

Press release

For immediate release

Early Help system in Crisis: national education charity joins the call for government to prioritise funding for preventative family support services in Autumn Budget

New Freedom of Information research from national education charity, School-Home Support, reveals 1 in 3 requests for Early Help made to Local Authorities are returned to schools without action.

Key Findings

- Local authorities **saw a 53% increase in referrals for Early Help** from schools between 2019/20 and 2023/24.
- 31% of referrals to local authorities for Early Help were **returned to schools without action** during the same period.
- One local authority shared that 75% of referrals were returned to schools without action.
- The data is indicative of a system where precious **opportunities flagged by schools to help families** before issues escalate could be missed as **many local authorities aren't in a position to fund early help services**.
- Reasons why referrals are sent back to schools vary from 'incomplete assessments' to 'thresholds not being met' to 'attendance', 'emotional', or 'SEN support'.
- The findings highlight **significant gaps in family support** and the urgent need for the upcoming **Autumn Budget to prioritise funding for local authority Early Help** services.
- School-Home Support is calling for **the creation of a statutory duty for local authorities to provide Early Help** services, with adequate funding and clear guidance on thresholds to clarify expectations about family support between schools and local authorities
- The charity has written to new Education Select Committee Chair, Helen Hayes, asking for **an inquiry into Early Help referrals to gain a better understanding** of the challenges faced by local authorities when delivering preventative care.

School-Home Support

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A new investigation from School-Home Support has revealed that schools have a 1 in 3 chance of being left unsupported by local authorities when they identify vulnerable children and their families who need extra support.

The findings highlight significant gaps in family support around schools and an urgent need for the upcoming Autumn Budget to prioritise funding for early intervention services.

According to the charity, the latest data gathered from its FOI request is indicative of a system which is stretched to the max, fragmented and currently failing children, families and the taxpayer as issues which could be supported are allowed to escalate.

The charity is concerned that high numbers of referrals returned to schools without action could indicate that families are being passed between cash strapped agencies losing precious opportunities for preventative support which could prevent issues escalating and becoming more costly to resolve. Inadmissible claims made by schools for early help could indicate the need to clarify expectations between schools and LAs.

In its policy report '[Every child in School and Ready to Learn by 2050](#)', which makes the case for the protective effects of education, through good school attendance, School-Home Support calls for radical collaboration between schools, local authorities, charities, and social services to achieve meaningful changes and support children and families when they need it most.

Early Help, a statutory duty for Local Authorities

Few local authorities are in a financial position to invest in preventative services for children and families as their budgets haven't been funded to keep pace with demand. They are forced to fund statutory services at the expense of preventative services.

The charity recommends the creation of a statutory duty for local authorities to provide adequately funded early help services, supported by clear guidance on effective delivery. Early help services should have ring-fenced funding to protect funds from budget cuts and ensure all local authorities have the sufficient resources to deliver preventative care.

Making early help a statutory requirement with ring-fenced funding would create greater clarity of expectation about more consistent and effective support for at-risk children, particularly in collaboration with schools, where poor attendance can be an early indicator of family need.

There is a strong fiscal case for investing in early intervention services as crisis level issues are more costly to the public purse to resolve. The report '[Struggling Against the Tide: Children's Services Spending, 2011-2023](#)', commissioned by a coalition of children's charities

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and produced by Pro Bono Economics finds that more money is now being spent on children's homes than on early help services which could prevent children from going into social care.

Jaine Stannard, CEO of School-Home Support, stated:

'Early help services are crucial for identifying and addressing issues before they escalate, preventing long-term harm to children and reducing costs to the public purse. It costs SHS around £1000 to provide bespoke support to families whose children are missing school, less than half the long term cost¹ to society of a persistent absentee. Our impact shows that bespoke support early on can make a huge difference to the young people and their families in the long term.

'The findings from School-Home Support's research show a system stretched to breaking point unable to act on information flagged by schools. Without urgent action we will see more families spiral, their children falling through the cracks. We call on the Government to make Early Help services a statutory requirement, with the necessary funding to back it and for radical collaboration across all of us involved in keeping children safe. The upcoming Autumn Budget is a critical opportunity to address this crisis and prevent more children from being left behind.'

ENDS

¹ Truancy Fiscal Cost/saving per individual per year missing at least 5 weeks of school per year (Cost Code E&S1.0 cell ref J3)
£1,000 = costs for SHS practitioner to deliver one tailored plan, per child per year
https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/7283/gmca-unit-cost-database-v2_3_1-final.xlsx

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About School-Home Support

School-Home Support is a national charity which supports families whose children are severely and persistently absent by addressing the root causes of high absence through whole family support. We are campaigning for an appropriately funded, reliable family support network around schools to support the growing number of vulnerable families who need help.

Since 1984, we have used early intervention and a whole family support approach to break intergenerational cycles of deprivation and low aspiration. Partnering with schools, local authorities and communities, our expert practitioners work one-to-one with families to establish long-term trusting relationships that build a bridge between home and school.

We look beyond the classroom to tackle the underlying causes of school absence such as poverty, domestic violence or mental health challenges, using bespoke support strategies to overcome barriers to learning and ensure children can achieve their potential.

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Notes to editors

Research from School- Home Support Freedom of Information (FOI) request

The data in this release is drawn from the second year of our Freedom of Information research on the availability of early help services across local authorities for schools.

Last year's research found 1 in 4 requests for local authority early help were returned to schools without action. This year shows a similar picture/ slightly worse picture- just over 1 in 3. We are not able to compare data year on year due to inconsistency in responses across the sample group.

Early Help Recommendations- Part of our Route Map for Government

[Our route map](#) calls on the Government to commit to an ambitious 'moonshot' goal to see Every Child in School and Ready to Learn. This can only be achieved by investing in a support-led and family-centric approach, with 'radical collaboration' between all partners, and with a focus on understanding and removing barriers to attendance.

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The route map uses a holistic focus to inform the policy recommendations. We want to see:

Recommendation 9

Create a statutory duty on local authorities to provide early help with adequate funding to meet that duty, and publish guidance on effective delivery of early help, including appropriate thresholds that match schools' thresholds.

Children who face difficulties growing up are more likely to face challenges in their adulthood. For example, 85% of children that had been cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence had been persistently absent, and 20% of all children ever suspended went on to be cautioned or sentenced for any offence.[24] Intervening early when problems first arise can protect children from harm and reduce risk factors that may negatively impact a child's life. Early help includes a range of support to families and children who are identified as at risk but do not meet the threshold for statutory services. Evidence shows that early intervention can improve outcomes for children and families.[25] Early help is often seen as preventative, as it can reduce the amount of support that an individual needs later in life, which reduces pressure on public services.[26] Pressure on children's services has greatly increased over recent years: for example, in 2023, 83,840 children were looked after, an increase of 23% since 2013, and 7% since pre pandemic in 2019, as in figure 5.[27] While early help can reduce the pressure on other services, it is not a statutory requirement. Due to resource constraints, many local authorities are unable to deliver it well or fully, with some local authorities only providing early help to some geographical areas.[28] The extent to which local authorities provide early help varies greatly from 0.6% to 15.7%. Nationally, there is a lack of consistency in the definition of early help and the support it includes.[]

Despite the vital importance of providing timely early support to a family, early help is often unable to deliver support to children who need it. The thresholds for receiving early help are inconsistent and potentially inappropriate, and the services that are delivered are equally inconsistent across the country. To protect early help from budget cuts and ensure that it is always delivered consistently, early help must be made a statutory requirement of local authorities with appropriate ring-fenced funding. New statutory guidance should also be published on the effective delivery of early help, with thresholds that match schools' thresholds, and encourage multi-agency working with schools, identifying poor attendance as a clear signifier that a family may need early help.

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