

# Peterborough City Council

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 25 June 2018 to 6 July 2018**

**Lead inspector: Brenda McInerney, Her Majesty's Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Peterborough are good and have improved significantly since the last inspection in 2015. Areas for improvement noted during the joint targeted inspection in 2017 have been addressed. Children's lived experiences are at the centre of practice and, as a result, they benefit from good, timely decision-making. The participation of, and direct work with, children and families are key strengths.

Corporate decision-making prioritises vulnerable children, with investments, partnerships and innovations in services all having a positive impact on children and their families. This includes investments in the virtual school, a psychology service for children in care and housing provision for care leavers. Some statutory functions in relation to fostering and adoption are delegated to a national charity that provides a seamless service model.

A stable, effective senior leadership team has driven improvement at pace. Leaders have an accurate understanding of strengths and weaknesses and have created the conditions for social work practice to thrive. There is a strong learning culture underpinned by an effective quality assurance and performance

framework. Leadership arrangements are combined with Cambridgeshire local authority.

Corporate parenting approaches are well established. Outcomes for children in care and care leavers are improving because of the concerted focus and challenge from leaders.

## What needs to improve

- Assessments of children who are missing or who are at risk from child sexual exploitation.
- The use of chronologies in underpinning children's assessments.
- The number of return interviews that are successfully completed with children who have been missing from care.
- The quality of information provided to care leavers about their rights and entitlements, including how to access their health histories.
- Consistency of management oversight, including recording of casework supervision across all social work teams.

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Good

1. Children and families benefit from a good early help offer, which is helping to prevent the need for statutory interventions. Early help assessments, mostly completed by schools and health professionals, are all quality assured to ensure that they capture children's needs and take account of their views. A range of family support is available, and this is effective in tackling emerging risks to children, including risks from neglect.
2. Partners are well supported to lead and review early help for children and families. The progress made by families supported by early help services is closely tracked, and additional support is provided if children's needs remain unmet. Children living with the impact of domestic abuse benefit from direct work from a dedicated children's worker. This helps to ensure that their experiences are understood by parents and professionals and can inform decision-making.
3. The multi-agency integrated front door (IFD) makes good, timely decisions in response to risks to children. Decision-making is well informed by family histories and social work analysis. Thresholds are well understood by referring partners and consent for information gathering is gained from parents and some young people. Immediate child protection concerns are passed

promptly for action within the assessment teams. However, a small number of lower-level contacts take several days to be completed, causing delays before children's needs are assessed.

4. A daily multi-agency meeting to review incidents of domestic abuse where children live within the household is ensuring timely action by children's services as part of a well-coordinated multi-agency response. For a small number of children, the impact of living with domestic abuse is not fully understood, due to the inconsistent use, by social workers, of risk assessment tools. This is noted as an area for improvement in the recent IFD service plan.
5. Children, families and professionals who require advice and support outside office hours receive an effective response. This includes discussions and joint investigations with the police and, where necessary, with health services, ensuring that risks to children are recognised and well managed.
6. When children are at risk of significant harm, strategy meetings are timely and well attended by key professionals. Child protection enquiries are effective. They are completed jointly with police when appropriate and they ensure that action is taken to protect children. When children are found to be at risk of harm, progress to child protection conferences is consistently timely.
7. Responses to children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation are timely and they are closely tracked by a lead manager and missing coordinator. When risks escalate, strategy meetings are held, with appropriate professionals in attendance. Practice around the use of specialist risk assessments, however, is not yet consistent. Some of these assessments lack meaningful analysis, as recent audit activity has recognised. For a small number of children and young people, decisive action to protect them should have been taken sooner. Recent practice to support children at high risk of sexual or criminal exploitation is resulting in effective interventions. This has reduced their exposure to further harm.
8. Children who go missing are now routinely offered an opportunity to speak to an independent person about their reasons for going missing. Most return interviews demonstrate detailed discussions with young people and they identify risk factors. This information is appropriately shared and used well to inform multi-agency planning. A multi-agency operational group is overseeing work with young people at risk, supporting planning for them. However, the impact of the work of the group on reducing risk to children is not routinely tracked and analysed.
9. Robust systems are in place to track and monitor children missing from education. The experiences of children being electively home educated are well understood. Reviews completed at each visit to these children provide a clear picture of the quality of provision they receive and of their well-being.

Any safeguarding concerns for both groups of children are promptly referred to children's social care.

10. Children's assessments are of a good quality. They include a clear analysis of presenting concerns as well as strengths, and they inform appropriate next steps. Social workers undertake creative and sensitive direct work to seek children's views within assessments, with cultural and identity issues being well considered for most children. Genograms are used to good effect to understand dynamics within families, particularly where there are concerns about alcohol and substance misuse within the family. Social work practice in updating chronologies with significant events to underpin children's assessments has improved since the last inspection. However, they are not consistently informing analysis and decision-making for all children.
11. A multi-agency unborn baby panel ensures that the needs of babies potentially at risk are reviewed at the point of referral and following assessment. Where necessary, parallel planning is initiated to support children achieving early permanence. However, guidance to refer the unborn children of young and adult care leavers to social care has been interpreted too narrowly. In a very small number of cases, this is resulting in decision-making which is not proportionate to risk. This was recognised by leaders and appropriate follow-up action was taken.
12. Effective planning is helping to maintain a clear focus on outcomes for children. Plans are regularly overseen through well-attended core groups and child in need reviews. A small number of children's initial child protection plans made at conference are too adult-focused and generic, although these develop in quality and child focus when updated by the multi-agency core group. Planning is dynamic and responsive, with highly effective practice in escalating and de-escalating children's plans when their circumstances have deteriorated or improved.
13. Children in need are helped by targeted interventions, led by children's practitioners, which are resulting in improved outcomes for children. Where risks escalate, or assessments need updating, work is led by a qualified social worker. Team managers have regular oversight of these plans and ensure that work undertaken by children's practitioners is at an appropriate level. Wider child in need planning, following a decision to cease a child protection plan, gives families sufficient time and support to sustain the progress made in keeping their children safe.
14. Recently established multi-disciplinary family safeguarding teams are having some early impact in addressing parenting impaired by factors such as substance misuse, poor mental health or domestic abuse. Children's circumstances are improving through timely, intensive support provided for parents whose capacity for change is carefully tracked through multi-professional supervision. Children build trusting relationships with their social

workers through ongoing direct work that helps their parents and professionals understand their lived experiences.

15. A quality of care tool, increasingly embedded following the findings of a joint targeted inspection last year, is strengthening practice for children experiencing risk from neglect. Where it has been used skilfully, this tool has enhanced the progress of planning and contributed to positive outcomes for children. There has been limited analysis of the evidence gathered to understand what the findings mean for the children and their parents. However, this is not preventing the best decisions being made for children.
16. Children benefit from effective legal planning when their circumstances do not improve. Letters sent to parents when decisions are made to initiate a public law outline process make clear what needs to change. Pre-proceedings work is timely, children's progress is closely monitored and authoritative action is taken when risks to children do not reduce.
17. Children with complex needs and disabilities receive timely and robust assessments that focus on their needs and inform their care plans. They benefit from sensitive work by experienced social workers, with the creative use of tools to capture their wishes and feelings. Risks to children are robustly managed, and decisive action, including initiating care proceedings, is taken to ensure that they are safeguarded.
18. The numbers of referrals for children at risk of radicalisation or female genital mutilation are low, although responses are proportionate, including prompt joint child protection enquires where required.
19. A small number of children are identified as being privately fostered. Arrangements for assessing and monitoring the care arrangements for privately fostered children are robust, visits are purposeful and, where relevant, children's need for permanence planning is addressed.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good**

20. When children need to be in care, decision-making is timely and appropriate, and thresholds are applied correctly. Any arrangements made for children under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 are promptly reviewed to ensure that they are appropriate. When care proceedings are issued, permanence is secured for the majority of children. The local judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) express confidence in the quality of care applications, including expertise in children's cases that include complex international dimensions.

21. Children live in placements that meet their needs, and overall placement stability is good. Most children in care live with foster families. Children are matched appropriately to carers, including, where possible, carers willing to commit to the option of staying put in the future. Planning and support for children who are unaccompanied asylum seekers is a strength.
22. Children in care get good support from their carers and their social workers to keep themselves safe. The designated nurse provides robust oversight of the health needs of children. Performance in providing initial health assessments, health reviews and dental checks shows sustained improvement.
23. There is now a consistent offer of an independent return interview for children who go missing from care. However, the process is not successfully engaging enough young people at high risk, so is not effective in reducing risk for this group.
24. Children's personal education plans (PEPs) are reviewed termly and help track children's individual educational progress. However, children's views and their hopes and aspirations for the future are not consistently recorded in these plans, and targets being set are not always specific or achievable between PEP reviews.
25. The quality of planning and support for children in care and care leavers provided by the virtual school has improved following investment in key new posts. Children's attendance at school is in line with pupils nationally and no children in care within the city have been permanently excluded in recent years. The recent addition of an educational psychologist is beginning to have some early positive impact in providing schools with strategies to support pupils in care.
26. Children know their independent reviewing officers (IROs) well and are consistently able to meet with them before reviews. Older children are encouraged to chair their own meetings. IROs appropriately escalate concerns when there is any delay in care planning, for instance in initiating pathway planning when children reach 16. Support from advocates and long-term independent visitors is ensuring that children's views are heard and can be promoted.
27. Foster carer recruitment, training and approval are effective. Assessments of foster carers are of good quality. The fostering panel addresses issues within assessments thoroughly, and carers' reviews consider the views of children in placement. The provision of equivalent support to foster carers, connected persons, special guardians and carers of privately fostered children is making a demonstrable contribution to the quality and stability of placements for a wide range of children.

28. Children are matched appropriately to carers, and children receive high quality, stable care. For the small number of children who have had several placements, this has been appropriate and well managed. Disabled children achieve permanence and stability in placements that meet their long-term needs.
29. Children are able to enjoy safe contact arrangements with their families through a dedicated contact service. Detailed assessments of children's need to live with or apart from brothers and sisters inform good decision-making, although in a small number of assessments there was limited use of available research to support recommendations.
30. Children are encouraged to pursue a wide range of hobbies and interests, which are consistently promoted and reflected within their care planning. Children spoke with pride about their individual interests and achievements and how much they enjoyed the free leisure passes, residential holidays and summer schemes which Peterborough local authority provides for all children in care.
31. Dedicated life-story workers help children to understand their histories and experiences. The quality of this important work is good, although for some children it is not timely enough. Steps to ensure that social workers routinely complete life-story work are at an early stage.
32. Children in care benefit from very effective multi-agency working to meet their needs. Many carers benefit from input from a 'looked after children' psychologist. These carers include families of children returning home from care. Children placed outside the authority access the same level of services, including good support for their emotional well-being.
33. Good-quality practice and outcomes for children in achieving adoption has been sustained since the last inspection. A wide range of children achieve permanence through adoption, including older children, children with complex needs and groups of brothers and sisters. The timeliness of adoption for the 23 children adopted in the last 12 months has improved. Fostering for adoption is a strength in Peterborough local authority, underpinned by robust arrangements for planning for unborn children. Post-adoption support and support to special guardians are effective, and there is good use of the adoption support fund to support trauma-informed practice with children and families.
34. Children who return home to live with their families benefit from detailed multi-agency planning and effective longer-term help, enabling them to return and remain at home successfully.
35. Care leavers receive very good support from social workers and personal advisers. Recent pathway planning is more collaborative with young people,



strengthening focus on their aspirations for work, education and volunteering, and consideration of their identity, health and emotional well-being needs. Senior leaders have recognised the need to increase capacity and reduce caseloads in the leaving care service.

36. Personal advisers know their young people well and they remain in very regular contact with them. They are highly committed and act as strong advocates for young people.
37. A large majority of children remain in care until the age of 18 and all eligible care leavers have been offered a service up to the age of 25. Care leavers are encouraged and supported towards independence at a pace that is right for them. Staying put is an option for increasing numbers of young people, and for others there is a range of suitable accommodation. Young people in semi-independent accommodation receive good levels of support to build a range of independence skills. Care leavers feel safe in their homes and communities.
38. Young people are financially supported to access higher education, with a good number of care leavers currently attending university. The addition of a post-16 adviser to the virtual school has helped to progress plans for work placements for care leavers, after young people themselves asked for easier access to work experience. However, there are currently no apprenticeships or schemes specifically provided for young people leaving care within the council, although several projects are being implemented.
39. The health needs of care leavers are well supported, and there is help to engage in services to address their emotional well-being. Some young people, and the staff who support them, are unclear about the location of health summaries. As a result, some young people, including some young parents, are not aware of important information about their health history.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Good**

40. There is very strong political and corporate support for children's services. This ensures that children's needs are prioritised, and that corporate decision-making, including significant areas of investment, is having a positive impact on children. The lead member and local safeguarding children board (LSCB) are providing effective challenge to the senior leadership team. The combined leadership arrangements with Cambridgeshire have been subject to tests of assurance by the LSCB chair, ensuring that there is sufficient senior management capacity across each authority.
41. Partnerships at strategic and operational levels are a significant strength in Peterborough. Effective relationships with CAFCASS and the family courts



are helping to secure early permanence for children. A senior manager from Peterborough co-chairs the Local Family Justice Board, which is actively driving local improvement work in public law.

42. Following the joint targeted area inspection last year, the action plan to address practice to safeguard children at risk of neglect has been largely implemented. Ongoing quality assurance activity and workshops for staff continue to ensure that good practice is fully embedded at the frontline.
43. Leaders understand well the diverse needs of their community. They target and commission resources, such as interpreters based within social care teams, and methods of intervention that are meeting the needs of children and their families.
44. Strategic planning for children's services prioritises innovation and sustainability through partnerships and participation. A number of initiatives, such as the targeted youth support service and supported lodgings, have been developed in response to the increase in the numbers of older children entering care. However, these are still at the implementation stage and not yet having an impact in providing robust alternatives to care for vulnerable adolescents.
45. There has been significant progress in strengthening corporate parenting. Young people run alternate corporate parenting committee meetings and support active children in care councils for different age groups. Elected members make changes based on the feedback that they seek from young people. In addition, members act as 'corporate parenting champions' for improvements in specific areas of need, an example of this being the successful challenge to improve children's uptake of dental checks.
46. While corporate parents have high aspirations for young people, this has not consistently translated into action in all areas. Elected member challenge to improve children's educational progress is not yet well informed because reporting to members on children's year-on-year progress is at an early stage. Progress on providing opportunities for care leavers has been slow.
47. A stable leadership team has an accurate understanding of strengths and areas for improvement within the service, prioritising the areas that make the most difference for children. All areas for improvement are being addressed. There remain some inconsistencies in the quality of practice in a very small number of cases.
48. There is a strong learning culture in Peterborough. Quality assurance approaches are a strength and play a pivotal role in improving frontline practice and encouraging reflective learning. Thematic issues pulled together from audit findings are used well to inform workforce development and provide good opportunities for learning from practice.

49. An effective participation strategy reflects a strong commitment to enabling children and parents to influence the delivery of services. This includes a service user forum to engage with parents involved in child in need or child protection planning and a monthly forum for parents of disabled children attended by senior leaders. Children contribute to improving services through a young inspectors programme; 10 young people audited their own care plans, and this led to improvements in information in care plans being kept up to date.
50. The local authority has made marked progress in strengthening its performance management arrangements. Leaders have embedded a new performance management framework, secured consistent compliance with practice standards and ensured more accurate target setting where improvements are needed. A range of 'trackers' and panels have improved management oversight and help prevent drift in plans for children, particularly around achieving permanence. Children's services performance is owned at a corporate level, with the chief executive chairing a quarterly performance meeting.
51. Managers have desktop tools to maintain oversight of performance at a team level. While these tools have only recently been introduced, they are having an impact on improving practice and outcomes for children. The lead member and chief executive are in touch with frontline practice, including regular reports on young people at highest risk.
52. Most social workers have regular supervision. While this has not been consistent in every team, recent audit activity and additional management capacity has started to address this. Social workers described supervision as being reflective, although this was not demonstrated in supervision records. Social workers told inspectors that they value other opportunities for case discussion, such as 'QA drop in' sessions. They feel very well supported by senior managers. They value taking part in case audit interviews with senior managers and link these directly to improvements in practice.
53. Children benefit from an increasingly experienced, permanent workforce. Social workers know their children well. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection. Almost all managers at all tiers are now permanent employees. Social workers have access to a range of training, including opportunities to progress as practice educators. They have time to spend with children, their visits are purposeful, and they capture children's views about their lived experience. Social workers told inspectors that Peterborough is a great place to work.



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