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John Gregg  
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Dear John

### **Monitoring visit to Peterborough children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Peterborough children's services on 21 and 22 January 2025. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2024. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Nicki Shaw and Rodica Cobarzan.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the Multi Agency Safeguarding Team (MASH), assessment team and emergency duty team. Inspectors had a particular focus on the following areas:

- Timely and effective response to contacts and referrals.
- MASH threshold decisions for early help, children in need and child protection.
- The quality of assessment and plans in the assessment team.
- The effectiveness of supervision, quality assurance, performance management and management oversight.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

### **Headline Findings**

Following the priority areas identified for improvement during the focused visit to the 'front door' in 2023 and at the last inspection, leaders have taken effective action to create a new MASH for Peterborough. This was established in August 2024. At this monitoring visit, inspectors found that the MASH is functioning effectively, supported by clear and appropriate processes. This is an impressive achievement in a short time frame.

The local authority's self-evaluation of the MASH is accurate. This is informed by effective practice audits and quality assurance processes that provide an additional layer of scrutiny of practice and assurance for leaders. The outcome of quality assurance activity is supporting the overall MASH improvement plan.

A new leadership team, led by an experienced and determined director of children's services and supported by the improvement board and the cabinet member for children's services, is providing drive and direction to improve outcomes for children. The pace of change is gaining momentum and while there is much still to do, and a need for ongoing corporate support and investment, there are promising signs of improvement for children in Peterborough.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Leaders have reviewed and refreshed policy and procedures to ensure that the foundations for effective operational systems and processes are in place to support multi-agency practice. These help to ensure that most referrals are screened promptly by experienced and confident senior practitioners.

Professionals identify when children and young people are in need of help and protection and make appropriate referrals to children's social care. However, not all information in referrals from the police is clear about the reason for the referral, with limited assessment of risk for children. This is mitigated through daily meetings between the police and children's social care so concerns about children's welfare can be fully discussed and decisions about next steps agreed.

Referrals for children are appropriately triaged in the MASH for early help services. Early help assessments are completed by a lead professional and benefit from management oversight and a clear rationale for decisions to provide early help services. Early help practitioners understand the need for parental consent before interventions can take place, and this is clearly recorded in early help assessments.

Children receive timely support from a lead professional and team around the family. However, for a small number of children referred for additional targeted support, there is a delay in services being provided. In these circumstances, families have access to community resources such as parenting groups and emotional support through a drop-in counselling hub.

When children's cases step down to early help following an assessment, they are presented to a multi-agency panel to share information and identify a lead professional. This helps to ensure effective and timely planning for children. When children are known to children's social care, a lead professional is identified prior to the panel to ensure that children and families benefit from a seamless transition between services. Early help practitioners recognise safeguarding concerns and any increase in risks to children and appropriately escalate children's cases to statutory services for a child and family assessment.

Managers have a good understanding of the risks associated with domestic abuse and neglect and the factors that increase children's vulnerability. This helps ensure that children referred into the MASH receive the right level of intervention based on appropriate thresholds. Parental consent is understood and appropriately dispensed with when required. This prevents delay in responses when safeguarding concerns are raised. When multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) or Independent domestic violence advisor (IDVA) involvement might be warranted, this is not always explored in the initial response. Police referrals following domestic abuse incidents are not always timely, which impacts the analysis of risk, safety planning and interventions to ensure children are safe.

Timely agency checks with multi-agency professionals are completed to inform decisions and next steps. For a small number of children, timescales were not in line with procedure, however, this was purposeful and informed by the need to gather further information to inform decisions and plans for children. This includes attempts by practitioners to engage fathers, so their views can be captured in the assessment.

When children require a safeguarding response, strategy discussions are well attended by multi-agency professionals. This promotes effective information-sharing to inform the analysis of risk. Chronologies are informative and highlight previous interventions about similar concerns. Comprehensive minutes of the strategy discussion clearly show the rationale for decision-making. When required, children are visited and seen on the same day.

Children at risk of significant harm benefit from interim safety plans, which include support and intervention from professionals and the wider family network. However, the quality of interim plans is not consistent. Well-developed plans are co-produced and include more detailed and realistic actions that families understand. Decisions to progress to child protection conference are well evidenced and proportionate to the level of risk. When decisions are made that children do not require a multi-agency child protection plan, the rationale is well documented.

Children who are missing benefit from daily MASH oversight and timely information-sharing by the police. Information about children missing or when children return home is shared swiftly by the MASH with the exploitation and missing team who have oversight of return home interviews, which supports planning for these children.

Children's cases are transferred without delay to the assessment team. Children and disabled children benefit from skilled, confident, and curious practitioners who undertake timely assessments of their needs that are proportionate to the level of risk and need. Visits take place at a frequency that supports the assessment process. Children are seen alone, and direct-work tools are used to engage them in the assessment to ensure their wishes and feelings influence the assessment and plan. Children's culture and religious needs are well considered in the assessment. Parents and children do not have to wait until assessments are completed to receive

help and support. Assessments make effective use of research to inform the analysis of risk and need. Management oversight at the point of referral, during and at the end of assessments drives child-focused practice.

The response to children who present as homeless is proportionate. Children's circumstances are promptly assessed. Social workers explore family networks and provide support to strengthen relationships and reconcile children with their parents or carers when appropriate. When there are no suitable family alternatives, accommodation through Section 20 is discussed and offered to children. The new joint housing and children's service protocol is used to inform the assessment of children's needs. There is extensive management oversight, proportionate to the level of harm and risk.

The commissioned emergency duty team (EDT) is too limited a resource. When there are concerns for children out of hours, strategy discussions are held with the police to share information. However, there is little capacity to respond effectively to children who are at risk and require a visit, or to contribute to immediate safety planning. In response, leaders have built in some additional capacity, but it is too early to see the impact of this.

Staff spoke of a supportive team culture that is developing in Peterborough. Managers and practitioners described positively the group-based learning and mentoring offered by the improvement partner as enhancing practice in the MASH. However, there is still much to do to fully develop the conditions for good social work practice to flourish.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Nicki Shaw  
**His Majesty's Inspector**