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Dear John

Monitoring visit of Peterborough children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Peterborough children's services on 15 and 16 July 2025. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2024. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Nicki Shaw, Joy Howick and David Cohen.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed children in care. Inspectors had a particular focus on:

- Permanency and reunification plans.
- Children missing from care.

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

Headline findings

Leaders in Peterborough continue to be ambitious for children and are informed by an accurate and detailed self-evaluation of the current effectiveness of services for children in care. Leaders have a good understanding of current performance and continue to drive improvement with rigour and pace. Financial investment in placement sufficiency has led to an increase in local foster carers, the creation of a house project for young people and the development of a clinical service to support placement stability.

Leaders within children's services are actively promoting corporate parenting across the council. Events such as Corporate Parenting Fortnight are raising awareness and

challenge to corporate colleagues to promote their understanding of this statutory duty and explore opportunities for how they can support children in care and care leavers.

While recognising the progress that has been made, there is more to do and an ongoing need for corporate and partnership support and investment to improve the lives of Peterborough's most vulnerable children.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Children and young people are active participants in influencing and shaping service development in Peterborough. This includes leaders responding to their recommendations for improvements at a family time centre.

Recently appointed leaders in corporate parenting and fostering are bringing rigour and effective management oversight to the service. Leaders have a well-developed understanding of the service needs and have plans in place to respond to identified improvement areas.

Permanency planning meetings and tracking meetings have been strengthened to consider all permanence options for children concurrently, including kinship care, adoption and long-term fostering, to determine the best outcome for each child. There is now a robust tracker for all children in care with management oversight, and this is enabling a timelier response to children's plans being progressed to avoid drift and delay.

Decisions about children's permanency arrangements are informed by comprehensive matching reports so they can live in permanent stable homes. Reports carefully consider children's needs, the foster carer's ability to meet these needs in the longer term and the social worker's analysis of the carer's suitability. Children's identity, ethnicity and culture are sensitively considered with the carers' ability to meet these needs if there are cultural differences. The agency decision-maker robustly reviews and approves all matches to test the stability and security of the long-term match.

Stability for children is also promoted by social workers encouraging foster carers to consider and secure special guardianship orders (SGOs) when this is in line with the child's best interests. Social workers carefully discuss any potential barriers that might prevent some foster carers from considering SGO as a permanency option. Some young people can remain living with their foster carers when they reach 18 in 'staying put' arrangements.

When returning home is being considered for children, social workers complete thorough parenting assessments that set out parental strengths and how vulnerabilities will be supported. The frequency of visits to children increases when they return home to live with their parents. This means children are well supported in their new homes.

Most children living with long-term foster families benefit from well-established relationships with their social workers. This means children have consistent, trusting and positive relationships. Committed social workers advocate effectively on behalf of children to ensure they receive the right support and services. Children's records of visits by their social worker capture key information effectively. Stronger recording of home visits is written to the child and conveys warmth and care, reflecting practitioners' understanding of children's early childhood trauma.

Skilled social workers are compassionate when supporting parents whose children have a plan for adoption. Parents are sensitively supported to meet adopters. Children's case records of the event are written thoughtfully with care and warmth.

Skilled life-story practitioners create thoughtful life-story books that use language that cares to describe why children cannot be safely cared for by their parents and why they live with adopters. Children receive a beautifully illustrated age-appropriate version. These, along with sensitively written later life letters, help children to understand their past and develop a strong sense of identity.

Children's transitions to care settings, including disabled children, have supported them to become more independent and confident. Children's emotional health has improved and behaviours that are harmful have reduced. Disabled children in care are referred to the transitions team when they are 17 to ensure their needs are well considered before they reach 18. Children benefit from joint working between workers so they can build relationships to ensure a smooth transition to adult services.

Children are supported to have family time with parents and people who are important to them. When there are known vulnerabilities, social workers complete multi-agency risk assessments to inform decisions about family time.

Disabled children are frequently visited by their social workers and, for some children who are non-verbal, skilled social workers use a range of communication tools that engage children, such as communication devices to indicate their likes and dislikes. This helps social workers to engage with children to fully understand their needs, wishes and feelings.

The quality of plans for children is not consistent. In examples of stronger practice, plans ensure that children's needs are carefully considered with appropriate actions that are SMART clearly set out so that children, parents and professionals fully understand expected outcomes.

Most children's diversity needs are recognised and responded to in a sensitive way by social workers. This includes children living in residential care, where their cultural needs are prioritised and cultural references to their heritage are promoted through a range of activities such as religious festivals, music and food.

Children in care who go missing and are at risk of exploitation are monitored and reviewed through daily operational meetings within the exploitation hub. This

ensures timely information-sharing between professionals to inform both the risk analysis and actions taken to respond to and reduce risk.

Most return home interviews are undertaken within timescales and are comprehensively recorded. Practitioners in the Empower team use a child sexual exploitation risk assessment tool to identify vulnerabilities and support effective interventions to reduce risk to children.

Collaborative partnership arrangements between the Empower and family safeguarding teams mean that information is shared promptly and effectively to manage risk when children are reported missing. Effective interventions are helping to reduce the number of children in care who go missing. Consistency of support reflects an improving picture since the inspection in 2024.

When some children become looked after, they do not receive timely initial health assessments. This means that for some children, any unknown health concerns are not identified quickly enough. Progress to resolve this issue since the inspection in 2024 remains slow.

Disabled children benefit from a range of health services to ensure their health is regularly monitored and reviewed. Regular multi-disciplinary team meetings ensure that there is information-sharing between agencies, so all are informed about any changes to children's health and any unmet needs.

Where children have specific needs in relation to their emotional and mental health, they can access effective support through specialist practitioners.

Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are supportive and active in progressing children's plans. Some, but not all, children, including disabled children, are visited by their IRO in between statutory reviews to check progress and ensure their views are captured to influence their plans. IROs offer robust and thoughtful challenge when there are delays or other matters of concern relating to children's needs not being fully met. Most are effective at escalating and resolving disputes.

Managers are responsive in supporting social workers when complexities arise and children experience crisis. Managers build in additional capacity and support when urgent tasks need progressing. This means children receive prompt help and support.

Practitioners describe managers and leaders as being accessible and supportive. They are positive about the breadth of learning and development opportunities on offer in Peterborough, including specialist and accredited training. They also value the monthly staff conversations facilitated by the Director of Children's Services. Some social workers have high caseloads, which impacts on their capacity to attend learning events and spend more time with children.

For some social workers, the frequency of supervision is not in line with policy and the quality of recording is not consistent.

Quality assurance activity is providing leaders with a clear line of sight of the quality and impact of practice. Feedback from children, carers and professionals provides a richness and triangulation of evidence about the quality and impact of practice. The tracking of audit actions through supervision is inconsistent. This means that the learning from audit is not always fully used to improve children's experiences and address any practice improvements that have been identified.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Nicki Shaw
His Majesty's Inspector