

Principles of the Family Hub model

This document explains what Family Hubs are by referring to a set of principles which the Family Hub model works to: it is not prescriptive but flexible and can be adapted to suit each context, meet local needs and evolve as these and other circumstances change over time.

These principles have been derived from FHN's engagement with a range of early adopter local authorities and policy reports (available on the [Family Hubs Network](#) website) which introduced and expanded the concept of Family Hubs. These reports similarly drew on good practice in existing Hubs, the evidence base from Children's Centres and learning from the Family Centres specified in the Children Act 1989 (and the National Audit Office in 1994). A significant body of literature has grown up around most of these principles such as the benefits of integration/joint working and the need for a relational culture when families seek help. It is anticipated that as planned evaluations of Family Hubs are carried out, the application of these principles will add to this literature.

The Family Hub model addresses two core and interrelated needs which are typically gaps in provision: **prevention** and **family help for parents with children aged 0 to 19 years**. 'Family help' was tentatively defined by the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) as follows:

A possible definition of 'family help'

The aim of Family Help should be to improve children's lives through supporting the family unit and strengthening family relationships to enable children to thrive and keep families together, helping them to provide the safe, nurturing environments that children need.

Family Help should be high quality, evidence-led and delivered by skilled professionals who are able to engage families and build trusting and supportive relationships with them. In delivering this support, Family Help should recognise that all families need help at times, and that does not mean there is a child protection concern. It should be able to confidently hold risk whilst also being equipped to recognise child protection issues.

Support offered has to be grounded in the context of family life, including the communities and circumstances in which families live. It should build on families' strengths, drawing on the wider relationships that families have, and on the capacity and potential for support and advice from within local communities, including schools and voluntary organisations. It should offer support at the level that a family needs in order for them to function well with the aim of avoiding ongoing service involvement.

This help should be available to any family that is facing significant challenges that could pose a threat to providing their child with a loving, stable, safe family life. This includes parents of children with disabilities and teenagers, adopters and kinship carers. It should seek to understand and respond to the whole range of challenges families face, and work with wider services and partners to support families and avoid them falling between services. Whilst we would expect the cohort of families who receive Family Help to be primarily those who are currently receiving early help, subject to a Child in Need plan or alongside a Child Protection Plan, there should be porous boundaries and access to the support should not be dependent on a statutory assessment.

Family Help would provide support with: parenting, helping parents and carers to manage their child's behaviour; improving the relationship between parents; supporting families to protect their children from exploitation or harm within their community; and providing respite for parents of children with disabilities. It would support adults with challenges that impact on children, including support with parental substance misuse, mental health, physical disabilities or domestic abuse, as well as helping to manage and mitigate other stresses on families such as poor housing and debt.

Taking '**prevention**' first; when families experience difficulties which could escalate and/or lead to poor outcomes, support needs to be readily accessible. Dovetailing this with safeguarding and child protection is also important, so there is somewhere to step families down to, after they have received intensive or targeted support.

And secondly, providing **family help for parents with children aged 0-19** (and up to 25 if SEND). Challenges don't stop when children start school and families need be able to access help and support whenever they occur during childhood. The easiest pre-schoolers can turn into the most challenging teenagers and these families need support as much as those with children in the early years. Extending reach, engagement and services to families with 5-19's is a new challenge for some local authorities who need the capacity (and funding) to think through the transformation this requires.

To reiterate, the Family Hub model addresses these and other needs by working to the following core **principles**:

Early years' excellence

Families with children 0-19 (up to 25, with SEND)

Early help and prevention

Integrated

Whole family approach

Access

Relational culture

Relationship support

Working with the voluntary sector, embedded in community

Early Years excellence

The Family Hub model starts with the early years, recognises the importance of this period and prioritises the need to support parents to ensure children have the best start in life. Ensuring every family has access to a welcoming Family Hub is one of the six action areas in the Government's vision for the [Best Start for Life](#). Building on the heritage and experience of Sure Start children's centres, the Family Hub model places importance on continually improving their Start for Life offer so outcomes improve (thereby contributing to another of the Government's Best Start action areas.)

One of the strengths of children's centres is that local authorities developed systems and practices which built confidence and expertise in catering for early years (0-5 year olds). Many are ready to prioritise these again and benefit from the freedom of the Family Hub model, which encourages responding to local need and meeting local strategic objectives, to develop early years services.

Families do not segment neatly into age bands. They can move in and out of early years services over an extended period. And it makes sense for families to have a main point of access (place, phone and/or website) through these years to which they can repeatedly return and from where they can source a range of help for all the issues that can impact upon them.

Families with children 0-19' (and up to 25, with SEND)

Given that families can face challenges at any time, not just when children are very young, the Family Hub model maintains a focus on the early years but extends family help to families with children aged 0-19 (and up to 25, where there are special educational needs and disabilities). During the early years, families build trusted and valued relationships with the people they meet in family support. Rather than sever this relationship when a child reaches five, parents can continue to contact a familiar team and access trusted resources of information, advice and guidance. This might lead to finding the right help online, over the phone or in person, either at the Family Hub or at another delivery site, where services for families with older children are available.

Families that have not needed help in the early years may begin to have difficulties later. Accessing early help through professional referral, such as school staff or nurses, or the GP, can prove challenging for many. Self-referral and walk-in access to Family Hubs and delivery sites enables families with older children to get the support they need.

Families with children with SEND need to be able to access help through the same system, including specialist services, until their children reach 25 years. These families often have other children without SEND and benefit from being able to access help for the whole family in one place, even if different delivery sites are appropriate for different members of the family.

Early Help and prevention

As prevention is a priority in the Family Hub model, a local authority's Early Help strategy is an essential element of any local design of the Family Hub model. Family Hubs are the 'Early Help Front Door' where families can get help in the right way at the right time.

As stated earlier, families may need early help at any time: as children develop, challenges can emerge. Equally family circumstances can change and families can need additional support. We referred earlier to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care's definition of family help, and this helpfully sums up the many areas in which families can struggle where early intervention could make a profound difference to outcomes.

Integrated

To achieve better outcomes for families, practice-based evidence shows that integration makes a significant difference. Effective, integrated systems and successful partnership work require creating a healthy culture and therefore leadership and training as well as commitment from a comprehensive range of stakeholders (including, for example, police, schools and health). As local authorities develop their local Family Hub model, system design concerns often predominate, especially when considering methods of evaluation. However, creating the right culture is essential and can also be evaluated.

Within the Family Hub model, integration is applied in several ways:

- **Multi-disciplinary and multi-agency teams** work together closely and in a coordinated way so families get the support they need and helping them solve their problems is at the heart of processes. It's not about a series of referrals or interventions. It's about practitioners working together to make the difference that's needed. An indication that a Family Hub is working well is when a family need tell their story only once and services and people then work together to give that family the right help. Achieving cross-organisation buy-in to create integrated working is essential and local authorities can learn from others' [experiences](#).
- By delivering a system for everyone from those with [universal through to intensive](#) needs, families can experience **seamless transitions** from one level of help to another. If a family's crisis escalates, through practitioners working together within a well-designed system, they receive more intensive support in a non-stigmatising way, without the delay of starting from scratch with a new referral. Similarly, when a family makes progress, they can be stepped down to a lower level of support, without facing a cliff-edge when intensive support comes to an end.
- Being 'integrated' also means [sharing data](#). This can be a stumbling block but we have seen how agencies can overcome this so they can work together better, by ensuring that new IT systems are compatible with other agencies' software (for example in Brent). And by asking families for consent to share information, in the right way at the right time (for example in Yeovil/South Somerset, where Hub deliverers have sensitively adapted their processes and as a result have high levels of consent and engagement among their families).
- A fourth area of integration is having [shared outcomes](#) (see Essex study below). This means that all agencies involved in supporting families, including child health, agree the shared outcomes they are working towards and then work out, who is going to do what, to make sure those outcomes are achieved. This can involve, for individual families, creating a Family Plan (e.g. City of Westminster) and/or more broadly working together to achieve county-wide targets (such as Essex, where this also involves an innovative approach to [budgets](#)). By having shared outcomes, goals are more likely to be met.

CASE STUDY: Essex

In Essex, the local system design of the Family Hub model illustrates how integrated can work effectively and achieve good outcomes.

Slides: <https://familyhubsnetwork.org.uk/event/family-hubs-webinar/>

Video of presentation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY46CeqVKWk&list=PLSBqP_HC1oQgEvcUo0p-nTlhK47lLeaXp&index=2&t=1s

Whole family approach

Rather than focusing on the child or member of the family needing support in isolation, those practising a Family Hub model consider the child within the context of their core relationships and the people around them when deciding which interventions or approaches are most appropriate. Frequently, **the presenting problem is not the core challenge**: a child's severe behavioural difficulties might be the presenting problem, but unemployment, housing issues or substance abuse can be significant factors. A 'whole family approach' will identify these and, the connectedness within the system, will enable them to be tackled (e.g. Isle of Wight case study below).

Coupled with this is the way in which Family Hubs prioritise **supporting relationships** within the family. Problems may appear to rest with individuals, whether a child or parent, but weaknesses in relationships within a family often cause distress and hinder progress. Counselling and programmes to address child-parent violence and couple conflict and develop parenting skills are valuable elements of Family Hubs' work. They are important delivery sites for the DWP's Reducing Parental Conflict programme and the MoJ's efforts to reduce the number of separating parents accessing the courts to resolve disputes.

So, how does the Family Hub model provide family support, for families with children 0-19, which prioritises prevention, and helping the whole family in an integrated way? It's about creating a system where **access** is key, where families know where to go and get help. Access must be straightforward.

Access

Families need to know where and how to get help and in the Family Hub model, straightforward access is key. Family Hubs have a central point from where services are accessed, whether this is a building named a Family Hub, a building with another title, or a virtual access point, reached by phone, email, app or online form. This access point is often called the Early Help Front Door, Integrated Front Door, or One Stop Shop.

Local Family Hub systems (see box below) make the most of the buildings/delivery sites they have available and respond to [local need](#), for example, ensuring the access points in buildings are in areas of greatest need (e.g. in a deprived housing estate) or with greatest reach (e.g. library, civic building). But the system can only work well if access points are non-stigmatising and well-connected with services and practitioners based in other buildings.

Hub buildings are important because they help make the local family help offer more tangible for families and often there is no substitute for a face-to-face meeting with a friendly person in a welcoming environment. Sometimes a Hub is positioned within a building known for another service, sometimes the building is called the Family Hub (or similar name), and other services are co-located there.

Often children's centres are used for this purpose (following [consultation](#)). This works well for families, who accessed services at trusted and familiar children's centres in their children's early years, and can continue to do so as they grow older. Some children's centres have become Family Hubs, others host a 'Family Hub'.

CASE STUDY: Isle of Wight

On the Isle of Wight, the local system design lifted children's services out of special measures and transformed family support delivery. On this journey, children's centres were repurposed as part of a comprehensive strategy to reach and support families more effectively.

Slides: <https://familyhubsnetwork.org.uk/event/family-hubs-webinar/>

Video of presentation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_uOPo9hPaE&list=PLSBqP_HC1oQgEvcUo0p-nTlhK47lLeaXp&index=5

Video of integrated working on Isle of Wight: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ke6QFBZL9NI>

Access points do not need to be purpose built or operate solely for family services. Other facilities which host a FamilyHub include: local libraries, GP surgeries, health clinics, [schools](#), registry offices, community centres, church and faith venues and voluntary sector organisations (e.g. Citizens Advice Bureaux). The diversity of how buildings are used within the Family Hub model illustrates how local Family Hub systems reflect the local situation: whilst this is a core strength of the model it does introduce complexity when trying to compare one local system with another.

Equally important to delivering the Family Hub model, is **virtual access** so families can look for help online (including through apps) or pick up the phone. Virtual access points need to be well-publicised and well-served, so they deliver a timely and helpful response, in a relational way.

From whichever point families access support, this needs to be well-connected to the full local offer of family help including to the **digital online offer** which became even more important during the Covid-19 pandemic in publicising and indeed delivering universal services.

Relational culture

Many families' enthusiasm for children's centres was derived from the relational approach they had experienced. The Family Hub model takes this a step further and prioritises a relational culture to infuse service delivery, whether through public, private or voluntary sector providers, in all areas of family help. A relational culture is built upon an understanding of the value and impact of how people relate to each other, across the system as a whole and specifically, staff to families and staff to staff. In the London Borough of Westminster, a relational culture is fostered in their Family Hubs through a bespoke workforce training programme delivered to both local authority staff and their partners in voluntary sector organisations.

Relationship support

As mentioned above, under the 'whole family approach', the availability and promotion of relationship support, such as couple counselling and the DWP's Reducing Parental Conflict programmes, as well as parenting courses, is an essential part of delivering family help and achieving better outcomes.

Accessing such support can feel stigmatising for parents and providers might shy away from suggesting it, but relationship strain is frequently an aspect of wider family problems and can lead to family breakdown, which can create emotional and economic hardship. With help some relationships can become more resilient, others still come to an end, even with support, and families may need help with the transition this entails. The Family Hub model champions the value and importance of relationship support and carefully challenges the fear of being judged and other taboos around talking about relationship health.

Working with the voluntary sector

Creating a local Family Hub model is a significant undertaking and local authorities can instinctively look inwards to reorganise their teams, services and systems. However, many are learning that for a Family Hub model to transform family support services and outcomes, in a sustainable way, the voluntary and community sector need to be involved from the outset. Their role in Family Hubs is extensive and valuable. From providing universal services through to partnership in delivering statutory services, national voluntary sector and local community-based organisations enable local authorities to reach more families and provide a more comprehensive offer.

Voluntary and community sector organisations are often highly effective at helping families to build their own relational support networks which can reduce their need for statutory services and formal family help now and in the future.

**For more information, please mail info@familyhubsnetwork.com
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