

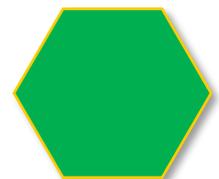
# Early Help Strategy



Merton  
**Safeguarding  
Children Partnership**

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# Introduction

Early Help means picking up on any problems as soon as possible so they don't get too big, and working alongside families to put things in place to help them get better. In Merton there are lots of different services that work together with children, young people and families providing 'Early Help' so that their needs are met.

We want to make sure children, young people and families in Merton can get the right help, in the right place, at the right time so that things do get better. We believe that Early Help is all about identifying family needs early, working together at the lowest possible level of need to address issues or problems before they get bigger and making sure families know how and where to get support if they need, mostly through the organisations already working with children like schools or health services

For many years, services in Merton have worked well together and many families have told us that the things we have done have really helped them.

We want to make sure that our services continue to help families and make sure that we always think about ways to make the support even better by working in partnership with the family.

The development of this strategy started in early 2020, prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> national lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the strategy developed, no one had anticipated that almost a year later we would be in a further lockdown, nor the impact that this would have on access to some of the most well used universal services such as health visiting and education services.

Ordinarily, most children and young people in Merton enjoy a good quality of life, have access to local services where their needs are met and they feel a sense of community. We are proud to have a variety of services that have continued to provide support and respond to challenges brought by the pandemic; however, we recognise the significant impact this has for some families who will not have been able to make full use of or have access to services within their local communities.

We are aware that for some families, particularly for those who would have ordinarily taken up universal and early help services such as new parents and new families in the area, things have been difficult. The impact is likely to have been greater for children who have not been able to attend school and for families where relationships have become strained and day to day routines more difficult due to restrictions and the changes these may have resulted in.

Within this changing environment, it is now more important than ever, that we all work together to support all families, children and young people in the best way we can. We want to refresh our approach to Early Help, thinking more about how children, young people, families and communities build on their own strengths and access the support and services they have around them, guided by community members and staff they know well, as and when needed. We see this early help strategy as the key driver for enabling all children young people and families to receive the help they need, particularly through the focusing of resources and service development for the families who have been most effected by the impact of COVID-19

# What have Merton's children, young people and families previously told us about Early Help?



Over 90% of parents said they were happy with the Early Help support they received

"My daughter received support and was provided with strategies to manage her situation. She is now well and asking for help as and when needed which she would not do previously."

"Wonderful service. It is a shame there is not a follow-up / check-in service to go for support in future"

"We are now talking and working together as a family. I understand my child's feelings and concerns"

"It's getting down to the point and having a connection with the family and understanding their dynamics, which I really feel you did, which helped us to move forward to a better place. We now have our lives back"

"As I am confident and knowing of information. My life is calm and my child is too now. I think my son thinks I am now a very good mummy and parent as I listen to him and play with him with special time for him"



Around 30% of parents stated that children could have been more involved in planning for the support they received

# What have Merton's children's workforce previously told us?

“

“Team Around the Family meetings work well to bring together all services and family members. It's particularly helpful to have other organisations involved to bring different ideas and perspectives ...”

**School Designated Safeguarding Lead**

“I don't always know where to go to get support for families I am working with. I'm not sure what services do what”...

**Health visitor**

## Workforce Feedback

“The forms and the way we have to do things are too long and detailed - they are not user friendly ...”

**Voluntary organisation Key Worker**

““Services work well together and really make a difference to families where they are well-coordinated ...”

**GP**

Early Help Case Audit  
January 2020

Early Help is the first priority of the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP). The Partnership has conducted an audit looking at families who had received 'Early Help' to help them to understand how the services were working for families and whether there were things that could be done to make things even better. The audit's recommendations for the children's workforce are below

1

Change the audit forms and process to making it easier for partners to contribute

2

All agencies should improve how they gather basic information so that they are able to capture key details

3

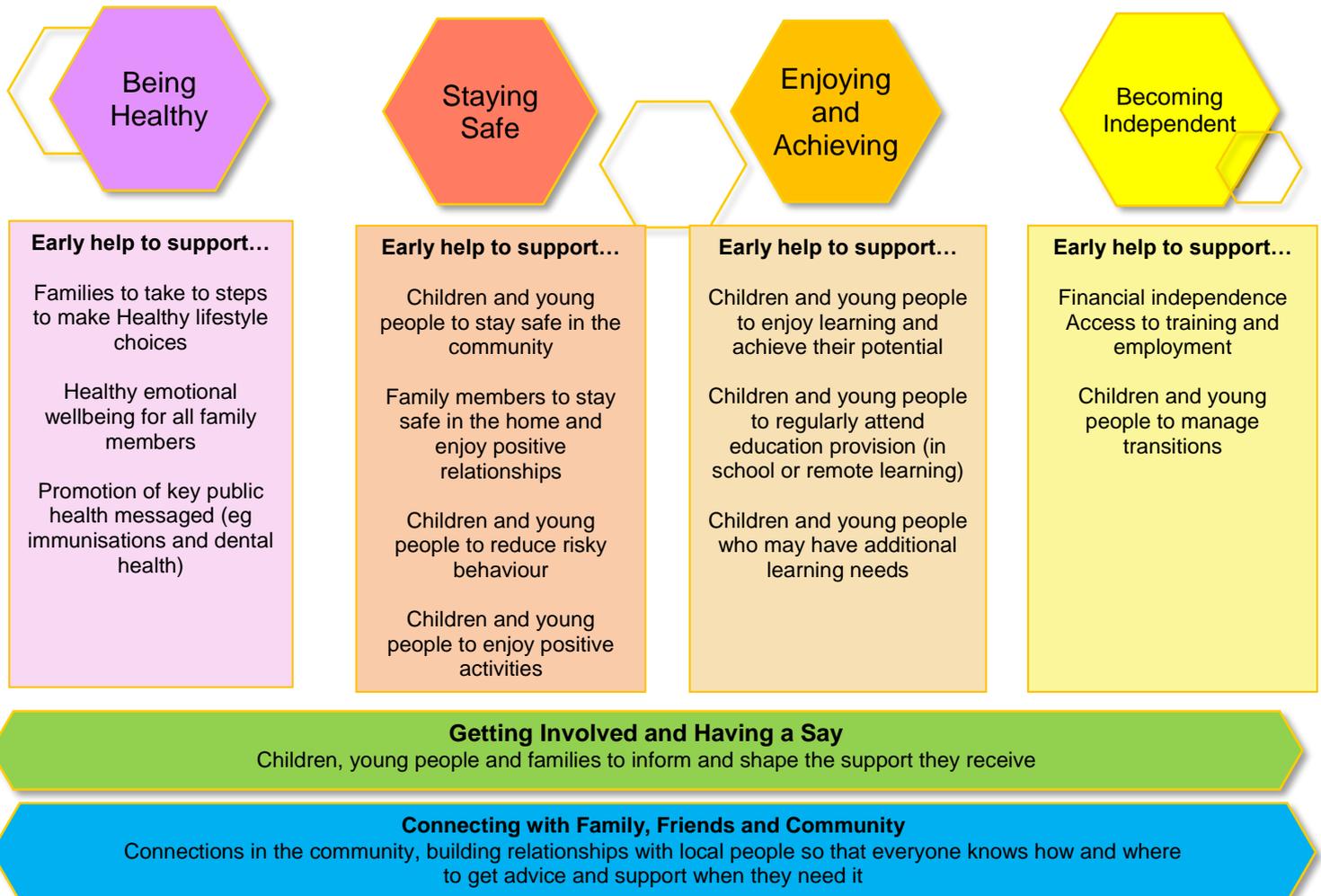
Development of an Early Help Strategy and Practitioner Toolkit to include guidance and templates to support work with families

4

Clarify pathways to access support for children with behavioural needs and parents with specific vulnerabilities

# Merton's Early Help Priorities

In Merton we want to make sure that all children can achieve well in the following areas of life:



We know that most children in Merton grow up and achieve well, and we want to make sure that this is the case for every child. We want to ensure that all children have these opportunities, despite the challenges faced as a result of COVID-19. Our Early Help Strategy is to understand what challenges and problems make achieving these outcomes more difficult for some children. Thinking about how we can build on strengths and opportunities within families, communities and services so that support at the lowest possible level of intervention to help all children belong, stay safe and thrive.

We know that in general, before and during COVID-19, there are certain groups of children and young people who are less likely to achieve in some of the areas and we are committed to targeting our services so that these particular groups are considered most in our strategy and plans.

We have reviewed lots of data and information to help us identify some of the main things that we need to be focusing on to make sure that every child in Merton can achieve in the areas in the diagram above.

# What we know....

that families know their children and young people better than anyone else

that COVID – 19 had had a big impact on many people; affecting them accessing services, their relationships, financial stability and emotional wellbeing. Restrictions have made it challenging for some families to access services and support

the voice of the child and young person is sometimes secondary to the voices of others around them and children and young people's views are not always clearly reflected

that nearly half of children in Merton who are classified as a 'Child in Need', are at risk due to neglect and / or abuse

a high number of requests to Children's Social Care do not meet the threshold for assessment or intervention

that children / young people with a wide range of needs are referred for criminal exploitation to the Multiagency Risk, Vulnerability and Exploitation (MARVE) panel

that not all children reach their expected child development levels by the age of 5 and this can mean it is harder for them to catch up by the ages of 11 and 16.

that children and young people who physically attend school regularly are more likely to engage well in learning and meet their potential

children / young people who are not at a healthy weight are more likely to suffer health problems as they grow up and some families find it challenging to follow healthy lifestyle choices

not all children and young people engage with child and adolescent mental health services

that all family members are individual and that what has happened in the past can sometimes affect the present. We know that these experiences can have a big impact on their wellbeing

Families living in relative low income can have a big impact on children's life chances and getting off to a good start

we have a low number of young people who are not in education or employment (NEET), but for those that are NEET, becoming independent can be more challenging

that transitions points (such as moving to secondary school / higher education and from children's to adult services) can be challenging for some children, often more so for those with a range of needs

Considering the key information above, we have identified, and we commit to working together to achieve the following three priority outcomes through delivery of our Early Help Strategy.

We will review these priorities to ensure they remain relevant in light of the COVID pandemic and its impact on family life an access to services

1

Not as many children and families require support from specialist services. Reduction in number of children in need

2

More babies / children meet the expected stage of development for their age

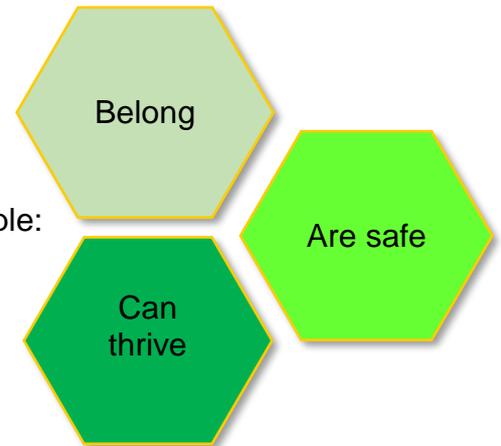
3

More children/young people attend school regularly and fewer are excluded

## Our Ambition

We want Merton to be a place where children and young people:

## Our Vision



We have used evidence and information from local and national data to develop our vision. We want to achieve our ambition by using a refreshed approach to Early Help across the whole system so that in Merton we know that we have in place:

### **The Right Help, at The Right Time in The Right Place**

#### Right Help

Work alongside all family members, helping them to think about their worries and come up with their own ideas and plans to make things better, building on their own family and community strengths.

Develop and train the children's workforce so that support is provided by staff who know the children and families best, everyone uses the same language, tools and approaches and everyone knows what to expect.

#### Right Time

Set things up so that problems are picked up early and support is put in place to help things get better, often through staff who know the children and their families best.

Work together to provide support to children, young people and their families at the lowest level possible in accordance with their needs.

#### Right Place

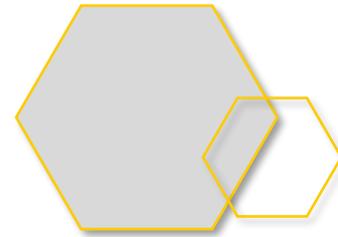
Support connections in the community, building relationships with local people so that everyone knows how and where to get advice and support when they need it and how to access services and support in their local area, from staff that they know already

# Our Approach - The System

We see Early Help as an approach or a system and not a response to a family need by a single service. Our refreshed approach is one of more shared working together across the community of services, based upon evidence of what works and strong use of data and information sharing to inform our decisions. Our strategy commits everyone to developing and investing in this approach so that our ambition and vision can be achieved.



# Our Approach - Continuum of Need

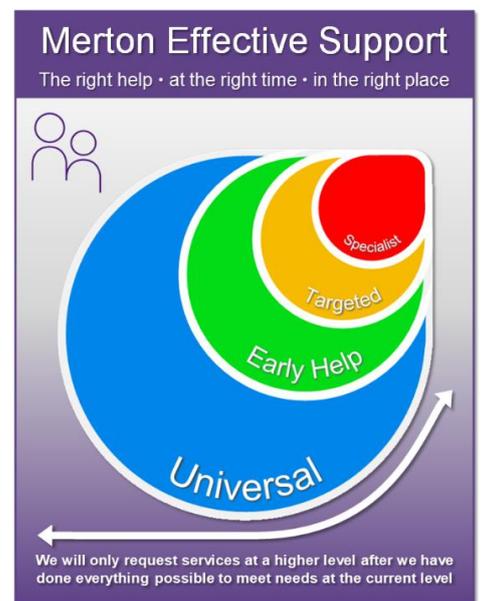


Children and Young people can be at different levels of needs for education, health and care and can move between these levels as their needs change. The child's journey through all levels of need is one that all agency partners wish to ensure is as smooth and time limited as possible, supporting our 'right help, at the right time and in the right place' approach.

In Merton we have the definitions of need shown in the Merton Effective Support Diagram

This conceptual model is a way of developing a shared understanding and explaining the Merton approach across all our services and partnerships, ensuring a consistent approach is applied by all practitioners and managers, including commissioners. The model illustrates how we respond to the requirements of children and families across four levels of need

In this model, all services and interventions seek to work openly with the family (or with young people on their own where it is age-appropriate) in order to support them to address their needs at the lowest possible level. We agree to actively work with children and families to prevent their needs escalating to a higher level.



**We will only request services at a higher level after we have done everything possible to meet needs at the current level.**

## Thrive framework and i-Thrive delivery

The Thrive framework thinks about the mental health and wellbeing needs of children, young people and families through five different needs based groupings as shown in this image. It places importance on the prevention and promotion of mental health and wellbeing across the whole population. The framework supports children, young people and families to make decisions and informed choices about the support and care they can receive. The groupings help to organise the different options that are available depending on what people feel at that point in time. We are working to embed this approach into our early help offer in Merton.



## Our Approach – Guiding Principles

We believe that to build an effective Early Help system, all services working together should be guided by a shared set of principles. In Merton we:

- ✓ Understand that Early Help is everyone's responsibility
- ✓ We will work flexibly together and collaboratively in times of uncertainty
- ✓ Work together to provide support to children, young people and their families at the lowest level possible in accordance with their needs.
- ✓ Always listen to children, young people and families
- ✓ Invest in relationships
- ✓ Put the child at the heart of our work
- ✓ Maximise opportunities presented through digitalisation (data and information sharing)
- ✓ Recognise children as part of a wider network of family, peers and community
- ✓ Focus on individual and family strengths and community assets
- ✓ Value the significance of the child's first 1000 days in improving life chances
- ✓ Base everything we do on evidence and what works
- ✓ Use our resources wisely and carefully, so that those with the most need are first in our planning
- ✓ Stop and review things if they are not working



## Our Approach – Practice Model

In Merton we want all those working with families to have a shared approach to working with families. In order to do this we have adopted a **Systemic, relationship based approach**.

### Key elements of the Practice Framework:

The underlying principle behind systemic practice is the ability for those working with families, to build open, honest and strong relationships, and to be able to develop a level of trust which will help them to create real and sustainable change, understanding that individuals are part of a wider context and considering this when working to identify goals and how to achieve them

### How the Practice Framework is being used:

- ✓ Discussions with families
- ✓ Early Help Assessments and Family Plans
- ✓ Team Around the Family Networks
- ✓ Supervision



## Next Steps



### **Merton's Effective Support for Families Guidance**

We will develop a guidance document to support all practitioners working with families in Merton to understand our approach, giving them helpful tools to aid their work. This will include:

- ✓ New Effective Support Model
- ✓ Refreshed multi agency indicators of need (threshold document)
- ✓ New Early Help Assessment and planning tools with guidance
- ✓ Templates and guidance to use when working alongside families
- ✓ Best practice guidance on Team Around the Family networks

### **New Front Door and Request for Service**

We will redesign our pathways for access to some Early Help services and social work support for children young, young people and families

### **Multi Agency Training**

We will develop a range of modules to support the implementation of our refreshed approach to Early Help. This will include modules on:

- ✓ New Effective Support Model
- ✓ Practice Model and Framework
- ✓ Team Around the Family / Whole Family Approach

We will explore the possibility of developing accredited training and We will support volunteers in the work so they too are skilled and trained, building capacity in communities

### **Online Tools and Information**

We will refresh our online information, so that it is accessible and easy to use for both families and practitioners

### **System Development**

We will work collaboratively so that the Early Help system contributes to develop, maximising opportunities presented through grants, projects/new programmes and pooling of resources

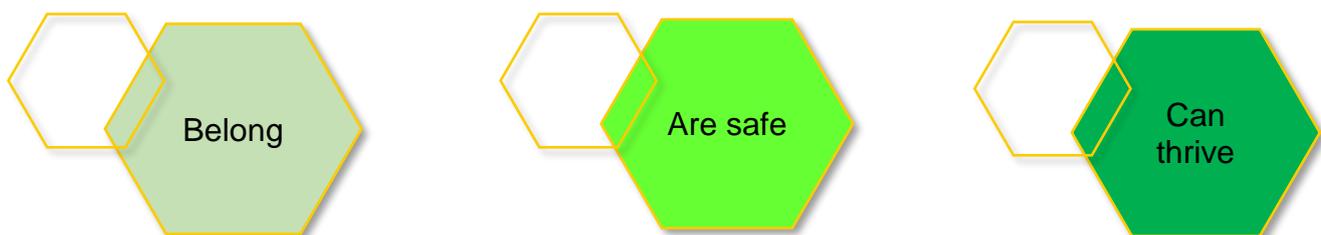
## How will we monitor our progress?

Merton's Safeguarding Children Partnership are responsible for monitoring the refreshed approach to Early Help. The Partnership will receive regular reports which will include a review of performance across the multi-agency partners, and listen to feedback from children, young people and families, which will show how well we are doing.

We have identified a number of measures linked to each priority area that we will be using to allow us to understand how well our refreshed approach to Early Help is working and the impact it is having on Merton's children and young people; these are illustrated by the models on the following pages.

It is recognised that our refreshed approach to Early Help, has been developed during unprecedented times, causing uncertainty for everyone with restricted access to every day services such as schools, health visiting and local community services that provide ongoing support and safety for children, young people and their families. Therefore, the monitoring of our progress is really important to ensuring that our priorities and outcomes remain relevant

Our approach and commitment to early help will maximise the full range of opportunities that are available to us, so that we continue to support families who have the most to gain from accessing the range of services and support. To this end we will work collaboratively and collectively so our priorities can be achieved together, so that all children and young people:



The full impact of the pandemic on children and family outcomes is not yet known, however, it is anticipated that there is likely to be a widening of the gap, across all children's outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

This strategy is a commitment from everyone within our early help system to work address these inequalities that exist for the children, young people and families in Merton.

# Priority Area 1

Not as many children and families require support from specialist services  
Reduction in number of children in need

## Outcomes

(What we will measure over the strategy period)

Number of Children classified as 'In Need'  
% of requests for service to the point of contact that do not meet threshold

Embed the systemic, relationship based Early Help Practice Model

Embed the team around the family approach, so families are supported by people that they know best

## Activity

Promotion and awareness of the range of services available to children and families across all levels of need to prevent escalation

Practitioners to use early help tools that aid work with families  
(Effective Support Model and indicators of need, early help plan and targeted early help assessment)

Prioritise access to early help support for those families where the impact of COVID is likely to have been greater (housing, financial, employment, domestic abuse, challenging behaviour, mental health, SEND)

## Priority Area 2

More babies/children meet the expected stage of development for their age

### Outcomes

(What we will measure over the strategy period)

% gap between Free School Meals and non-Free School Meals eligible children who achieve a 'good level of development' at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage

% of disadvantaged families who take up free childcare offers

Promote and support take up of universal provision for babies and young children; ante/post natal support, mandated health reviews, libraries, community play / social groups and early education

Make sure our work promotes healthy child development and healthy lifestyle choices

Provide a range of early help services that support the development of babies and young children who have been denied opportunities due to COVID-19

### Activity

When early childhood developmental needs are identified, make the best use of appropriate early help services

Raise awareness of the importance of the first 10001 days

# Priority Area 3

More children and young people attend school regularly and fewer are excluded

## Outcomes

(What we will measure over the strategy period)

Merton children and young people who are persistent absentees

Merton children/young people of secondary school age who are excluded

Promote the importance of school attendance, with consideration to those who may find this harder following the COVID pandemic

Ensure that parents and carers of children and young people where school attendance may be a concern are supported

Embed the iTHRIVE approach to promote children and young people's emotional wellbeing across the children's workforce

## Activity

Ensure that transitions are well planned and managed

Promote take up of services to support children and young people at risk of exclusion and their families, both in and out of school

# Equalities Impact

## The Public Sector Equality Duty

1. The Equality Act 2010 identifies the following as protected characteristics for the public sector equality duty:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender Reassignment
- Pregnancy and Maternity
- Race (including ethnicity)
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation
- Marriage / Civic Partnerships

2. Under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 there is a duty to have due regard to the need to:

a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010;

b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it, in particular the need to:

- remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
- take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- encourage persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low. c. foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it, in particular the need to:

- tackle prejudice, and
- promote understanding.

We will consider, pursuant to the public sector equality duty, the potential impact of these proposals. The Equality Act 2010 identifies eight protected characteristics, as set out in paragraph 1.

**We have no evidence to suggest there would be a negative impact on those with other protected characteristics.**

**We welcome stakeholder feedback on this topic.**

# Your Views

We would like to invite you to share your views regarding Merton's proposed approach to "Early Help". Early help is provided when families need a bit more help than is universally available from a health visitor or a nursery or school. Sometimes when families need extra help they may get extra support from a health visitor, children's centre staff, community and voluntary sector staffs, youth workers or support workers in school

## Children, young people, parents and carers

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Thinking about a time when your family was given extra help, we'd like to hear about how it was for you. Was it;

- The Right Help for you?
- The Right Time for you?
- The Right Place for you?

We'd like to understand how the extra help worked for you, what was good about it and what could have made it even better?

We know that this year has been exceptional and some families may have not been able to access services in the usual way. So, we also want to know if there are things that could have helped in the past year, which you think might have helped your family during the Covid pandemic.

### How we will gather views

- 1) Via be an online survey at xxx
- 2) Contact with families who are currently or have previously accessed help to find out about their experiences
- 3) Contact with existing local parent and carer groups
- 4) Contact with young people

## Professionals and practitioners

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We would like to understand how your organisation and/or you in your role could support us to achieve our priorities

### How we will gather views

- 1) There will be an online survey at xxx for anyone who would like to share their views to access
- 2) We will be making contact with a range of teams and services that work with families in the early help space
- 3) We will hold 2 online events for professionals to log into where we will summarise the strategy and explain the key messages

We will be seeking views between 28 February and 26 March, after this we will review the feedback and amend the strategy, with a final version being published in April



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**Safeguarding**  
Children Partnership

