

Practice guide

Family Help & Children's Social Care

Family Hubs – Thriving Families, Cheshire West and Chester

Background, purpose and rationale

The Thriving Families programme in Cheshire West and Chester emerged from analysis of local data and practice. This highlighted gaps in early intervention, particularly at the very earliest stage before families reached higher levels of need or required statutory intervention. Practitioners recognised that, in many cases, there were missed opportunities to provide support earlier, which could have prevented escalation in need. Historically, early help operated across a tiered continuum, but over time services became more aligned with higher-level needs, and provision for the earliest help became less defined. At the same time, pressures on services and communities meant families were often only seeking help at crisis point, leading to a greater need for statutory intervention.

The purpose Thriving Families was to create an “earliest help” offer that sits before traditional early help thresholds, providing accessible, relationship-based support to families at the earliest possible opportunity. The rationale was both preventative and systemic: to improve outcomes for families, reduce escalation, and enable cost avoidance through earlier targeted support. This required a different approach, including investment in community-based provision, collaboration with the voluntary sector, and a shift away from output-driven models towards relational, outcome-focused practice.

What we did to improve children's outcomes and experiences

The local authority worked in partnership with Cheshire Community Foundation to design and deliver the Thriving Families programme, combining council funding with match funding from corporate and private donors to create a larger, more flexible programme. Delivery was commissioned through the voluntary and community sector, with organisations such as Koala North West and Home-Start Cheshire and Warrington working as lead partners within a consortium model. This ensured a breadth of expertise and enabled whole-family support tailored to individual needs. A key feature of the model is that families can self-refer, often via trusted community routes such as schools, GPs and local networks. Delivery partners work directly with families in their homes, building relationships, identifying needs and coordinating support. The approach is flexible, with no fixed time limits and an emphasis on stepping families up or down depending on need, rather than discharging them at a set point. The programme deliberately moved away from traditional performance measures such as targets and volumes. Instead, providers were given the freedom to focus on building trusted relationships within communities and delivering meaningful change for families. This included removing expectations on the number of families supported and focusing on quality over quantity. Another key element was the use of volunteers and peer support to strengthen community connections, although this has required ongoing investment and has presented challenges, particularly post-COVID. The programme also introduced a different commissioning and governance approach,

with the council stepping back from direct contract management and working collaboratively with the Foundation and providers to monitor delivery and address challenges.

What was the impact?

The programme has demonstrated positive early impact, particularly in relation to preventing escalation of need. Although families often present with higher levels of complexity than originally anticipated, the support provided has been effective in de-escalating issues and avoiding the need for statutory intervention. It is estimated that over 90% of families supported have not required escalation into local authority services.

Impact is also evidenced through qualitative feedback and outcomes-based measures. Providers report improvements in family wellbeing and functioning using tools such as outcome measures and goal-based tracking. Importantly, there is strong feedback from families themselves, with some describing the programme as “life-changing” and “lifesaving.”

The programme has also led to stronger partnership working and a more collaborative system. The relationship between the local authority, the Foundation and delivery partners has evolved into a genuinely shared approach, with ongoing learning and adaptation. This has supported innovation and allowed the model to respond to challenges such as increased complexity of need and pressures within the voluntary sector. While it is recognised that early intervention impact can be difficult to evidence in the short term, there is strong confidence that the approach is making a meaningful difference and has the potential to deliver longer-term benefits for families and the wider system which is why it will continue for another two years.

Resources

[Online Flipbook](#): Impact report

Find out more

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