

CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	AGENDA ITEM No. 7
1 OCTOBER 2020	PUBLIC REPORT

Report of:	Lou Williams, Service Director, Children and Safeguarding	
Cabinet Member(s) responsible:	Councillor Lynne Ayres, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Education, Skills and University	
Contact Officer(s):	Lou Williams, Service Director, Children and Safeguarding	Tel. 01733 864139

RECOVERY PLANS AND PRIORITIES: CHILDREN AND SAFEGUARDING SERVICES

R E C O M M E N D A T I O N S	
FROM: Service Director, Children and Safeguarding	Deadline date: N/A
<p>It is recommended that the Children and Education Scrutiny Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Records the thanks of the Committee for the dedication of children's services staff throughout the pandemic; 2. Notes the content of this report and areas where possible increased demand for children's services as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic are possible; 3. Notes the actions being taken by the service to prepare for and mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable children, young people and their families; 4. Notes comments about likely inspection activity by the regulator, Ofsted. 	

1. ORIGIN OF REPORT

1.1 This report was requested by the Children and Education Scrutiny Committee.

2. PURPOSE AND REASON FOR REPORT

2.1 This report provides Members with an overview of recovery planning being undertaken across children and safeguarding services as the Covid-19 pandemic continues. The report provides information about the likely areas of impact for vulnerable children, young people and their families, and how our services are preparing to meet possible increased demand. Finally, the report concludes with a brief update on likely inspection activity over the coming months.

2.2 This report is for the Children and Education Scrutiny Committee to consider under its Terms of Reference Part 3, Section 4 - Overview and Scrutiny Functions, paragraph No. 2.1 Functions determined by Council:

Children's Services including:

- a) Social Care of Children.
- b) Safeguarding; and
- c) Children's Health.

- 2.3 This report relates to the corporate priorities relating to the safeguarding of vulnerable people.
- 2.4 This report directly relates to the children in care pledge as it is about the performance of children’s safeguarding services including services for children in care and young people who have left care.

3. TIMESCALES

Is this a Major Policy Item/Statutory Plan?	NO	If yes, date for Cabinet meeting	N/A
---	-----------	----------------------------------	-----

4. BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

Background

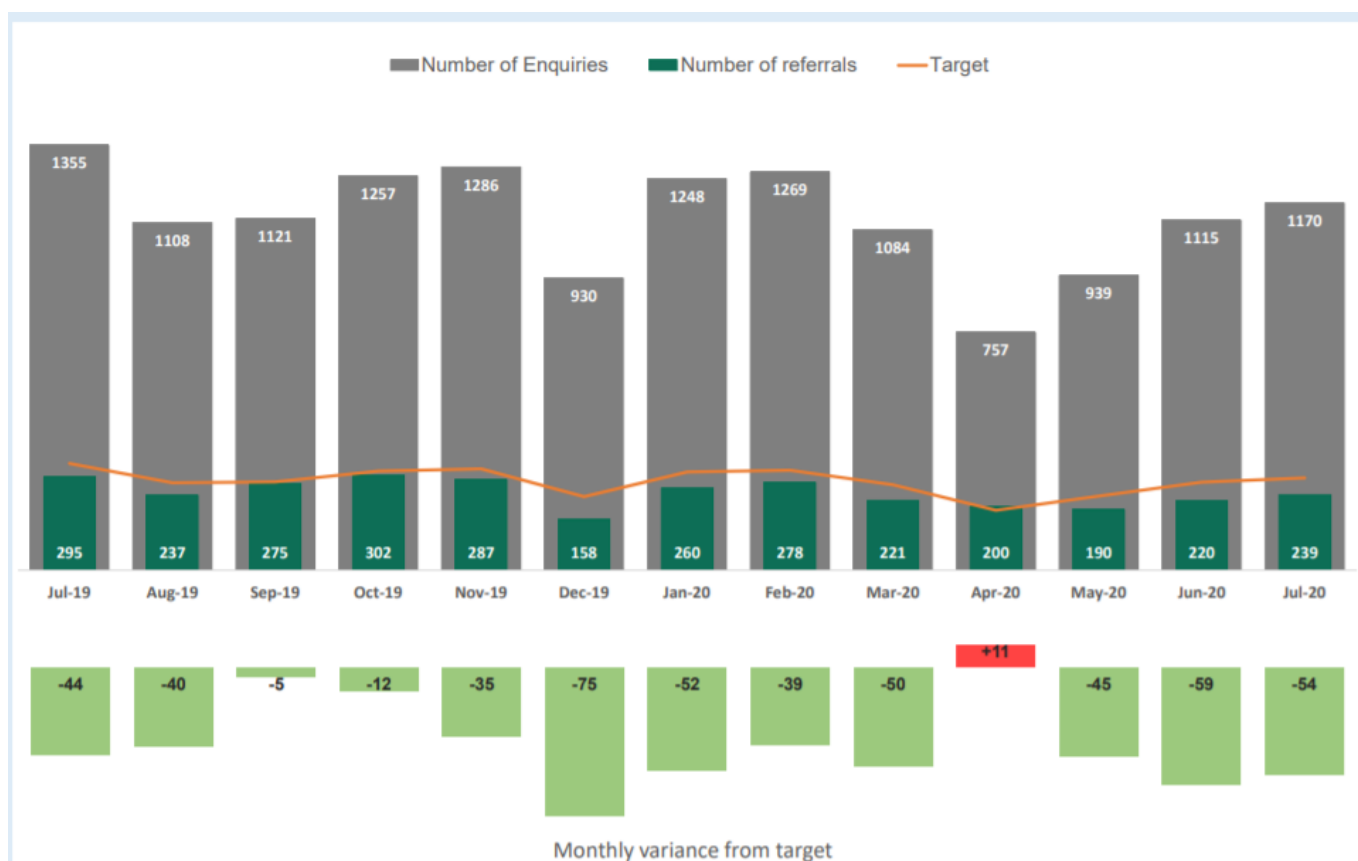
- 4.1. The Covid-29 pandemic and associated lockdown has resulted in very considerable challenges for children, young people and families and the services that support them.
- 4.2. As children and young people return to school, it is timely to take stock of impact of the pandemic, the changes in service delivery – positive and negative – and assess the likely longer term implications that will result.

The pandemic and lockdown period

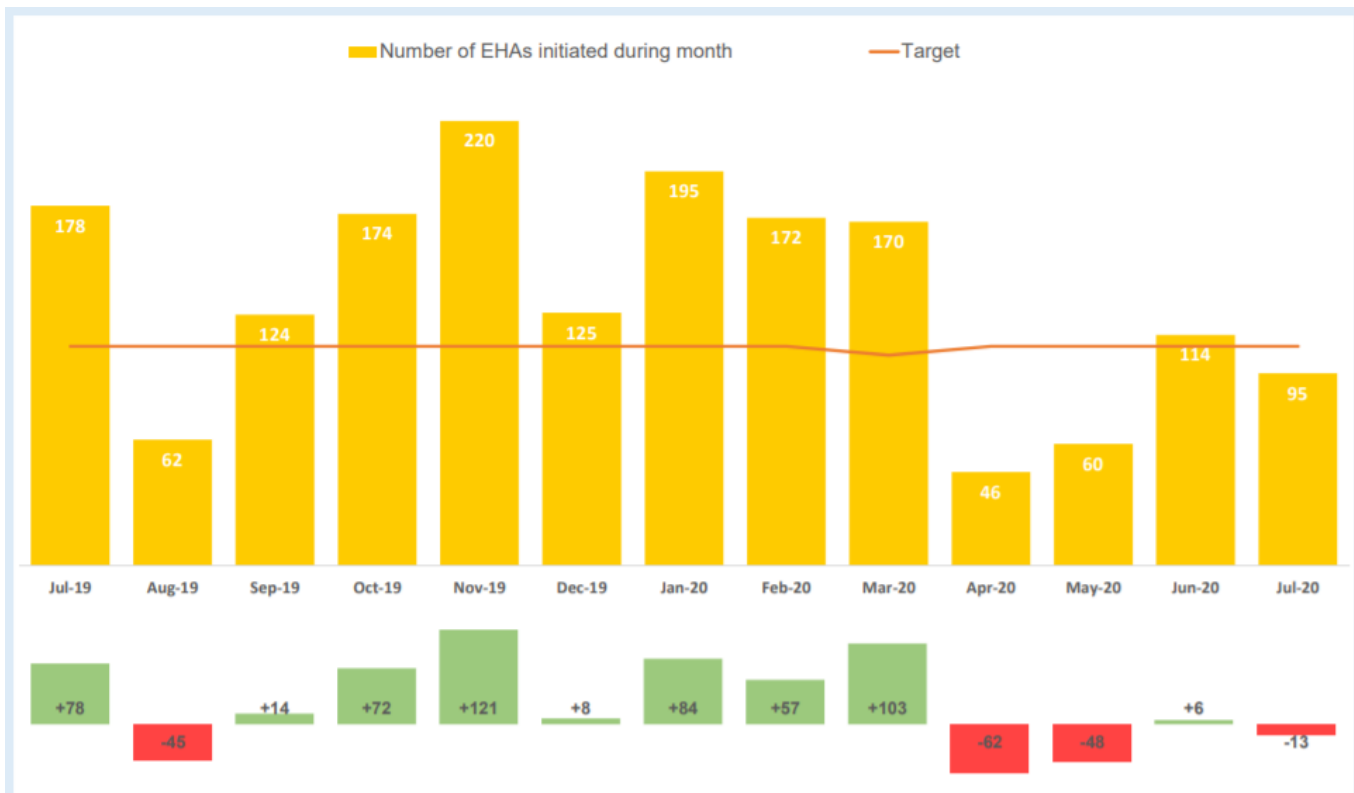
- 4.3. As soon as it became clear that a lockdown was imminent, senior managers in children’s services undertook risk assessments of all children and young people open to social care or being supported through early help services in the City. All children known to us were RAG rated to ensure that we would be able to maintain focus on children and young people about whom we had the greatest concerns.
- 4.4. Our staff continued to undertake face to face visits to all children subject to child protection plans, and to any other child or young person we had assessed as being particularly vulnerable to poor outcomes including, for example, children in care living in placements that were seen as less secure than others.
- 4.5. A small number of key members of staff and managers remained working from office bases, able to respond to urgent situations. The majority of our staff worked from home, with a number shielding. Those shielding were engaged in a range of activities to support front line working including, for example, responding to enquiries and undertaking virtual visiting as appropriate.
- 4.6. A considerable amount of the work switched to virtual engagement during the lockdown itself, inline with government guidance. In some areas, adopting this approach had some early and clear advantages. Virtual parenting programmes and advice lines have proved popular, for example, with some evidence of these approaches reaching more families and families who might not have approached services for support using more traditional means. Some young people in care, care leavers and vulnerable young people engaged better with their workers virtually than they were comfortable doing in face to face meetings.
- 4.7. Some other elements of the work quickly became more challenging and many have remained so. Enabling the effective participation of parents in child protection conferences where all participants are contributing virtually through Teams has proved to be very difficult, for example.
- 4.8. As the lockdown period continued into the summer, it has also become clear that while virtual engagement work well in some areas, there are many where the best this form of work can achieve is to maintain a position, as opposed to moving things forward. This has resulted in some increases in numbers of children open to our Family Safeguarding teams, for example, as virtual engagement of parents in group work has proved less effective in helping to address many of the

key issues they are struggling with, meaning that it has taken longer to complete the work needed with those families.

- 4.9. The closure of schools to the majority of pupils had a very significant impact for all families. While schools continued to remain open for the children of key-workers and children assessed as being vulnerable, in reality very few of the latter group attended school regularly. Attendance for vulnerable children was always voluntary and many families made a decision not to send their children into school. Some families and their children did not want to be marked out as different through school attendance. A number of our children in care, for example, did not want to be treated differently to the children of their foster carers or any other children, and did not recognise themselves as being vulnerable.
- 4.10. Some families, and particularly those who have children with additional needs and/or disabilities, were very fearful of implications should their child catch the virus. Others worried about their own vulnerabilities, with many of those children supported by early help services having parents who had pre-existing health conditions that meant that they faced increased health risks were they to catch Covid-19.
- 4.11. Schools worked incredibly hard to remain in contact with all children who were in the vulnerable groups throughout this period, regardless of whether or not they were in school, and schools and their staff should be commended for their efforts in this area.
- 4.12. Many other service providers ceased face to face visiting throughout the lockdown. This included, for example, health visiting and some mental health support services to adults and young people. Virtual support continued, but the reality was that the reduction in face to face work, the closure of many informal or less targeted support services such as children’s centres, voluntary groups and other activities meant that many children and young people were much more isolated, particularly at the start of the lockdown.
- 4.13. This reduction in visibility of children and young people had an immediate impact on the numbers being referred to our services, as is illustrated in the following chart:



- 4.14. As can be seen from the above, there was a significant drop in the number of children about whom enquiries were made in April 2020, and a corresponding reduction in the number of referrals. It is encouraging, however that while still below trends, numbers have recovered steadily since then, indicating that despite their reduced visibility, vulnerable children and young people are still being referred for help and support.
- 4.15. That said, the number of children and young people being supported through an early help assessment has also reduced significantly, and remains considerably lower than trend data:



- 4.16. Most early help support is provided by schools and other partner agencies and so it is not surprising that the number of new early help assessments has reduced by a considerable amount. While many families who may have accessed support through an early help assessment are likely to have been able to access support through other means, there is a clear concern that there will be a peak in numbers of children and young people needing additional help identified as schools return. There is also a concern that for some, needs may have increased undetected, requiring input from children’s social care services that they may not have needed had they been able to access support through schools and elsewhere in the way that was possible prior to the lockdown.

Indications of increased need for support by children, young people and families

- 4.17. At the time of preparing this report, children were only beginning to return to school. Indications of increased numbers of children and young people being identified as in need of help, support and protection will only begin to become apparent as we move into October and towards the end of the first half-term. There is, however, an emerging consensus among leaders of children’s services nationally about the groups of families, children and young people who are most likely to experience the most significant impact from the Covid-19 pandemic. These include:

- 4.18. **Families who were already struggling with routines prior to the lockdown may find it more difficult to encourage their children back into school:** Most children have been out of school for 6 months and some will find the transition back to school harder to manage than others. Some research has identified that families who are ‘just about managing’ have found it more difficult to find the practical, physical or ‘head-space’ to engage their children in regular home learning, meaning that their children may find it not only more difficult to adjust to the routine of regular school attendance, but to get back into the pattern of learning once in school. Some families may prefer to opt for home education, either because it appears to offer solutions to some difficulties,

or because they remain fearful of perceived health risks associated with their children returning to school.

- 4.19. **Families in less secure employment are more likely to be affected by any economic downturn:** As the Government's support to employed staff through the furlough scheme comes to an end during October, there are widespread predictions that unemployment will rise significantly. The number of claims for Universal Credit have already increased in Peterborough. Economic impact is likely to affect those in lower paid and less secure work more quickly. Knock on effects can include risks of homelessness. Families in this position can struggle to also meet the demands of children in their care, finding it more difficult to manage challenging behaviour and similar.
- 4.20. **Black and Minority ethnic children and young people:** Black and minority ethnic adults appear to be at significantly increased risk from serious complications and death as a result of becoming infected with Covid-19. Children and young people from black and minority ethnic groups are therefore more likely to have experienced a loss of a significant adult in their extended families. Black and minority ethnic children and young people are also more likely to live in more disadvantaged communities, where higher population densities are likely to increase the risk of outbreaks of the virus in the future, with the potential to further disrupt their education, health and social development.
- 4.21. **Children and young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs:** Many parents of children with complex disabilities have been understandably very reluctant to allow their children to engage in activities outside the home, or to risk bringing support services into their homes for fear of their children catching the virus. They are likely to have continued anxieties about their children returning to school over the coming months. Families may become under increased pressure as a result, and find it less easy to continue to care for their children as a result. For the children themselves, some, including, for example, those with autistic spectrum disorders or ADHD, are also likely to find it more difficult to manage the transition back into school.
- 4.22. **Young people who were already struggling to remain engaged with education:** A relatively small group of young people struggle to engage in education even at the best of times. For some young people in their early to mid-teens who were already struggling prior to the lockdown, a six month period out of school may well mean that they will struggle to re-engage at any level. The difficulty here is that it is young people who are out of school who are most at risk of becoming involved in offending behaviour, or being criminally or sexually exploited. These vulnerabilities are often accompanied by increased tensions at home as parents struggle to know how to keep their children safe and to manage escalating behaviour.
- 4.23. **Families experiencing significant difficulties prior to and during the lockdown period:** For a relatively small number of families, potentially very difficult and damaging behaviours including domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental and emotional ill-health will have intensified during the lockdown. Some children will have experienced trauma for longer periods unnoticed by services because they have not been visible, or because support for families has not been available. This does not only include services; many families have been isolated from the support they would otherwise have accessed from extended family and friendship groups. Difficulties or behaviours that may have been possible to address and change in other circumstances may have become more entrenched as a result.
- 4.24. **Young people leaving care:** This is in any case a very vulnerable population, more likely to struggle in making the transition into adulthood. The employment market for young people is already under stress; those who are the most vulnerable will be likely to be the ones who find it most difficult to access the kind of employment and training that has in the past been most likely to support them into the world of adulthood and employment. All young people are likely to be affected in the shorter term, but those with the greatest vulnerabilities including some of those leaving care are more likely to experience longer term difficulties in remaining in education, employment and training.

- 4.25. Many of the above issues will not emerge immediately, which is why there is also a growing consensus that for children's services, much of the impact will be felt over a considerable period of time, with some effects still being evident 18-24 months from now.
- 4.26. There is, however, also a counter view that says that while some families and vulnerable young people will have experienced additional difficulties as a result of the pandemic and lockdown, the vast majority have had the resilience to cope very well. While attendance at school for vulnerable children was low in Peterborough as everywhere else, and a programme of academic catch up will almost certainly be needed for many children and young people, the fact that schools worked very hard to maintain links with children, and that many parents were also either furloughed or working from home may have reduced pressures experienced by many families. Proponents of this view would argue that the programme in place to enable schools to support pupils to catch up with their missed work will address that issue over time, and that once any short term difficulties of transitioning back into regular school routines have passed, the impact of the pandemic and lock-down will be less severe than many expect.
- 4.27. My view is that while we see a surge in referrals as schools return, this will not be significantly larger than the surge that we always experience at this time of year. What we are likely to see is a much longer and shallower 'tail' of higher referral rates over the next academic year as difficulties emerge over time. The extent of the impact for families and demand for services as a consequence will at least in part depend on broader factors such as the depth and length of any recession, and how this affects families in terms of housing security in particular.
- 4.28. Longer term outcomes for vulnerable young people are also an area of concern; as noted above, there is an increased risk of higher numbers of young people being out of education, employment or training. The group of young people who were struggling to remain engaged in education prior to the lockdown are also at greater risk of mental and emotional ill-health and of becoming vulnerable to exploitation. This in turn could result in an increase in the breaks-down of family relationships, and additional pressure on placements for young people needing to come into care.
- 4.29. Children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities and their families are also likely to be disproportionately affected in the longer term, for the reasons set out above.

Actions we are taking to respond to changing patterns of need

- 4.30. A detailed recovery plan has been prepared and is available as Appendix 1 to this report. This recovery plan has been shared with other authorities in the Eastern Region of the Association of Directors of Children's Services. Our strong regional arrangements ensure that our services are open to both support and challenge from the other authorities in the region.
- 4.31. We will do all we can to enable children and young people to return to school. All children known to children's social care will be monitored to ensure they have returned to school, and we will focus support on any who have not. Schools will also liaise with children's services about children for whom they have concerns. We will work together to persuade families against opting for home learning.
- 4.32. As noted above, on-line support including virtual 'drop-in' support for parents, has been very popular. Materials produced by children's centres around supporting reading and play have been taken up widely, as has similar support produced by schools. These resources will continue to be produced in line with what parents, schools and other partner agencies identify is needed. A very recent example is the information published to help parents prepare for a return to school, which can be found at Appendix 2 to this report.
- 4.33. There are a great many unknowns about how needs and demands for services will change over the coming weeks and months. Key to managing our response is to ensure that we keep a very close eye on some key indicators of changing or increasing demand, including weekly reviews of referral and early help data, while also maintaining close links with parent organisations and key partners including schools in particular.

- 4.34. As far as is possible, services are now returning to normal, but certain key activities remain very challenging or impossible to deliver because of rules relating to social distancing. Children's centres in Peterborough have re-opened, for example, but are only able to work with parents by appointment – more informal drop-ins cannot take place as yet.
- 4.35. Some group activities are re-starting – groups for parents with substance misuse difficulties or to address domestic abuse within our Family Safeguarding services for example – but these can only operate with many fewer participants because of the need to maintain social distancing.
- 4.36. These realities mean that there are inevitable delays in accessing some forms of support and while virtual services have continued, these do not work for everyone or address every issue as successfully as direct work.
- 4.37. Within children's social care services, almost all visiting to children, young people and families now takes place on a face to face basis. Some exceptions remain – some virtual visits still take place where a child or young person is in a long term matched and secure foster placement, for example – but even in these circumstances, a minimum amount of direct visiting is now taking place.
- 4.38. Child protection case conferences have reverted to face to face meetings, although some professional attendees continue to attend virtually. Child protection conferences can require the attendance of a number of practitioners from different agencies. Enabling parental participation in these meetings is challenging at the best of times; securing such participation virtually proved to be particularly difficult.
- 4.39. As noted above, we do expect there to be some areas of increased demand across our services. Some increased workload will result from the challenge in progressing plans for children, meaning that they may remain in care for slightly longer than otherwise would have been the case. We have seen a small increase in numbers in care over the months of lockdown; numbers in care in Peterborough typically range between around 370 and 390 and were, at the time of preparing this report, just below 390. This increase has been about it taking longer to move children into permanent homes outside of the care system than it has been, to date, about more children coming into care.
- 4.40. We have submitted business cases to MCHLG outlining additional areas where we expect to see increased demand. These include additional capacity for both early help and children's social care services. As noted above, we expect to see a longer term increase in patterns of demand for specific groups of vulnerable children, young people and their families.
- 4.41. Our response cannot be based only on doing more of what we have always done, however. Prior to the pandemic, the two local authorities, police and crime commissioner and the CCG jointly commissioned a review of how all services can work better together to support older children and young people at risk of poor outcomes as a result of mental and emotional ill-health, and/or vulnerabilities to criminal or sexual exploitation, or involvement in serious offending behaviour.
- 4.42. ISOS, the organisation leading this review on our behalf, was to have concluded this work by the summer of this year; the pandemic has delayed this and we now expect the work to conclude by the end of the calendar year. This review will provide us with some clear recommendations as to how we can provide a much more integrated response to older children and young people with emerging complex needs. There is a considerable amount of service provision available to young people, but it has developed in a relatively fragmented manner and our view is that we can offer a more joined up response to the needs of vulnerable young people as these have also changed in the light of issues including new forms of exploitation such as county lines.
- 4.43. Another very important area of focus more broadly is to support the continuing development of place-based initiatives and build on the incredible response from our communities throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

- 4.44. The Peterborough hub has galvanised large numbers of volunteers to help support vulnerable people and communities across the City throughout the pandemic and lockdown. There is a continuing opportunity to harness this energy within communities to increase resilience and ensure that vulnerable members of those communities can access other forms of support in addition to those provided by public services.
- 4.45. We will also continue to learn from those enforced changes to service delivery that have gone well. Some models of virtual service delivery have worked really well, most notably within the early help sphere. We will continue to offer virtual parenting support and drop-ins and other on-line guides to support families moving forward.
- 4.46. We will also work with colleagues in Cambridgeshire to continue to improve the signposting information on our website, enabling more families to identify sources of support that they can access directly.
- 4.47. As we have increased the amount of face to face work, we have also increased the number of frontline staff who are spending at least some of their time working from offices. While many of our staff were initially very positive about the move to mostly home working, as time has progressed, more and more have wanted to return to work for some of the time, while continuing to benefit from increased flexible working.
- 4.48. Children's services work is challenging, particularly for front-line practitioners, and it is very important that our staff and managers are able to access the informal support and supervision that office working provides. We continue to work with colleagues in building services, public health and others to ensure that staff can return to offices safely, since this is very important not only for staff morale, but also to ensure the effective safeguarding of vulnerable children and young people.
- 4.49. In concluding this section, I would like to pay tribute to the dedication of our staff and managers throughout the pandemic. They have embraced new working arrangements, continued to undertake face to face visits to families throughout the pandemic, and have often been the only source of support and monitoring for families as other services have withdrawn. Morale has remained incredibly high and the commitment to supporting our most vulnerable has not wavered. Many of our staff have at the same time needed to support members of their own families who have been shielding, or have supported front line work in other ways when they themselves have had to spend time shielding. Despite these and many other challenges, they have continued to place their work with vulnerable children, young people and their families at the centre of what they do.

Likely Ofsted Inspection Activity: Peterborough Children's Services

- 4.50. Peterborough was last inspected by our regulator, Ofsted, in July 2018, when the outcome was 'Good' overall. The inspection framework envisages annual contact by inspectors with authorities rated as good. This annual contact in pre-Covid times would be an annual conversation between Ofsted inspectors and senior officers and, in most circumstances, a focused visit.
- 4.51. An annual conversation took place during 2019, during which inspectors confirmed that they were happy with the progress being made in Peterborough and that they did not think a focused visit was necessary in that year.
- 4.52. This means that we are effectively now considerably overdue a focused visit. Indeed, this would probably have taken place by now, had inspections not been suspended owing to Covid-19.
- 4.53. Ofsted is re-starting inspection activity from September 2020 and has introduced a slightly revised framework for focused visits to take place between then and the end of the calendar year. Inspections taking place during this period will be of a similar format to that of a standard focused visit, but inspectors will also consider how the service has responded to the pandemic in keeping

children and young people safe, and how we have encouraged joint working with schools to support attendance by vulnerable pupils.

- 4.54. Inspections will take place over a two week period, with an off-site analysis of key data and interviews with key individuals, followed by a week in which inspectors will talk to staff and analyse case files. Some of this activity will take place remotely, but not all. There is no grading applied to the service following this kind of an inspection. A letter setting out areas of strength and for development will be published, and the visit will inform inspectors of areas to focus on in their next full inspection, which is due in 2021.
- 4.55. While we welcome inspections in Peterborough because they provide us with a valuable assessment of how well we are doing to support improved outcomes for vulnerable children and young people, and enable us to continuously improve our services, restarting inspection activity at this point feels premature. We are confident that we can demonstrate continued effective working to support vulnerable children and young people; That said, it does not seem proportionate action by the regulator to place the substantial burden of inspection preparation and activity on services that are simultaneously dealing with the implications of children returning to school and services resuming more normal levels of activity and models of service delivery.
- 4.56. Nevertheless, given that inspection activity is returning from September 2020, it does seem likely that Peterborough will receive a focused visit before the end of the calendar year.

5. CONSULTATION

- 5.1 Consultation has taken place with key officers and key partner service areas including business information services for performance data.

6. ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES OR IMPACT

- 6.1 That the Committee:
- Gains an overview of how children's services have responded to the changing circumstances facing children, young people and families as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic;
 - Gains an understanding of the preparation and steps being taken to bring services and activities back into a more normal pattern of functioning;
 - Has an overview of predictions of possible increase in demand, the nature and duration of that demand and the underlying reasons for increased need in the communities we serve;
 - Is informed about likely inspection activity by our regulator, Ofsted.

7. REASON FOR THE RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1 Children's services support and help to protect some of the most vulnerable children and young people in the City. How well the service performance is therefore properly a matter of significant importance to leaders and Members.
- 7.2 In these challenging and unprecedented times, it is more important than ever that the Scrutiny Committee has the opportunity to understand, explore and scrutinise the way that we support and safeguard our vulnerable children and young people.

8. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 8.1 There are no applicable alternative options available

9. IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

- 9.1 As noted elsewhere in this report, there are risks of increased demand in both early help and

children's social care services. Bids have been made to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to cover expected increased costs, but should additional funding be required and not supported by additional government funding, this will become a financial pressure for the authority.

Legal Implications

- 9.2 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

Equalities Implications

- 9.3 There are no direct implications for equalities issues arising from this report.

Rural Implications

- 9.4 There are no particular implications for rural communities in Peterborough arising from this report.

Carbon Impact Assessment

- 9.5 Any carbon impact is likely to be neutral, but there are some potential benefits to reduced mileage undertaken during the lockdown period.

10. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

- 10.1 None

11. APPENDICES

- 11.1 Appendix 1 - Children's services recovery plan submitted to the Eastern Region Association of Directors of Children's Services.
- 11.2 Appendix 2 - A guide to school readiness for families, available through our early help services.