three neighbourhoods. These services will be based in the Family Hubs and work alongside other local neighbourhood services such as schools, nurseries, health visitors, voluntary organisations etc.
- Develop an offer of support for lead professionals and 'team around the family' members. This will include the implementation of three 'Early Help Link Worker' roles to offer advice and guidance, modelling and training, challenge and support, in each of the three neighbourhoods. We will also develop a workforce training and development programme for lead professionals from all partner agencies.
- Build a stronger parenting support offer by growing the delivery of evidence based group-based parenting programmes alongside support that works with individual families. We will use learning from our A Better Start work to support this development and make group based parenting support available across all levels of the continuum of need.
- Develop our relationship support offer that helps couples and co-parents address their relationships issues and reduce conflict, working with the national Reducing Parental Conflict Programme.
- Continue to work regionally and nationally with the Supporting Families programme to improve our early help work and outcomes for children and families.



Action planning

We will establish a multiagency steering group to take these actions forward through a development plan. Progress will be reported through the Children and Families Strategic Partnership Board.

Outcome and indicators of success

This strategy seeks to realise four broad overarching outcomes:

- To support children and families earlier, as soon as needs are identified
- To support all our lead professionals to undertake good quality impactful early help work
- To reduce the demand on higher level or specialist services; and most importantly
- To improve the outcomes for children and their families

There are a vast array of existing measures that we can use to track our progress against these outcomes, some are existing measures where data is readily captured and analysed and others will be new measures where we will need to gather data. An Early Help performance dashboard will be developed to support reporting on the progress of the strategy.

The table to the right sets out some suggested measures that will be considered for the dash board:

Outcome	Support children and families earlier, as soon as needs are identified
Support children and families earlier, as soon as needs are identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in the number of families being supported by an early help assessment and plan. • Reduction in the number contacts made to the Request for Service Hub for families who have not have an offer of early help prior to the contact • Number of parents accessing parenting support groups and activities support • Reduction in the number of contacts to the RFS Hub that result in services who already know the family and/or child being asked to do an early help assessment. • Increase in the number of children with emerging or identified SEND needs that have an early help plan prior to a request for an EHCP. • Reduction in the number of statutory social work assessments that result in closure (or step down to early help) • Reduce the proportion of children who are excluded, without an early help plan in place before exclusion
Support all our lead professionals to undertake good quality impactful early help work Reduce the demand on higher level or specialist services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in the number of lead professionals attending early help assessment and associated training. • Increase in the of staff reporting confidence in undertaking EH work • Improvement in Consistently good quality assessments, plans and reviews • Number of families who do not re-enter the system for early help or higher levels of • Reduction in the number of statutory social work assessments that result in closure (or step down to early help) • Reduction in referrals into SW teams • Reduction in the number of children referred to the Awaken service • Reduction of children entering the youth justice system.
Improve the outcomes for children and their families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of families who close to early help with all needs met • Number of families reporting improved family life at the closure of EHA • Improved educational outcomes for children from the most deprived areas in the town at KS2, GCSE, Level 2 or 3 at 19, EET at 17

Appendix 1 - Early Help Assessment process for Lead Professionals

Process step	Guidance Notes
<p>A need or problem is identified</p> <p>Explaining the process and gaining consent</p>	<p>The person who identifies the need (or who the family share their problem with) should talk to the family about supporting them using the early help process - that they would work with them and other services/workers who know them, to gather information about what works well in their family, and what doesn't, so we can understand how best to help them. The worker would then create a plan with the family and involve the other people who know them. This plan would be reviewed on a regular basis. The worker should gain explicit consent from the family to take part and to support contacting other services.</p>
<p>Assess</p> <p>The assessment and detailing the suggested plan should be undertaken within 20 days.</p>	<p>The worker takes the role of lead professional. This means that they coordinate the gathering of information from the family, including the children and young people and the other service who know the family – this includes gathering information about the family's history, family strengths and worries.</p> <p>The Lead professional uses the information to complete the early help assessment, analysing the information to understand what it means for the children and the family and what support may be needed.</p> <p>Where there are immediate needs or quick wins for a family these should be actioned as soon as possible rather than waiting for the assessment to be completed or the plan to be agreed</p>
<p>Plan</p> <p>The first meeting of the TAF group should happen no more than 10 days after the suggested plan has been reviewed by the Early Help and Support Service.</p>	<p>The lead professional works with the family to pull together a 'Family Plan' based on the understanding gained from the assessment.</p> <p>The lead professional will be expected to engage with a quality assurance process supported by the Early Help and Support Service.</p> <p>The first Team Around the Family meeting (TAF meeting) should be arranged to formally agree the plan and prioritise actions so not to try to do everything at once and overburden the family. The family are integral to this meeting.</p>
<p>Do (with)</p>	<p>The TAF group find effective ways to work with parents and children ensuring that actions in the family's plan happen, supporting children and parents to access the services, programmes and help that they have identified that they need.</p>
<p>Review</p> <p>Reviews/ TAF meetings should take place every 4-6 weeks</p>	<p>TAF meetings should take place regularly to support the children, (where appropriate and if it isn't their feedback or voice should be shared in the meeting) family and the TAF group to celebrate success, challenge each other where progress hasn't been made and identifying what should happen next.</p>

More technical and detailed guidance is available to all lead professionals - please ask your Link Worker.

**For further information, support and advice
about early help work you can contact**

Request for Service Hub on 01253 477299

Blackpool's Family Hubs

North Family Hub (Grange Park)

E: GrangeFamilyHub@blackpool.gov.uk

T: 01253 476480

Central Family Hub (TAB)

E: TABFamilyHub@blackpool.gov.uk

T: 01253 951190

South Family Hub (Revoe)

E: RevoeFamilyHub@blackpool.gov.uk

T: 01253 798016

Blackpool Council

