



# **Children's MARS Guidance**

## **Early Help**

**November 2022**

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## Introduction

In North Lincolnshire we subscribe to the Supporting Families Programme's definition of early help:

**Early help is the total support that improves a family's resilience and outcomes or reduces the change of a problem getting worse.**

When early help is needed, we know that families want help from people and professionals that they know and trust. The One Family Approach encourages professionals, including those working with adult family members, to act early and provide the help that is needed.

Professionals should know when and how to make a plan for a child and their family, when they should access further help and support from their manager or partner agencies, and when to refer to social work services in line with the specialist level of need which is outlined in the [One Family Approach – Helping Children and Families in North Lincolnshire document](#).

North Lincolnshire Children's Multi-Agency Resilience and Safeguarding (MARS) Local Arrangements, sets out how the safeguarding partners will work together and with other agencies, to identify and respond to the needs of children in North Lincolnshire. For further information, see [North Lincolnshire Children's MARS Local Arrangements](#).

[Working Together 2018](#) provides statutory guidance on inter-agency working and outlines how agencies should respond individually and collectively to concerns related to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.

For supporting information, please see the [Children's MARS Policy and Procedure for Assessing Need and Providing Help](#).

It is expected that practitioners will complete early help training and will use this guidance in addition to their learning.

## Early help

Our ambition is for children to be in their family, in their school and in their community. As partners take a One Family Approach across North Lincolnshire, we want children, young people and families to be able to build upon their strengths and their resilience to find or be enabled to find solutions when things are not going so well. Help at the earliest point enables families to access information and self-help, in their communities. For those more in need, targeted early help prevents escalation and enables resilience and independence, to achieve positive outcomes for the whole family.

Early help is everyone's business and it is vital that practitioners are initiating early help assessments with any children and families where needs are emerging or identified, particularly for a child who:

- has very poor school attendance, is frequently excluded or likely to be excluded, is at

risk of being NEET, or there are concerns around the suitability of Elective Home Education

- has a disability, physical or developmental needs which are not being met
- has special educational needs which are not being met in line with the SEND Code of Practice (including social, emotional and mental health)
- is an unsupported young carer
- is identified as at risk of, or experiencing sexual, criminal, or pre-criminal exploitation (e.g. trafficking, county lines, radicalisation, gang involvement or association with organised crime groups)
- is experiencing other types of risk outside the home (e.g. child on child sexual violence or harassment, bullying, online abuse, teenage relationship abuse, modern day slavery or harmful sexual behaviour)
- is showing signs of being drawn in to anti-social or criminal behaviour
- goes missing from home
- lives in a family circumstance presenting challenges for the child such as drug or alcohol misuse, adult mental health, domestic abuse or criminal activity
- lives in an environment where there are harmful levels of conflict (frequent, intense or poorly resolved)
- lives in an environment where housing or debt impacts on the family and is a significant concern.
- has returned home to their family from care or is privately fostered
- has a parent / carer in custody

For families receiving coordinated early help from two or more agencies at 'targeted focused' level, the needs and strengths of the whole family should be captured in an early help assessment.

## **Completing the Early Help Assessment**

The Early Help Assessment is how we capture the conversation we have with families to gather information to help us develop a plan with the family.

Printable versions of the Early Help Assessment and Early Help Review Plan templates can be found on the [Children's MARS website](#) although the information gathered must then be entered into the online system.

Guidance for completing the Early Help Assessment form can be found on the [Early Help page of the Children's MARS website](#) which provides some prompts for consideration.

Before you begin the Early Help Assessment check with the family if they already have an Early Help Plan or have had an Early Help Assessment in the past. If they have, and it is thought that the previous information may be relevant, ask for permission to make contact with the lead professional.

## Online early help system

The online early help system provides the facility to complete the Early Help Assessment, Early Help Review Plans and the Closure Summary. You can do this via the online system [using the link on the Children's MARS website](#).

All of the relevant information gathered through discussion with the family and support network can be entered into the online Early Help Assessment, this must be filled in and submitted in one session as you cannot return to the form. It may be useful to write notes beforehand which you later add to the system in one go.

Once you have entered the Early Help Assessment information and submitted the completed form you will receive an email with a link to the next review form. Save this email for when the review meeting has been held and you wish to write up the revised plan. You must opt to receive a PDF version of the Early Help Plan which you can save, share with the family and relevant professionals and use it to review at the next meeting.

After each Early Help Review is added to the system you will be asked to enter a future review date or if the plan is to cease you will be able to complete a Closure Summary to evidence progress and the reason for closure.

## Timescales

There are clear timescales for each stage of the early help and intervention process and it is really important that practitioners are mindful of these timescales to help families make progress and prevent drift:

- Initial review meeting to be held within 20 working days after the Early Help Assessment is completed
- Review meetings are to be held at between 6-12 weekly intervals
- The revised Early Help Plan (from the last review) should be sent out within 10 working days after the meeting
- Two working days after the decision to close the Early Help Plan is agreed with the family and other professionals, the Early Help Closure Summary Form should be completed

## Outcome areas

All local authorities must ensure that the national Supporting Families Programme outcomes are embedded in early help and prevention support. These outcome areas are the ten most common factors impacting upon whole families and must be considered within assessments and planning:

1. Education
2. Early years development
3. Mental and physical health
4. Substance use

5. Family relationships
6. Children are safe from abuse and exploitation
7. Crime
8. Domestic Abuse
9. Housing
10. Finances and employment

Further details on the Supporting Families Outcomes Framework are outlined later in this document.

## **What makes a good assessment?**

A good assessment should be clear, concise and free of professional jargon. It should cover why the assessment is being undertaken, what the family need help with, what the strengths are and how all of these impact on the child/young person. It should conclude with an analysis of what the information means in terms of future risk and what are we going to do about it. Using the words that the family use and understand can help to promote family ownership of the plan.

This section will cover some overall assessment principles and guide you in how to go about completing a good assessment.

### **Working in partnership with the family**

*'Helping families involves working with them and therefore the quality of the relationship between the family and professionals directly impacts on the effectiveness of help given.'*  
Munro 2011

The quality of the relationship between the worker and the family has a significant impact on the effectiveness of the engagement and support offered to the family and the lasting change it can bring. Relational practice is a key aspect of our One Family Approach Practice Model and building, maintaining and strengthening relationships improves the wellbeing of children, young people and families.

Families say it helps when professionals:

- take the time to listen and understand and make the effort to develop a trusting relationship
- have an approach which appreciates and reinforces their strengths
- enable them to be fully involved in the process
- work together so the family only have to tell their story once
- communicate openly, are honest, direct, yet sensitive and take time to explain things clearly
- are reliable, provide services and support which is practical and tailored to particular needs
- treat them as an equal partner, focus first on the issues of most importance to the family
- write information down to help them remember things

- hold smaller meetings and make them accessible
- develop a clear plan of support and what's happening next, involving the family in setting achievable goals

We are not expected to have all the answers or provide solutions but using active listening techniques to really hear and understand what families want and demonstrate we've heard, understood and value what they say is an important part of the process.

### **Strengths-based and solution focused conversations**

Being strengths-based and solution-focused is how we enable achieving sustainable change that improves the wellbeing of children and young people. This approach encourages positive worker-family relationships, and restorative conversations that helps build confidence for the future based upon 'what is working well'. Effective help is based upon people being inspired and enabled to resolve and overcome their difficulties, believing that answers to problems are found within families and communities. Being strengths-based and solution-focused does not mean discounting or minimising risk, or that we cannot have challenging conversations, it calls for risk to be assessed and responded to in a proportionate and sensible way, so that action aims to increase safety rather than reduce professional anxiety.

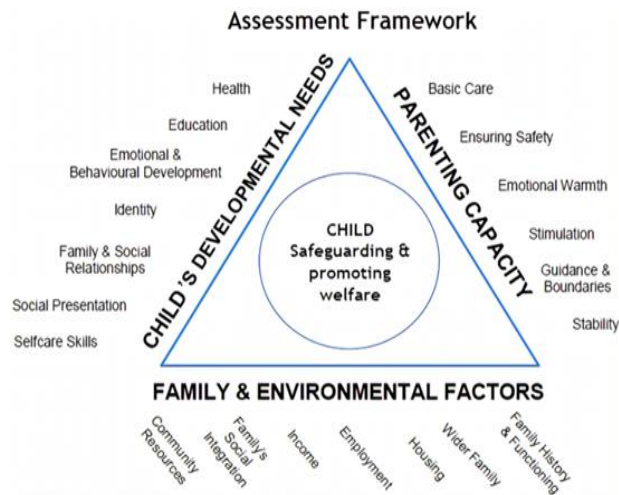
### **Professional curiosity**

Professional curiosity requires professionals to be curious about the child's life and family circumstances so they can effectively identify need. Equally, professionals should be mindful of disguised compliance and adults trying to minimise worries about their family. It is important that practitioners maintain an attitude of healthy scepticism and respectful uncertainty when working with families to help consider if they have the whole picture. Along with professional curiosity, good information sharing is key.

### **Gathering information**

The quality of the information gathered during the Early Help Assessment is crucial to ensure that the strengths and needs for the child and family are fully identified. These identified needs directly correlate to the support plan that is created with the family and so ensuring a full and holistic assessment is completed is really important.

The Assessment Framework as outlined in Working Together 2018 should be considered throughout the assessment. The three domains, the child's developmental needs, parenting capacity and family and environmental factors, should be considered.



Assessments need to involve all the important people in the child and family's life including but not limited to health, education, specialist services, adult services and friends and family who support the child in order to ensure that a full picture of their life is captured.

Where there are concerns about a child's basic needs being met consider using the [Graded Care Profile \(GCP2\)](#) Neglect Assessment Tool as a part of the Early Help Assessment and planning process. This tool can only be used by professionals who have been accredited. If you require advice and guidance please contact the Single Point of Contact (SPOC) for advice.

The [Risk Outside the Home Toolkit](#) is aimed at any practitioners working with children, young people and families who may be at risk of or who are experiencing harm outside of the home. These threats can take a variety of different forms and children can be vulnerable to multiple threats, including: exploitation by criminal gangs and organised crime groups such as county lines; trafficking; online abuse; teenage relationship abuse; sexual exploitation and the influences of extremism leading to radicalisation.

### **Child's voice**

Any assessment or intervention undertaken with a child and their family should focus on the key question of 'what is day to day life like for this child?'. It is critical that the assessment includes direct contact with the child which explores, at an age and stage appropriate level for the child, their views on the reason for the assessment, what their daily life is like for them, who would they talk to about their worries and what would they want to change about their life in relation to the current circumstances.

Children and young people's wishes and feelings should be routinely sought and recorded throughout the early help process. It is important for those involved to understand, from the perspective of the child, whether the support offered is making any difference to their daily life and if anything needs to change to ensure that the child is getting the help they need.

### **Whole family working, involving men, non-resident parents and significant others**

Early help is a whole family approach which means the needs of the parents will be addressed and met which in turn will address the needs of the children.



The inclusion of men, particularly fathers, male carers and partners is really important and an often-overlooked aspect of early help planning. When undertaking an assessment it is crucial that fathers and male carers are included in the work wherever possible, as well as other relatives or friends who may live elsewhere but continue to have contact with the child and be a regular part of family life. They may be a significant protective factor for the child and family and be an essential part of the support plan, or there may be concerns, such as domestic abuse, which may mean that they are not able to be an active part of the assessment and support plan.

The support network of any family is usually broader than just those who live in the household, therefore enabling families to build resilience by utilising the strengths and relationships of the wider family and community is vital. These relationships should be clearly considered and recorded in the Early Help Assessment.

For more information on why involving fathers, male carers and partners is vital in early help intervention and prevention work you can read the [Myth of Invisible Men: Safeguarding children under one from non-accidental injury caused by male carers report \(2021\) Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel](#).

## **Using analysis to inform decision making**

Analysis is the step in between assessment and intervention, it helps us to make informed decisions and create better plans which are more likely to be successful. Our local approach to the Early Help Assessment aims to avoid families being referred to multiple services or being referred to the same service multiple times, keeping them in a cycle of referral and intervention without successful outcomes, which can be confusing and overwhelming for families.

When the information is gathered, we need to understand what it means for the family now and what it might mean for the future. The Early Help Assessment pulls together the needs which have been identified, the strengths which may be protective factors, what is driving the concerns and what might happen if they continue.

The North Lincolnshire Early Help Assessment is based upon the Six P's framework of formulation, which when working with children, young people and families, refers to the way we analyse information to develop a better understanding of the family and their experiences, and use this enhanced understanding to decide and agree on what support or intervention is most likely to help.

This approach enables the family and those helping them to better understand how certain difficulties may relate to one another and provide a plan of action which addresses the underlying causes rather than just the immediate presenting concerns. Formulation encourages practitioners to consider a trauma informed approach with families where appropriate, recognising that some of their needs may be as a result of past or ongoing trauma. For example, a family may have difficulty engaging with professionals, but when we consider their past experiences this behaviour can make sense. Therefore, in this instance the plan of action may include working to build a positive trusting relationship with the family.

The model encourages practitioners to explore six key factors:

- Protective - what are the positives and strengths?
- Presenting - what is happening right now that is causing concern?
- Precipitating – what triggers things?
- Perpetuating – what keeps the issues going?
- Predisposing – family history, challenges and vulnerabilities
- Predicting - what could happen if things don't change?

The strengths are the things that are working well, protective factors and safety measures that exist within the family already. These factors are the basis of the child and family's safety and security within their home or community environment.

The analysis will clearly state what impact the identified needs combined with the strengths will have on the child and family, and will highlight the key things that are keeping the issues going, and what is likely to happen if the cycle continues without change.

Should concerns emerge during the assessment or planning process that indicate there may be concerns that require specialist help and protection then the lead professional will follow guidance in [Assessing Need and Providing Help](#). Professionals should follow their own organisation's safeguarding procedures, and with their agency's Designated Safeguarding Lead or manager, consider if a referral to Children's Services needs to be completed.

## **Formulating a plan**

### **Goal setting and SMART planning**

Setting goals with the family, making it clear what needs to change and why, and working out the best way for the family to achieve the goals is vital to give a sense of direction and motivation as well as accountability for who is responsible for each action. The initial Early Help Plan should be targeted at addressing the identified priority needs. For example, if outstanding dental hygiene has been identified as a need, then there should be a corresponding action within the immediate next steps.

Good quality planning prevents drift, ensures the children's best interests are kept under constant review, and ensures the focus of intervention remains on achieving positive outcomes for the child and family. Involving the whole family in identifying and prioritising the actions needed is good practice, it promotes family ownership of their plan which means that they are more likely to make and sustain positive changes in the longer term.

S.M.A.R.T goals are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time bound. Following the S.M.A.R.T system helps to break down vague ideas into concrete plans with easy to follow steps and actions. Although the level of detail required might feel a bit onerous to start with this method helps plans to work smarter not harder, goals are achieved quicker, and obstacles are identified and can be addressed quickly.

## Early Help review meetings

The initial review meeting should be held within 20 working days of completion of the assessment.

At each meeting:

- the plan will be reviewed and progress against the actions recorded
- additional actions required to achieve the desired outcomes will be added to the revised plan
- the outcomes on the plan are unlikely to change unless other priority needs are identified and added
- minutes of the meeting are not required, however any significant events since the completion of the assessment or previous meeting can be noted
- the date of the next review meeting will be set, or the plan will close if professionals and the family are in agreement that the issues have been addressed and no further meetings are required

The family should always be invited to the meetings and ideally suggest or agree when and where the meeting is taking place. Adjustments should be made to support parents/carers to attend the meetings; this may include using accessible venues including the family home if the family welcome this, online/ virtual attendance where physical attendance would be a barrier or adjusting times or meetings due to the family's work commitments.

The child should be invited (where appropriate) so that they can actively participate in their plan. This may mean that professionals need to consider how to make the meetings as child and family friendly as possible. If it is not appropriate or the child does not want to attend then the child's views on the plan and progress made should be gathered beforehand and shared during the meeting.

Professionals who are **actively supporting the family** should be invited to meetings. When actively involved professionals are unable to attend the meeting they are expected to update the lead professional by contacting them or provide a written update in advance of the meeting. Other professionals who are involved on a less active basis may be asked to contribute relevant updates, including in writing.

Review meetings should be held at intervals of between 6-12 weeks depending on the level of need and risk. More frequent reviews may be needed for families where there is a significant event or concern for welfare so that there is no drift and delay and to ensure that they receive the correct level of intervention.

## Closure and ceasing the plan

When the outcomes from the plan are achieved, the family's needs are met or agreement is reached to close the plan for another reason then the Early Help Closure Summary should be completed on the online early help system within two working days of the decision being made. This decision will usually be made at the last review meeting where it is confirmed that all outcomes have been achieved.

Any decision to close the plan must include the views of the family and all professionals involved. The Early Help Closure Summary allows the lead professional to record the outcomes achieved and the reason for closure.

## **Measuring the impact of support and interventions**

The impact of early help and intervention is varied and depends on many factors including but not limited to the context the help is offered, the family's motivation to change and the skills and conduct of practitioners.

A clear, focused Early Help Plan allows the family and practitioners to easily identify whether outcomes are achieved and if life is improving for the child and family at each review stage.

Where families struggle to remain engaged in the process the plan can be reviewed and a discussion can take place with those involved, to reflect on the offer of help, the skills and strategies used to attempt to promote family engagement and to consider the impact or risk of the lack of engagement on the child or family.

To ensure openness and transparency, the lead professional should share the concerns about engagement with the parent/carer remembering that early help is a voluntary process promoting the potential benefits of the support offered and listening to the views of the family in order to plan the next steps. Where there are concerns that progress has not been made or circumstances have declined which presents a risk or significant impact on the child or family it may be necessary to seek advice from the SPOC.

## **Escalation and resolution**

A good quality family led Early Help Plan is a document for which all parties are accountable. Where there is a difference in opinion between professionals or where a professional or agency are not fulfilling their responsibilities the [Children's MARS Policy and Procedure for Escalation and Resolution](#) provides information on how to address this.

## **The role of the lead professional**

The lead professional is usually the person who first recognises an emerging need and or who has written the Early Help Assessment, at least until the initial review meeting where a decision can be made jointly with the family as to the professional most relevant to the child, young person or family, with the skills to carry out this role.

Further information and guidance on the lead professional role can be found on the [Early Help page of the Children's MARS website](#).

## **Supporting Families Outcomes Framework**

The government's Supporting Families Programme reflects a focus on the importance of

bringing services together around families to deliver whole family working. The vision of the programme aligns closely with the ambitions and values of the Children's MARS Local Arrangements, and of the One Family Approach which is our local framework for creating a system that works for all children, young people and families. Further information on [the Supporting Families Programme can be found here.](#)

The Supporting Families Outcomes Framework sets out ten headline outcomes which reflect the most common issues faced by families. Below these sit descriptors of family needs which are used as measures of success.

### **1. Getting a good education**

- 1.1 Average of less than 90% attendance (including authorised absence is optional) for 2 consecutive terms
- 1.2 Average of less than 50% attendance unauthorised and authorised for 2 consecutive terms
- 1.3 Not able to participate and engage with education – motivation, emotional regulation and behaviour difficulties, risk of, or subject to exclusions, concerns around suitability of Elective Home Education, child is off-roll and not receiving an education otherwise, risk of NEET
- 1.4 Child's Special Educational Needs are not being met (including SEMH)

### **2. Good early years development**

- 2.1 Expectant or new parent/carers who require additional or specialist support (e.g. young parents, parents who have been in care, parents with learning needs)
- 2.2 Child's (0-5 years) physical health needs not met (e.g. immunisations not up to date, concerning accidental injuries, dental hygiene)
- 2.3 Child's (0-5 years) developmental needs not being met (e.g. Health visitor review, taking up 2/3/4 year funding)

### **3. Improved mental and physical health**

- 3.1 Child needs support with their mental health
- 3.2 Adult (with parenting responsibilities) needs support with their mental health
- 3.3 Child and/or parent/carer require support with physical health needs that affect the family (e.g., long-standing health conditions requiring management, physical disabilities requiring adaptations)

### **4. Promoting recovery and reducing harm from substance misuse**

- 4.1 An adult has a drug and/or alcohol problem
- 4.2 Child or young person has a drug and/or alcohol problem

### **5. Improved family relationships**

- 5.1 Parent / carers require parenting support
- 5.2 Harmful levels of parental conflict i.e., when it is frequent, intense or poorly resolved
- 5.3 Child / young person violent or abusive in the home (to parents/carers or siblings)
- 5.4 Unsupported young carer or caring circumstances changed requiring additional support

### **6. Children safe from abuse and exploitation**

- 6.1 Emotional, physical, sexual abuse or neglect, historic or current, within the household

- 6.2 Child going missing from home
- 6.3 Child identified as at risk of, or experiencing sexual exploitation
- 6.4 Child identified as at risk of, or experiencing, criminal, or pre-criminal exploitation (e.g., county lines, radicalisation)
- 6.5 Child experiencing harm outside of the family (e.g. peer to peer abuse, bullying, online harassment, sexual harassment/offences)

## **7. Crime prevention and tackling crime**

- 7.1 Adult (18+) involved in crime and/or ASB (at least one offence/arrest/named as a suspect/ASB incident) in the last 12 months
- 7.2 Young person (u18) at risk of crime including gangs, serious violence and weapons carrying, or involved in harmful risk-taking behaviour
- 7.3 Young person (u18) involved in crime and/or ASB (at least one offence/arrest/named as a suspect/ASB incident) in the last 12 months

## **8. Safe from domestic abuse**

- 8.1 Family affected by domestic abuse or inter-personal violence and abuse - historic, recent, current or at risk (victim)
- 8.2 Adult in the family is a perpetrator of domestic abuse
- 8.3 Child currently or historically affected by domestic abuse

## **9. Secure housing**

- 9.1 Families who are in local authority temporary accommodation and are at risk of losing this
- 9.2 Families are not in suitable, sustainable housing and/or threatened with eviction /at risk of homelessness
- 9.3 Young people aged 16/17 at risk of, or who have been, excluded from the family home

## **10. Financial stability**

- 10.1 Adult is unemployed
- 10.2 Family require support with their finances and / or have unmanageable debt (e.g. rent arrears)
- 10.3 Young person is not in education, employment or training (NEET)

## **Further information and resources**

### **Children's MARS guidance and forms**

- [Early Help Assessment Form](#)
- [Early Help Assessment Form completion guidance](#)
- [Early Help Review Plan](#)
- [Early Help Closure Summary](#)
- [The role of the lead professional guidance](#)
- [Early Help Assessment leaflet for children, young people and families](#)
- [Early Help awareness training presentation](#)

Regular updates from the Early Help Forum and other useful information relating to Early Help can also be found on the [Early Help page of the Children's MARS website](#).

### **Children's MARS policies, procedures and resources**

- [One Family Approach – Helping Children and Families in North Lincolnshire document 2020/24](#)
- [One Family Approach – Practice Model briefing](#)
- [Children's MARS Policy and Procedure for Assessing Need and Providing Help](#)
- [Children's MARS Toolkits](#) including the Risk Outside the Home Toolkit, Hidden Harm and Domestic Abuse

A range of resources for professionals can also be found on the [resources page of the Children's MARS website](#). Resources aimed specifically at families can be found on the [children, young people and families page](#).