

CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	AGENDA ITEM No. 7
21 JANUARY 2021	PUBLIC REPORT

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

SERVICE DIRECTOR REPORT: CHILDREN & SAFEGUARDING INCLUDING UPDATE ON IMPACT OF COVID-19

RECOMMENDATIONS	
FROM: Service Director, Children and Safeguarding	Deadline date: <i>n/a</i>
<p>It is recommended that the Children and Education Scrutiny Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Notes the evidence of emerging impact arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated economic and other implications; 2. Notes the preparedness of children's services to continue to meet need; 3. Notes the potential resource implications of continued increased demand and complexity of need; 4. Welcomes the findings of the independent evaluation of Family Safeguarding as practiced in Peterborough, including evidence of improved outcomes for vulnerable children and lower costs. 	

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 a brief overview of the current position in Children's Services and the impact from the Covid-19 pandemic. The report also provides a summary of the very positive evaluation of the Family Safeguarding model in Peterborough that was published by the Department for Education in November 2020.

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
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4. BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

Background

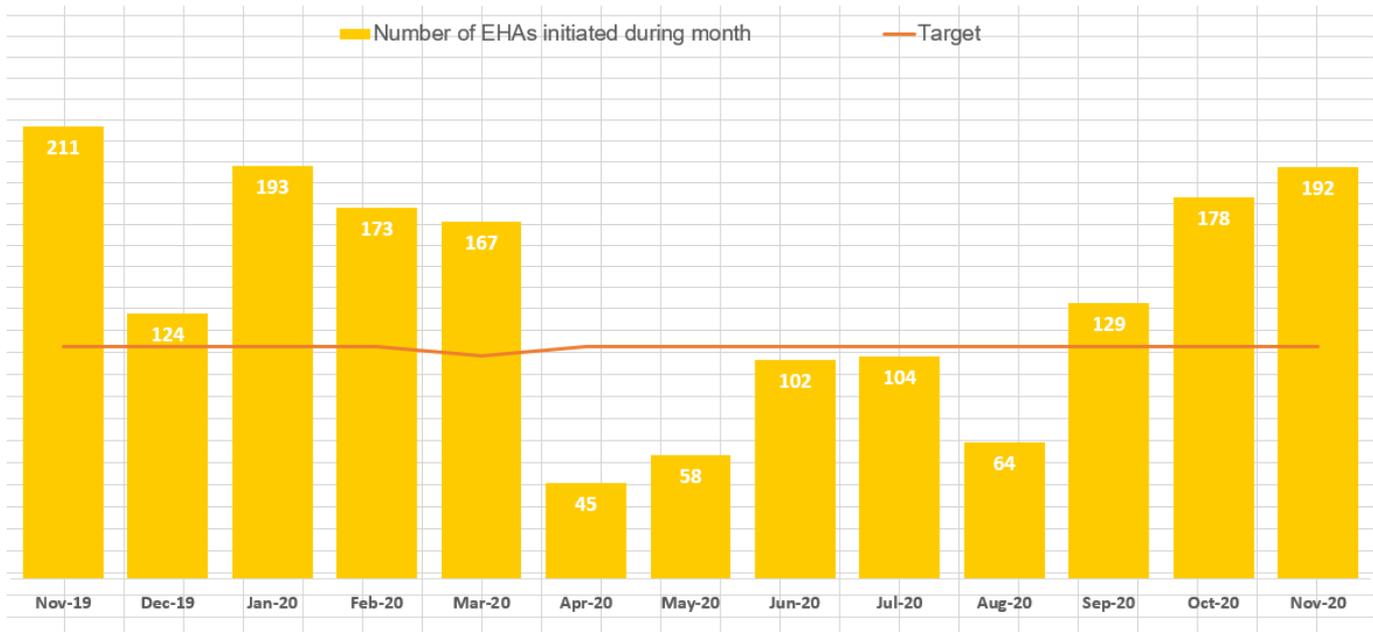
- 4.1. The Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown continues to result in very considerable challenges for children, young people and families and the services that support them.
- 4.2. As previously reported, the contribution by our staff, foster carers and by partner agencies - schools in particular - in helping to safeguard our most vulnerable children and young people has been exemplary.
- 4.3. In the main, the impact of Covid-19 to date has been less about increased volumes of children and young people requiring support, and more about an increased complexity of presenting need.

General observations: Impact of tier 4

- 4.4. At the time of preparing this report, Peterborough had just moved into the new tier 4 restrictions. These new restrictions are bound to have further impacts for children, young people and families across the City, over the coming weeks and months.
- 4.5. As was the case during the national lockdown in November, we are continuing to prioritise face to face visiting, particularly to those families, children and young people about whom we are most concerned. We will also continue to operate key meetings – particularly those where there are potentially serious consequences for families such as child protection case conferences – on a face to face or hybrid model wherever we can.
- 4.6. Government guidance for authorities in tier 4 states that supervised contact between children in care and their parents should continue. Clearly, guidance may change as the new variant of the virus becomes better understood, and this may result in us making some changes to the way that we deliver services.
- 4.7. We have reviewed our Covid-19 practices and, for example, insisted on increased use of PPE by staff during visits to family homes and during meetings.
- 4.8. Public Health England’s advice remains that the hands, face, and space actions are the most effective ways of avoiding transmission, accompanied by PPE as appropriate. Our continuing challenge is to balance our absolute priority to maintain the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people while balancing the need to keep our staff and service users safe, recognising that no activity is entirely risk free.

Indications of changing demand and service availability: Early Help

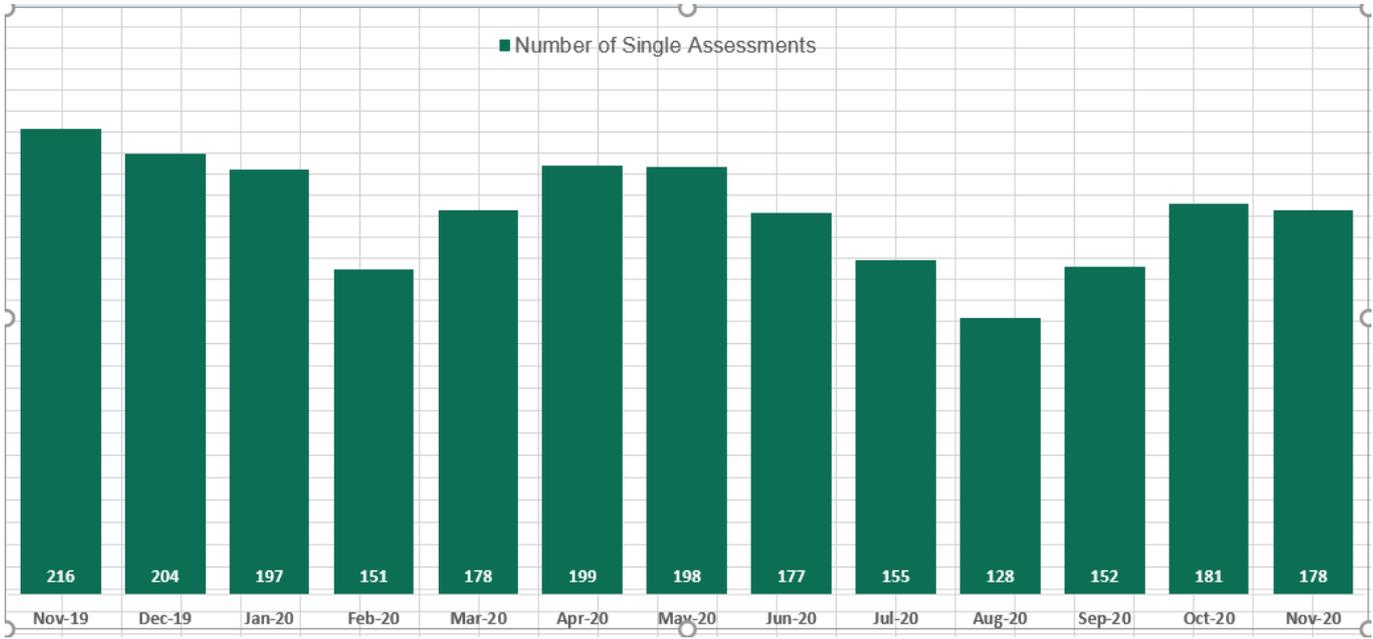
- 4.9. The chart below shows the number of new Early Help Assessments opened each month over the last year:



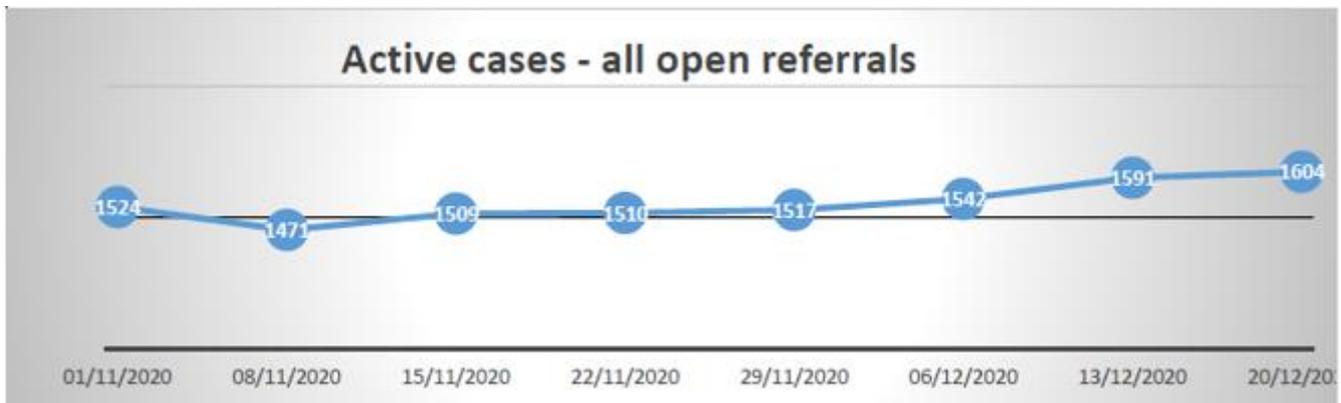
- 4.10. This indicates that recent demand has not been out of step with the pre-Covid-19 position. This, however, is only a part of the picture in respect of early help in Peterborough.
- 4.11. Our model of Early Help is very different to that in many areas. The Council does not employ a team of Early Help workers to do direct work with families in order to prevent their needs from increasing. Instead, we have a small Early Help service that coordinates the efforts of key partners – principally health, schools, Early Years’ settings, registered social landlords and the voluntary sector – to support families with additional needs. Where families have particularly complex needs, the local authority commissions additional specialist support services. This approach is supplemented through the provision of a wide range of parenting programmes.
- 4.12. There is clear evidence that this approach supports good outcomes. Ofsted praised the model in our most recent inspection, for example. Before the pandemic struck, we were also making consistently good payment by results claims through the Government’s Troubled Families programme, which funds the majority of our Early Help services. Under this model, we can claim funding for each family where we can demonstrate that sustained improved outcomes have been achieved. We were often among the best performing 10% of authorities nationally in terms of the level of successful payment by results claims.
- 4.13. The challenge for our approach in the pandemic, however, is that capacity within partner agencies to undertake the work with families in need of Early Help support has been significantly adversely affected. Schools, for example, have been having to manage the extra pressures associated with managing pupil bubbles and, in the New Year, are likely to face new pressures in respect of expectations around testing for Covid-19.
- 4.14. This means that while demand for Early Help services has yet to increase significantly, capacity to provide support within the system has reduced considerably, despite some very positive and innovative work around providing virtual support.
- 4.15. We highlighted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in May 2020 that we would be likely to need additional funds in order to maintain Early Help services in Peterborough. We are now drawing down this additional funding, and expect to need around an additional £220K in order to fund an increase in directly provided support to families in need over the coming months.

Indications of changing demand: Family Safeguarding and young people at risk of harm

- 4.16. The position in our front-facing teams within Children’s Social Care is that while demand has not increased significantly in terms of volumes, the needs of families and their children have increased in complexity.
- 4.17. The chart below shows the number of single assessments undertaken in Peterborough each month over the last 12 months. Single assessments are undertaken whenever a child is accepted as a referral into children’s social care:



- 4.18. The purpose of the assessment is to determine what steps are needed to support the child concerned. The outcomes of a single assessment include referral to support by Early Help, the child being supported as a child in need by Children’s Social Care, or the child being in need of protection, and so moving to a child protection plan.
- 4.19. As can be seen from the above, overall numbers of assessments being carried out this year are, if anything, lower than they were prior to Covid-19. This partly reflects improvements that we have made in ensuring that we only carry out a single assessment when this is absolutely needed. In the past, we have seen a number of single assessments close with no further action, suggesting that better triaging would have avoided the assessment being carried out in the first place.
- 4.20. The following charts show the numbers of children open to Children’s Social Care overall, showing a continuing increase over recent weeks:



Cases opened and closed in week



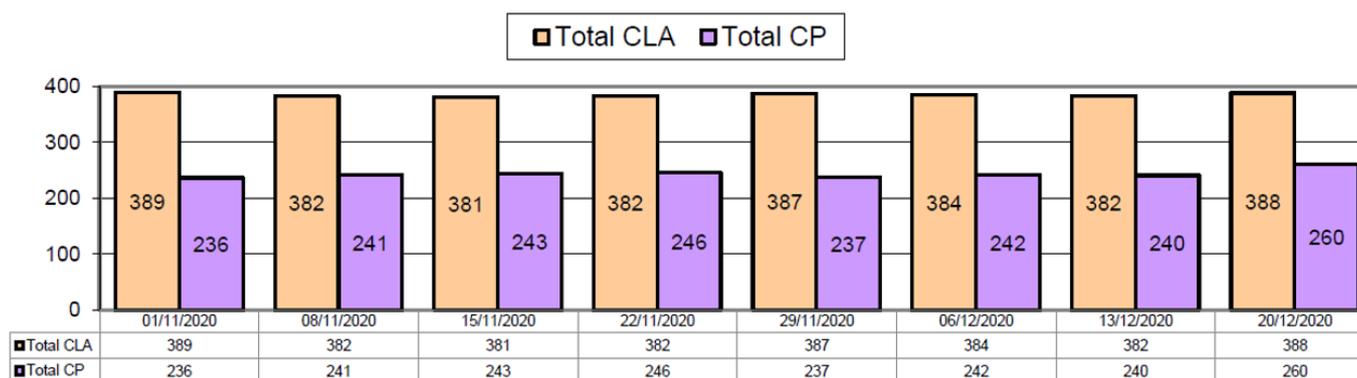
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4.21. Taken together, these charts indicate an increasing complexity of need, since we are finding that we need to open more children and young people as children in need following completion of the single assessment.

4.22. Given that we aim for our social workers to hold no more than 15 cases per full time employee, an increase of more than 90 children being open to the service, if sustained, will start to have an impact on the work and may result in a position where we need to deploy additional resources.

4.23. We are also seeing a steady increase in the number of children who have child protection plans in place, which is a further indication of growing complexity:



4.24. This chart shows the position as of 20th December 2020 and while it is encouraging that increased demand is not yet resulting in sustained increases in children in care numbers, more children now have child protection plans in place than at any time in the last year. Our target is to have fewer than 200 children in need of this level of input and support and again, if levels of 250 and above are sustained, there will be implications for the ability of the service in terms of quality and sustainability.

4.25. This increase in numbers is partly about it being more difficult to progress child protection plans at present; this is leading to children tending to remain on a child protection plan for longer. This,

combined with an increase in complexity among children coming into the service, is causing our numbers to increase.

- 4.26. We also have continuing concerns for the wellbeing of vulnerable young people. Our colleagues in health services have seen significant increases in referrals for specialist child and adolescent mental health support and for young people affected by eating disorders. Our workers in the Youth Offending Service and Targeted Youth Support Service are reporting an increase in the numbers of young people with complex needs who they are supporting.
- 4.27. These changes are being managed within current resources for the present. There is, however, the likelihood that increasing pressures on young people combined with fewer opportunities to engage in activities such as employment will begin to feed through into increased demand for services.
- 4.28. As noted in previous reports, our expectation is that the impact for young people of the pandemic will continue to build over the coming months, as opposed to being felt immediately. The indications from some parts of the overall system are that this is indeed likely to be the case.

Indications of changing demand: Children in care and care leavers

- 4.29. As noted above, numbers of children and young people in care have remained relatively stable, although slightly higher than long term averages. Most recent numbers in care [as in the chart above] are in the 380s; for most of the time prior to the pandemic, they tended to be between 360 and 370.
- 4.30. We are expecting numbers to go up again in coming weeks as there are a significant number of unborn babies due to parents with significant additional vulnerabilities. In line with our general approach, we will do all we can to support these families to provide safe, stable and loving homes, but we expect there to be an increase in numbers needing to come into care for their safety and protection.
- 4.31. In practice, this increase is likely to be temporary since children coming into care as babies tend to leave the care system quickly and be adopted or move to extended family under Special Guardianship Orders.
- 4.32. We are, however, also seeing an increase in the demand for placements for young people with some of the most complex needs and while numbers remain low, the availability of specialist placements is very restricted and costs are high.
- 4.33. Our foster carers continue to do an amazing job and we have seen very few placements come to unplanned ends. But foster carers, like the rest of us, are also concerned about the risks of Covid-19. For some, this means that they are worried about children in their care going to have contact with their parents, for example. Government guidance is very clear on this; children should continue to have contact with their birth families and in most cases such contact is court ordered.
- 4.34. We do all we can to ensure that contact takes place in as Covid-19 secure way as possible, but it is clearly reasonable for foster carers to be concerned about this. In a sense, facilitating supervised contact encapsulates the challenges of ensuring that we do the right thing for children, who should be able to see their parents, while also doing all we can to keep people safe and the service operating.
- 4.35. As has been outlined in previous reports to committee, our expectation is that we will maintain numbers of children in care in Peterborough at below the rate for similar authorities. Our Family Safeguarding approach continues to enable us to support families to make the changes they need to make in order to provide the safe, secure and loving homes that their children need.
- 4.36. Our concern is more that we will see an increase in the number of young people with particularly complex needs – related to mental ill health or significant risks of criminal or sexual exploitation for example – and while actual numbers are likely to remain small, costs for the specialist

placements needed by these young people are very high, with consequent risks to overall budgets.

- 4.37. We have indicated to the MHCLG that we expect to see pressures in placement costs as a result, and projected increased costs has been factored in to budget preparation for the next financial year.

Indications of changing demand: Children and young people with disabilities

- 4.38. Families of children with complex disabilities have been particularly hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 4.39. The children concerned are often at greater risk of developing complications from the virus, with the result that parents have been understandably reluctant for some forms of support to continue. The restrictions in the lockdowns have in any case mean that many group-based short break activities ceased. Covid restrictions have also meant that extended family support has been reduced.
- 4.40. Added to this, some children with particularly complex needs have been less likely to be able to attend school on a full time basis, or have had their return to school delayed, because of the need for additional safeguards to be in place to ensure control of the spread of the virus.
- 4.41. Some families have required additional short breaks in order to manage the additional pressures that they have faced. This has resulted in costs in this area have been higher than normal, although remaining within the estimates that we made at the beginning of the pandemic and which we submitted to MHCLG.
- 4.42. In a very small number of cases, young people with very complex needs have become looked after on a full time basis during the period of the pandemic. Breakdown in family living arrangements in such circumstances are always very difficult for all concerned, however understandable.
- 4.43. In these situations, the pandemic has, in all likelihood, brought forward the circumstances where the family is no longer able to meet the needs of their child, as opposed to causing a breakdown that would not otherwise have happened. This does not, of course, lessen the impact for the child or their family of the change.

Assuring continued quality of the service

- 4.44. We have a number of measures in place that enable us to ensure that the quality of practice is effective, and to take action to improve things when necessary. A number of these measures have been strengthened over the course of the pandemic to reflect the fact that there are fewer opportunities for line managers to informally discuss case progression with members of their teams, given the reduction in office-based working.
- 4.45. Our independent chairs of child protection conferences and review meetings for children in care provide oversight and scrutiny of plans for our most vulnerable children. They also monitor progress of plans for individual children and young people between meetings. There is a case escalation system in place that chairs use to raise concerns with managers. This system works well, and helps to ensure that plans for individual children do not drift.
- 4.46. Managers, including senior managers, are required to undertake a number of case file audits each month. They audit randomly identified children's files, doing this with the practitioner allocated to the case. This provides an opportunity for practitioners to discuss their cases and practice with more senior managers, and is good preparation for Ofsted inspections, since case file audits feature heavily in the inspection process.
- 4.47. Our quality assurance service also undertakes a range of dip-samples of case files, usually focusing on key decision points in the child's journey. These might include, for example, reviewing a number of case files where a decision has been made to step a case down to Early Help

services. Dip samples such as these help us to be confident that decision making is proportionate and consistent. This area has expanded throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, with an increase in the number of dip samples being completed.

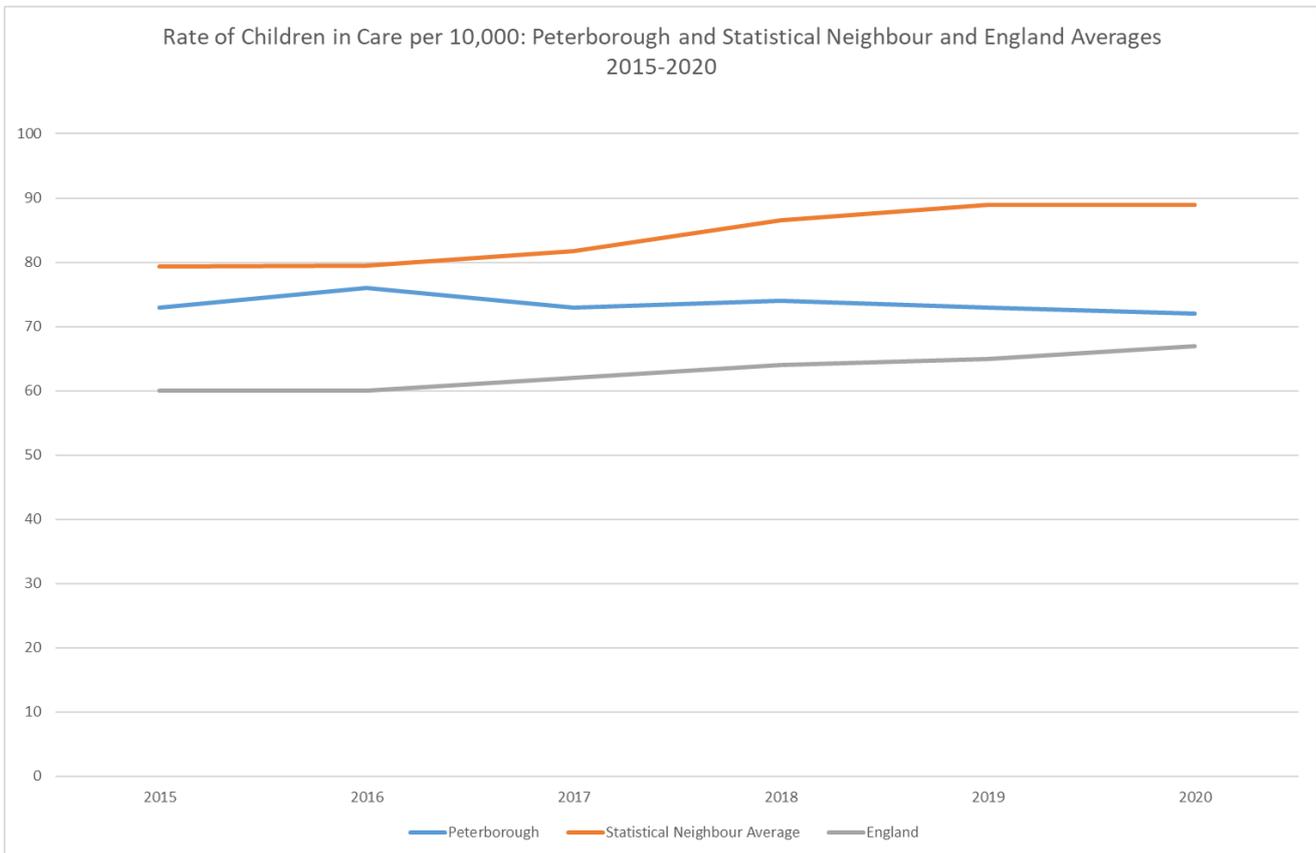
- 4.48. Finally, our quality assurance service also undertakes thematic audits, where a number of case files concerning children experiencing common issues are audited. This might include, for example, audits of our response to children and young people who have been reported missing, or who have been affected by domestic abuse. This is another area of auditing and quality assurance that has expanded in scope during the pandemic.
- 4.49. All thematic and dip-sample audits are written up into a report summarising key findings and areas for continued improvement and development. These then feed into service development and training plans for our front-line staff and managers.
- 4.50. There are always areas that can be improved, but it is reassuring that the general message from the great majority of audits is one of generally solid practice and decision making.
- 4.51. One of the key measures of how well a service is performing from an Ofsted perspective, is for managers to have a strong and accurate sense of strengths and weaknesses. Our audit programme means that this is a continuing strength in Peterborough, and plays a key part in our approach to service development and improvement.

Think communities and capacity building

- 4.52. It is clear that the impact of the pandemic is going to be felt for a considerable time yet.
- 4.53. As has been reported in earlier reports to Committee, the commitment from the communities we serve to support those in greater need remains very strong. The Peterborough Hub also continues to work tirelessly to ensure that vulnerable individuals and families are supported.
- 4.54. Work on the Think Communities agenda continues, with investment in community capacity building. Given the likelihood of an increasing number of families needing support, advice and guidance, it is clearly essential that we do all we can to identify ways in which we can build community resilience and community-based support, since more traditional models of support focused on individual families are unlikely to be able to cope with the expected increase in need over the coming months.
- 4.55. **Evaluation of Family Safeguarding in Peterborough**
- 4.56. Members will be aware that the Family Safeguarding approach was piloted in Peterborough following successful development of the model by Hertfordshire. The Peterborough pilot was initially funded by the Department for Education's innovation fund, and began in 2017. Three other authorities benefited from this wave 2 funding – Luton, Bracknell Forest and West Berkshire. This funding met the costs of implementing the model, including IT upgrades, training for staff and the additional staff costs associated with the model.
- 4.57. As part of the wave 2 innovation funding, all projects were subject to independent evaluation. This evaluation consisted of wide-ranging interviews with families and practitioners, as well as analysis of key performance data.
- 4.58. Our view in Peterborough has always been that the Family Safeguarding model is highly effective. It is therefore extremely welcome that the independent evaluation of Family Safeguarding in the four wave 2 authorities, including Peterborough, has found that the model delivers better outcomes for vulnerable children and delivers cost savings or avoidance.
- 4.59. The evaluation was originally completed in July 2020 and published by the Department for Education in November 2020. It was undertaken by York Consulting and a link to the full report can be found in section 10 of this report, below.
- 4.60. Under the Family Safeguarding model, adult-facing practitioners are seconded into children's social work teams. These practitioners are experts at addressing mental and emotional ill-health,

domestic abuse and problematic substance and alcohol misuse. These challenges can have a very significant impact on the wellbeing of children in the household and if unresolved can result in children coming into care.

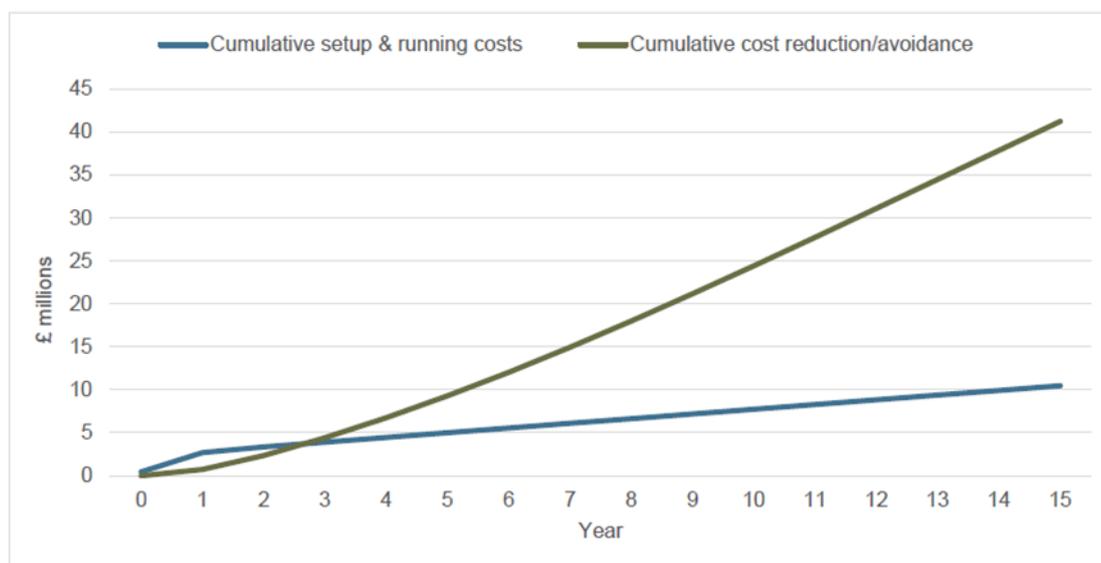
- 4.61. The strength of the Family Safeguarding approach is that these practitioners become part of the children's social work teams. This means that families benefit from a multi-disciplinary approach, with quick access to the kind of support services they need in order to make sustainable change. Very often, the support they can access as a result of the Family Safeguarding approach would not otherwise be available to them.
- 4.62. One such example is that of domestic abuse programmes. The most intensive and successful programmes for perpetrators of domestic abuse are usually only available to people who have been convicted of a related offence. Only a very small proportion of perpetrators are ever convicted, and very often those who are convicted have become entrenched in a long history of abusive behaviour that is much more difficult to successfully challenge and change. Under Family Safeguarding, however, perpetrators of domestic abuse have access to very effective evidence-based interventions regardless of whether or not they have been convicted.
- 4.63. Parents within the Family Safeguarding cohort also tend to be highly motivated to make changes, since this means that they will be able to provide safe, secure and loving homes for their children. Few parents intentionally set out to cause harm to their children and most welcome the support to make the changes they need to make. One example is in relation to addressing problematic substance and alcohol misuse. The charitable organisation CGL is commissioned to provide these services in Peterborough. Nationally, around 18% of adults successfully complete substance and alcohol misuse programmes. The success rate for adults within the Peterborough Family Safeguarding model is currently 36%.
- 4.64. The model means that more families are supported to make the changes they need to make in order to continue to provide safe, stable and loving homes for their children. The multi-disciplinary nature of the model means that assessments of families and of likely harm to children are of much better quality. This also means that parents who are not able to make the changes that their children need are identified much more quickly. Children who need to come into care do so at an earlier age and suffer less harm, meaning that they are more likely to benefit from permanent homes through adoption or Special Guardianship Orders.
- 4.65. Outcomes such as these are clearly beneficial for children. They are also positive for local authorities, since they reduce the overall number of children in care. The rate of children and young people in care per 10,000 of the 0-17 population in Peterborough has remained consistently below the average of our statistical neighbours. Latest comparative data to the end of March 2020 confirms that this trend has continued, as shown in the chart below:



- 4.66. The chart demonstrates how rates of children in care in Peterborough have declined since 2018, in contrast to increases among our statistical neighbours and across England as a whole. Indeed, given that Peterborough is the 40th [of 150] most deprived upper tier authority in the 2019 ranking of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, the fact that the gap between the Peterborough position and the England average was only 5 per 10,000 as of March 2020 is a significant achievement.
- 4.67. There are currently around 375 children and young people in care in Peterborough. If the rate of children in care were equivalent to the average of our statistical neighbours, we would have around 455 children and young people in care. Even if it were possible to find foster placements for all of these additional children, additional placement costs would be in the region of £3.7M per annum.
- 4.68. Family Safeguarding costs around £800K per annum more to operate than a traditional service, making the approach very good value for money, even when only considering a single year of additional costs.
- 4.69. The reality is that costs would rise year on year without the model in place. This is because as noted above, the Family Safeguarding model is very good at identifying situations where risks facing children from the combination of factors are too high to enable sustainable change within the family. This means that children who need to come into care for their own safety do so at a younger age, having suffered less harm.
- 4.70. Children who come into care early are very much more likely to leave the care system quickly – usually either through adoption or by Special Guardianship Order to a relative. Older children, and children who have experienced a longer period of serious trauma, are much less likely to leave care in these ways. Instead, they are likely to continue to be looked after throughout their childhood. They are also more likely to have needs that cannot be met in a foster placement, increasing the need for the highest cost specialist residential placements as they grow older and particularly as they reach adolescence.

- 4.71. In other words, as the years go by, it is not only the number of children in care that is higher, but the complexity and unit costs of those children who have come into care and who would otherwise have been supported within their families that increases.
- 4.72. As part of the evaluation of Family Safeguarding, the researchers estimated the cumulative savings to Peterborough City Council of continuing the Family Safeguarding model. This is shown in the chart below:

Figure 8: Cumulative costs and savings – Peterborough



Source: York Consulting, based on authority level data supplied by local authorities

- 4.73. We are about to head into the 4th year of Family Safeguarding; as noted above, the set up costs for the project in Peterborough were met by the Department for Education, meaning that Peterborough has already benefited substantially in terms of cost avoided, and will continue to do so.
- 4.74. More importantly, however, and as the evaluation report finds, the approach is popular with practitioners who very much value the multi-disciplinary approach. It is also generally very well received by parents, the majority of whom told researchers that it had been very effective in supporting them to make the changes they needed to make.

Concluding Remarks

- 4.75. The on-going pandemic and economic and other implications present families and vulnerable children and young people with significant and on-going challenges.
- 4.76. We are now seeing indications of some increased demand for services and more definite indications of increased complexity of need among vulnerable children and young people.
- 4.77. Our services continue to respond positively to the support needs of families, and we will deploy additional resources where we need to.
- 4.78. While there is clearly a lot of uncertainty about how the next few months will unfold, it is clear that demand and complexity will both increase. It is therefore very positive that we go into this period with a service that is operating well, and delivering good outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people.

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 Committee:
- Gains an overview of how Children's Services has responded to the changing circumstances facing children, young people and families as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic;
 - Has an opportunity to explore possible future implications of further Covid-19 restrictions;
 - Has an opportunity to review the effectiveness and value for money of the Family Safeguarding approach in Peterborough.

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 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 in this report, additional funds are being drawn down to support Early Help services in the City. The amount currently being profiled is £220K, which is comfortably within the £263K initially identified as a likely pressure within the bidding process for additional funds from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that took place at the start of the current financial year.

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 There is no carbon impact relating to the above.

10. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

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

10.1 John Roger, Tim Allen and Sophie Elliot of York Consulting: Family Safeguarding Evaluation Report, 2020, published by Department for Education:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/932367/Hertfordshire_Family_Safeguarding.pdf

11. APPENDICES

None