

Wirral family hubs engagement

Summary report



Anna Freud
building the mental
wellbeing of the
next generation

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Acknowledgement from Elizabeth Hartley

Interim Director of Childrens Services at Wirral Council.

Family hubs are an opportunity for Wirral to build upon and connect the services for families already in the community. I would like to thank everyone who supported us in the application for funding and the continued work to develop the vision for family hubs in Wirral, and the Family Hubs transformation team for their ongoing hard work and commitment. Special thanks go to families who gave up their time to attend our workshops – you gave life to the family hub vision. Finally, we would like to thank Erica Roscoe, Claudia Coussins and the rest of the team at Anna Freud for their support in facilitating workshops and bringing everyone’s ideas together. Wirral looks forward to continuing to develop family hubs over the coming months.

About Anna Freud and the National Centre for Family Hubs

Anna Freud is a world leading mental health charity for children and families. Our vision is a world where all children and young people are able to achieve their full potential, where they get the right support at the right time to develop their emotional and mental health. Our mission is to close the gap in mental health and wellbeing by advancing, translating, delivering and sharing the best science and practice with those who impact the lives of children and families. This means recognising structural inequalities and playing our part in tackling social injustice which leaves marginalised people behind.

We host the National Centre for Family Hubs – a national learning platform supporting local authorities in England to design and develop family hubs. These enable children, young people and their families to access joined-up, whole family, inclusive support. Our work is evidence-informed, practice-based and participation-led. Family hubs are funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and are jointly overseen by DfE and the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC).

Our work is informed by mentalization, a concept rooted in attachment theory. Mentalizing refers to our ability to make sense of ourselves and others by imagining what might be going on underneath surface-level behaviours. We can mentalize at an individual level as well as a systemic level. This means that as well as informing our direct work with families, mentalization is helpful in supporting multi-agency teams to work together in complex networks. Cultivating trusting relationships is a core component of mentalization and creates a culture of learning and reflection that can help prevent burnout in the workforce. This idea informed the development of the work for Wirral, leading us to propose a programme which sought to gather views and develop a dialogue with a range of stakeholders.

Summary

This report is aimed at senior managers involved in developing family hubs in Wirral. It summarises the learning from a series of workshops facilitated by Anna Freud which took place between March and July 2023. The workshops were designed and delivered in response to needs identified by the family hubs team.

All partners involved identified the need for a shared approach to develop family hubs. The workshops were developed in response to this need, to engage stakeholders and help all involved to understand the priorities for family hubs.

The learning falls into two categories: shared language and shared approach. The DfE and DHSC outline three principles essential to the family hub model: accessibility, connectedness and relationship-centredness. We have applied learning from the workshop to these principles to outline how they can be realised in family hub development.

Accessible

Providing a universal offer with immediate crisis point access and creating a safe, comforting and welcoming space to improve accessibility of services.

Connected

Developing a seamless experience which builds on existing effective programmes. Supporting and empowering a multi-agency workforce enhances this network of connections which in turn provides greater support for families.

Relationship-centred

Developing strong relationships based on trust is what makes family hubs effective. Developing strong relationships across communities can help to address inequalities, identifying communities' diverse needs and taking steps to respond to them.

Context

The national policy landscape

Over the years, local authorities have seen numerous national policy interventions designed to improve outcomes for babies, children, young people and families. Sure Start Centres have been a pivotal part of early intervention services since they launched in 2000. More recent initiatives that focus on early intervention include the Supporting Families programme (previously Troubled Families), the Reducing Parental Conflict programme, and the development of integrated care systems (ICSs), boards (ICBs) and partnerships (ICPs). Recent reviews into children's social care and support for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) have also offered support for early intervention.

In November 2021, DfE launched a £12 million Family Hubs Transformation Fund to support 12 English local authorities to implement a family hub model. This funding is known as 'Transformation Funding 1' (TF1). All local authorities receiving TF1 will take part in a publicly accessible evaluation to gather learning about the local transformation process and build an evidence-base to support other areas moving to a family hub model.

TF1 is separate to the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme which supports an additional 75 local authorities. The vision for the transformation of services into a family hub model is consistent across both programmes: to provide families

with the integrated support they need to care for their children from conception to adulthood. This enables parents to establish a foundation of wellbeing from which their children can meet their full potential. This vision is underpinned by the three key family hub principles: being more accessible, better connected and more relationship-centred.

More accessible

A single point of access helps families recognise and understand the services on offer. This includes hub buildings, virtual offers and outreach.

Better connected

Family hubs join up professionals, services and providers (state, private, voluntary and community) through co-location, integration, partnerships, data sharing, shared outcomes and governance. Holistic, wraparound services support families with a wide range of needs, identify need early and consider the whole family.

More relationship-centred

Family hub practices focus on building trusting and supportive relationships and emphasising continuity of care. They build on families' strengths, drawing on and improving relationships, including building networks with peers to address underlying issues.

Provision for families in Wirral prior to family hubs

In 2016, Wirral closed 12 of its 16 children's centres. Retaining these four children's centres provided Wirral with a good foundation upon which to build family hubs. Family hubs' integrated working practices were already in place in the children's centre offer, so the principles of family hubs were not new, but a development of existing practices.

This has coincided with the development of the Early Help Alliance and the Family Toolbox, offering a comprehensive digital service to families so they can access information and guidance at any time. The Alliance organisations within their own right support families via their services and have also been able to bring funding into the borough through this model. In 2021 children's centres alongside 0-19 partners were accredited as Baby Friendly by UNICEF- a process in which environments, staff practice and support offered is analysed to ensure it is of a good standard to encourage responsive parenting and infant feeding choices.

Over the last two years, a partnership between children's centres and midwifery public health charity Koala North West was granted funding from the DHSC to develop their 1001 days programme. This programme focuses on the 1001 days between conception and a child's second birthday. Funding such as this has enabled Wirral to develop their offer for families and deliver more seamless support. It is intended that family hubs in Wirral will build on this model.

Applying for transformation funding

Wirral was on the verge of transforming its early help services when the opportunity for local authority funding arose. Working in partnership with Capacity: The Public Services Lab and local communities, Wirral codesigned a family-led, referral-free, threshold free model. This builds on the learning of the Supporting Families programme, and introduces an alliance of third sector organisations to continue the transformation.

The Capacity team engaged with over 450 local families to understand their needs, how they prefer to engage, what barriers they face and what was important to them. The most significant finding was the desire for a 'relationship' rather than a service. Family hubs help facilitate this relationship and create meaningful peer support. The main issues identified were:

- mental health
- social isolation
- managing change
- supporting children with additional needs

These challenges align with the family hub framework, creating an opportunity to work with parents, carers, children, young people and partners to address them. Wirral has a strong basis for the Start for Life vision – they already offered all six core services from conception to age two, providing a solid foundation on which to implement the family hub model.

Midwifery	All pregnant people have a named community midwife to provide individual care. Midwifery teams work across nine neighbourhoods with parents accessing clinics in a variety of community venues. Birthing options offered include hospital, the community birthing suite at Seacombe Children's Centre or a home birth.
Health visiting	The health visiting service delivers the healthy child programme to pre-school children and their families across a four locality model. The service also includes a Family Nurse Partnership Programme to provide intensive support to first-time parents aged 19 or under, or up to 23 for those with SEND.
Mental health support	Mental health services are provided by Cheshire and Wirral Partnership, including antenatal support provided by perinatal mental health midwives. Across the partnership a range of services support mental health and wellbeing including health services in schools, CAMHS, counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) delivered by third sector partners.
Infant feeding advice with specialist breast feeding support	Koala North West were commissioned to help families achieve their desired feeding journey. Children's centres are UNICEF accredited as breastfeeding friendly and the health visiting service provides specialist support through a drop-in clinic.
Safeguarding	Wirral Council operates an integrated front door (IFD). Families can self-refer or be referred to receive the right support. The IFD, staffed by social workers, triages referrals to ensure the right service is identified, whether this be social care or early help services.
Services relating to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)	The early childhood service has a dedicated early years SEND Team. Portage workers support children and families before they enter childcare and education. SEND officers support early years providers to meet the needs of children with SEND, and where appropriate signpost access to financial support, either through the inclusive practice fund or an education and healthcare plan.

Responding to local need

Reducing inequity is a priority for several of Wirral's strategic groups. This includes Wirral's Health and Wellbeing Board, Wirral Health and Care Commissioning, and Wirral Safeguarding Children Partnership. They highlight:

- Male life expectancy in Wirral's most under-resourced wards is 12.1 years lower than in its more affluent areas, and 10.7 years lower for women (2016-2018 data, Wirral Intelligence Service).
- Poverty increased in Wirral between 2015 and 2019, with 35% of its population living in deprivation (2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation).

Wirral Intelligence Service's collection of statistics and insight, This Is Wirral, provides key messages relating to multiple disadvantage categories:

- Birkenhead and Tranmere, Rock Ferry, Bidston and St James, and Seacombe wards report high numbers of people with no qualifications and high numbers of people claiming out-of-work benefits. These wards also consistently perform poorly for participation in higher education, healthy life expectancy at birth and net household income.
- People living in lower income households were more likely to have requested, but not received mental health treatment.
- Over half of all social care users in Wirral report living with anxiety and depression.
- The health of people experiencing homelessness is significantly worse than that of the general population. Forty-one per cent of people experiencing homelessness report a long-term physical health problem and 45% report a diagnosed mental health problem, compared to 28% and 25% respectively in the general population.
- The majority of local YMCA residents are in contact with drug or alcohol services. Wirral also had over double the national rate of benefits claimants for alcohol dependency. Alcohol consumption was estimated to have cost the borough £131 million in 2018.
- In 2015-2016, 22% of crime costs in Wirral were estimated to be alcohol-related. Anti-social behaviour incidents related to alcohol were most common in more economically deprived areas, with peaks in domestic violence associated with periods of increased alcohol consumption.

This insight, alongside learning from the workshops, will be used to inform the development of Wirral's family hub offer, including hub locations and the programmes offered.

Our approach

Seven workshops took place - in a variety of formats to include a range of participants. While the format differed to suit the needs of participants, the structure of the sessions was largely consistent across all seven workshops. Workshops were designed to offer participants space for reflection and were delivered using a relational approach.

Workshop one

An online planning session with the core team, consisting of 11 participants. This was to facilitate an open discussion about the strengths and challenges of the family hubs programme within the existing local landscape.

Workshops two and three

Two face-to-face sessions with the wider family hubs teams, including education, voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) and health colleagues. The aim of these sessions was to focus on the strengths and challenges identified in workshop one, and start to develop a shared understanding of family hubs based on a shared language.

Workshops four and five

Two face-to-face sessions with parents and carers across Wirral to further develop the understanding and vision for family hubs, building on workshops one to three.

Workshop six

A face-to-face session with frontline staff to further test and develop the findings of workshops one to four.

Workshop seven

A face-to-face session with elected members to present findings and facilitate discussion.

The parent, carer and frontline worker sessions were supplemented with sessions and online surveys led and disseminated by the team at Wirral Council. Where appropriate, findings from additional sessions have been included in this report.

Learnings from the workshops

The workshops were intended to build on one another. The initial workshop with the core team formed the general structure of how subsequent workshops would be run. This workshop highlighted the need to be considerate of language. The second workshop also highlighted a number of key points which were subsequently tested with frontline workers, parents and carers.

At the first workshop, the core team identified and agreed on key family hub elements, which were developed into a shared approach in the following workshops. These principles are intended to inform how Wirral's family hubs will operate.



Exploring a shared language for family hubs

Initially, this discussion focused on ensuring that language doesn't place blame on families. Using terms such as 'hard to reach' or 'won't engage' often overemphasises a family's role; reframing these terms can better reflect the authority's failure to reach and connect with families. Framing language more positively avoids stigmatising families and encourages practitioners to take responsibility for engagement.

These ideas were developed through discussion with the wider team, who highlighted the need to avoid certain labelling terms such as 'child in need', 'young mum' and acronyms such as 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training) which might have negative connotations.

However, when this point was raised with parents and carers, they identified the need for a more nuanced approach. Some stated they found labels useful for explaining, understanding or justifying behaviour, especially in relation to their children. Parents and carers also highlighted that terms such as 'disabled' often prompt an emotional response, so it is important for practitioners to be flexible and sensitive to the needs of each family.

Practitioners, parents and carers all highlighted the need for language to be inclusive, accessible and easy to understand. The language practitioners use between themselves should be consistent with the language used to communicate with families, to prevent practitioners using complex or industry-specific

language with a non-specialist audience. Families also highlighted that 'community language' puts them at ease over 'system language', which is often unfamiliar. One workshop participant mentioned that in their team, case notes are written as if they will be read by a child. This exercise ensures that language used is simple and free of unnecessary jargon.

The wider family hubs team emphasised that taking a trauma-informed approach means adopting trauma-informed language. A trauma-informed approach recognises that anyone may have experienced a potentially traumatic event, and that those who have may be less likely to engage with support services. As such, relationships are key for families recovering from the effects of trauma. Practitioners highlighted that staff need to actively listen to families to develop a culture of compassion and trust – identifying when to dig deeper and helping them recognise that it's okay not to be okay.

Practitioners highlighted the need for staff to understand the nuances of different yet related programmes and issues, such as the difference between domestic abuse and parental conflict. This would increase the effectiveness of the programme, as staff would be better able to identify what issues a family is experiencing and offer them the most useful support.

Parents and carers suggested that practitioners create a glossary to help them to understand specialist or complex terms. They also mentioned the idea of a similar resource for children, to help them to better understand certain situations or feelings.

Exploring a shared approach for family hubs

Throughout the workshops, it was clear Wirral already had good provision for families. Steering group participants in the first workshop highlighted the need for family hubs to connect strands of the existing support offer. Given that there is such a strong offer across the borough, it was important to frame family hubs as a development of the current services, rather than a replacement.

During the initial meeting, the following points were raised as being important for developing family hubs:

The offer needs to be universal, with immediate access for families who have reached crisis point alongside support to avoid reaching crisis point.

Moving between services provided by different agencies should be seamless, and any referral processes should expedite rather than delay access to support.

Workers should develop strong relationships with families.

Workers need to be empowered to step up to new challenges and meet the higher expectations of the family hub workforce.

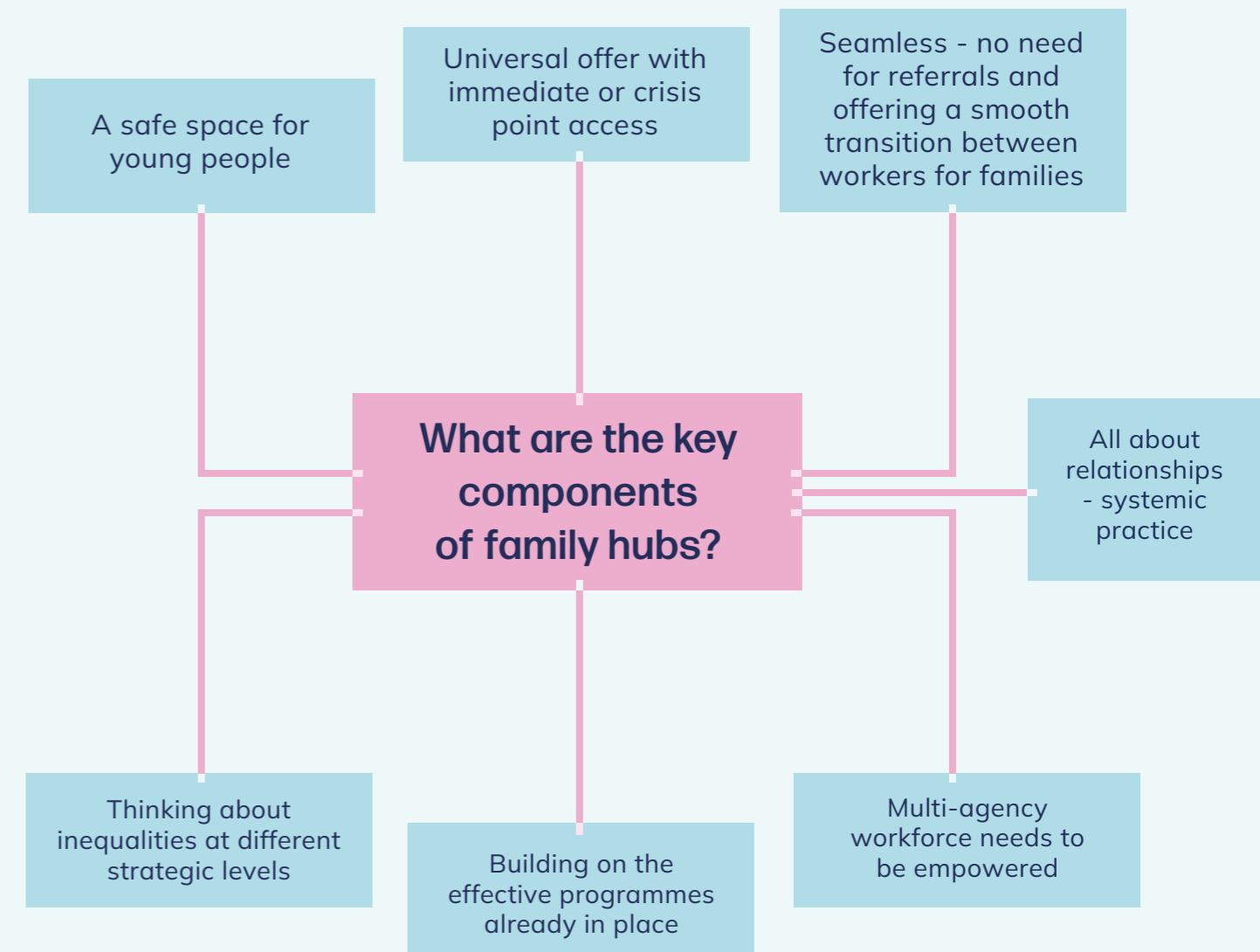
Family hubs should build upon the programmes already in place.

Reducing inequalities should be central to family hub policies, linked to the area's existing health and wellbeing strategy.

Centres should offer a safe space for all members of the family, including young people.

The subsequent workshops were used to test these points, which most participants agreed with. However, participants highlighted the challenge of creating a service with both universal and targeted support. They also highlighted the challenge of creating physical spaces that were welcoming for all – making a space suited to young people alongside parent and baby groups, for example. Similarly, having an entirely inclusive space presents its own challenges, such as working with victims of domestic abuse, who may not feel safe in mixed-gender spaces.

Workshop participants expanded on these seven key points to help develop a common understanding of them. The illustrations over the following pages offer an overview of how these points were expanded upon, as well as some additional points of note.




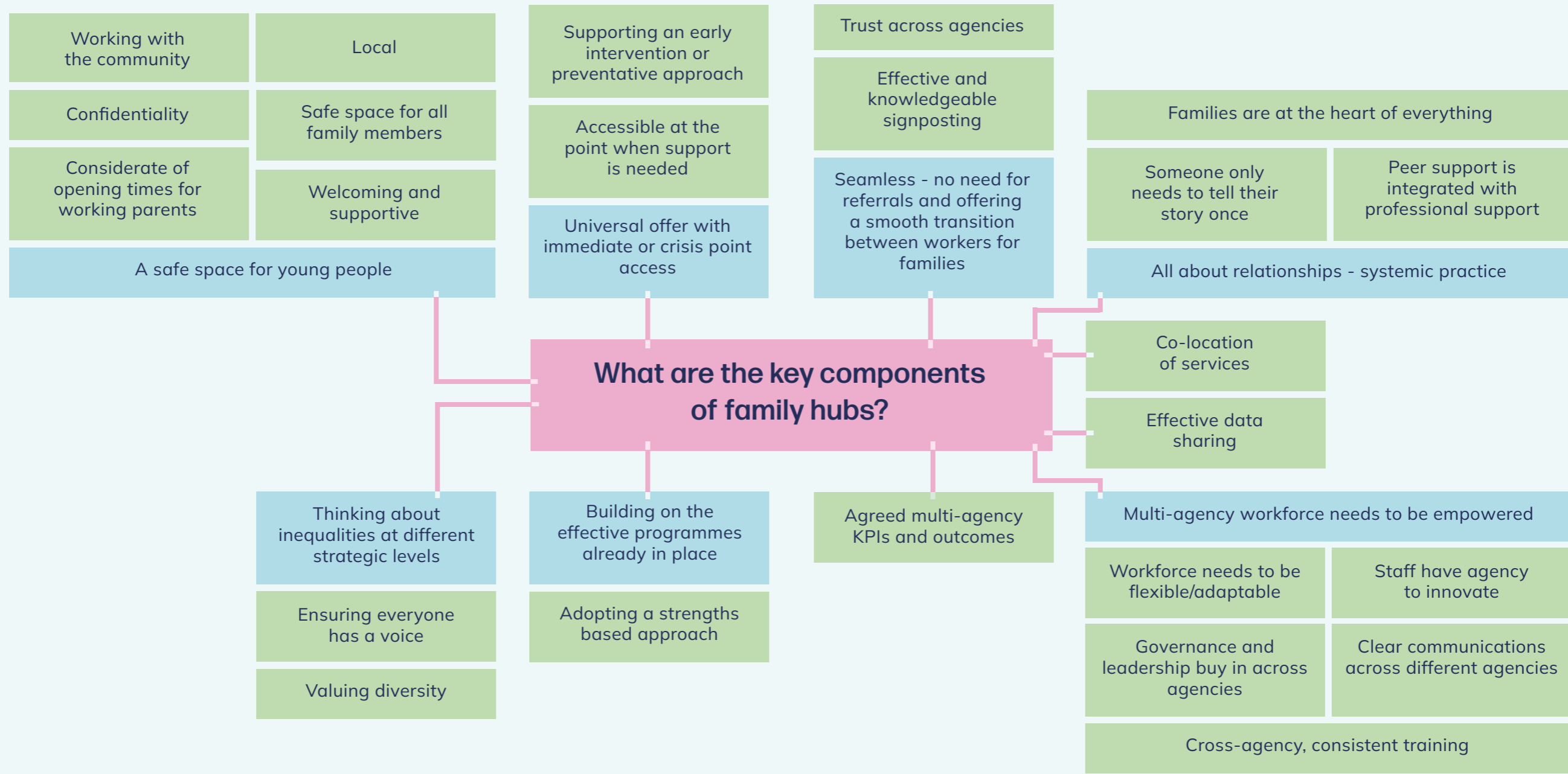
 key components as identified by the core team

Figure 2 – key components as identified by the core team, plus responses from the wider family hubs team in green





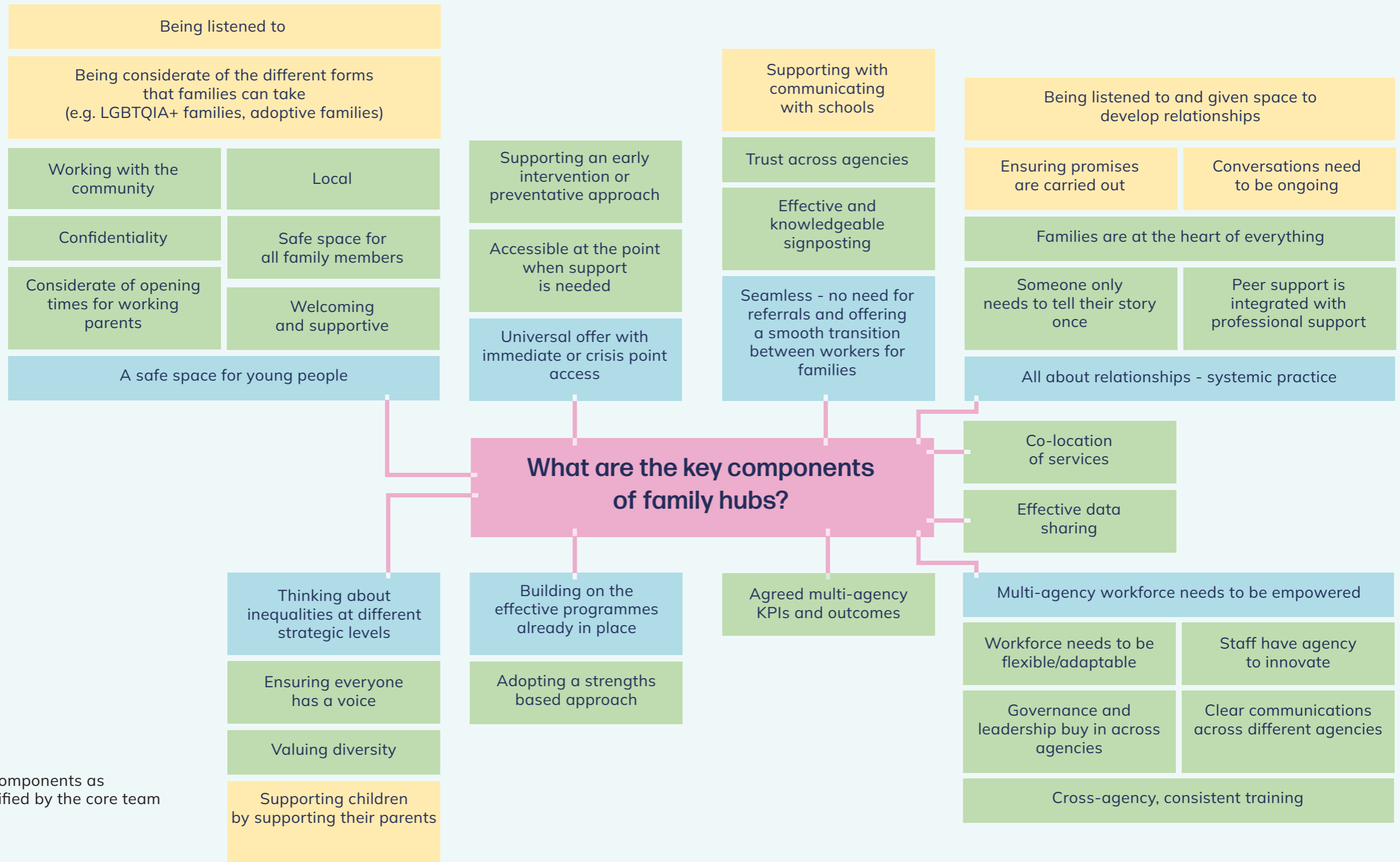
 key components as identified by the core team
 responses from the wider family hubs team

Figure 3 - key components plus responses from the wider family hubs team and parents and carers in yellow





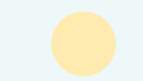
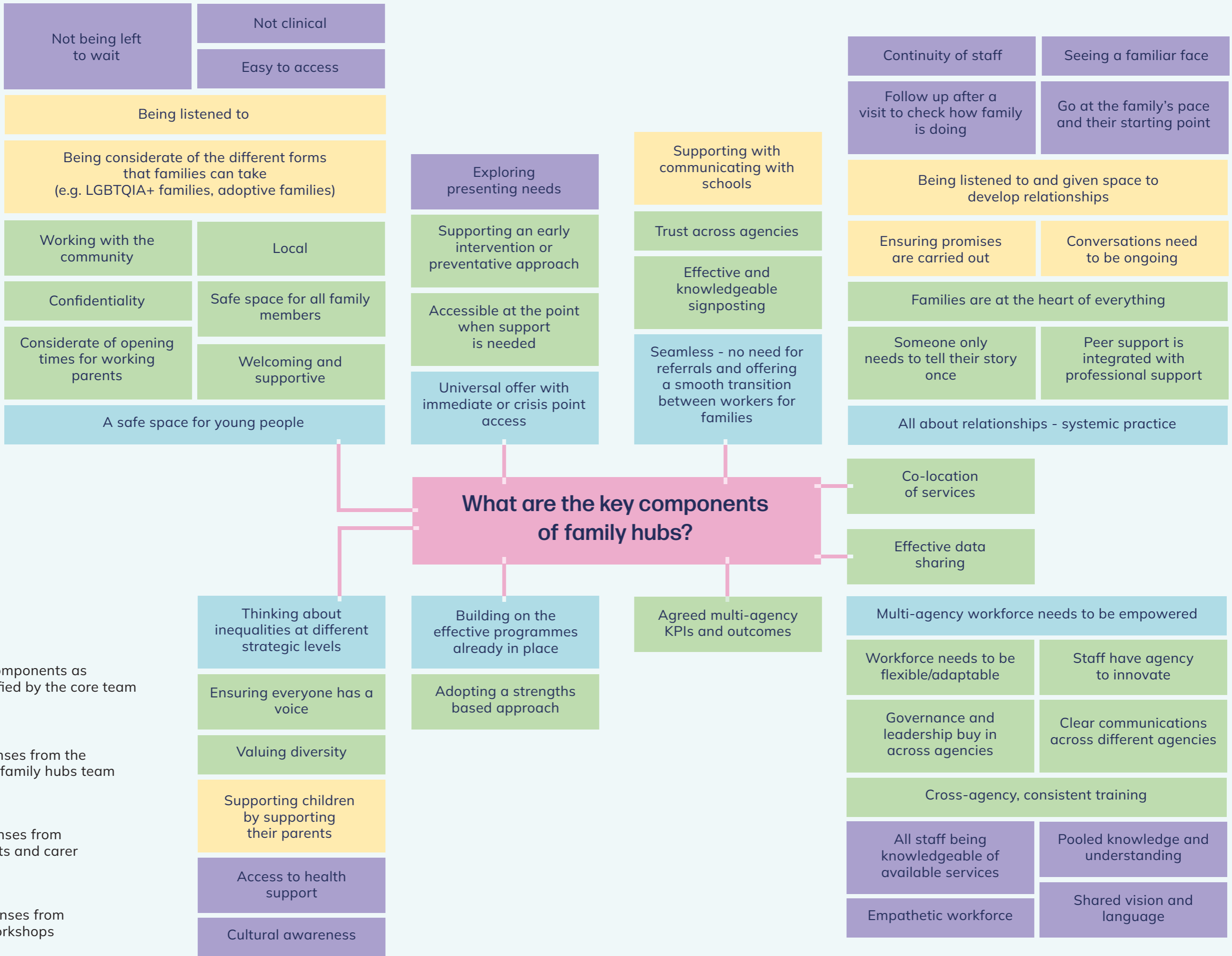
-  key components as identified by the core team
-  responses from the wider family hubs team
-  responses from parents and carer

Figure 4 - key components plus responses from all workshops in purple



- key components as identified by the core team
- responses from the wider family hubs team
- responses from parents and carer
- responses from all workshops

How these points were developed through the workshops

A universal offer

Workshop participants discussed the importance of a space where families can get immediate support. This may not need to be intensive or high-level support, but having a universal offer of early support can prevent small problems from escalating. This might take the form of a cup of tea and a chat, allowing parents and carers to share their concerns and be reassured that they're not alone. This could also include offering a pathway to additional support.

In line with making sure provision is available when it is needed, workshop participants noted that family hub opening times must allow opportunities for working parents to attend, which may mean it is necessary to open outside of the 09.00-17.00 period.

A safe, comforting and welcoming space

Initially, this point was specifically about young people, but it was agreed that family hubs need to be safe spaces for all family members. Making a space suitable for families and age groups with different needs could present a challenge, but possible solutions included using family hubs as a base from which individuals can be directed to the most appropriate services, rather than providing in-house support.

Participants suggested that working with the community will help ensure that the space is welcoming. They recommended that the space shouldn't feel too clinical and waiting times should be kept to a minimum. The centre also needs to consider the diversity of families who use the hubs, so that LGBTQIA+ families, adoptive families and other family types feel welcome.

Addressing inequalities

Participants in the initial workshop discussed the need for family hubs to integrate with existing policies, including Wirral's Health and Wellbeing strategy. Professionals in the subsequent workshops talked about the need to value diversity at a strategic level and recognise the impact of inequality on communities. They also suggested that family hubs could play a key role in addressing inequalities in access to health provision. Parents and carers also said that recognising the breadth of potential stress triggers outside of usual family life – like debt and housing – could help to support families holistically. In the long term, this would help address inequalities which begin in childhood.

Building on existing strengths

The workshops consistently highlighted the strengths of the existing offer, including the work of the VCSE sector on the Family Toolbox and community-based SEND support. It was universally agreed that to create a strong family hub offer, existing programmes should act as the foundation.

Empowering and supporting a multi-agency workforce

Participants discussed the existing strengths across the multi-agency workforce, but stressed that the introduction of family hubs would likely increase the pressure on them. They identified the need for strong governance and leadership with equal buy in across agencies, as well as the need for shared vision and language. Participants suggested that consistent training and communications across agencies would help empower the workforce.

Developing strong relationships based on trust

Participants frequently mentioned the importance of relationships. These comments were consistent in identifying that relationships with families should be genuine and on a family's own terms, including going at the family's pace and avoiding making assumptions.

Seamless experiences

Professionals mentioned that a multi-agency offer needs to be seamless for families and they shouldn't be referred to different individuals within the same team. It is essential that families feel they are being continually supported by one or several key practitioners rather than being passed from one agency to another.

Recommendations and principles

A number of recommendations emerged for the family hubs programme. These have been separated into general recommendations and a list of specific key principles.

General recommendations

Continuing the conversation

Workshops highlighted that all participants were keen to develop family hubs in the area, but there was particular interest among parents, carers and frontline workers. They emphasised their hopes that the workshops would provide a basis for an ongoing conversation about family hub development. They felt this dialogue should involve asking for input and responding to feedback, so that participants know and feel their voices have been listened to.

Responding to population need

The contextual information highlighted the need that family hubs in Wirral should respond to. Being aware of local need helps distinguish between the services currently offered at children's centres and what would be needed at family hubs. Population-level needs such as alcohol dependency, homelessness and mental ill health have an impact on family life – family hubs could use a whole family approach to provide support for these needs.

Language must be flexible

Language emerged as a key discussion point in the workshops. Parents and carers highlighted the need for flexibility, as what works for one family will not necessarily work for another. This was particularly pertinent in relation to use of labelling terms. Staff should adopt language that reflects the language used by a family (where appropriate), and they should be open to explaining why they use certain terms, especially when speaking in a medical context. Staff training is essential to support this flexible approach.

Language between practitioners is equally important

Frontline workforce participants highlighted that language used between practitioners should be the same as that used with families. This ensures an understandable, common language, supports the use of non-specialist language and reduces the chance of practitioners slipping back into 'system language'.



Key principles of family hub development

A universal offer

Family hubs should offer an 'extra early' support function which allows families to access low-level support in an informal environment, without the need to book an appointment or meet specific criteria.

A safe, comforting and welcoming space

Adaptable spaces allow family hubs to be used in different ways depending on who is in the building or what programme is taking place. Where possible, spaces should avoid feeling clinical, to create a welcoming, comfortable environment where families feel at ease.

Family hub staff should understand that families come in all shapes and sizes and have different needs. LGBTQIA+ families, adoptive families and other family types should be welcomed to use family hubs. Engaging with existing support services or with experts by experience could help to ensure that family hubs are welcoming to all.

Considerations such as varied opening hours must also be explored, to ensure hubs are accessible to all families.

Addressing inequalities through a whole family offer

Family hubs, unlike the area's current offer, provide scope to address inequalities with a whole family approach. This includes supporting families with things like housing, mental health, debt relief and issues related to poverty. This should not be thought of as an add-on but rather as an integral component of family hub practice which all staff should be familiar with.

Building on existing strengths

Developing a wider offer that complement the area's existing strengths is more efficient, and a means of recognising the strengths of existing services, in turn developing stronger relationships with partners.

Empowering and supporting a multi-agency workforce

Staff must be included in family hub development and supported in the transition to the family hub model. This could be achieved by collecting feedback from staff and sharing updates. If staff feel like they are part of the process, they will feel more empowered.

Developing strong relationships based on trust

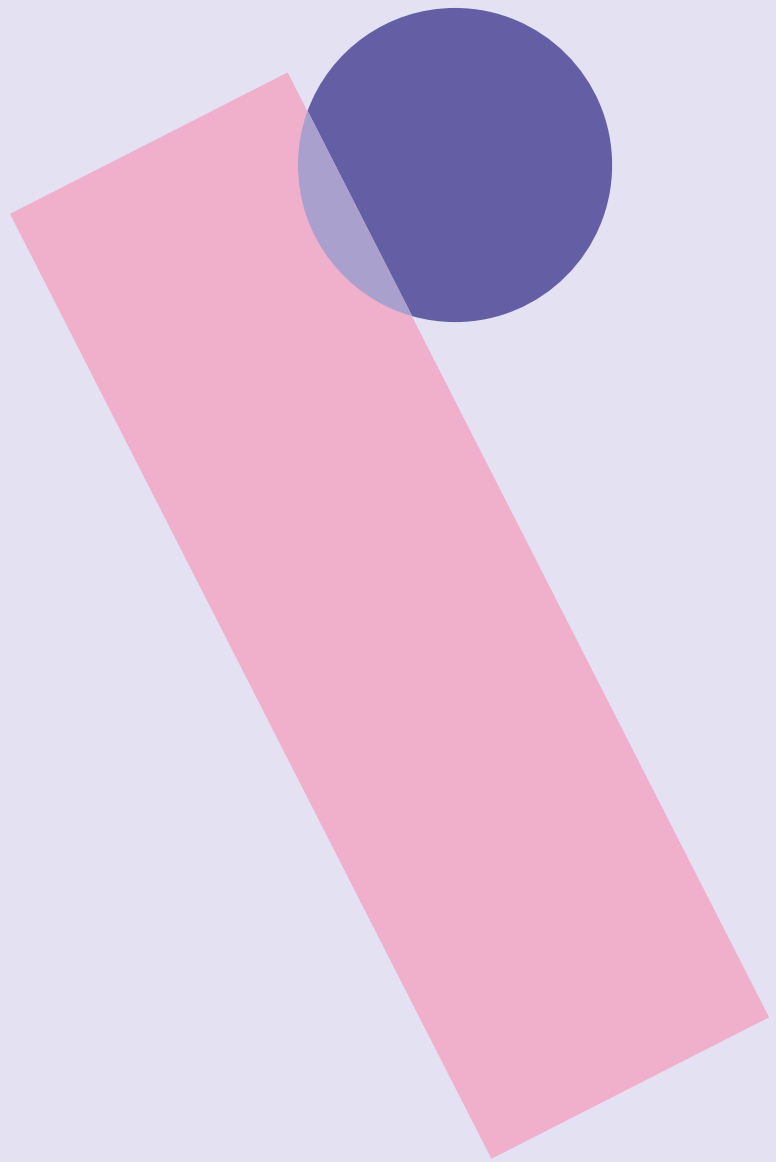
Strong, trusting relationships with families are essential to the success of family hubs. To create these, professionals must understand what strong relationships look like, and there should be transparency about the power imbalance between families and professionals. Even if parents are not thought of as 'partners', trusting relationships can still be established if the parameters of the relationship are understood.

Seamless experience

Staff must be supported to ensure that handovers from one professional to another are seamless and comfortable. When families are receiving support from other organisations, hub staff can support them by offering to work as an intermediary if a family needs additional support.



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