

CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	AGENDA ITEM No. 5
10 MARCH 2022	PUBLIC REPORT

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

DIRECTOR REPORT: CHILDREN & SAFEGUARDING

RECOMMENDATIONS	
FROM: Director of Children's Services	Deadline date: N/A
<p>It is recommended that the Children and Education Scrutiny Committee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Note and comment on the performance indicators and other measures of the effectiveness of children's services within the report; Note and comment on the outcome of the visit to Peterborough by the national independent review of children's services Note the likely inspection activity by our regulator, Ofsted, over the next 12 months. 	

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 children's services performance in Peterborough, and information about likely Ofsted inspection activity in the current calendar year. The report also includes a brief summary of the outcomes of the visit to Peterborough by the national independent review of children's services which is currently taking place and is due to report findings in Spring 2022.

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
- Social Care of Children.
 - Safeguarding; and
 - Children's Health.

3. TIMESCALES

Is this a Major Policy Item/Statutory Plan?	NO	If yes, date for Cabinet meeting	N/A
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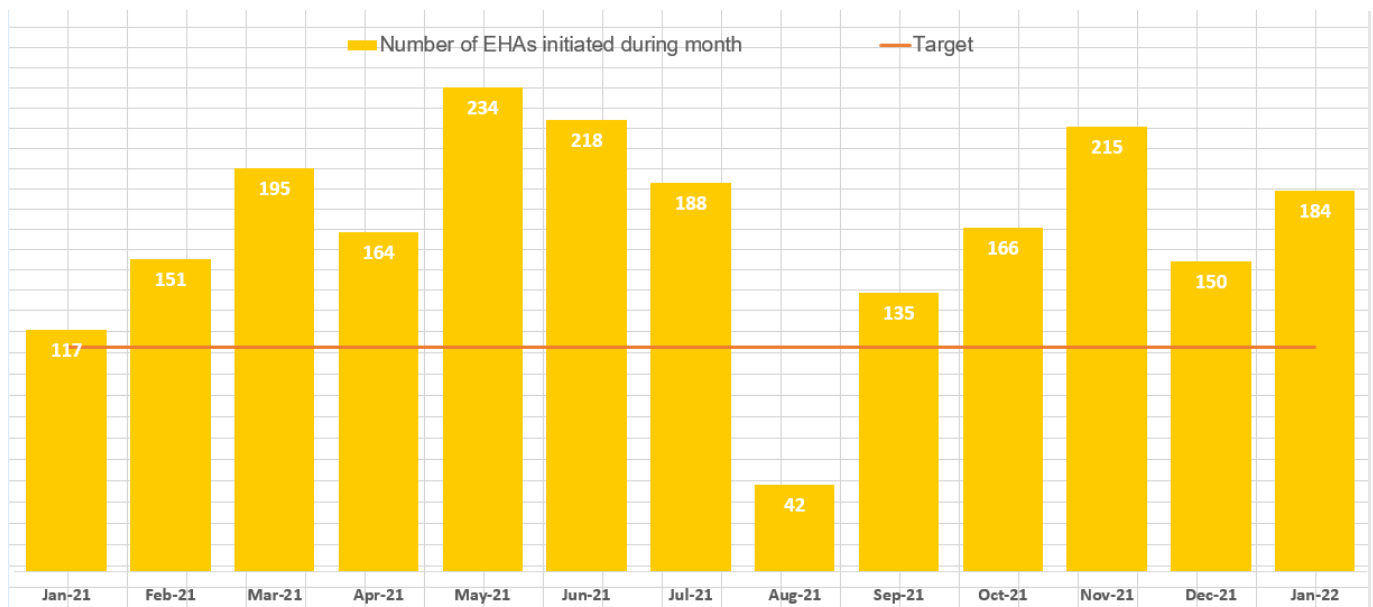
4. BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

Background

- 4.1. This report provides an overview of the performance of children’s services in Peterborough, starting with early help, the work of the Integrated Front Door, including the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, services to children in need provided by the Family Safeguarding service, and finally considering corporate parenting services. All performance information is as at the end of January 2022, the most recent data available at the time this report was prepared.
- 4.2. The report also provides a brief summary of the findings of the visit to Peterborough undertaken as part of the national review of children’s services being led by Josh McAllister on behalf of the Department for Education.

Key Performance Information: Contacts, Referrals, Early Help and Assessments

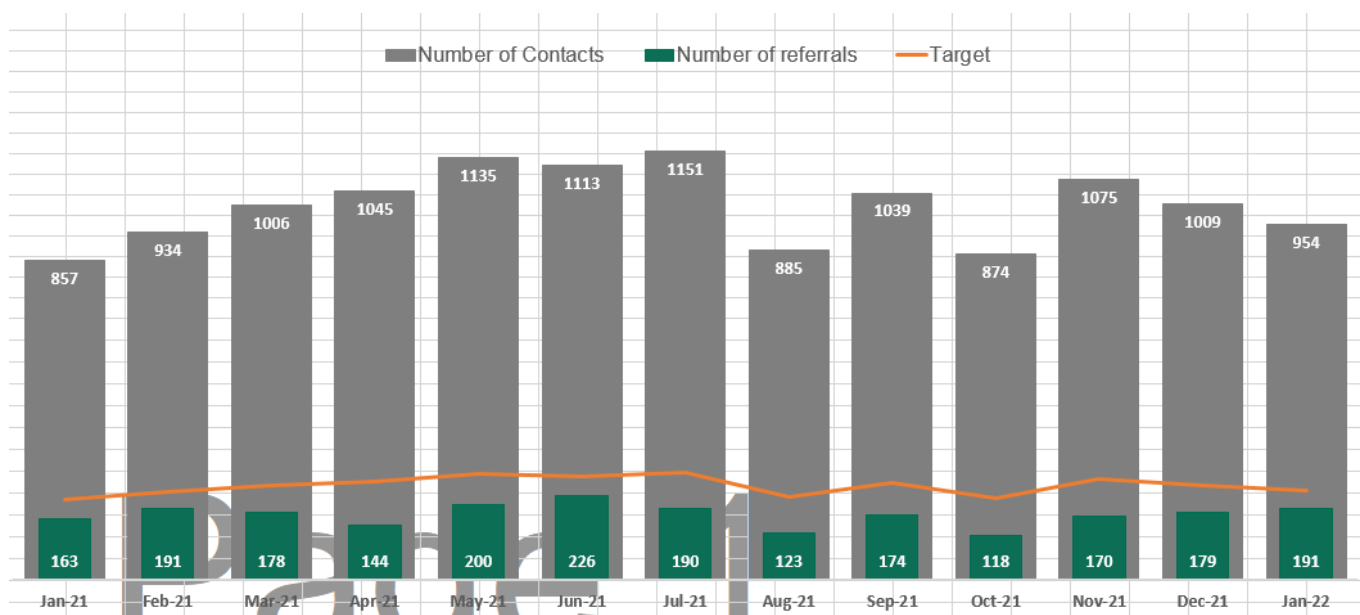
- 4.3. This section provides information about the number of contacts and referrals into children’s services, how many of these progressed to assessments, and information about the number of children and young people who have an active early help assessment.
- 4.4. The chart below shows the number of new Early Help Assessments started each month:



- 4.5. This chart shows the reduction in activity in school holidays. Most early help assessments originate in schools. There is also a marked difference between January 2021 and January 2022, illustrating the impact of the second lockdown at the beginning of 2021.
- 4.6. Many more children than the numbers shown in this chart are being supported at an early help level. Early help assessments are completed where a child or young person has more complex needs such that they may require the additional support from two or more services.
- 4.7. Early help services in Peterborough remain highly effective. The authority continues to perform very well in demonstrating the sustained outcomes required in order to access the Government’s Strengthening Families payment by results funding. The visit by the independent care review team was also very positive about our model of early help, as discussed further below.
- 4.8. Our model of Multi-Agency Support Groups, which bring together key partners from health including child and adolescent mental health, the police, registered social landlords, children’s centres and a range of other local services and organisations continue to thrive. These are problem solving arenas where additional resources including in-home parenting support can be provided to support those families with some of the most complex needs.

4.9. Effective early help services are vital in ensuring that children, young people and families receive the support they need without their difficulties escalating to the point that support is needed from statutory children’s services.

4.10. The next chart below provides information about contacts and referrals over the last 12 months:



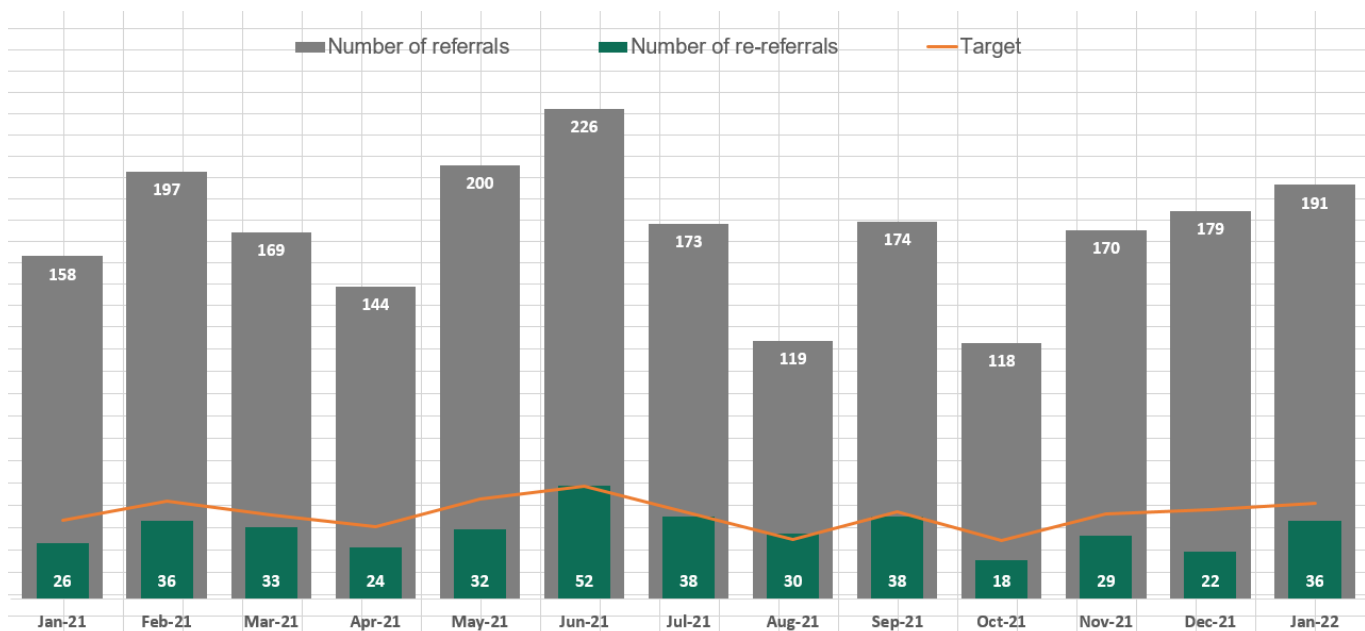
4.11. Our year to date performance in this area is that 17% of contacts proceed to referrals, which is below our target of 25%.

4.12. We undertake regular dip-sampling of the decision as to whether a contact may indicate a need for further enquiries to be made and so become a referral; this audit process consistently shows that decision making in this area is consistent and appropriate. The lower conversion rate from contact to referral is therefore likely to be a continuation of pattern of other agencies giving us information about children and young people that we do not need.

4.13. We continue to work with our partners in this area; many are understandably worried that by not passing on information about a child or young person, something may be missed, and a child may experience harm as a result. Receiving too many contacts also has its risks, however, since we need to sift through more information about more children which may make it more likely that we miss information about a child about whom we should be concerned.

4.14. We are also developing new approaches that partners can use to notify us of concerns about a child or provide us with information that we may need to know. This has included the development of an on-line referral and now includes the adoption of new modules within our electronic children’s information system [LiquidLogic] that will allow partners to input information directly onto our systems. Approaches such as these reduce the number of hand-offs and double-keying of information. This is not only more efficient but also makes it less likely that critical information will be missed.

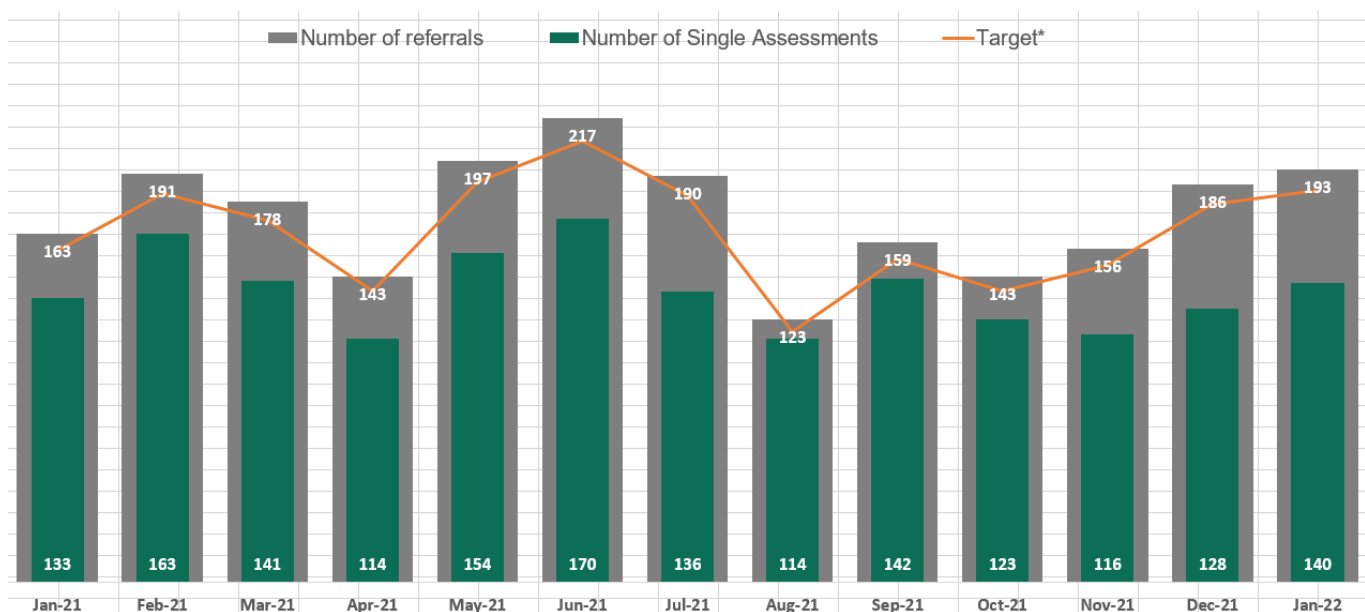
4.15. The chart below shows the proportion of re-referrals within 12 months of a previous referral over the year to date. This is a measure of the extent to which our response to the original referral has been successful in addressing the concerns raised:



4.16. Our year to date performance is that 19% of referrals are re-referrals; this compares well with both national and statistical neighbour performance, which is 23%. It is possible for a re-referral rate to be too low; this would indicate that the service is keeping cases open for too long. This would result in increasing caseloads for social workers, and families experiencing delays in the progression of care plans. A recent audit [Quarter 3 of 2021/22] undertook a dip sample of re-referrals and found that:

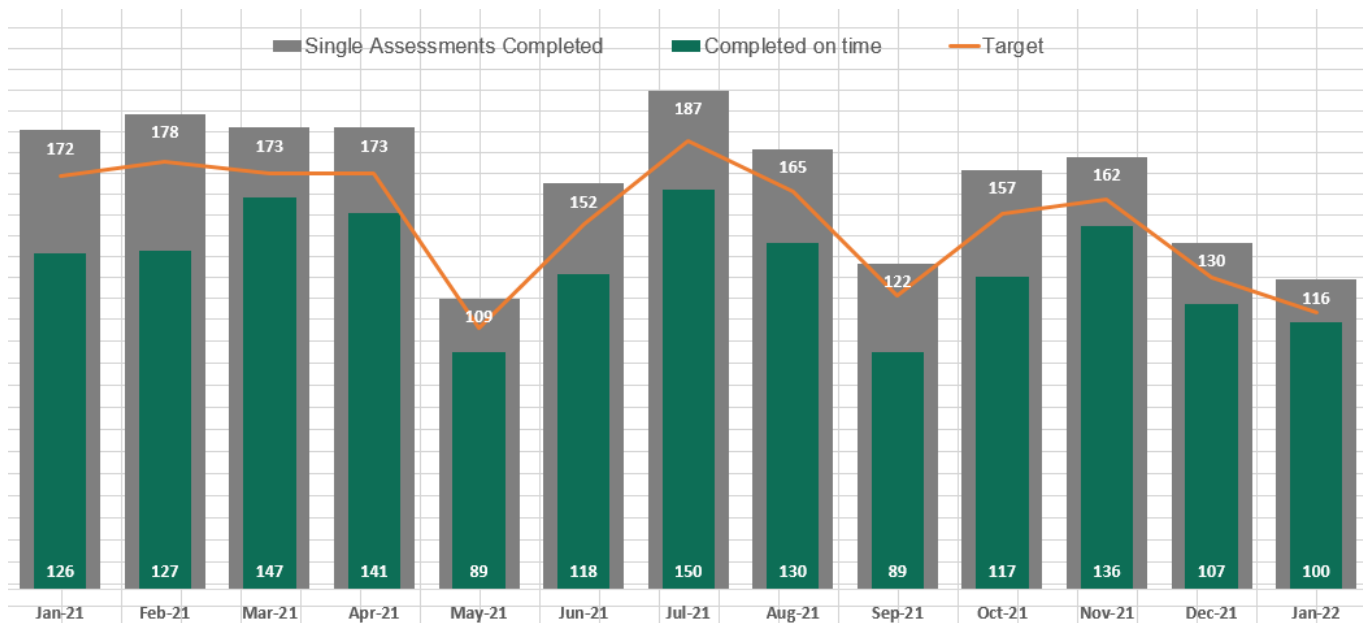
‘All initial referrals were closed with appropriate consideration of thresholds and detailed decision making. Re-referrals considered the historical information from the child’s record and applied thresholds correctly. As per previous quarters, the majority of re-referrals would have met the threshold to progress to assessment based on the presented information and concerns.’

4.17. The following chart shows the proportion of referrals that proceed to a single assessment by Children’s Social Care:



4.18. This chart shows that fewer than the target of 95% of referrals progress to an assessment; this means that we could potentially do more to tighten up decision making about the number of contacts that progress to a referral. That said, 95% is a very high target and lowering this may be more realistic.

- 4.19. The chart below shows the proportion of single assessments completed within 45 working days. Our year to date performance is currently standing at 80%, which is slightly below national performance of 84% and statistical neighbour performance of 86%.
- 4.20. Performance was affected by some staffing issues earlier in the year, and December performance is always affected by our office closure. It is worth noting, however, that performance in January was that 100 of 116 assessments were completed within timescale – only 4 assessments below our 90% target:



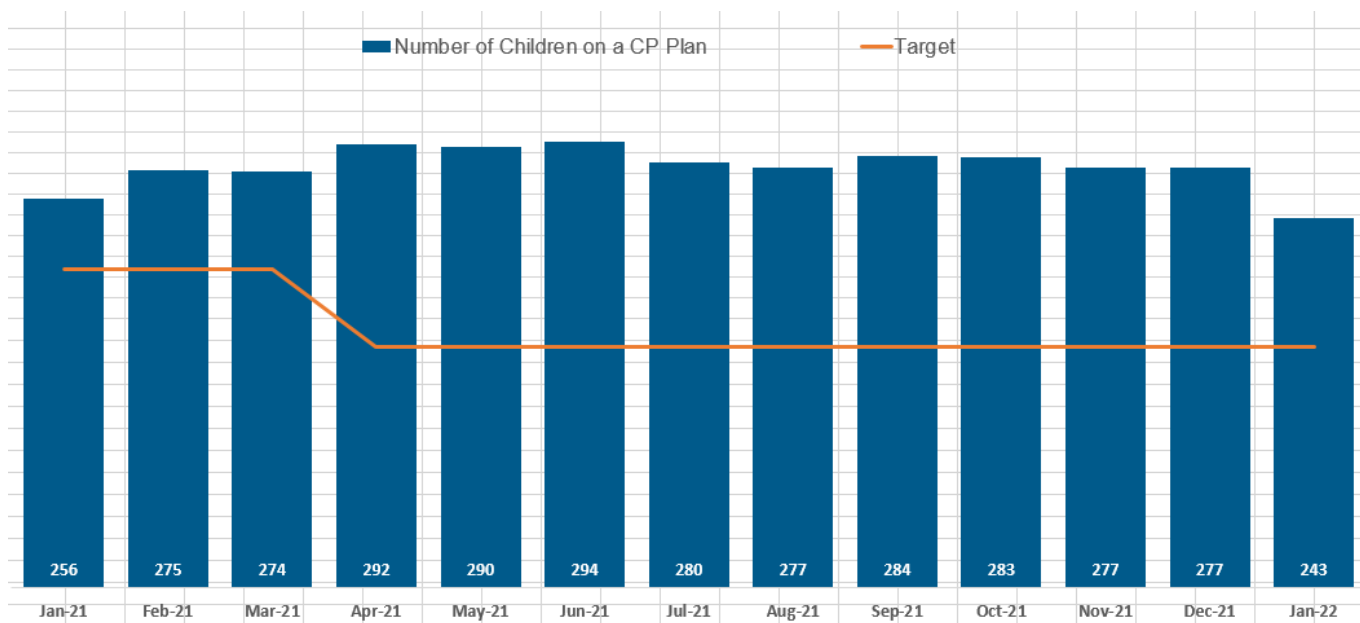
- 4.21. Audits of the quality of assessments show a generally good picture; they generally include a good analysis of risks and protective factors and include use of appropriate specialist assessment tools in many cases that help understand the impact on the child of things like parental neglect. They make good use of information held by partner agencies. The lived experience of the child is mostly considered well, and the extent to which cultural competence is considered and included within plans for children is improving.
- 4.22. Overall, the picture that emerges from the early help service and the assessment area of the children’s social care service is a positive one, despite some impact earlier in the year from staffing shortages.

Family Safeguarding

- 4.23. Our family safeguarding teams work with children and young people in need and in need of protection, as identified by their child and family assessment. Where issues cannot be safely resolved for the child, this part of the service is also responsible for issuing care proceedings and/or seeking other legally permanent parenting options for the child.
- 4.24. The Family Safeguarding service consists of multi-disciplinary teams that include adult practitioners who work with parents who are struggling with domestic abuse in their relationship, substance or problematic alcohol misuse or mental and emotional health difficulties. This model of practice was first developed in Hertfordshire; Peterborough was awarded funding from the Department for Education to implement the model here.
- 4.25. As noted in previous reports, Family Safeguarding is associated with better outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people and the need to issue fewer care proceedings and so have lower numbers of children coming into care than would otherwise be the case.
- 4.26. Children living in the community who are subject to child protection plans are the children about whom we are most concerned. As noted in previous reports, this was an area where we have seen an impact from the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. Children and young people were less visible to services during lockdowns in particular, which resulted in some

children being referred to our service later than they might otherwise have been, and after the risks they were facing had escalated.

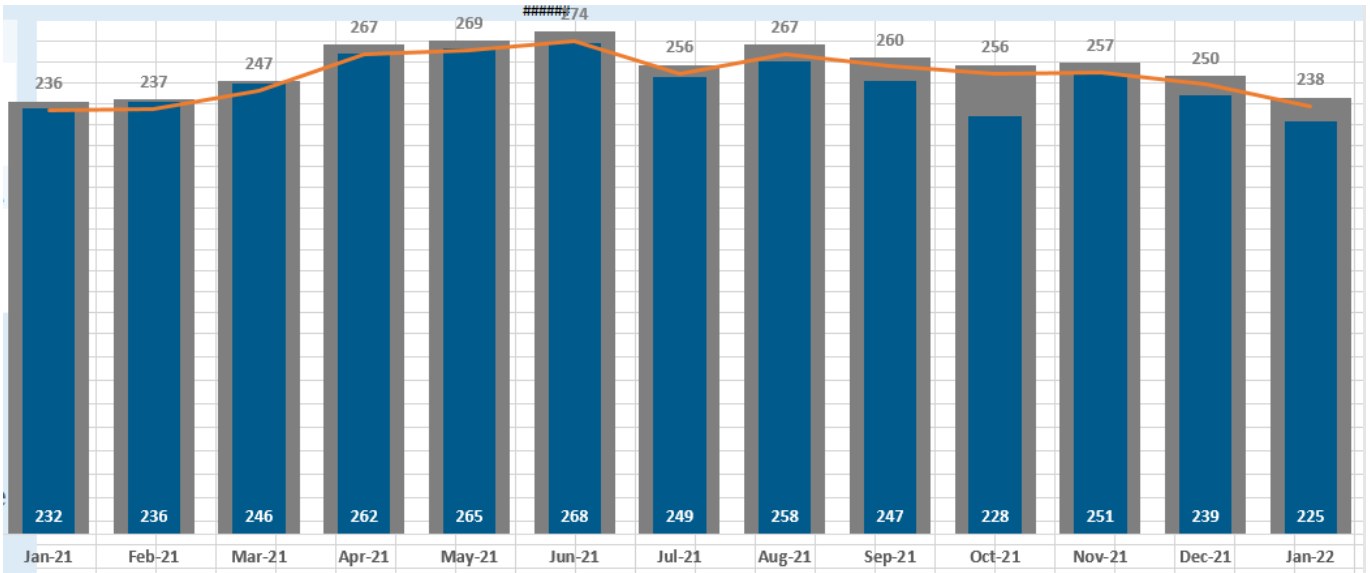
4.27. As the chart below shows, we have seen numbers stabilise over the last six months or so, and most recently begin to reduce. Reassuringly, this reduction has not been accompanied by an increase in the numbers of children coming into care, suggesting that our Family Safeguarding model has continued to be effective in enabling our most vulnerable families make the changes they need in order to provide the stable and loving homes that their children need:



4.28. Prior to the pandemic, the number of children subject to a child protection plan was consistently below the 200 mark compared with 243 as of the end of January 2022. Despite numbers being higher than our target, our rate of children subject to a child protection plan at 47.5 is lower than our statistical neighbour average of 55 per 10,000. The Family Safeguarding approach is associated with lower numbers of children on a child protection plan, which explains why we have relatively fewer than similar authorities. Using Family Safeguarding means that we are able to prevent more children from reaching the ‘in need of protection’ threshold.

4.29. Other indicators of our performance in supporting good outcomes for children subject to child protection plans also remain positive; we currently have no children subject to a plan who have previously been subject to a plan in the last two years, and only 12 children and young people of the current 243 have been subject to child protection plans for longer than 18 months. This is important because where there are these levels of concerns about a child, then we should ensure that plans to safeguard them proceed without delay.

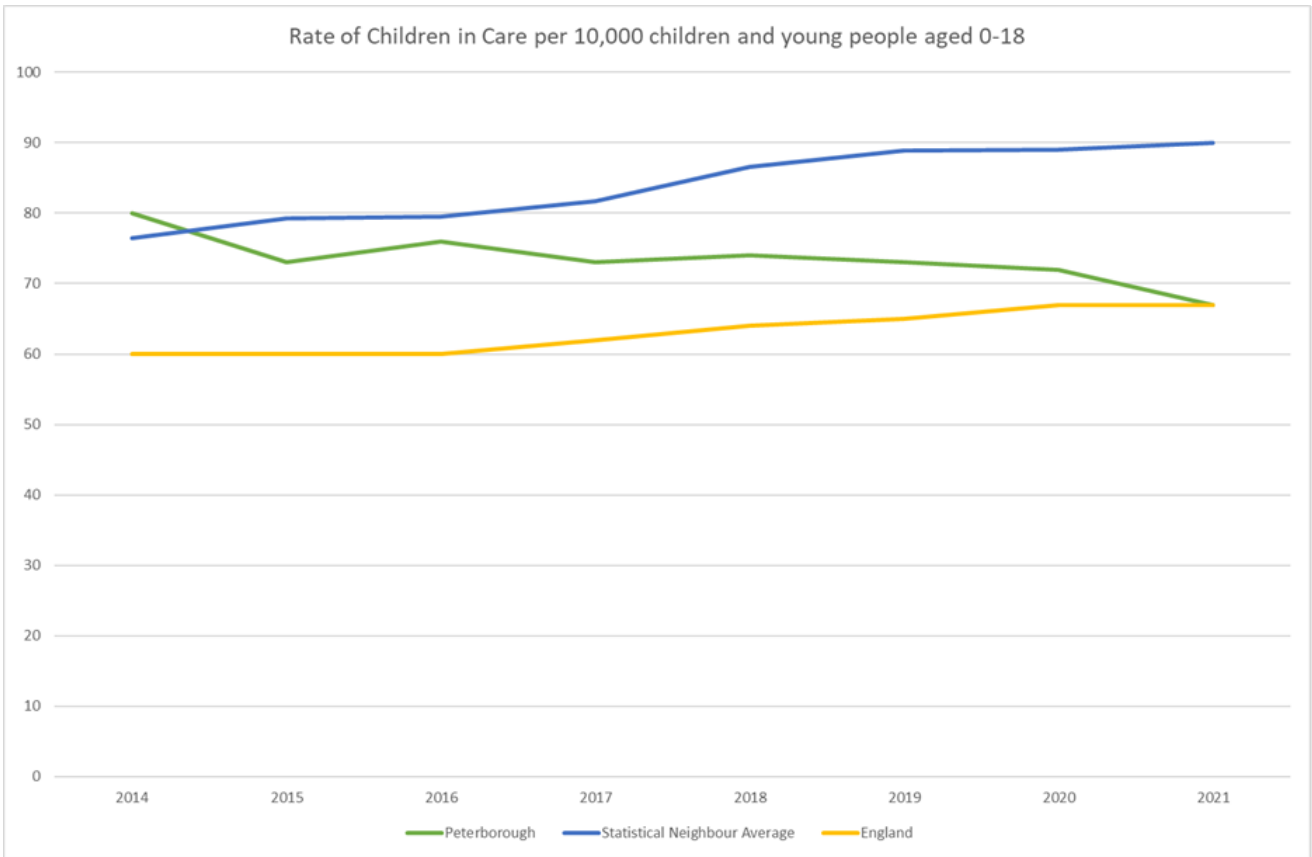
4.30. The chart below shows the proportion of visits to children subject to child protection plans that have been carried out in accordance with the required timescales:



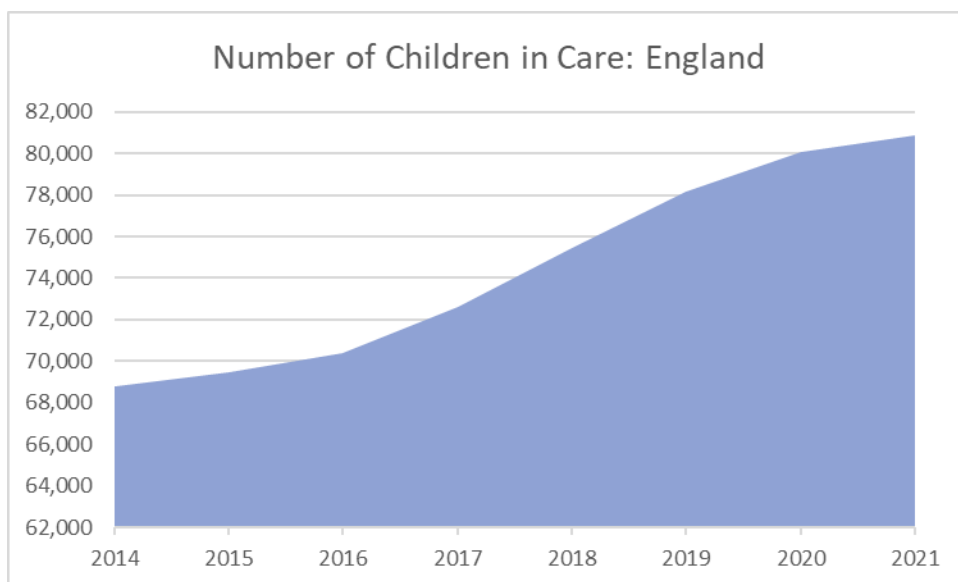
4.31. Current performance is 95% - just below our stretch target of 98%. There will always be some situations where visits do not take place as expected; this might be because the worker is unwell or is pulled away on other urgent matters; it could also be that the family is deliberately frustrating visits. Performance of 95% and above is really very good performance. That said, we will do all we can to achieve the 98% target by the end of the year.

Corporate Parenting

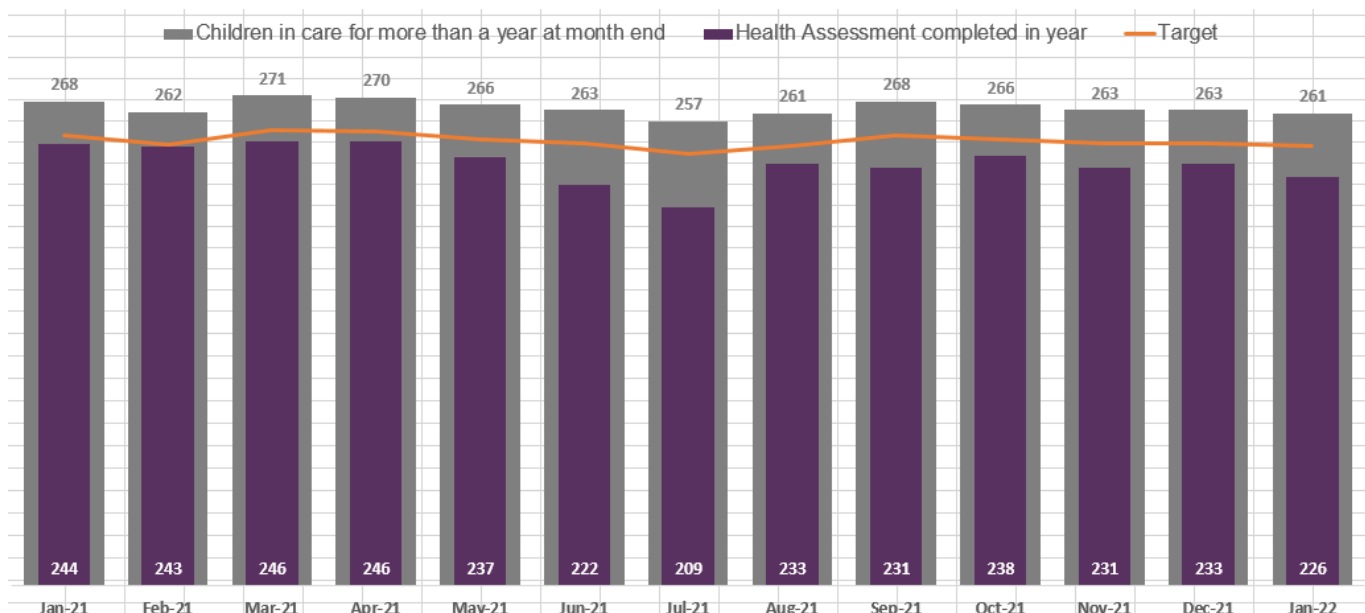
4.32. The local authority continues to perform very well in relation to preventing children and young people coming into care, and ensuring that those who do need to come into care spend the minimum time in care before moving to permanent homes through adoption, Special Guardianship, or a return to the care of their parents. The following chart shows the relative performance of Peterborough against the average of our statistical neighbours and the England average:



- 4.33. We currently have around 340 children and young people in care, equivalent to a rate of 66 per 10,000, just slightly below the England average rate of 67 per 10,000 as of March 31st 2021, and significantly below the rate of our statistical neighbours, which was 90 per 10,000 in March 2021. It is generally accepted that there is a close correlation between children in care numbers and the level of deprivation. Deprivation levels in Peterborough are considerably higher than the England average, emphasising again the effectiveness of our approach in enabling children to remain at home with their families.
- 4.34. While numbers in care have reduced over recent years in Peterborough, the national picture is very different. The chart below shows the number of children in care in England, showing a year on year increase:

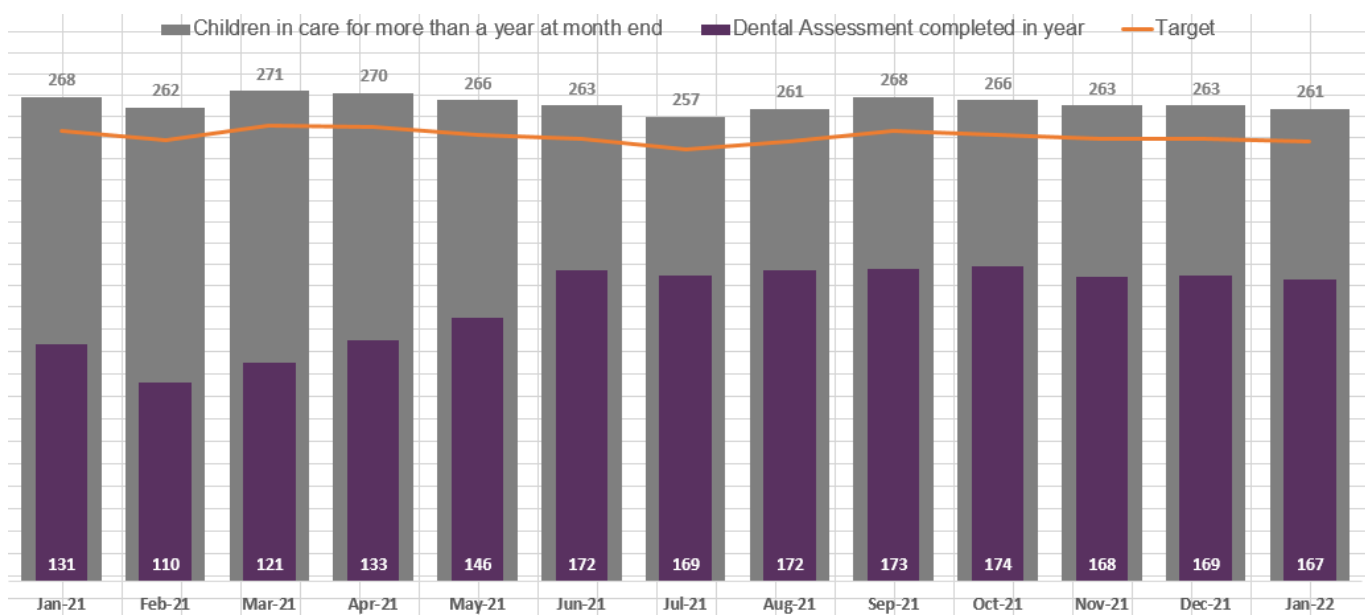


- 4.35. Lower numbers of children in care are associated with a successful Family Safeguarding approach. Family Safeguarding is not the whole story, however; we also have good care planning arrangements in place that seek to ensure that children in care remain in care for as short a period as possible. This may mean a return home to parents once issues have been addressed, or permanent alternative arrangements such as adoption or a permanent family through Special Guardianship Order.
- 4.36. Our performance in relation to the proportion of children and young people in care who are in stable placements is also good, while the proportion of children and young people in our care who experience three or more changes of placements at 9% is in line with statistical and England averages. Our performance in relation to placement stability also needs to be viewed in the context of our low overall numbers. A smaller overall population of children in care means that a higher proportion of those in care will have very complex needs. Maintaining placement stability rates at or below national performance levels is therefore more of an achievement than it might first appear.
- 4.37. Ofsted noted our strong performance in respect of placement stability in the focused visit in June 2021, saying '*Once in care, children rarely move other than in a planned way.*' This is clearly good in terms of securing the best outcomes for children in care, which are associated with placement stability.
- 4.38. Performance in respect to the timeliness of visits is at 93% - this is a little below our stretch target of 98% - and is an area of focus for the service to improve in the coming weeks and months.
- 4.39. The chart below details the proportion of annual health assessments for children in care that are undertaken within timescale:



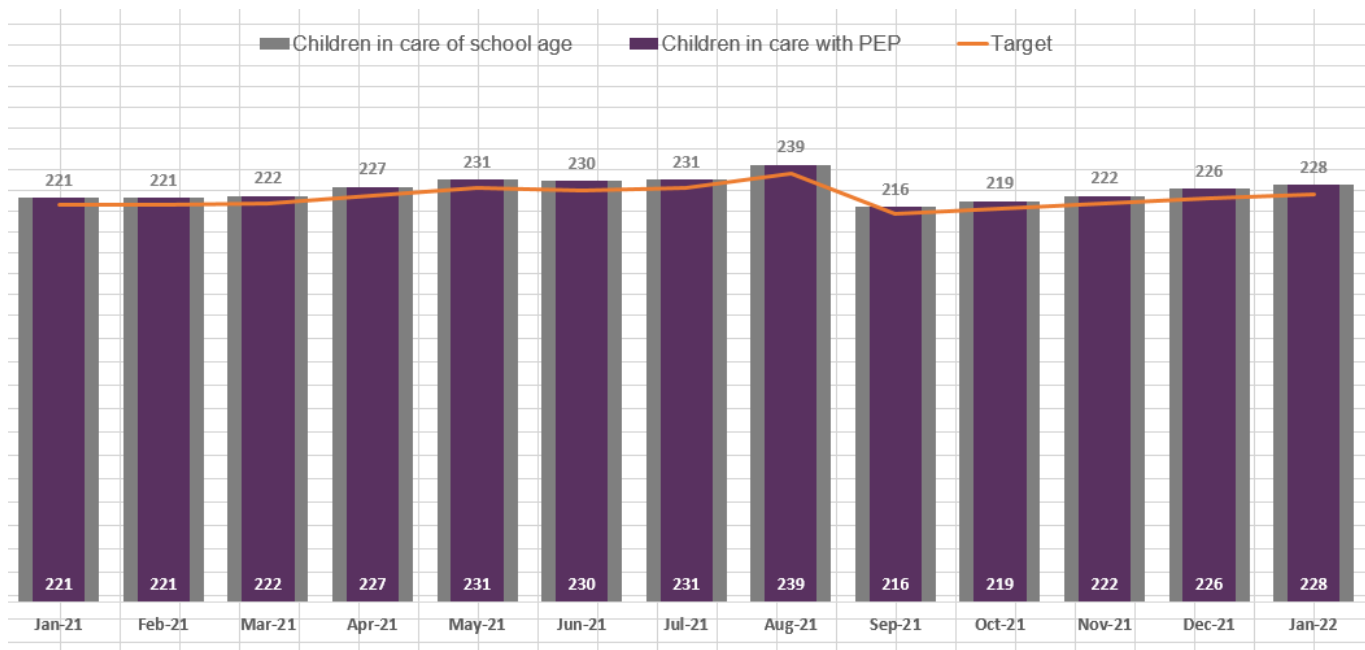
4.40. Current performance is 87% against a target of 93%. For comparison, the England average is 91%. Some young people in particular will decline a health assessment, meaning that exceeding our stretch target is challenging. That said, performance below the England average is disappointing and we will seek to see an improvement on these numbers over the next few months.

4.41. Availability of dental services was severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, and access to dentists for those newly into care [as opposed to those who are already registered with dentists] remains a challenge. While numbers of children accessing dental checks has improved from the low point during and after the lockdown periods, performance seems to have reached a plateau:



4.42. This is an area where we will continue to improve performance wherever we can, including by working with our colleagues in the NHS to help us to identify dentists that are able to accept children and young people in care onto their patient lists. The Corporate Parenting Committee has recently written to NHS England expressing concern for our young people and the lack of local provision.

4.43. Performance in relation to the proportion of children and young people in care who have Personal Education Plans [PEPs] continues to be very good, reflecting the close working relationship between Children’s Services and the Virtual School:



Visit to Peterborough by the National Care Review

- 4.44. As noted above, Josh McAllister is leading a national review of children’s services, encompassing early help and preventative services, child protection services and services for children in care. This is a national review that is being undertaken on behalf of the Department for Education.
- 4.45. As part of this review, ten local authorities were selected as areas that would be visited by the national review team. The idea of these visits was for the team to develop a closer understanding of how services operate in practice across the country. Peterborough was one of the ten authorities selected, and the review team visited at the end of October 2021.
- 4.46. Members of our staff who engaged with the review team found the process to be worthwhile and were pleased to be part of a review of this sort. Verbal feedback from the review team at the time of the visit was very positive about our staff and our services, while noting the financial challenges faced by the authority.
- 4.47. We have now heard from the review team more specifically about their views of services in Peterborough. They were very positive about our Family Safeguarding approach, which is perhaps not especially surprising given the evidence of the effectiveness of the approach.
- 4.48. They were also, however, very positive about our model of early help delivery in the City. As Members will know, our approach in Peterborough has been different; we have avoided establishing a substantial directly delivered early help service [although we do have a small service able to provide direct support in certain situations]. Instead we have focused on building capacity alongside our partners, with the aim of as much help and support to children, young people and their families being delivered by and through universal provision as possible.
- 4.49. Families are more likely to engage with support that is available through a trusted professional than when they are referred on to a separate service, which families can experience as being stigmatising. The review team identified that our model, supported through the Multi-Agency Support Groups, had also enabled the development of a very effective partnership approach to the early help system in Peterborough.
- 4.50. The review team will not publish a separate report about their visit to Peterborough, but findings from the visit and to those of the other nine authorities will inform the final report, due to be published in the Spring of this year.

Expected inspection activity in Children’s Services

- 4.51. Under the current inspection framework for children's services [ILACS, or Inspections of Local Authority Children's Services] there is some form of contact between Ofsted and local authorities on an annual basis. A focused visit took place in June 2021, when inspectors took an in-depth look at our services for children and young people in care. As noted in previous reports to Scrutiny Committee, this was a very positive visit, with inspectors saying about us: *'A conscientious corporate parent, Peterborough City Council looks after most children in its care well.'*
- 4.52. Peterborough's last graded inspection was in July 2018, when the outcome was Good overall. Ordinarily, graded inspections take place once every three years, but the pandemic has resulted in delays to the Ofsted inspection timetable. It is, however, very likely that a graded inspection will take place at some point in the current calendar year. Because we are a Good authority, the inspection will be a short one of one weeks' duration. These inspections take place without notice.
- 4.53. We continue to benefit from a largely stable and very committed staff team and have been fortunate to have avoided some of the workforce challenges faced by our neighbouring authorities. That said, the availability of experienced permanent and locum staff remains very limited and in a small authority like Peterborough, even a small number of key vacancies can have a significant impact on the overall service.
- 4.54. Nevertheless, we remain confident that the overall quality of practice in Peterborough is one that succeeds in serving most of our vulnerable children, young people and their families well. There are always things that we can improve on, and we welcome external scrutiny since this can help us to continue to shape our services positively.

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 key performance information in relation to children's services in Peterborough;
 - Receives updates about the national care review and likely inspection activity;
 - Has an opportunity to discuss the activities of the Portfolio Holder in supporting children's services 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 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 Members will be aware of the wider financial situation and savings targets attached to most areas of Council business. Children's Services recognises that there has been a real commitment to protect and promote services for children and families, but we do need to contribute as far as we are able to the overall savings plan. There are 3 areas in which we are being asked to make savings in the next financial year: reunification of children in care to their birth families in a timelier

manner; increase in Council fostering places enabling us to reduce the number of children placed in more expensive agency placements; and increasing income in respect of the provision of some services for children with complex needs.

In 2022-23, the savings target amounts to £1,122,000 (£250,000 for reunification; £372,000 on foster recruitment; and £500,000 for increased income). We are working with CIPFA consultants to develop business plans around each of these areas and are confident that significant progress can be made against all three areas. Children's needs and appropriate care planning will, of course, take precedence in all decision making in relation to individual cases, but we do agree that these are areas where we can have an impact on the budget and potentially improve service delivery at the same time.

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 The report contains no proposals for changes to service delivery and therefore there is no decision to take which may impact carbon emissions of the council or the city.

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 None.