



# Report to Children's & Education Select Committee

**Date:** Thursday 8 September 2022

**Reference number:** NA

**Title:** Early Help Strategy and Impact of the Family Support Service

**Relevant councillor(s):** Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member Education & Children's Services

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**Ward(s) affected:** none specific

## 1. Recommendations to the Committee

- 1.1 The Committee is asked to acknowledge the progress made by the Family Support Service (FSS) since its introduction in September 2019, recognising the inevitable impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on the establishment and development of the service.
- 1.2 The Committee is asked to note the positive impact the FSS has achieved across all areas of its operation, despite the pandemic, as evidenced in this report.
- 1.3 The Committee is asked to recognise to significant role played by the FSS in supporting vulnerable families to become more self-reliant and resilient and in preventing the escalation of need.

## 2. Background and context

- 2.1 The Family Support Service launched in September 2019 as part of Children's Services response to the Ofsted inspection of 2017 and following public consultation. The service restructure sought to provide a more accessible, connected, and targeted response to the needs of families, by focussing resource and effort on those most in need, whilst retaining a universal offer to support the early identification of emerging need as well as delivering a £3.1m budget saving.

- 2.2 Soon after its launch, the service had to adapt quickly during the pandemic, moving a significant part of its operational activities to virtual support in line with Children's Services, and developing and enhancing self-help information through the website and directory.
- 2.3 Since its launch there has been an increase in demand for the service year on year, in line with social care. Despite the demand, performance has remained stable with improvements in many areas as monitored through regular reporting and audit activity. The service offer has continued to flex and increase in order to support the changing needs of families across the county. Ongoing audit activity has identified areas for service development and highlighted good practice for the service to build on.

### **3. How early help has developed since September 2019**

- 3.1 The new service is focussed on working with partners to deliver the ambitions of the revised [Early Help Strategy 22-25](#). It has established a strong network of named, link family support workers aligned to every school in the County, providing a consistent offer of advice, information, and joint working with school staff to discuss emerging needs and concerns for children and families and identify the appropriate support to prevent matters getting worse.
- 3.2 A significant ambition of the newly designed service was to promote the partnership approach towards the delivery of early help, with partner agencies and community-based groups understanding their role within the early help partnership and how they can best support children and families, to prevent issues becoming worse and escalating. This is being achieved by the reinvigoration of the strategic partnership forum to drive collaboration and Strategy ambitions. The Early Help Strategy 22-25 has recently been signed off and governance is provided through the Children's Partnership Board, supported by a new Early Help Operational Sub-Group, which has been established to develop and own the action plan to deliver the aims of the strategy through a multi-agency group, reporting back on a regular basis to the Children's Partnership Board.
- 3.3 The new Partnership Early Help Strategy 2022-25 was launched in May and included a Partnership Marketplace and Learning event at The Gateway which was attended by over 200 practitioners and 25 agencies had stalls promoting their early help offer as part of our wider partnership which really illustrated the developing strength and breadth of the partnership and significantly, its potential in increasing our early help partnership offer.

3.4 The development of the partnership has been key to increasing the offer at Centres, helping partners to understand their role in early help and increasing capacity and available support for families. Some examples of partnership early help activity include:

- EH Partnership Forum – Regular Forum members come from 17 individual agencies. Each offer their specialist knowledge and resources to families who are brought for discussion. Each month professionals are able to bring families, children or peer groups to be discussed and the group take a problem-solving approach to come up with option/s for the professional to take back and try or offer to the family/child/group.
- Family Centre Advisory Groups – This is made up of a variety of statutory and Voluntary Sector agencies and parent representatives. The group members share local knowledge and as a collective they explore opportunities for the Family Centres and hold them to account as to whether they are meeting specific local need. These partnerships have also enabled collective responses to local issues. For example, one partner raised the issue of drug paraphernalia being found in Amersham skate park. This led to a joint piece of diversionary and education work being delivered by Amersham Youth Centre, the Community Safety Team and FSS.
- Community Boards - FSS is represented at these termly board meetings and various sub-groups by the Community Coordinators. Some boards have delivered partnership events in local areas. One example is the well-being event run at the Grange School in Aylesbury. The Community Coordinator played a significant part in organising partners to attend this event and speak with young people in an engaging way about what their service offered. Plans are now in place for this programme to be delivered in Mandeville School later this year.
- The VCS Community Youth Team lead on the relationship with the voluntary and community youth sector, promoting the early help offer to young people transitioning between targeted and universal provision and building the capacity of the Early Help partnership in the county by providing support for the 16 Buckinghamshire Council retained youth centres to ensure high quality provision and maximise opportunities, including a training offer and annual spot checks. They have worked within localities to develop, deliver and strengthen youth-focussed voluntary community sector organisations and support networks that enable stakeholders and young people to engage with and make informed use of voluntary community services and facilities whilst instigating behavioural change.

- 3.5 The FSS is working in partnership with the Oxford Health Trust and Commissioning teams, to jointly deliver the Mental Health Support Teams in Schools, with each team including a family support worker and a youth practitioner in them, to offer targeted support to young people with emerging mental health issues across an increasing number of settings in Buckinghamshire. The scheme has progressed from two to four teams in the last 18 months and provide an additional layer of support for young people in Buckinghamshire.
- 3.6 There are also jointly delivered parenting courses with FSS and CAMHS which have enabled us to offer a course aimed at parents of children with neuro-developmental issues. In addition, there are also a range of other joint interventions including:
- Case supervision support from CAMHS for FSS via small group peer support meetings.
  - Attending monthly team SPA meetings to develop better knowledge of FSS and support triage.
  - Re-design of NFA/Closure letter sent out by CAMHS teams so Early Help information is up-to-date and clear.
  - Bi-monthly meeting with senior managers to aid joint working and communication.
- 3.7 Partnership working is further supported through the core FSS offer and the teams within the service. The Participation Team gives young people a voice through Youth Voice Bucks, incorporating We Do Care and Shout Out for SEND who work closely with the virtual school and social care colleagues to increase youth participation, promote engagement and ensure young voices are heard.

Quotes from young people:

- “Before accessing the We Do Care activities I had very low self-esteem and no self-confidence. Now I am able to talk out for myself. I am no longer what others think or say about me. They have given me a voice. I’ve made lots of friends and I love it when I get to help the younger members, all the staff are lovely and friendly too.”
  - “We Do Care has helped me with my mental health and self-esteem. Also helped me make friends and I like the activities and staff.”
- 3.8 Family Support Locality teams delivering hands-on support to families with complex and enduring needs, but which are below the statutory threshold for social care. This core offer of support delivers targeted help alongside families to address their issues, build resilience and self-reliance and prevent escalation to social care. Locality teams also deliver individual and group work to support young people to improve self-esteem, safe decision-making, and socialisation as well as parenting groups to

enhance parenting skills and capacity at all ages. As part of the locality team practice, universal sessions are delivered at Family Centres across the county where, working with health, maternity and early years services are delivered on a regular basis. We have also established a network of school-linked family support workers, so that every school in the county has a named contact they can call to discuss concerns, work with families and access advice and guidance.

- 3.9 The Community Team is a dedicated resource focussed on expanding the volume and capacity of community led groups to deliver early help through family centres or other settings. This team also respond to calls into the early help duty line where families looking for support contact the team, who have an in-depth knowledge of the wide range of help available outside the council. Building good links creates a network which provides benefits to all. An example is a Community Coordinator being able to link one partner who had funding for BAME youth work to another who had identified a gap in provision. The result was a girls youth group now being run from Castlefield Family Centre by a VCS group.
- 3.10 The Digital team is responsible for the Buckinghamshire Family Information Service (BFIS) social media and promotion of the FSS. BFIS provides both statutory information such as the Local Offer where SEND information on services, processes, and support for children with SEND is co-produced with parents and made available on-line.
- 3.11 On average BFIS received 4851 unique visitors to the website per month and a further 7156 visitors to the BFIS directory. BFIS maintain a strong social media presence with 16,603 followers across the service's social media platforms in March 21 which has grown by 11.5% to 18,539 followers in March 22.

Early years and childcare provision are also accessed via BFIS together with a huge listing of available community events, activities, and support information.

- 3.12 The Community and youth team lead the 'Bucks Inspired' traineeship for NEET young people which started in April 2020 and has since seen 6 cohorts run successfully. The offer has developed, increasing numbers and content to include work placements, life skills and reaching a wider range of young people. 118 young people started the traineeships with 75 successfully completing the course with support from the service where needed. 33 young people continued into a subsequent cohort.

#### **4. Key Performance**

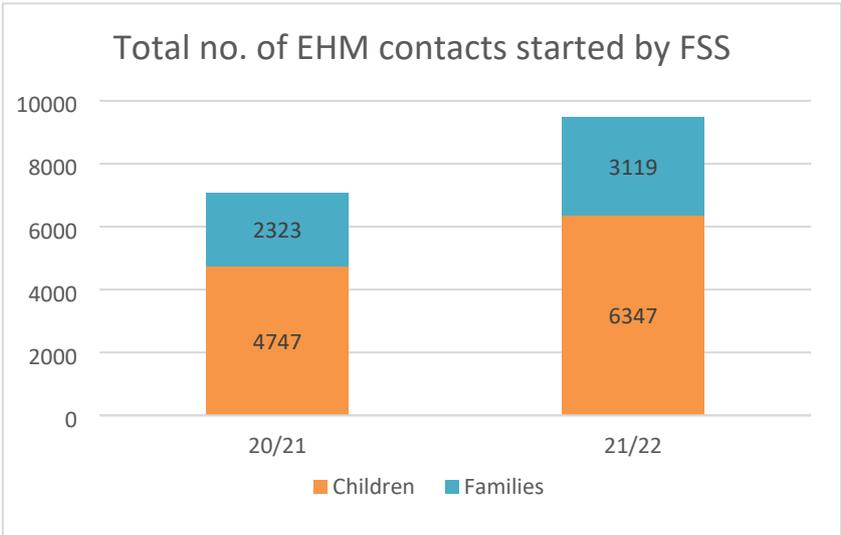
- 4.1 Early help and the FSS have seen demand continue to increase sharply in line with children's services but has continues to deliver strong performance. The internal

reporting and auditing processes that have been developed, provide strong management oversight and enable prompt responses to reported change in performance in key areas. Equally important, it enables the service to identify areas for improvement, understand the picture of need to drive service development and to increase and improve its provision and quality.

The total number of contacts to the Family Support Service has risen 33% in 21/22 compared to 20/21.

4.2 FSS staff continue to work alongside MASH colleagues to ensure that families access the right support at the right time. The increased partnership working and the development of a broader offer to families who need shorter term support (Level 2) has meant that while the number of contacts being supported by FSS overall has increased, the proportion of those contacts being supported by partners through groups and alternative provision has also increased, enabling the FSS to focus resources on families with complex issues where a longer-term support plan is required.

Table of EHM contacts started by FSS comparing 2020/21 with 2021/22



4.3 The FSS focusses resources consistently at those families in need of additional support and help, to prevent things getting worse and their impact was noted following to Ofsted Inspection in December 2021.

4.4 The Ofsted report following Inspection said, “The work carried out in targeted and universal early help services results in discernible improvements in many children’s circumstance.” and went on to state, “Several Family Centres and 3 Family Centre Plus sites offer a valuable range of community-based programmes to support parents.

.....these services prevent many children’s difficulties worsening and escalating requiring intervention from social care”.

- 4.5 Early help and the wider work of the Family Support Service, which includes the Participation team, Community Youth team and Buckinghamshire Adult Learning was also recognised during the recent Joint Area SEND Inspection in Buckinghamshire, where Inspectors wrote;

“The young people participating in the Shout Out for SEND group are rightly proud of what they have done to promote awareness of SEND to practitioners. Members rightly see the group as good preparation for 6 adulthoods, the world of work and participation in society. This aspect of coproduction is a real strength”.

“The 16 family centres across Buckinghamshire enhance the good quality of pre-school support available in the area”.

“There are some positive examples of the successful use of internship programmes as a gateway to employment. As part of the area’s preparation for adulthood strategy, leaders are working proactively with potential employers to expand the amount of available provision”.

- 4.6 The biggest increase in the source of contacts to FSS for the year 2021/22 (April – March) was seen in Education, which increased by 50% (897 from 599) and from Individuals which increased by 91% (773 from 404), which demonstrates both the increasing strength of our relationship with school settings who are increasingly confident of the FSS’s ability to provide effective support, and also the visibility of the early help offer, its accessibility and ease of access for individuals to reach out when they need advice, guidance or support.
- 4.7 The promotion of the FSS to partners has meant that contacts increasingly come through the right route, demonstrated by the increased number of contacts directly to BFIS and FSS which has contributed to the proportion of contacts received in Social Care via MASH that are subsequently allocated to FSS, which has remained stable at around 5%.
- 4.8 The FSS focusses heavily on talking directly to families quickly as we know this provides the best opportunity for meaningful engagement and supporting families to achieve positive outcomes. It also contributes to reducing unnecessary demand in children’s social care by ensuring families who need help have access to appropriate services or advice.

We continue to improve our performance in this area from the very first contact:

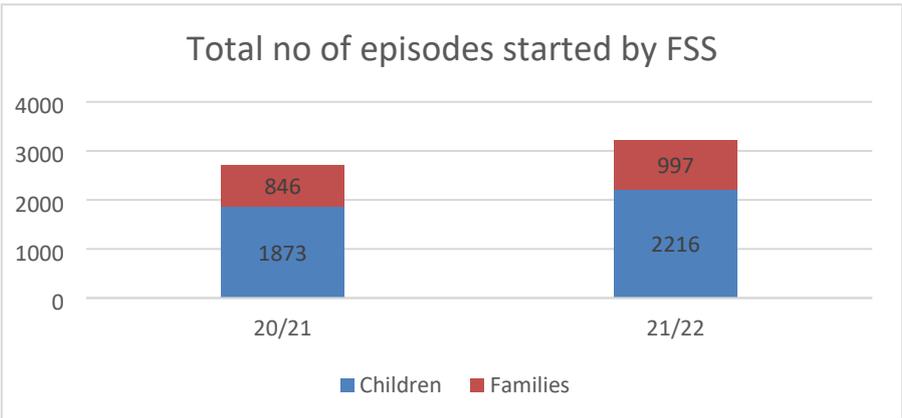
79% of contacts were actioned by FSS within 72hrs between April 21 – Mar 22, compared with 63% for 20/21. An increase of 16% despite significantly higher volumes.

4.9 The FSS focusses most of its resources on those in highest need (Level 3) in order to prevent escalation and support families to overcome the issues they face. It is of note that when looking at areas of concern for families (reasons for seeking support); 40% of families being supported come from areas with a high index of deprivation (IOD). On average, these families average of 5.5 areas of concern, 10% higher than the number of concerns for families in less deprived areas.

4.10 The number of families receiving support from FSS has increased by 52% since its introduction in 2019/20 and 15% since 2020/21.

In 20/21 33% of the total contacts to FSS progressed to episode increasing to 37% in 21/22.

Total number of episodes started by FSS in 2020/21 and 2021/22



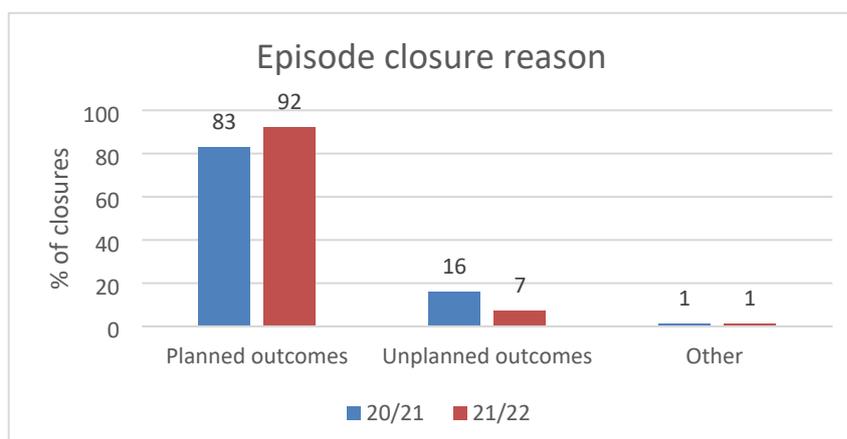
4.11 The FSS aims to support families to overcome issues that they are facing before things get worse, wherever possible. We believe the key to effective engagement is timeliness in terms of engagement with families and regular reporting allows management oversight of prompt contact, early face to face meetings, active engagement, and an increase in planned outcomes.

In 21/22, 92% of families were contacted within 24 hrs from case allocation, an increase of 6% compared with 20/21 (86%).

In 21/22, 93% of Initial Plans have been completed within 31 working days of episode start which is 8 percentage points above the 85% target. (New target in 2021)

In 21/22, a total of 730 cases closed with planned outcomes, which was 92% of closures. An increase of 9% compared to 83% planned closures in 20/21.

## FSS case closure by reason in 2020/21 and 2021/22



- 4.12 Step up and step down: Ensuring children are receiving the right support inevitably means that some children's cases have to be escalated and moved into statutory support when the threshold has been met in relation to the risk of significant harm. In this performance year this has been the case in 47 cases (19%) of FSS case closures, a reduction from 22% in 2021/22.

Similarly, to effectively support children and families when a statutory plan comes to an end, or where following assessment, the threshold is not met for statutory involvement, children have their cases stepped down to FSS who can continue to provide identified support, enabling families to continue to benefit from support while establishing their independence once again. In the current performance year, 188 families have been stepped down from statutory support to FSS.

- 4.13 Re-referrals: It is always the ambition for children and families who have been effectively supported by services, to be sufficiently resilient to be able to cope with issues that arise in the future. Unfortunately, either due to a reoccurrence or a new incident, some families and children get re-referred back into children's services for support. Transitioning cases from statutory care through the FSS has a marked impact on the re-referral rate and the evidence indicates that planned transition for children coming off Children in Need plans provides the best opportunity for future independence for the family.

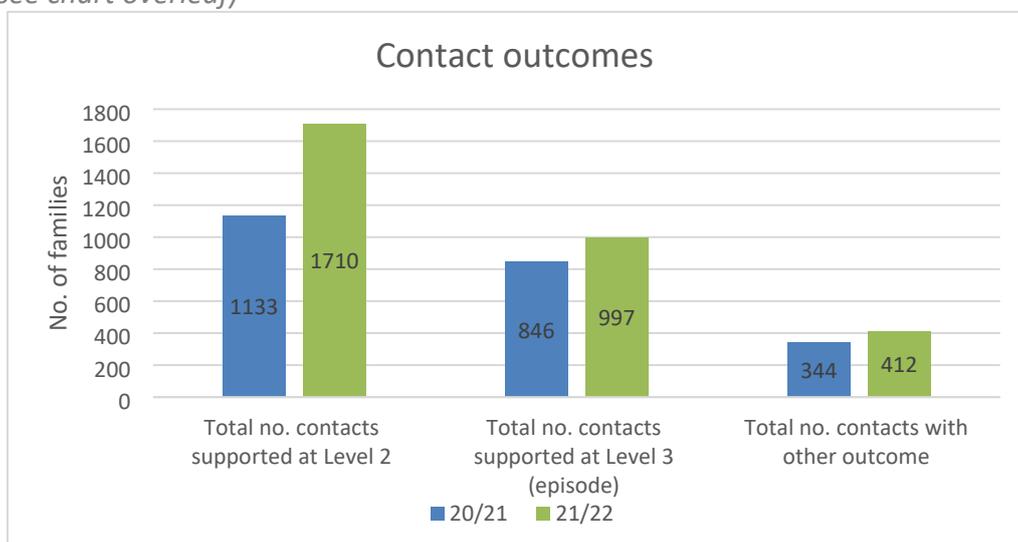
As an average across 21/22, 13.5% of cases previously closed to social care which then had subsequent or ongoing support from FSS were then re-referred to social care within 12 months from the previous referral start. This compared to 21% where closure had occurred without FSS involvement and support.

Families returning to the FSS In 20/21 within 12 months of a previous episode closing was a rate of 15.75%. This has been reduced to 9.25% in 21/22 (source: quarterly

report), through greater focus on quality assessment and planning with families, to leave them more resilient following FSS intervention.

- 4.14 Earlier intervention and group support: In 20/21 49% of all contacts to FSS were supported at Level 2, compared with 55% in 21/22. The number of contacts being supported at Level 2 in 21/22 has increased by 51% since 20/21. This earlier intervention prevents escalation and demonstrates the increase in breadth of the Level 2 offer provides more options for families to be supported by targeted and appropriate services, enabling FSS to focus resources on more complex, longer-term family support plans.

Outcomes for contacts received by FSS in 2020/21 and 2021/22  
(see chart overleaf)



The FSS performance framework tracks and monitors performance across a range of key indicators enabling management oversight and service development.

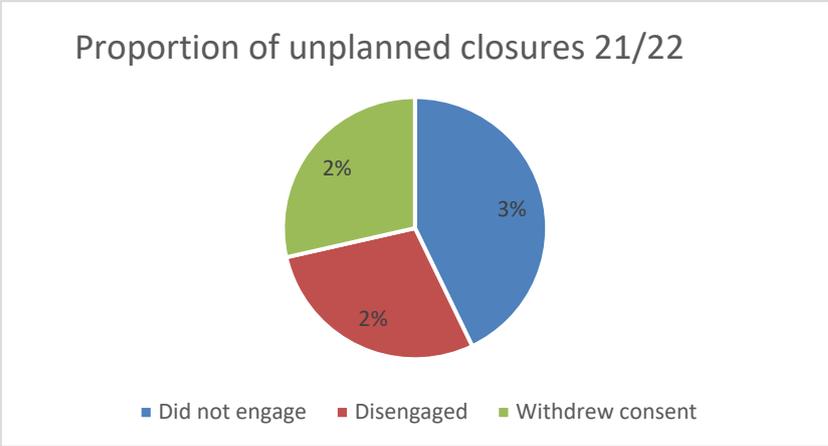
## 5. Progress and Service Development

In the last impact report presented to the Select Committee some key areas of focus and improvement were identified, all of which have progressed well.

- 5.1 Clear improvements have been demonstrated through regular audit activity, training and support provided to staff in key areas. FSS case audits are usually carried out monthly, based on a theme agreed with Social Care. Thirteen cases are selected to be audited by Team Managers and Assistant Team Managers.
- 5.2 The monthly reporting has shown a reduction in disengagement from 13% of closures in 20/21, to 7% of closures in 21/22, which were due to families not engaging in order

to start a support plan or disengagement/ withdrawing consent once a plan had been started.

Unplanned closures of FSS cases during 2021/22



5.3 The activities taking place at Family Centres have increased post-pandemic with a focus on increasing provision for over 5s and joint delivery with partners, as well as offering space for our many EH partners to deliver in.

Family centres continue to provide both universal and targeted activities in local communities, led by the FSS and partner agencies and community groups. We have seen growth of 36% in attendance at family centres, moving from 20/21 when 4,381 people attended 626 sessions run by the FSS (including groups, individual work, parenting, virtual and youth), to 5,952 people attending 630 sessions in 21/22. Take up of Parenting groups (including Little Talkers, Talking Teens, Nurture Programme, Incredible Years, Stepping Stones, Triple P) has seen the greatest growth with 1,045 attendees in 20/21 compared with 2,135 in 21/22 (a 104% increase). The growth in attendance at these sessions supports early intervention and builds confidence and parenting skills amongst attendees.

In the summers of 21 and 22 Open Days were held at the Family Centres, with multi-agency representation to encourage families to access the centre and make connections with local support services.

5.4 The service has mechanisms in place to capture feedback from families to understand their experience of support provided and this is being further developed to ensure a consistent approach is adopted for level 3 work, group and individual work at levels 2 (using the 'Life Path Model format used by YOS), family centre attendees and partners who deliver from the centres.

In addition, the service has feedback forms available on the website to capture user experience and ongoing participation work to capture the voice of children and young people, which is also a key requirement in the direct work with families

## **6. Future direction, focus and next steps for early help**

6.1 Our vision is to be an exemplar early help provider within an outstanding children's services. To achieve this, we need to ensure we retain our focus on prioritising support for families who, without support may need statutory intervention. Working closely with children's social care and education colleagues to understand demand drivers and how, through targeting FSS support, strengthening and expanding our early help partnership and continually reviewing practice we can continue to improve service effectiveness. In addition, continuing to promote early intervention and prevention through our family centre programmes and wider partnership early help offer.

6.2 Increasing opportunities for peer-led provision operated by volunteers and local families is also a key objective for the coming months, increasingly accessing and supporting the development of community-led support. We would also like to offer an increased number of short-term workshops for parents based on evidence of local need together with increased on-line resources to enable parents and young people to access support virtually. A key focus of the Children's Partnership Board Operational sub-group is the research into options for the development of a Partnership Family Hub model in line with current national thinking, to provide truly integrated services to families at a local level.

6.3 Priorities going forward include:

- Delivering the Early Help Partnership Strategy 22-25 - developing the early help partnership, promoting whole family working with all partners recognising the part they play in the system.
- Focussing resources toward those most in need.
- Working towards a family hub model with truly integrated delivery from partners.
- Using family feedback and local data to develop a responsive service through the universal and partnership offer.
- Deliver and embed the Participation Strategy to ensure the voice of children and young people are at the heart of decision making and service development.