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Lou Williams
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Mr Williams

Focused visit to Peterborough City Council children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Peterborough City Council children's services on 22 and 23 June 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tom Anthony and Nigel Parkes.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. This visit was carried out on site and appropriate measures were put in place to enable discussions with children in care as well as local authority staff, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

A conscientious corporate parent, Peterborough City Council looks after most children in its care well. While there are challenges with placement sufficiency, children in care experience stable placements. Although the proportion of children in care living more than 20 miles from home is relatively high, most are living with foster carers who understand their needs and are supported by social workers who know them and their histories. Independent reviewing officers provide an appropriate level of critical scrutiny, to progress children's plans in a timely way. Senior leaders understand children's lived experience and there is a clear and consistent approach to permanency.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality and recording of supervision to evidence monitoring of children's progress and experiences.
- Maximise the impact of audit activity on outcomes for children.
- Fewer children living at considerable distance from Peterborough.

Main findings

There have been relatively high rates of COVID-19 infection in Peterborough. Swift and effective decision-making has ensured that the most vulnerable children have continued to receive face-to-face visits throughout the pandemic.

The number of children in care in Peterborough remains fairly constant. The majority of children live with suitable carers who are able to meet their needs. The quality of placement matching is an area of strength, and staff make best use of limited placement options. The local authority creates strength-based profiles of children to share with prospective carers. Thoughtful and thorough placement planning by social workers, who consider the views and wishes of children, helps carers understand children's needs and provides them with good care.

Once in care, children rarely move other than in a planned way. Emergency placements are rare. If a child's placement is under pressure, placement disruption meetings are organised swiftly to mobilise a multi-agency team around the child and their carers. Every effort is made to prevent children having to move. When a placement breakdown is unavoidable, social workers provide effective support to ensure that children have a planned move to their new home.

During the periods of restriction, children in care have been seen regularly by their social workers. COVID-19 risk assessments are routinely updated to inform the type of visiting that is required. Decisions to visit children virtually are approved by managers. Face-to-face visits continue to take place for children when there are concerns about placement stability or other risk factors.

Assessments are clear and concise and provide an appropriate level of critical analysis. Plans reflect changes in children's lives and consider their needs, wishes and feelings. While social workers are knowledgeable about diversity, this is not consistently explored or addressed in children's written assessments and plans. Although children's wishes and feelings are often captured, virtual visiting has impacted on opportunities to undertake direct work with some children.

Children in care are involved in a range of activities that influence service developments and enrich their experiences. These include the recruitment of workers, acting as young inspectors, and leading the development of materials to support new entrants to care and better manage the process when children have a new social worker. Children spoken to are confident that senior managers listen to

their views and take action to respond. Children are encouraged to engage in a range of sporting and other activities outside of school.

Foster carers make informed decisions when they are asked to care for children and are highly committed to them. They encourage and support children to engage in a wide range of social and leisure activities. Leaders value the role of carers and understand that they are key to improving children's lives and experiences. Carers are well supported and are active and influential in recruitment and marketing campaigns run by the authority.

Good attention is paid to the children's physical and emotional well-being. The children in care health team has mainly undertaken virtual assessments during the pandemic, routinely monitoring children's health and addressing any identified needs. Face-to-face assessments have continued for more vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Arrangements to assess and meet the health needs of children placed at distance are sometimes more difficult to arrange. This means that for a small number of children, there are delays in receiving specialist services or assessments. Senior leaders are taking action to strengthen this area of practice.

Services for children in care with disabilities and complex health needs are well managed. Some children are placed at distance from the local authority because there is not suitable provision more locally. Additional visiting from independent reviewing officers and independent visitors helps to ensure regular contact and oversight of the needs and planning for these children.

Independent reviewing officers produce thorough and detailed review reports. They coordinate care planning and identify appropriate actions that support children's progress. They are not slow to use case alerts and activate dispute resolution processes to address issues or concerns. In a small number of cases, despite appropriate escalation, actions to improve or address children's circumstances are not completed within reasonable timescales.

The local authority provides a highly effective response to children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation. Strong operational partnerships and effective multi-agency working underpin this effective response. Children who are vulnerable to exploitation are swiftly identified and risk assessments are used well to inform safety planning. Well-attended strategy meetings are convened for children who regularly go missing. Children are routinely offered return home interviews. These are well managed, well recorded and improve the quality of children's safety planning.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual school has been active in addressing the educational and social needs of children. Staff understand the importance of education in supporting placement stability. Careful child-centred planning between foster carers, social workers and the virtual school has enabled children's education to continue while taking account of foster carers' individual circumstances. All

children in care have up-to-date, good-quality personal education plans. When a placement change necessitates a change of schools, effective collaboration between the virtual school and social workers ensures that the school best able to meet the child's needs is identified.

Accurate performance management information provides senior leaders with a clear understanding and knowledge of practice as well as of the experiences and progress of children in care. The local authority's quality assurance framework is well developed. Senior leaders recognise that audit activity needs to return to pre-pandemic levels to maximise the impact on outcomes for children, workforce learning and development, and enhance social work practice.

Senior leaders have ensured that social workers have the tools they need to be able to practise effectively. Staff have been provided with suitable technology and personal protective equipment to enable them to continue to work from home or the office and visit children safely. Foster carers and social workers have put the needs of children first during this challenging period.

Written records of supervision do not consistently evidence oversight of the progress of children's plans or the impact of supervision in driving forward agreed actions. There is also variable evidence in written records of supervision being used to reflect on children's experiences effectively.

Social workers have manageable caseloads and the workforce is relatively stable. Low turnover of staff is central to providing children with consistent, reliable support and care. Leaders are visible and accessible. They are involved in key decision-making for children in care and know children well.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Your sincerely

Tom Anthony
Her Majesty's Inspector