

## 1.4 Families First and Early Help

### AMENDMENT

This chapter was updated November 2024.

#### What is Families First?

Families First is the term used in Hertfordshire for services that work together to support families who need extra help. These are also known as early help services. We all experience difficulties at some point. Families First can help you find early help and information to prevent issues from getting worse.

If you need more help than your usual support network - for example your health visitor, school, doctor or family centre - we can work with you and your family to create a package of support.

#### Who is it for?

Families First is available to all Hertfordshire families with children under 18 (25 if they have a learning need or disability).

#### The Continuum of Need

Hertfordshire has developed the Continuum of Need document. This provides an important tool to support families to thrive through early intervention and multi-agency working and covers all needs. Even if a practitioner is not trained to do a Families First assessment themselves, knowing about the threshold document '**Continuum of Need**' will help them recognise when it might help so that they can arrange for someone else to do the assessment.

[Click here to view the Continuum of Need.](#)

Children and young people will transition between these levels of need according to their circumstances. The aim of early identification, referral and service provision is to ensure that children and young people thrive, are prevented from moving up the continuum and, wherever possible, concerns are reduced.

## What help is available?

The type of support offered is based on your family's individual needs, but it can help with issues such as:

- parenting
- mental and physical health problems
- drug or alcohol dependency
- domestic abuse
- school related concerns – such as your child is not attending school
- debt problems
- risk of becoming homeless.

## Families First Portal Families First Portal

The Families First Portal is a website which helps Hertfordshire families find:

- Information, advice and guidance on local and national services for families,
- parents or carers
- Childcare options and much more
- Many of these services are free for families to access

A designated area of the website for practitioners, which can help you find:

- How to access appropriate services
- Resources you can use in your day-to-day work with families
- Workforce development and practice support opportunities to enhance
- your work with families

Families First [Portal](#)

## Families First Assessment (FFA) and Early Help Module (EHM) System

Families First Assessment is the Hertfordshire County Council Early Help assessment tool. The Early Help Module (EHM) is a multi-agency case recording and management system that used for Families First Assessment case work. Please note your local Senior Families First Coordinators and Families First Coordinators will provide advice, guidance and practice support the Early Help Module (EHM) system

## [Families First Assessment and Early Help](#)

Families First Assessment (FFA) is used by practitioners who work with children, young people, parents and carers. It's used to identify needs, and to organise the right support and services to address those needs at an early stage. The FFA

process allows different agencies and services to share information and work together in a coordinated way. FFAs are voluntary and require consent from parents or carers before they can begin.

The FFA process is designed to address needs which require a multi-agency response. FFA can and should be started by any practitioner who has identified additional needs amongst any of the children, young people or families that they work with. The FFA process uses a "whole family" approach, which allows everyone's needs in the family to be considered, in order to make a lasting difference.

### **The Families First Interactive Process Map tells you more about the process.**

The most important way of ensuring that these children can be identified early and helped before things reach crisis point is for everyone whose job involves working with children, young people and families to take an interest in their well-being and be prepared to help if needed.

The FFA creates a structure for agencies to work together, reducing the negative impact of agencies working in isolation, through a lead practitioner where families are involved in identifying their own strengths, networks of support and additional services that they might need. The assessment will have been completed when a plan is agreed by the family and the agencies.

The family and relevant professionals will form a group together known as a **Team Around the Family** (TAF) which is co-ordinated by the **keyworker/lead practitioner** from any partner agency. This ensures that the family is empowered to solve their own problems with support from agencies working effectively and flexibly together.

Members of the TAF will liaise regularly and review their progress through the early help module and regular TAF meetings, reducing and subsequently ending their involvement as outcomes improve for the child and family.

Use of the Families First assessment should not delay referral to Children's Services if there are concerns that a child or young person:

- Is in need (as defined under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989); or
- Is being abused or neglected; or
- Is at risk of being abused or neglected.

If an FFA has already been completed (or is in progress) when the concerns are recognised, the keyworker/lead practitioner consults with the coordinator and if required the practice team will transfer the family to the relevant Children's Services team.

If problems increase whilst agencies are working with a family and there is concern that the child or young person may be suffering, or is likely to suffer, **Significant Harm**, a referral must be made to Children's Services under the **Referrals Procedure via the professionals online referral portal**. The agencies will then continue their involvement within the scope of the Safeguarding Procedures set out in Part 4 of this Manual. – Managing Individual Cases – Procedures and Guidance.

## **Schools and Keyworkers with an Open Families First Assessment**

Children's Services provide a Consultation Hub for Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) in schools and support for keyworkers/Lead Professionals initiating or leading a Families First Assessment, or those coordinating a package of support.

The Consultation Hub is operated by a Social Worker, a Child Protection School Liaison Officer and a Families First Coordinator and is intended to provide advice on child protection concerns.

The Consultation Hub is open to all schools in the county, including Independent Schools and key workers with an open Families First Assessment only. There is an expectation that professionals will continue to consult the [Continuum of Need](#) and [HSCP Child Protection Procedures](#) and their Designated Safeguarding Lead.

Following a recent review of the Consultation Hub, and the survey undertaken with schools, the Consultation Hub will be open Monday to Fridays from 12:00 to 3:00 p.m. as of September 2024. This is undertaken initially as a pilot with a view to becoming a permanent arrangement. A review of how things progressed during the pilot period will be undertaken, and subject to findings, firm long-term arrangements for the Consultation Hub will be put in place. Tel: 01438 737511 (NB: This number MUST not be given to members of the public.)

## **Early Years and Childcare**

If you are not a school or a Lead Professional of an open Families First Assessment, please use the [Continuum of Need](#) and/or seek advice from your agency designated safeguarding lead.