



Summary

This is a story of a local authority's Start for Life – Family Hubs journey.

The programme was launched in the local authority in 2022 as part of their Early Help offer following a consultation carried out with families and practitioners across the city between 2018 and spring 2020.

The project was awarded government funding in the autumn of 2022 along with 75 other local authorities to develop 'Family Hubs' for children 0-19 (25 with SEND). This funding included a 'Start for Life' offer for families in the first 1001 days of baby's life.

Plymouth Family Hubs

| Overview and history

Describe your context and the work that your organisation/partnership does.

The consultation highlighted that the service delivery system was not effective in providing a local, integrated, family-centred service to families in need. Instead, the system was a patchwork of different services/experts offering particular assessments, interventions and specialisms that did not always link well to each other. People were expected to navigate this complex system and often required to fit the service criteria rather than the service adapting to fit their needs.

The aim of the Family Hubs programme is to provide families with a locally offered integrated service in which volunteers, practitioners, professionals and whole services have a common approach and work together to listen, understand and respond to each family's unique circumstances and needs, adapting to support at an early stage, before problems magnify.



From the family's perspective it could be summed up as: Right support, right place, right time:

- Tell your story once.
- Strengths led, trauma informed, community development approach.
- Access to support early before problems develop.
- Access to support locally – either in person or online.
- No wrong door – any service in the community can offer the right support through a team around the family approach (A Circle of Support).

The programme involves two main elements:

1- Start for Life:

This is part of a targeted national initiative spanning antenatal to age 3, aimed at ensuring that all families including those with extra support needs receive help and advice whilst children are very young and where possible before babies are born. The Start for Life offer is focussed on improving the families' insight into their baby's attachment, growth and development, supporting them to offer attuned and insightful responses to their newborn and through the 1001 critical early days. The Programme starts with focussed ante-natal support using evidenced based antenatal programmes such as Solihull, which continues as a programme of support through infancy and the inclusion of other evidenced based programmes such as Triple P, Incredible Years, VIG, Circle of Security and PEEP across the multi-agency network in contact with babies. The funding also supports staff development to embed the knowledge across a wider system and creating capacity for programmes to be offered online including access to online advice and support. The plan was for this work to be supported through the network of Children's Centres across the City to emerge into Family Hubs, building on best practice and evolving an evidenced based programme of help as well as early connectivity and support for parents.

2 - Transformation of the wider service delivery system

The aim is to bring all those with whom families come into contact together into an integrated system of a Family Hubs Network, offering 'One Service Together for Children and Families' both virtually and in person. This 'Family Hubs Family' draws on a shared framework as described above in the 'Overall Aims' section and below in the 'Human' section. There are a wide range of elements including:

- Children's Centres for 0-5 are all to become Family Hubs for Children aged 0-19 (0-25 with SEND). There is a strong focus on developing the peer support aspect of their work including; infant feeding, perinatal mental health, home learning environments, speech and language, parenting support, and the antenatal journey. This will ensure the sustainability of the Start for Life work when that time-limited initiative comes to an end.
- Schools and other services in contact with children are showing interest to join the network of services to become part of the Family Hubs Family so that parents can access support through schools settings via the no wrong door approach.



A programme of evidenced based working is being adopted across the system that monitors impact and supports changes that build resilient children and communities. This includes an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model which has been adopted across the community work. Bringing a childhood focussed approach to communities, based on the 'It takes a village to raise a child' principle. The community approach aims to connect people together locally, build on strengths through activating an asset-based approach and upskills communities. This includes the recent appointment of a Community Builder for Family Hubs who will work alongside the Family

- Hubs, connecting them to families (both face to face and online) for infant feeding, perinatal mental health and outreach to vulnerable families who are hard to reach. They join a team of community builders who work in disadvantaged communities to ensure their voice is represented to services. This person will build parent forum networks and increase reach.
- Staff from all services are participating in the development of core standards for services covering aspects such as being trauma informed, relational, restorative, anti-discriminatory, non-judgmental, child and family led, adaptable and supportive. This brings together and strengthens previous work on a values-based approach to our support to people. Staff already have and will continue to have access to core training to build a baseline of insight into children's development, signs of difficulties and methods of help.
- A single case recording system, in development, that will support joint working and collaboration across services, responding to families request, 'Tell my Story Once'.
- A workforce development initiative to build skills in working in a relationship oriented, responsive and collaborative way across the workforce and across communities, so making training available to communities and families not just professionals.
- Promotion of policy and leadership that puts children back in the heart of planning and response across the City. 'A City for Childhood'.

Do you use the language of 'Human Learning Systems' to describe your approach? If not, what other language do you use?

No, this has not been the language used. The language has centred around the 8 'A's (see below). The Family Star Plus has also provided a shared language across the programme.

| HLS Approach

| Human

What is 'Human' about how you work ?

The model that SK has developed for the programme is called the eight 'A's. It aims to support helpers in building strong trusting relationships with the people they are supporting and to increase reflective practice approaches, encouraging and empowering practitioners to think creatively about how to respond to individual and family needs – inviting them be more thoughtful, rather than telling them what to think.



A key part of this is not rushing to put people on the service 'train', but pausing to get to know them and build trust ensuring they get on the right 'carriage' to the right destination – the one that is really going to meet their particular need and support sustainable change.

The eight 'A's are:

Understand

- **Attach:** Taking time to understand the person how they connect in order to build their relationship with us as a foundation for everything else. Different styles of attachment need different styles of connection. Worker as well as family members.
- **Attune:** Listening, connecting, empathising and relating to understand their perspective, strengths, challenges and historical context.
- **Assess:** Only once we have attached and attuned do we begin to assess – to listen to the story they are telling us understand their context, their tyle, their wants and needs.
- **Analyse:** What does what we have heard mean in this family's/child's day to day life and community? Understanding their circumstances, strengths and unmet needs. What potential do they have to build on strengths? What are their priorities and the things that are most pressing? Where are they at on the journey of change? Testing any hypothesis for clarity.

Act

- **Adapt:** Building the offer around the family rather than making them fit into our standard offerings.
- **Attend:** providing them with the support they need. This might include direct services, information and linking up to peer support. Reviewing and checking that things are helping and being ready for things to change, both improving or getting worse.
- **Activate:** Understanding the complex web of relationships that make up the families life - what sources of support people have around them and how can those resources be harnessed to build a sustainable change and future for all – This may mean building on strengths and addressing community gaps and risks.

Measure

- **Aspire:** Helping people believe that change is possible and that they can achieve their goals. This underpins everything else and will allow for independence.

The Family Star Plus will become an integral part of the delivery of the programme which supports its aims by:

- Providing a shared framework across different services and professions for co-creating a picture of the family's current situation and helping them to voice their priorities for change.
- The holistic nature of the tool helps the helper to attune to what is happening for the family and what matters to them.
- The visual graphic helps the helper and the family to assess and analyse their situation and get an overview and clarify priorities.
- The Journey of Change holds an aspirational vision of what families can achieve while helping to attend to where they are now on their journey and the kind of next step that might help them move forward.
- The fact that the Star is collaborative can help to deepen the attachment with families as the engagement progresses – providing a framework for supportive challenge when needed.



| Learning

How have you enacted Learning as a management strategy ?

The programme is taking a learning approach at all levels, in community, family, management, strategy and in service delivery.

At a system level this means making sure that there are ways of hearing the voice of parents and children and what we offer is shaped by that – that practitioners have the mindset and a supportive policy and practice framework to adapt to respond to what is needed in a timely way rather than process driven bureaucratic hold-ups that might delay a response to act early in the development of a problem. In terms of policy, we are currently looking into ways that practitioners can do things that might fit outside of normal procedures where this is needed to serve the family better. For example – not automatically terminating a service if the family misses an appointment as this is often a sign of increased need. In terms of practice, we are providing increased access to a network of specialists so that practitioners right across the service delivery system can be supported by the expertise they need to respond appropriately to different needs and reduce the need to send families outside of their community or on particular pathways that are inappropriate or overused and/or overstretched. We are embedding a culture of curiosity and assessment of need, harnessing family and community strengths, rather than service led/threshold led assumptions of the solutions.

Much of the work is around culture change - moving away from the idea that there are particular service interventions on offer and families connected without understanding the complexity and priority of their needs, moving to a more responsive approach that is adapted and tailored to the needs and strengths of each family. Starting with the networks already established around the Children's Centres this already has a responsive approach, with open access for families who can drop in during opening hours, call or email and will receive a warm response. If there is more that advice or information or a quick response to a request, then the Centres/Hubs can explore the families story to build some assessment of their needs. The Outcomes Star helps with this, by building the assessment to create a unique picture for each family and their journey of change, helping the practitioner and family co-create an action plan – and then review it and together see how things have changed.

There is also a strong research strand to learn from. For example, using existing data to identify school absence 'hotspots' and good practice in supporting children to stay in school through challenging times. Researchers are being sought to help extend the profiling work in order to add to what has already been done to understand in depth what it is like for children to grow up in this local authority.

For practitioners the learning approach is about supporting people to become reflective practitioners. Rather than moving too quickly into action/response, we are supporting people to slow down and take time to reflect on what they have heard and consider different perspectives and ways of conceptualising it. We find the Kolb Learning Cycle is a helpful way of thinking about this – helping people take on board not just the story, but the feelings/emotions/trauma and different ways of thinking about it. Another example we want to embed is the National decision Model based on a similar cycle of reflection.



We can describe the trap of working quickly as being like a fairground ride which is spinning round so fast that people are pinned against the sides by the centrifugal force –working on their own and doing things in survival/auto-pilot mode. Our aim is to slow things down so that people can come back into the centre, find a place of curiosity together rather than be led by trauma, anxiety or feel overwhelmed, and, from that place of curiosity, make sense of the situation together and take the right kind of action that is more likely to be effective. Reflective supervision is key to making this approach work. Unfortunately, not everyone has supervision at present so we are looking to create reflective peer groups. This is a gap for many services in our area. We are looking at doing some pilot sites for schools that others can learn from.

The Star - particularly the Journey of Change - can support peer reflection in peer supervision networks. It can help them think about the style of key-work that is appropriate and reflect on where they are at in the relationship of support, change and learning. Practitioners/services need help to think about when to be proactive in their support for families and when to step back and let the family do more for themselves, learn from their own mistakes and build insight and confidence into what works for them. When is it necessary to prioritise the family's own learning and development needs so staff/services need to empower rather than do to people? Families need to be allowed to do things for themselves and make mistakes (within an expectation of keeping children safe) and staff can find it hard to be a bystander, offering reflection to the family rather than taking over is the right approach at some points. Balancing risks and protective factors are a real challenge for staff when working with families when they are concerned for children. Reflective, confident leadership and supervision are fundamental if we are to be balanced and consistent in protecting people, but also allowing them to learn and develop their own management of risks.

If the worker is supported to be reflective and learn, then they are more equipped to support others to be reflective and learning.

For families, taking a learning approach means the services moving from extractive assessment to a coaching model and moving from talking about deficits to building on strengths. This applies at the community level as well, for example through the work of the community builder. People tend to use language of insight, self-awareness, development in this context. The word 'learning' can put people off – implying a teacher: pupil situation rather than doing with in collaboration and learning together.

The Family Star Plus really supports insight and self-awareness. The graphic gives parents an overview and helps them make links between different aspects of their lives and develop a greater awareness of how their behaviour impacts on their children. The Journey of Change helps them recognise that experimentation and learning is part of the process. It can help them not get too disheartened when things don't go well – the learning frame makes this a positive part of the process rather than a sign of failure.



| Systems

What is the 'system' that you have worked with/brought together?

The system that this programme is working with is everyone who has contact with families and children. It is a whole community approach to understanding children, to make them everyone's business and build together a collaborative and child focussed approach to their care and support.

The different bodies involved are outlined under the Governance section below. It is the Early Help Partnership Executive and the Partnership Forum where all the different players come together. This includes Children's Services, Police, Education, Integrated Care Board, Job Centres, Citizens Advice, Adult Learning and Community Health Services, Community and Voluntary Sector, Children's Centres Schools, Youth Services, Housing providers, GPs, Hospitals and many more. We are also looking to the involvement of local businesses such as the Coop.

We have been using mini action learning sets with practitioners from the services to explore and learn together on particular topics. We have started to use a tool called 'Critical Moments' to explore stages of a child's journey from 0-18. One example was to look at what impacts on a child's engagement with school from the beginning of a child's learning journey during pregnancy and beyond. The area of learning more broadly is one that we would like to develop and are keen to learn from other work across the city on appreciative enquiry – how to design an experiment. We haven't cracked that yet.

SK works as a system steward working closely with the Chairs of the Early Help Partnership Executive and the Partnership Forum. As well as reporting into the Strategic Leadership Board to trouble shoot blocks and keep them informed she brings together the network of services to support the transformation towards an integrated family-led system of support within local communities.

| Governance/Accountability

How is this work being governed? How have your governance or accountability processes changed to work in a Human Learning Systems way?

The layers of local governance are as follows:

1. **The Councillors:** are the community accountable body. They supported the Family Hubs approach from the start (before the national government drive and funding)
2. **Strategic Leadership Board:** comprising the Director of Children's Services, Senior Police Officer, Director of Education, Integrated Care Board Senior leader.
3. **Early Help Partnership Executive:** This is the key place for the connectivity across services – As well as representatives from key Council departments.
4. **Partnership Forum:** These are run by Early Help Partnership Agencies, including multiple partners from across the statutory, community and voluntary sector. Others whose work impacts on children are engaged at this level including Job Centre, Citizens Advice, Adult Learning, Community Health Services. They have very broad participation and are involved in monitoring progress and exploring common themes and strands across the system. This is an exciting place – where there is potential to enact learning cycles.



| Story of Change

How did you go about adopting an HLS approach? What was the spark for change? Where did you start? Who was involved?

1. A consultation was carried out with families and practitioners across the city between 2018 and spring 2020.
2. "New vision for A local authority Children – Bright futures" 2021-2026 was published setting out the new vision for children in A local authority.
3. Work was carried out to gain commitment across the city for Family Hubs and place-based delivery of services before the funding was secured.
4. Central government 'Start for Life' funding was announced for A local authority.
5. Key appointments were made. SK – as Programme Manager (Family Hubs) was the first appointment – she has recruited 3 more people – Communications and Marketing Officer, Project Manager, Community Builder (part-time – based in the Community Builder service). SK's Team sits in Education – managed by Assistant Director of Education.
6. There was a city-wide public consultation on the proposal to change Children's Centres into 0-19 Family Hubs- including where they should be located.
7. City-wide data was gathered and analysed to gain insights on needs. This included insights on the lived experience of children across the city. This gave a sense of the pockets of deprivation and additional needs across the city were and how these fitted with where services were located.
8. The 8 'a's model was created to support a cultural shift to a relationship model of working and inform how the Family Hubs would operate. It emerged from wide-ranging conversations about how to improve the way that services worked together.
9. The Family Star Plus was introduced as a way to better understand families' needs and the journey that they were on. and monitor and measure the journey families go on. Some of the centres were using it and finding it very helpful in their work with families so it made sense to build on that as part of the drive to create more flexible, bespoke, responses services. It is now being picked up in others in the council who are recognising the value of having a common language across disciplines. This is particularly the case in the 'Tell my story once' multi-disciplinary group. Another factor in its adoption has been the desire to measure change that is less visible – not just whether a child is back in school which can be a rather problem focussed 'us and them' kind of conversation, but what is needed to provide the foundation that supports the child being in school. This frees up a style of working that is less about us and them and more about us together.

| Barriers and Tensions

What difficulties did you encounter? How did you respond to them?

Short term projects and funding

The funding for Family Hubs as with many grant funded projects, is short term and due to end in March 2025. The expectation of a sustainable preventative programme without longer term investment is significantly challenging. Transformation of the way that services organise themselves locally and together will not cover all the gaps in what families need.



Statutory responsibilities

The leadership of services for children is responsible for direction of this programme alongside carrying out the LA statutory duties. It can be hugely stretched in a time of increasing need. The pressure on statutory services can determine how services are contracted, how money is spent, how challenges are managed leading to how much time is available to engage communities and families with early support and solutions. Limited resources are directed towards the needs of families who have complex and high risk need.

Services and their connection with the community

The community profiling work showed that children in some communities are struggling more than other communities – there are areas of high deprivation on a number of measures. But the way that services are organised for those children is often centralised, so case loads are spread across the whole city. This means that some services are not connected with specific communities which makes it harder to work in a community-based way, join up services and build resilience at a community level. It also makes it harder to integrated solutions to family and community problems rapidly.

“This has been my biggest learning. It is a challenge to get people to recognise and engage differently away from a process/service driven response to a strengths-based needs led approach.”

However, there is a broad commitment across all universal and statutory children’s services to take a much more locality based approach and services are beginning to deploy their staff to locality working.

Leadership

Changes in leadership can impact on progress of initiatives as different visions come into force. In addition, when key contracts have short term arrangements, it can be harder to provide a focus on longer term initiatives. This can impact on morale and motivation for those driving the changes forward – people start to lose momentum and energy. A relationship-based leadership style with leaders who understand deeply what is happening in communities and services is evident in the Council leaders.

We are living through difficult times, children’s wellbeing is compromised by the challenges of our society, a world post covid of mental health and financial issues. We need a learning systems approach where responsibility is shared and owned and a leadership approach adopted for our time that allows for this.

| Enablers

What were the factors/conditions which enabled you to adopt an HLS approach?

Good cross-party commitment

The leader of the council and colleagues have a particular vision joining communities together and working with them and the VCS to address disadvantage. The council has changed leadership in the last year, but because all Councillors were supportive of the Family Hubs, the wider programme and the ideas behind it, the change of leadership did not interrupt the initiative.



A strong voluntary and community sector

The local authority has a broad range of voluntary and community sector organisations that are connecting well with families. There is a strong community feel across the local authority and close neighbourhoods. This is a real asset. Some are working in isolation and so need joining up – but the raw ingredients are there and connections made with the body that connects the groups together across the City.

A stable population that really cares about children

Many people have lived and worked in the local authority for many years which provides stability and commitment at community level. There is a strong sense of locality and a great commitment to doing better for children and families.

The Family Star Plus

This is providing a shared holistic and developmental framework for working with families. The fact that it can be used by different professionals and in different service settings is helpful in creating a common language across different parts of the programme. It is a practical tool that supports putting the values of the programme into practice on the ground.

