

Implications for  
policy & practice

# EVALUATION OF MULTI-AGENCY SAFEGUARDING HUBS

# INTRODUCTION

An implementation and process evaluation (IPE), commissioned by Foundations and conducted by University College London (UCL) and Newcastle University, provides valuable insight into how Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) work, for whom and in which contexts.

This implications for policy and practice briefing summarises the key findings of that study and, based on this evidence, provides advice and considerations for national policy makers, local safeguarding partnerships and senior leaders. This briefing should help to inform policy development and local implementation of children's social care reforms.

You can read the full findings here: <https://foundations.org.uk/our-work/publications/multi-agency-safeguarding-hubs/>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE **[CLICK TO NAVIGATE]**



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# What are MASH?

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs or ‘MASH’, also known as Integrated Front Doors or Single Points of Access, are a multi-agency front door service acting as a point of access for referrals to local authority children’s services. Multi-agency front door services bring together key practitioners from across the safeguarding partnership and other relevant agencies to rapidly share information about a child referred to children’s social care and their family, to support with an initial assessment of their risks and needs, and triage them to the right part of the system for support as required.

MASH were first set up by local areas in 2011, as a way of improving multi-agency working and information sharing for children and families. Safeguarding partnerships were encouraged to set up MASH by national government,<sup>1</sup> however they were not mandated and there was no national policy direction.

As a result, MASH developed based on the needs of local areas and are highly variable in their implementation. This makes it difficult to describe what a MASH is, and how and why this way of working contributes to outcomes for children, families, practitioners and services. Given this, there is no centrally held data on MASH, and little is known about their spread or coverage across England, or their specific characteristics. However, despite MASH not being mandated, a 2023 survey suggests that MASH processes in England are commonly used for children and young people referred to children’s services.<sup>2</sup>

## About this study

In response to a recommendation made by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2022),<sup>3</sup> the previous Government committed to conducting an evaluation of MASH in *Stable Homes Built on Love* (2023).<sup>4</sup> Foundations commissioned UCL and Newcastle University to conduct an implementation and process evaluation (IPE), with funding from the Department for Education, to provide research evidence on MASH. An IPE focuses on understanding how an intervention or programme is put into practice, how it operates to achieve its intended outcomes, and the factors that influence these processes – i.e. what works, for whom, why and in which contexts.

A national cross-government steering committee fed into the study design and presentation of the findings. This group included the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Home Office, the police, the National Police Chiefs’ Council, Ofsted, local authorities, MASH Communities of Practice, and the NHS.

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1 Home Office (2014) [Multi Agency Working and Information Sharing Project: Final report](#)

2 Mendez Pineda, R., Grant, C., Blythe, F., Harron, K. & Woodman, J. (2025) Multi-agency front door services within children’s social care in England: A scoping review and national survey. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EXRZA>

3 The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2022) [Child Protection in England: National review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson](#)

4 Department for Education (2023) [Children’s Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love consultation response](#)

The IPE set out to develop a concrete understanding of how MASH work, how they are implemented, and what their processes are. The study used accounts and views from practitioners in MASH and parents with experience of children's social care involvement to identify key components of MASH, their functions, mechanisms, perceived impact, and expected outcomes. The study collected data from 103 practitioners, including those working in children's social care, health, police, early help and education, across 58 (38%) of the 153 local authorities in England. It also built on existing evidence, which included a scoping review of all published literature on MASH since 2010 and a 2023 survey of local authorities in England about their front door services.<sup>5</sup>

The findings provide valuable insight into how to enable effective multi-agency working at the 'front door' of children's social care. However, it is important to note that they provide a snapshot of MASH as they operated in 2024 and so should be interpreted in light of rapidly evolving services.

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<sup>5</sup> Mendez Pineda, R., Grant, C., Blythe, F., Harron, K. & Woodman, J. (2025) Multi-agency front door services within children's social care in England: A scoping review and national survey. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EXRZA>

# SUMMARY OF THE KEY FINDINGS

## The strategic function of MASH

- The study identified two models of MASH as implemented in England – MASH with a primarily risk assessment function and MASH with a primarily needs assessment and service planning function. These models differ by their strategic priorities and remit:
  - **Risk assessment MASH** have a narrower focus and aim to make sure no harm or risk of harm to a child is missed, particularly when there are a high number of children and families experiencing multiple challenges referred to children's social care. They tend to hold cases with higher but less certain risk and work with a smaller number of core partners.
  - **Needs assessment and service planning MASH** are designed to respond to the whole spectrum of family need and work with a wider range of partners, including early help. They focus on getting services to families earlier in their journey to prevent problems escalating, but will also include the risk assessment function to make sure no harm or risk of harm to a child is missed. **MASH which fall into this model may be accountable for the delivery of agreed early help services.**
- The study makes clear that, in practice, the separation between the two models may not always be clearly defined and that MASH exist along a spectrum (see figure 1).
- **The needs assessment and service planning model received stronger support** from both practitioners and parents than the risk assessment model. The research suggests that where local areas are innovating at the front door, they are moving towards the needs assessment and service planning model. Practitioners acknowledged that **a needs assessment and service planning model, while favoured, may not be practical in all local areas due to the operational context and intensity of resources required.**

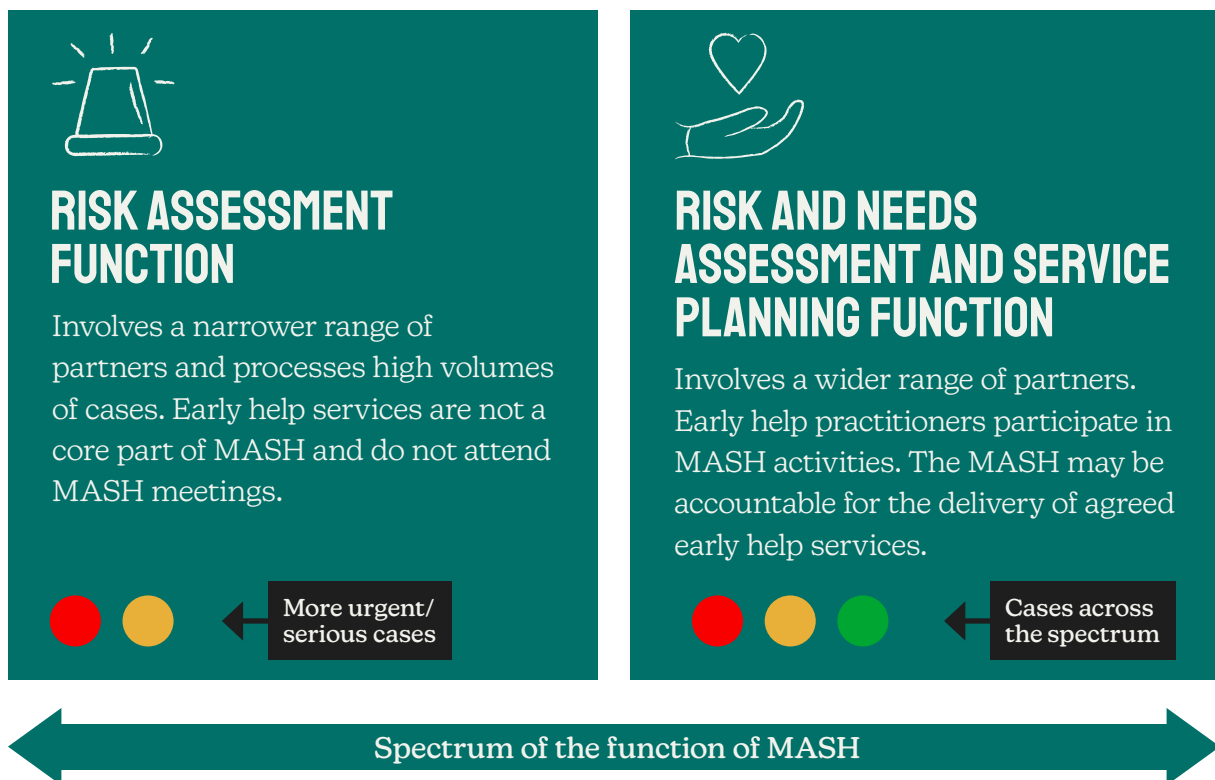


Figure 1. The two strategic functions of MASH [\[Go to accessibility text\]](#)

## Mechanisms for the effective operation of MASH

- The study identified two key mechanisms for the effective operation of MASH:
  - **Strong professional relationships fostered by co-location practices** were felt by practitioners to contribute to better, more timely multi-agency informed decision making and to improved outcomes for children and families.
  - **A stable, skilled, and experienced workforce** was emphasised by practitioners as essential. This is because multi-agency practitioners need to be able to select, analyse, and frame information from their agency in ways that are relevant, proportionate, and interpretable by colleagues from other agencies. In addition, parents that participated in the study felt that a stable workforce helped to foster trust in practitioners.
- **Parental consent for information sharing** was also identified as an important mechanism for the effective operation of MASH. This **was consistently highlighted as a confusing and difficult issue for practitioners**, especially in complex situations where additional information was needed to determine whether the threshold of significant harm had been met. Parents reported feeling concerned about the way practitioners shared information, particularly 'historic' data, and felt excluded from the information-sharing process.

# The role of education in MASH

- **Education was viewed by practitioners as one of the essential partners in a MASH**, alongside children's social care, health and the police. Education professionals were perceived as providing a critical and unique view of the child. However, practitioners felt it was difficult for education colleagues to participate in MASH processes, including meeting timelines for returning information about a child to the MASH team, due to their classroom roles and term-time working.

## Perceived outcomes of MASH

- Practitioners reported several benefits from a well-functioning MASH: timely and relevant information sharing between practitioners, informed multi-agency decision-making by children's social care, a reduced likelihood of missing or underestimating risk, swift needs assessment, and enhanced practitioner confidence and wellbeing.
- The study identified distinct additional perceived outcomes for the different MASH models:
  - **Needs assessment and service planning MASH** were perceived by practitioners as having **the potential to reduce demand on child protection services through early intervention and by preventing repeat referrals**. Practitioners in these MASH also reported improved family experiences as a result of offering earlier support and building trust in services.
  - **Risk assessment MASH** were perceived by practitioners as particularly **effective in managing high volumes of referrals for families with multi-faceted needs within short timelines**.
- Practitioners told us that they saw **re-referral rates of children and families as an indicator of MASH performance**, with higher rates understood to be evidence of service failure requiring investigation.
- Parents that participated in the study described **potential negative outcomes when MASH mechanisms were not functioning effectively**. This included increased family mistrust in services and distress caused by poor communication or inappropriate timing of interventions.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

## 1

Safeguarding partnerships should consider whether MASH could support them to achieve the expectations set out in the Families First Partnership programme guide.

Based on the findings of the research, when transforming services in line with the expectations set out in the Families First Partnership (FFP) programme guide,<sup>6</sup> safeguarding partners may look to:

### I. Create a shared understanding of the strategic function of the multi-agency front door

It will be important for safeguarding partnerships to establish the role and purpose of the multi-agency front door service within the reformed system. In most local authorities, this will be a MASH.<sup>7</sup> The research found that it was easier for practitioners to describe the structure and processes of MASH than its strategic function. **Senior leaders could use this research to inform the development of a theory of change for their (current or future) MASH.** The findings could support them to articulate its strategic function, identify relevant mechanisms and outcomes, and consider how to monitor progress and impact. This provides an opportunity to improve consistency for children, young people, families, and practitioners by establishing a shared understanding across partners.

### II. Identify any barriers to achieving the expectations set out in the FFP programme guide

**The needs assessment and service planning model of MASH is consistent with the function of Multi-Disciplinary Family Help Teams** which, as set out in the FFP programme guide, will be linked to the front door arrangements. Both intend to ensure children and families that are referred to or have contact with children's social care receive the right support in a timely manner. They do so by ensuring that practitioners working at the front door can access the information that they need to assess the needs and risks

<sup>6</sup> Department for Education (2025) [The Families First Partnership \(FFP\) Programme Guide](#)

<sup>7</sup> Mendez Pineda, R., Grant, C., Blythe, F., Harron, K. & Woodman, J. (2025) Multi-agency front door services within children's social care in England: A scoping review and national survey. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EXRZA>

of a child and family, and to make an informed decision about the level of support they require.

Practitioners and parents showed greater support for the needs assessment and service planning model of MASH than the risk assessment model, and the results from the 2023 survey suggest that this is already the direction of travel where services are innovating on the ground.<sup>8</sup> However, it is important to note that the findings of this study are based on existing, well-functioning MASH. **The key mechanisms required for the effective operation of a needs assessment and service planning model may feel far from current practice in some local areas.** For example, some operational contexts, such as population size, demographics, geography, service landscape, resources and available workforce will make it harder to create a multi-agency front door team that is stable, skilled, and has strong inter-personal relationships.

### III. Assess duplication risks

It is important that the Department for Education and safeguarding partners are aware of the risk of duplicating functions between MASH, Family Help Teams and Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs) whilst further developing and implementing the FFP programme. The FFP guide states that MACPTs, amongst their other responsibilities, will need to establish a mechanism for working with the front door, receiving triaged cases, reviewing and responding to referrals sent to them.

## 2 Guiding principles for multi-agency front door services in children's social care could be usefully developed and provided to the sector.

The Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme, within the College of Policing, recently published MASH guiding principles (April 2025).<sup>9</sup> These principles aim to support a shared understanding of what good looks like among safeguarding partners when performing MASH functions. **These principles provide a strong starting point, which, alongside the findings from this research and existing statutory guidance,<sup>10</sup> could be used by the Government to develop their own principles to help ensure effective multi-agency working at the front door of children's social care.**

Guiding principles would help set some parameters for MASH, MACPTs and Family Help services operating at the front door. They could also help ensure that these different

<sup>8</sup> Mendez Pineda, R., Grant, C., Blythe, F., Harron, K. & Woodman, J. (2025) Multi-agency front door services within children's social care in England: A scoping review and national survey. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EXRZA>

<sup>9</sup> Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (2025) [MASH guiding principles document](#)

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education (2023) [Working together to safeguard children](#); Department for Education (2023) [Children's social care national framework](#)

multi-agency teams contain the key mechanisms for effective operation. **This research identified that strong professional relationships and a stable skilled workforce are crucial to the success of multi-agency working in children's social care.** In addition, practitioners reported that working relationships are stronger when safeguarding partners are co-located in a shared office for at least parts of the week. Other important mechanisms included clear information sharing processes, co-produced thresholds, strategic buy-in and a shared strategy at senior levels, and a functioning IT system.

**Ensuring multi-agency or disciplinary teams operating at the front door of children's social care have the mechanisms for effective operation is important because resource constraints and capacity issues were found to significantly impact MASH operations.** This was found in relation to both the internal mechanisms of a MASH and the external provision of local services, including early help and statutory support, for families post-MASH assessment.

To create an optimum multi-agency child safeguarding process, safeguarding partners will need to provide significant resource in the form of staff time. **The Department for Education will need to be mindful of the significant workforce and resource pressures across the safeguarding partnership** and the impact this could have on their ability to implement reforms and achieve the intended outcomes of a seamless system of help, protection and support for children and families.<sup>11</sup> Safeguarding partners are also operating in a complex and evolving environment, managing numerous system changes due to various reform programmes across children's social care, health and the police.

# 3

## Specific resources on information sharing in multi-agency safeguarding contexts would be useful for safeguarding partnerships.

Our study found that practitioners weren't always clear on the expectations for gaining parental consent, and that varying procedures across different safeguarding partners sometimes complicated information sharing. Consent is a complex issue due to the interplay with data protection laws. A new information sharing duty sets out to provide a clear legal basis for sharing information for the purposes of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.<sup>12</sup> While parental consent won't be required to share information under this new duty, parents should still be informed about the information being shared. Before discharging this new duty, safeguarding partnerships should re-visit their data

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education (2023) [Children's Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love consultation response](#); Department for Education (2024) [Keeping children safe, helping families thrive](#); Department for Education (2025) [The Families First Partnership \(FFP\) Programme Guide](#).

<sup>12</sup> Department for Education (2025) [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Policy Summary Notes](#)

sharing agreements and privacy notices and have regard to national guidance that is provided.

**The findings of this research suggest that further guidance could be usefully provided to practitioners in safeguarding partnerships to support them to navigate complex situations.** Such guidance should be co-produced with families and staff, underpinned by research, and include case examples of how legal guidance has been interpreted for families in specific circumstances. Clarity in this area of practice could, in turn, support parents (or those with parental responsibility) to be fairly and meaningfully engaged by MASH practitioners. **It could form part of the suite of guidance and resources which will accompany the new information sharing duty in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.**

## **4** This study strengthens the case for education to be made a statutory safeguarding partner.

Practitioners working in education were identified as key partners that can provide a unique perspective on the child to inform decision making. However, specific operational challenges facing education practitioners, such as classroom teaching responsibilities, make it difficult for education partners to engage in MASH processes.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill includes a measure to place duties on safeguarding partners to secure the participation of education and childcare settings as relevant agencies, as well as to ensure that their views are sufficiently included and represented at strategic and operational levels in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. It does not formally make them a statutory safeguarding partner. **This research indicates that, without additional resource, education may continue to struggle to engage with multi-agency child safeguarding processes.**

# CONCLUSION

As stated in the FFP programme guide, it is crucial that reform is multi-agency, and that multi-agency working is effective. This study provides insight into how to achieve this, particularly in the context of children's social care reform. Although some caution is needed when interpreting findings from one study alone, the IPE provides valuable insight on how to implement, adapt, and innovate effective multi-agency front door services locally. This paper highlights the key implications for both national and local government, which are particularly significant during this year of transformation (2025/6) for safeguarding partners.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Department for Education (2025) [The Families First Partnership \(FFP\) Programme Guide](#).

# ANNEX I: DEFINITIONS

**Child protection services** – Child protection services are statutory interventions provided by local authorities when there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. These services aim to protect children from abuse or neglect and are governed by Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, which requires authorities to investigate such cases and take appropriate action to safeguard the child's welfare.

**Early help** – This term refers to non-statutory services provided to families who need additional support, but don't meet the threshold for statutory social care intervention.

**Family Help** – Family Help combines targeted early help and Child in Need services and aims to provide wrap-around support to families, at the earliest opportunity, to prevent problems escalating. It is expected that Family Help will be delivered out of community-based, local-authority led multi-disciplinary teams. Family Help teams will not be mandated, but the Government expects them to reflect local area needs assessments.

**Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs)** – These teams are currently being legislated for in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. The legislation will place a duty on statutory safeguarding partners (children's social care, health and the police) to establish MACPTs. These teams will support local authorities to investigate child protection concerns by bringing experts together across agencies to identify actual or likely significant harm and take decisive action. Alongside Family Help reforms and increased use of Family Group Decision Making, MACPTs form a core expectation for safeguarding partners in the FFP programme guide.

**Practitioners** – The term practitioner in this report refers to those working directly with children, young people, and families, building relationships and providing support. It refers, but is not limited to, social workers, senior practitioners, family support workers and multi-agency practitioners with expertise in specific fields such as domestic abuse, mental health, and substance misuse.

**Referral** – A referral is a formal request made to local authority's children's social care services for assistance or intervention concerning a child or young person who may be at risk of harm, abuse, or neglect, or whose well-being may require assessment and support. Referrals are typically initiated by professionals (e.g., teachers, health workers, police) or members of the public (e.g., family members, neighbours).

## ANNEX 2: ACCESSIBILITY TEXT

### Figure 1. The two strategic functions of a MASH

This image presents a visual representation of the spectrum of MASH (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) functions. The diagram employs a horizontal arrow to illustrate the range of approaches, from left to right.

On the left side, the “Risk assessment function” model is characterised by:

- A narrower range of partner agencies involved
- Processing high volumes of cases
- Early help is a core part of MASH operations
- Early help representatives typically do not attend MASH meetings

On the right is the “Risk and needs assessment function” model, characterised by:

- A broader range of partner agencies
- Early help actively participates in MASH activities
- Early help tends to influence early help services

The diagram features colour coding with red, amber/yellow, and green blocks at the top of both sides, indicating risk levels. For the “Risk assessment model,” the colour coding includes only red and yellow, demonstrating that only more urgent or serious cases go through the MASH process. On the right side, concerning the “Risk and needs assessment function,” the colour coding incorporates green, amber, and red, indicating that cases across the entire spectrum of need go through the MASH process.

At the bottom of the diagram, there are two blue text boxes. The left one, associated with the “Risk Assessment function” MASH, indicates that “Cases with serious child protection concerns are processed by all MASH models”. The right text box, related to the “Risk and needs assessment function,” states that “Cases where the whole spectrum of need is present are processed by all MASH models”.

The horizontal arrow traversing the bottom of the main diagram is labelled “Spectrum of the function of MASH,” indicating that these are not binary models but rather points along a continuum of approaches to multi-agency safeguarding.

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