

Understanding Early Help in Surrey: Stories from children, young people, families and practitioners

The following report was commissioned by Surrey County Council from Ideas Alliance, to help understand the experiences of people using Early Help services in Surrey and inform how these services will be delivered in the future.

What Surrey County Council asked Ideas Alliance to do:

Surrey County Council wanted help to understand children, young people and families' experience of using Early Help (EH) services in Surrey, in addition to the experience of EH service providers. This research required us to understand:

- Experiences of the current service (those eligible for EH and those accessing EH)
- Needs and assets
- Barriers to accessing services and how these can be alleviated
- Views on where improvements are needed
- Future service options, based on evidence-based best practice
- Comparisons between the findings from participants and the data/metrics that Surrey County Council currently collect/use to help keep us informed about these services' performance

What Ideas Alliance did

- Provider workshops
- Engagement with children, young people and families
- Community research

How they did it

Provider workshops

- Used an appreciative inquiry approach to gather insight about how things are when they work best within the system
- Facilitated four workshops (in each quadrant) and one online workshop
- Asked participants to share stories about a time when they felt they really helped a young person or a family to achieve their outcomes
- Identified themes that cut across all the stories and prioritised the ones that resonated the most

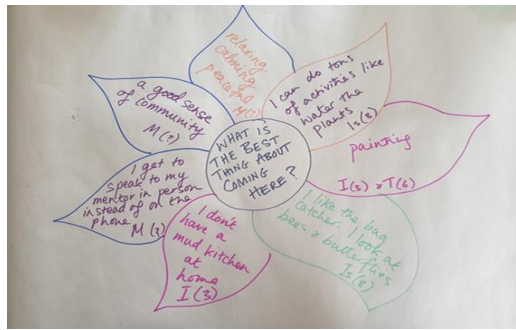


Engagement with children, young people and families

- Conducted semi-structured interviews, small group chats, creative activities, provider-led interviews, and online interviews
- We were guided by the trusted adults about the most suitable place and way to engage with their service users:



- Stay and play session
- Family allotment day
- Café meet-ups
- Drop-in at a family centre
- Creative arts at a holiday club



Community research

- Recruited three community researchers after widely promoting the roles across Surrey
- Held two three-hour training sessions covering interviewing techniques, safeguarding and ethics, then co-created the questions to ask
- Community researchers went out into their communities and networks across Surrey to find people eligible for EH and collected stories of people's experiences
- Places within their networks included churches, soft plays, food banks and cafes

Who they spoke to

- 105 practitioners
- 5 children aged 1-10 years
- 34 Young people aged 11-18 years
- 23 Parents
- 3 Mentors

The community researchers conducted 59 interviews and 62 people were consulted. The entire sample included the following family situations:

- Single parents
- Parents for whom English is not their first language
- Travellers
- Young parents
- Those with young children
- Those with teenagers
- Parents of children with SEND
- Young people with SEND
- Parents with adopted children



What they heard

There are 10 themes that cut across the stories we heard from practitioners, children, young people and families. We have grouped these together on the following pages. For each theme, we've used the voices of the people we met to highlight some of the barriers and enablers to good support. These voices are scattered throughout this section and are key to understanding what great support looks like for this cohort. They can help inform and guide the commissioning process.

Theme overview

- **Strength based approach:** creativity, flexibility, collaboration, time
- **Accessing support:** communication, visibility, simplicity and ease, places and spaces, hub
- **Relationships:** trust, transparency, empathy, peer support

Time

- **Time to build relationships and trust**, and work at the family's pace - flexibility about how long, when and where
- **Consistency and continuity are key** - persistence and longevity produce great outcomes
- **Wait times** - having to wait a long time to access support is frustrating

'My son was offered six sessions of online counselling, but he found that very difficult. He was so anxious that it took him six weeks to even feel like saying anything, then it was over!' (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, mid 40s).

'They would make me feel loved, give me a hug sometimes, make me feel cared for. The unknown is scary. They would listen and be present. They would come to my house. It's really hard to get out sometimes'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, mid 20s).

'I'm on the waiting list for two parenting courses but there aren't enough people signed up yet. I feel so alone'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Single Mum, victim of domestic abuse).

'Someone who could help people live their lives in the best way, pointing you in the right direction to get support. They'd wave a magic wand to make things happen quicker - we had to wait 9 months for an appointment. Mothers are not always listened to - they would listen and have a person-centred approach'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, late 30s).

Relationships

- **Person and family centred** - treating family members as individuals
- **Relationships and connections** between providers and practitioners are vital to create and maintain good teamwork across sector
- **Being brave** and feeling supported to have difficult and challenging conversations with families

'My friends with SEND kids. They get it. We're in the same boat and we go through the same each day. I can't leave the house with my two SEND children. We meet online and through our WhatsApp groups. We'd like to meet face-to-face but most of us are single parents so we can't get out and leave the kids. Life's hard. It just doesn't stop'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, early 40's, two SEND children).

'I moved here not knowing one person - I get nervous taking [my son] places not knowing how he'll behave. Because of support from Centre, I now take him to Bouncing Bunnies and the allotment. 1:1 support has helped with meeting people and my confidence to make contact with others'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, mid 20's).

'It's easier if you have things in common. People like me that have gone through similar experiences, then I can relate to them'. (Extract from a community research story. Older mum).

'People who would normally walk past each other in the street and wouldn't normally mix outside of here (allotment). They realise that we all share similar issues. This place gives them some common ground. Lots of our families are at home alone, but they come here, meet other people and start building a whole support network. It's great to see that'. (Extract from a story shared by a Surrey Care Trust staff member).

Trust

- **Transparency is important** - being open clear with families about what's happening is important
- **A recognised brand** - trusted people and trusted places - somewhere that people know they will get good support
- **Paternal/maternal figures** – someone who can give advice or fix things

'It's easier if you have things in common. People like me that have gone through similar experiences, then I can relate to them'. (Extract from a community research story. Older mum).

'Someone who makes me feel loved and cared for'. Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Girl, age 15).

'I need to trust the place and the people. Like Sure Start. That was a trusted brand. And Mothercare!' (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, in her 30's).

'I had a counsellor. She came to my school. I was confused when she stopped coming' (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Young man, age 14).

'Staff are lovely here [Home Start drop-in] they're so knowledgeable about what help is available and it's lovely that someone else makes me a cup of tea! I had postnatal depression with my son and the Sure Start centre near me was a lifeline. I don't know what I would have done without it. There was always someone there. This time around [with her daughter, aged 3] they just don't exist. It's harder to find help now and know who to turn to'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, early 40's).

'She's (his mentor) caring, forward – she doesn't dance around the issue. She doesn't sugar-coat things. She's honest and gives good advice without being blunt. She's easy to talk to. She laughs'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Young man, age 17).

Communication

- **Some services are hard to reach and not visible enough** - not getting a response causes anxiety
- **Consider different methods** - WhatsApp for groups and regular contact, plus out-of-hours support
- **Signposting** via friends, networks and professionals – GPs are often the trusted default

'They need to make support more visible. Lots of people are scared. They don't know where to go. It feels easier to keep your mouth shut. I had nowhere to turn. I wouldn't have known where to get my support if it weren't for the police'. (Extract from a community research story. Single mum with young children).

'For example, if a receptionist at the GP surgery is rude over the phone, it can stop you from making that call again, thus stopping you from getting the help that you may need'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum in her 30s).

'Mentoring is less questions and more dialogue. It's more like the conversation leads you to answers, rather than the questions lead you to answers'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Ex-mentee. Femail, age 22).

'When my calls aren't returned, it makes me wonder if I'm imagining things are worse than they are' (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum of 14-year-old boy).

'It should be more advertised; when people need support, they might be the people who don't know where to go'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum with a young child).

'They should go to the parents, rather than needing the parents to work hard to search for the right places and reach out to them. They should go to them to ask how they are doing. When you have mental health problems you need help right then!' (Extract from a community research story. Mum with a young child).

Places and spaces

- **Choice is key** to creating safe and supportive spaces: cafes, parks, allotments, home, dog walks etc
- **Social opportunities with peers are valuable** - meeting people with similar circumstances to share stories, bond, and create networks
- **Welcoming, neutral and informal, one stop shops** with friendly and skilled staff who can signpost to additional support - an obvious 'go to' place for everyone, regardless of their situation

'I feel more confident with my dog there, when I meet with my mentor' (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Boy, age 14).

'We need more places to go for mental health [other than the GP], more support, so when you have a 'wobble', there is somewhere to go, easy to access'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum in her 20s).

'I can do tons of activities like water the plants (allotment). I like the bug catcher. I look at bees and butterflies'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Girl, age 8).



'We should have hubs to go to, where we can find out where to go for support, ask questions, be with other

families'. (Extract from a community research story. Single mum with young children).

'I would be lost without the community centre and to be given help when you ask for it'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum in her 20s from GRT community).

'I find it difficult to get support and I am an assertive person! It would be helpful if there was one obvious place. I feel I don't know where to go and I get pushed from pillar to post. GP says go to hospital and hospital says go to mental health services, mental health says go on counselling and then you have to wait'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum in her 50s).

'Help people to find those places where they can meet people and find help. The Children's Centre in Cheam is brilliant. They need to bring back Children's Centres!' (Extract from a community research story. Single mum in her 30s).

Access

- **'Formal' buildings are daunting** to many young people and families - choice about where to meet is key
- **Face-to-face should always be an option** - physical connections are important
- **Drop-ins are great but closed groups are also important** - a range of options is best to meet people's differing support needs

'It's knowing WHO to ask and to feel confident to do this. When you are homeless it's very much 'sink or swim'. (Extract from a community research story. A Dad).

'I don't like going to places that are too busy; that's overwhelming. I prefer a youth group with limited numbers, for young people in the same boat as me'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Young man, age 14).

'I miss meeting people. Everything seems to be over the phone now, I don't always want that!'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, in her 30s).

'If help and support was more readily available and well-advertised to make me feel at ease and that its ok to ask! Sometimes you don't know if you need help or are unable to admit that you need help'. (Extract from a community research story. Older mum).

'I like the calm, patient activity here [allotment]. The people who come here are calm, not chaotic'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Young man, age 17).

'Now nothing is in person anymore because of COVID. It needs to be in person again. You've got more connection with someone'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum in her 30s).

Simplicity

- **Anything that simplifies life** for people really helps - families are exhausted!
- **Stay and plays, picnics, food and drink** - a reason to get out of the house and be with other people with similar circumstances
- **Confidence that it will be easy** - no form filling or chasing, especially for those with low levels of digital literacy or mild learning difficulties

'There should be a leaflet for parents on services that are available. I just don't know where to go. They did one in lockdown with contact details for support like domestic abuse etc. That was so helpful. We need a clear place with all the support information'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum with teenage children).

'Clarks came to a session I was at to measure my son's feet. He's disabled and I can't take him out easily - it helped me loads' (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, late-30s).

'There's a big lack of self-care when you have a baby. I didn't lose weight on purpose. And sleep - that goes when you have a baby. And when [baby] doesn't settle for sleep until 10.30 you can't be bothered to make food for yourself then'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Single mum, age 26).

'I think the fact that we have the internet makes it easy to find out where to go but form filling is a big thing.

Some people can't be bothered or find it really hard. It's hard work'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum with young children).

'GP time slots are never long enough to help you. One of my children needs CAMHS but we can't wait for it. Someone I know pays for private mental health support for their child, but they can't really afford it'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum with teenage children).

Strength based

- **Peer support is an invaluable resource** for all family members – your greatest resource are your families
- **Work with families to understand their strengths** – what they can do, how they have managed. Build on their abilities, resilience and what's working well
- **Work in partnership with families** – do with rather than to. Start with what they say they want rather than what we think is best for them

'I want someone that actually listens to me, without judgement'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum in her 20s).

'Be human and keep it real. "I am not the expert!"' (Extract from a practitioner's story).

'The WhatsApp group for this session (Home Start drop-in) is really helpful. We all share when we hear things that are going on locally. I have recently joined a breastfeeding group and our WhatsApp group is brilliant, no matter what time, day or night, I know that someone will be there'. (Extract from a children, young people and families story. Mum, age 38).

'The people measuring if someone needs help don't know the person or understand the needs properly. It's too regimented. What's missing is the personal relationship. In the old days you'd have one GP that knew you really well but now you see lots of different people'. (Extract from a community research story. Older Mum).

Collaboration

- **Networking and sharing good practice** - Make time to build strong relationships with other providers. Knowing the person who you're signposting a family to, will help them through their journey
- **Strong multi-agency working** - a joined up, consistent approach from the get-go is less confusing for families
- **Continuity, trust and transparency between services** - we all need to work from the same value base and have a shared understanding of our processes

'No-one takes responsibility...I get fobbed off and they lose the paperwork when you are being passed around. I've lost faith in the system'. (Extract from a community research story. Mum in her 20s from GRT community).

'I'd make it so that systems weren't separated. Everything should be streamlined and be part of one central support system. You have to contact lots of different places to get support'. (Extract from a community research story. Single mum in her 30s).

'I'd like befriender support - like a Home Start volunteer but for those of us with older kids who still need help at home. Someone who could 'hold my hand' and give me the confidence to go along to groups'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, mid 40s).



'You don't get one midwife and one number no more. I've seen a different midwife at and you only have one advice line to call - with my daughter, I saw one midwife contact her on her mobile. This new way really stresses me out. I don't mind meeting new frustrated telling them my story over and over again'. (Extract from a children, young story. Mum, early 20s, teenage pregnancy).

Creativity

- **Having permission and autonomy** to do what is needed for families - trusting providers that they have the commitment, motivation, skills and abilities to work alongside families
- **Having flexibility in time and response** - so that providers can work with the different needs of families as they arise
- **Being trusted to take positive risks** and holding 'safe uncertainty' - being brave

'For my son's first 18 months I got support from the perinatal team, which was covered by the council. You are only supposed to have the support covered until they turn one but they held onto me for longer because I was poorly. I really valued that'. (Extract from a community research story. Single mum).

'I feel relaxed here. It's calm. We've got a tiny garden so coming here (allotment) gives us a chance to have more space. The summer holidays are long and can be expensive. This is a great activity which is free, and that means I don't worry about over-spending. It's good for my daughter to do simple things like pick blackberries – just natural stuff'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Mum, mid 30's).

'You get to do lots of activities like art (at Spurgeons). Colouring in can be therapeutic especially when my brother annoys me. I like lots of different things. I like being productive, not just watching telly'. (Extract from a children, young people and families' story. Girl, age 11).

What we noticed

- The workforce is hugely committed to the work they are doing, both in their values and their practice
- Some families are still dealing with the consequences of the pandemic and lockdown
- When services are working well there is strong enthusiasm from service users (e.g., mentoring)
- Diversity is a challenge in terms of workforce composition
- There is an embedded parent / child dynamic running through the system
- Linked with this is the perceived fallacy of the 'expert' - who is the expert about what is needed for families and how it should be provided?
- Workers should be given the space and confidence to innovate

Personas

Customer journey mapping

We facilitated a customer journey mapping exercise with Early Help (EH) service leads and commissioners. It gave participants the opportunity to experience a pathway through the EH system from entry point and referral, to discharge or disengagement.

We used one of the following personas which we created from the insight gathering stage. Participants were asked to imagine being different members of that family, working through their service journey, thinking about what is going on within formal services plus the informal support that person may be receiving from elsewhere.

Crucially, this exercise asked people to feel what it might be like at various stages of the journey, because emotion has a huge impact on the behaviour of people and needs to be considered when attempting to understand someone's experience.

Customer journey mapping is collaborative and engaging and helps to identify where the enablers and barriers are to good support within the current EH system.



Lydia, age 6 Lives: Spelthorne

Summary:

Lydia lives with her Greek mum and 2-year-old brother. English is her second language. Lydia's mum is a victim of domestic abuse (DA) and is involved in an ongoing custody battle with Lydia's dad. They live in temporary accommodation and Lydia attends the local primary school.

Current support:

Lydia's mum is receiving 1-1 support for DA from her local family centre. She is on the waiting list for 2 parenting courses. She receives parenting support from a Home Start volunteer.

Barriers to good support:

No family or friends close by: Lydia's abusive dad shut down all her mum's previous support networks. He has contact details for all her old friends, meaning it's too dangerous for her to contact any of them. The family she does have in this country live too far away, and she can't afford to travel to see them.

Long wait time for local courses: Lydia's mum would like to attend some parenting courses at her local family centre but they need to wait until there are enough people signed up before they run them. This is frustrating for Lydia's mum. Poor public transport links make it difficult for her to attend similar courses in other parts of the county.

Enablers to great support:

Opportunities to socialise: Lydia's mum would like opportunities to meet new people in a safe space, for example, coffee morning or stay and plays. Peer support is important to her. 'I'd like to be able to make new friends in a place I can bring my son to, where it's relaxed'.

Skilled professionals: 'They (the staff at the family centre) are really informed about DA and the pain of losing someone. Even though he was bad through and through, I'm still grieving for the life I've lost. They're helping me to come to terms with that'.

Leo, age 2 Lives: Surrey Heath

Summary:

Leo lives with mum and dad in rented army accommodation. Leo has speech and development delay. Leo's dad is a soldier and is away for extended periods of time, leaving mum as the sole carer. They moved to the area 8 months ago and have no family close by. Leo is a Lockdown baby and mum has suffered with post-natal depression.

Current support:

Leo's mum was referred by her health visitor to Home Start for parenting support. She also attends Home Start's stay and play session.

Barriers to good support:

Breaks in provision: 'We lose our routine over the summer - everything stops! For those of us looking for things to do with pre-school age children, it's really hard. I just want to be able to attend my normal weekly groups. I feel that most things in the summer are geared towards school-aged children. They (Home Start) ran a picnic one day in the summer and it was great - such a simple idea but we had a lovely time. The summer isn't a good time for my mental health - I lose my connections with people, my support'.

Cliques / no introductions: 'I feel like I'm somebody when I come here [Home Start stay and play]. There are no cliques. Somebody meets me at the door and when I first came, they introduced me to people. I've been to groups where that doesn't happen and you're just left to find your own way. That puts me off and I don't go back'.

Enablers to great support:

Simple comforts: Leo's mum talked about how some simple comforts – like food and drink on offer at stay and plays – are a big help to her. There's a big lack of self-care when you have baby!

Peer support groups: ‘The What’s App group for this group is really helpful. We all share when we hear things that are going on locally. I have recently joined a breastfeeding group and our What’s App group is brilliant - no matter what time, day or night, I know that someone will be there’

Drop-in groups: Great support means not having to book - drop-ins are best. ‘I feel bad if I’ve booked a space but then can’t attend. I feel guilty that I’ve let someone down’.

Bethany, age 10 Lives: Woking

Summary:

Bethany lives with mum, dad and 6-year-old sister in their own home. She has severe physical disabilities. Bethany’s mum worries that her other daughter misses out on getting her attention because she is so focussed on Bethany. She thinks she might have mild depression but hasn’t spoken to her GP about this as she has too much else going on in her life.

Current support:

Bethany attends a special day school for disabled children. Her mum attends drop in sessions at the allotment provided by Surrey Care Trust with her younger daughter.

Barriers to good support:

Distance: ‘I don’t drive, so I need to be able to walk there otherwise I just won’t bother going out’

Lots of paperwork: Bethany’s mum feels like she is always completing forms and having to repeat herself over and over again. If a group or service asks for lots of information and paperwork, it discourages her.

Enablers to great support:

Trusted brands: ‘Trust is important – I need to trust the place and the people. Like Sure Start. That was a trusted brand. And Mothercare! ‘Sure Start’ was brilliant – I wish it was still around as it helped me so much. Having everything in 1 place (different professionals, services, groups) made life simpler. I miss meeting people. Everything seems to be over the phone now, I don’t always want that!’

Practical help: Bethany’s mum remembered a time when a Clark’s shoe assistant came to the Sure Start centre she was at and measured her daughter’s feet – ‘I can’t take her out easily and get her to their shop so it helped me loads that they could come to where I was at’.

Louis, age 14 Lives: Elmbridge

Summary:

Louis lives with mum and dad in their own home. Louis developed severe anxiety during the first Lockdown. Even when the world started to open up again, he found it difficult to go out and wanted to stay near to his mum all the time.

Current support:

Louis was referred to CAMHS by his GP and was offered 6 sessions of online counselling. He was referred to Surrey Care Trust’s mentoring service by his youth group leader at church. He has been receiving support from his mentor since December 2021.

Barriers to good support:

Time-led: Louis’ mum says: ‘He was offered 6 sessions of online counselling but he found that very difficult. He was so anxious that it took him 6 weeks to even feel like saying anything – then it was over!’

Poor communication: Louis’s mum says: ‘CAMHS are a nightmare to contact whereas I know with the mentoring service that someone will contact me or get back to me quickly. It makes me feel like I’m not on my own. I feel reassured. When CAMHS or their GP don’t get back to her, ‘it makes me think, am I imagining that this is worse than it actually is?’

Enablers to great support:

Needs-led: Louis says: 'There's no time limit here; [the mentoring service] I can take it at the speed I need. That helps me to relax and not panic that I have to sort things out right now'.

Pets: Talking about each other's pets is a good conversation starter. 'I go on dog walks with my mentor – I'm more myself when my dog is with me'.

Closed / referral-only groups: 'I don't like going to places that are too busy – that's overwhelming for me'. Louis would prefer to go to a youth group that was limited in numbers, where young people with similar issues to him attend: 'They wouldn't judge me'.

Alex, age 4 Lives: Waverley

Summary:

Alex lives with mum and older sister in council accommodation. Alex has speech and language difficulties and is awaiting assessment for suspected ADHD. Alex's mum, 26, also has a 7-year-old daughter with SEND. Dad of both children is currently in prison.

Current support:

Alex's mum receives 1-1 parenting support from the local family centre. They are waiting on an EHCP for her daughter. She takes Alex to a local stay and play session.

Barriers to good support:

Anxiety about not fitting in: Alex's mum says that there are coffee mornings at other community centres, but she doesn't drive and it's expensive to get the bus everywhere. She's not sure that families from her estate would attend groups on other estates: 'They'd feel self-conscious'.

Poorly maintained play parks: Alex's mum likes to take him to free activities as she is on a low income and would like to meet friends locally, but the play parks near her are poorly maintained and many have broken equipment. 'Also, they have no toilets which is useless when you have small children'.

Enablers to great support:

Peer-support: Alex's mum says: 'They understand [parents with SEND children]. With these people I feel relaxed and happy. They don't judge me'

More SEND groups: Alex's mum would prefer some groups in the afternoons as she says there's nothing on after lunch. She gets lonely when she's stuck at home and it's not good for her mental health.

Free activities: 'I worry about my electric and how I'm going to pay for things. The play schemes and Runabouts are too expensive'.

Chloe, age 19 Lives: Guildford

Summary:

Single mum to 3-year-old boy and currently 28 weeks pregnant with her second child. Chloe lives in council accommodation and is on benefits. Her son and the unborn baby have different dads, neither of whom are present in their lives.

Current support:

Chloe receives 1-1 parenting support from her local family centre, plus some debt and housing advice.

Barriers to good support:

Access issues: When Chloe had her first child, she saw the same midwife throughout her pregnancy, and had her mobile number to contact her when she needed to. For her current pregnancy, she has seen a different midwife at each appointment and has one number for a midwifery advice line that she must use. This new way really stresses me out. I don't mind meeting new people, but I get frustrated telling them my story over and over again'.

Lack of relevant groups: 'I had my son at 16 - I didn't meet any young mums then. I felt so alone. Someone should start a young mums' group. When I got pregnant at 16, I wish I'd had someone to talk to who'd been through it (teen pregnancy) themselves'.

Enablers to great support:

Professionals in one place: Chloe explains that being able to get all the different support she needs from the one place (near to home) helps her because her life is full looking after her son and getting ready for the new baby. Having to travel to different places is stressful.

Advocacy: To navigate the system, 'everyone told me that I needed to phone the council, but they didn't tell me what to say! I didn't have a clue! I need help with the simple things - someone explaining to me what I'm meant to say or ask for. Someone who won't just fill out the forms but will help me all the way through'.

Big thanks to...

- The children, young people and families who shared their stories with us - thank you for being open and frank, and giving us some valuable insight to your lives
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