

Inspection of Peterborough local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 27 November to 8 December 2023

Lead inspector: Russel Breyer, His Majesty's Inspector

| Judgement | Grade |
|--|---------------------------------|
| The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families | Requires improvement to be good |
| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection | Requires improvement to be good |
| The experiences and progress of children in care | Requires improvement to be good |
| The experiences and progress of care leavers | Inadequate |
| Overall effectiveness | Inadequate |

Since the last inspection of Peterborough, in June 2018, when all services for children were judged to be good, there has been a deterioration in the quality of practice, and in the experience and progress of children and young people. A lack of sufficient leadership focus, complicated by joint service arrangements with a neighbouring local authority, has meant that the significance of this decline was only identified relatively recently.

The new leadership team, led by an experienced director of children's services (DCS), has quickly grasped the scale and nature of the improvement that is needed. Since July, the leadership team has completed a robust and accurate self-evaluation, identified the crucial areas for improvement and begun to tackle these, with appropriate prioritisation. This has included taking effective action to address the most pressing shortfalls, identified by a focused visit to the integrated front door in March 2023. This improvement is, however, very recent, and there remains much to do, particularly in improving support for care leavers, which is currently inadequate.

What needs to improve?

- The quality of support, advice, and guidance for care leavers, including those with additional vulnerabilities, to ensure that this is timely, consistent, and responsive to levels of need.
- Service capacity, particularly in the safeguarding teams, care leaver service and emergency duty service.
- The consistency in quality of social work assessments.
- Social work support for disabled children in need of help and protection.
- The identification and response to increased vulnerability when children are electively home educated or missing from education.
- The quality of supervision, so that social workers are supported to think through complex situations, to help children make progress.
- The sufficiency of suitable placements that can meet children and young people's assessed needs.
- The consistency of support for children who go missing from care.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Children benefit from early help services, with support provided in line with their needs. Changing needs and risks are identified and responded to in a timely way. Workers develop positive relationships with children and their families, which helps them to deliver effective interventions.
2. The focused visit in March 2023 found that there were serious delays in the response to contacts and referrals and in children being visited and seen. Initial responses to this shortfall were not effective and backlogs remained until August 2023. Since the summer, improvements have been achieved and this inspection found children's needs being promptly considered and responded to.
3. A small number of management decisions made while addressing the backlog in July and August 2023 lacked sufficient curiosity and were over-reliant on parental self-reporting. When these cases were presented by inspectors for review, managers took swift and appropriate action to remedy these shortfalls. More recent decision-making is more robust. Strategy meetings are appropriately convened and attended by the necessary range of professionals. Child protection enquiries are planned appropriately, although the written plans to monitor and support children while risks are being assessed sometimes lack detail about how potential risks will be managed.

4. The capacity of the commissioned emergency duty service to respond as needed to concerns about children out of hours is too limited. This means that sometimes partner agencies, such as the police, are managing situations without social work support.
5. Most assessments of children's needs are timely, and children receive an appropriate service. A minority of weaker assessments give insufficient attention to family history and are not sufficiently specific about what needs to be addressed.
6. Children in need of protection, and those with more complex needs, receive appropriate support from the family safeguarding teams. For most children, risks and needs are identified and interventions are provided at the right level.
7. When risk to children increases, children are moved into and through pre-proceeding processes in a timely way. Many children are diverted away from court effectively and remain safely living with their parents. When risks are not addressed, timely court applications are made for those children who need them.
8. Most children at risk of exploitation have their needs identified, with risk and harm responded to appropriately. Social workers develop meaningful and trusting relationships with children, which helps them to make progress and advocate strongly for children, challenging preconceptions, and use of inappropriate language by partners. This was an area for priority action following the focused visit in March 2023.
9. Children who are privately fostered are appropriately identified and have their needs assessed and support provided accordingly. Children who are at risk of needing to become looked after receive effective support.
10. Practitioners are unclear about the threshold for disabled children to receive a service from the children with disabilities 0-25 team. This means that some children may not benefit from the specialist service they need or continuity of service and worker. Most disabled children receive a sensitive and needs-led service, but some assessed as in need of support experience delay before they are allocated to a social worker. The duty system in the 0-25 team means that unqualified workers sometimes respond to situations which may become child protection concerns, which creates potential delay in these concerns being fully assessed. Children in the transition service who are approaching adulthood have their needs identified well and are supported towards achieving their goals.
11. The circumstances of most children missing from education are understood, and appropriate checks are made. Clear policies and procedures are in place to review children who are electively home educated. The numbers of children receiving home education have increased significantly in the last year, which has

stretched current service capacity. This delays the reviewing of some children's circumstances and means that referrals to other teams are sometimes not made swiftly enough when concerns escalate.

12. Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds have not, until recently, received a response in line with the local authority's responsibilities. Consequently, some children with care needs have not had them met. This has been recognised and recent practice in this area better addresses children's needs and rights.
13. Allegations against adults who work with children are responded to appropriately and responses are proportionate to risk.

The experiences and progress of children in care: requires improvement to be good

14. Most decisions for children to enter care are made when it is in their interests to do so.
15. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the family court judge report that the quality of evidence submitted by social workers in legal proceedings is good, and that the right children enter care at the right time.
16. Most children do not receive a timely initial assessment of their health needs when they first enter care. Senior managers are seeking to resolve this with health partners, but progress has been slow. Social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) seek to mitigate this by giving careful attention to meeting children's health needs through the looked after review process.
17. When there is potential for children to return to their family's care, assessments are detailed, and risk is carefully considered and reviewed. Rehabilitation back to their family is successful for most children for whom this is the plan.
18. Children who are subject to care orders and who return to live with their parents have their needs well assessed prior to placement and appropriate support plans are put in place. Plans are signed off at senior level and there is appropriate management oversight for these children.
19. Children in care are supported to remain in contact with people who are important to them.
20. Children are enabled to live in their extended families when possible. Assessments and plans to support this are thorough. Family group conferences support this process, although they are not always held early enough to avoid delay for some children.

21. Social workers form positive relationships with children and can articulate their wishes and feelings. Children's views and feelings are generally well recorded, but the voice of the child is not consistently captured meaningfully in care plans, and it is not always clear how the child's voice is influencing their care planning.
22. Many children in care live in homes that meet their needs. However, lack of sufficiency means some children are not initially placed in homes that are well matched to their needs. A small number of younger children are placed in children's homes, not because this is what best meets their needs but because of a lack of suitable family-based alternatives.
23. A significant proportion of children are placed at a distance from Peterborough. Most of these children are visited regularly, and social workers ensure that their needs are met in the area they are living in.
24. A well-resourced virtual school provides good-quality support and training for designated teachers and has improved the process for devising personal education plans so that children can better access resources to support their educational progress.
25. Foster carers are well supported to care for children. The fostering service is being developed to increase support to them and to encourage more people to foster for Peterborough.
26. Permanence is well considered for individual children, with a range of options. Adoption is appropriately considered, and decision-making is supported by good-quality assessments and plans. The local authority collaborates effectively with its local regional adoption agency (Cambridge and Peterborough Adoption Agency) to promote early matching to adopters. There are delays in securing permanence for a small number of children, for example those who are being fostered long term.
27. Children's care and progress are reviewed regularly. IROs visit children prior to their review meetings and seek their views. IROs challenge managers when children's plans are not progressing, but this does not always improve children's outcomes.
28. Social workers advocate well for disabled children in care. Most disabled children live in homes which meet their complex needs. For others, difficulties in identifying suitable placements, including education provision, lead to delay in having their needs met.
29. Service responses to children who go missing from care and may be at risk of exploitation are inconsistent. Some receive strong, individually tailored support, whereas others do not receive an effectively coordinated and sustained response.

30. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking children being cared for live in homes that meet their needs and they are well supported by their social workers.
31. Children are very well supported to engage in a range of participation activities. There is a clear commitment from leaders to gain the views of a wide range of children and to evidence these views, making a difference to how services are designed and delivered. Children value and benefit from these participation activities.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: inadequate

32. While some care leavers develop positive relationships with their personal advisers (PAs), too many young people do not receive the support they need to make progress in their lives. Most are not allocated a PA early enough and some experience prolonged delays or a lack of consistency in PA, which has led to understandable disengagement. For too many young people, who may need encouragement to work with a PA, persistent efforts to engage them are not made. The expectation is that young people will reach out if they need help. Many do not. As a result, these young people are not getting the help or support they need, leading to delays and a deterioration in mental health and living conditions for some young people.
33. Throughout the local authority, there has been a lack of ambition for care leavers. PAs act as strong advocates for some young people, but this is not consistent across the service. The status of the local offer for care leavers reflects this. It is underdeveloped, and not consistently shared or understood. This means some young people are not getting the support they are entitled to. Support for social and leisure needs is particularly limited. For example, financial support to access Wi-Fi is not routinely provided and plans are only now being developed to offer gym passes. Care leavers with relatively modest requests for support with leisure activities face difficulties accessing this support, even when it could make a significant difference to their emotional well-being.
34. When care leavers are visited by their PAs, the quality of visits is too variable. Vulnerability is not always sufficiently understood or explored. PAs and managers are not curious enough about young people's histories and are over-reliant on self-reporting. Young people often have to repeat their stories and are not always signposted for support when addressing early-life trauma.
35. Pathway plans provide a reasonably comprehensive record of a young person's circumstances but are not completed within timescales for some, and not consistently updated when young people's situations change. Action plans resulting from pathway planning put too much onus on the young person to address their own needs and do not identify the support that needs to be provided.

36. A small but significant number of care leavers are not in suitable accommodation. This includes young people living in bed and breakfast accommodation. Some young people sofa surf for short periods. 'Staying put' requests are supported, and a specialist housing PA provides some creative and effective interventions to support young people to access housing and to maintain tenancies. However, a lack of capacity to do this work means that it is not consistent for all young people. Some housing providers understand the vulnerabilities and needs of care leavers and work with PAs to help them into housing and to maintain tenancies. Some providers work less well with leaving care services, which limits housing options for young people.
37. More needs to be done to ensure that an increased number of care leavers are fully engaged in suitable education, employment, or training. Their options are limited and not enough is being done to address this. While care leavers who go to university are well supported, with extra support provided for those who need it, outcomes for young people vary greatly across the service, with the most vulnerable doing far less well than their peers because of a lack of support.
38. Care leavers' health needs are addressed in their pathway plans, but for those who are not engaged by their PAs, their health needs can go unmet.
39. Care leavers who are parents are well supported when there are concerns about their child. In the small number of cases when a decision is reached that young people cannot provide safe care for their child, they are given appropriate emotional support.
40. Most care leavers who are in custody receive regular visits, and the service has delivered training to prison staff to help develop their understanding of care leavers' vulnerabilities. Plans for the release of care leavers from custody are weakened by a lack of local resources, for example, support in gaining employment.
41. Care leavers who are engaged with the service are supported to obtain the important documents that they need, such as passports and birth certificates.
42. When care leavers request support from a PA after the age of 21, this is usually agreed. However, this is not proactively offered to care leavers, which means that some are unaware of their rights and miss out on support they may need.
43. Engagement with young people in the Care Leaders Forum is a strength. They are involved in a number of projects and have been well supported to express their views. Until recently, however, leaders have been too slow in responding by, for example, enhancing and promoting the local care leaver offer.

44. Although PAs report that they like working for Peterborough, many view their service as lacking in capacity and resources in relation to other services, which impacts on their morale. Leaders acknowledge that services for care leavers have not been sufficiently prioritised.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

45. The current DCS has brought stability and renewed focus to the areas in which improvement is needed across children's services. Clear priorities have been set and appropriate plans developed. Some significant early improvements have been achieved, most notably in the integrated front door. The deficits in the current care leaver service have been accurately diagnosed and a plan to provide some much-needed additional capacity agreed. In this and other areas, more work is still required to deliver the necessary improvements.
46. Prior to the appointment of the current DCS, a lack of continuity in senior leadership contributed to the decline in services to children since the last inspection in 2018. Joint leadership and service arrangements with a neighbouring authority complicated and weakened service oversight and, until recently, self-evaluation had not accurately identified the seriousness of the deterioration in performance. Insufficient priority has been given to the resourcing of essential services and, as a result, there are significant capacity shortfalls in several service areas, most notably the leaving care service and the emergency duty team.
47. Alongside securing the business case for additional investment, senior leaders have taken further steps to achieve improvement. These include establishing an improvement board with strong external expertise and challenge, moving towards a more open culture of learning, reframing partnerships more collaboratively, listening to children and raising the ambition and aspirations of services for children.
48. A suitably experienced lead member for children's services is now in post. The chief executive is fully sighted on the need for step change improvement and, in a challenging financial climate, is committed to prioritising this work.
49. The formal corporate parenting board has not been effective in ensuring that improvements for children in care are driven forward, or that issues leading to the decline in performance for care leavers are addressed. The informal corporate parenting board, chaired by children, is enjoyed, and valued by them. Leaders recognise the need to strengthen the impact of the board. Some other strategic partnerships are underdeveloped following the termination of joint arrangements. The new leadership team has acted swiftly to form fresh relationships and develop a more coherent strategic approach.

50. Leaders now have a good range of performance information, including effective auditing arrangements, which help them to be sighted on the experience of children and to know what needs to improve. Their self-evaluation provides a realistic view on the current quality of practice.
51. Too many workers have workloads that are too high to allow them time to help children make progress. Management capacity is insufficient in some areas. Supervision is regular, but often not of good enough quality to ensure that children do not experience delay, or to help workers to think through approaches that would help children who have complex needs.
52. Despite this, workers are committed to Peterborough and most teams have stable staffing. Workers report good availability of managers when they need advice or support, and they are satisfied with training opportunities and the development offer. This provides a promising foundation on which to build the necessary improvements to services for children in Peterborough.

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