

Agenda Item 8

For general release

REPORT TO:	Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub-Committee 2nd March 2021
SUBJECT:	Update on Children's Social Care, Families and Education Services
LEAD OFFICER:	Debbie Jones, Executive Director, Children, Families & Education
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning
PERSON LEADING AT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING:	Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning

CORPORATE PRIORITY/POLICY CONTEXT/AMBITIOUS FOR CROYDON:

[Corporate Plan for Croydon 2018-2022](#)

The plans and recommendations in this report focus on ensuring that all Croydon's children live a happy, healthy life, free from harm and that they have every opportunity to thrive and become fulfilled adults.

ORIGIN OF ITEM:	This item forms part of the Sub-Committee's work programme
BRIEF FOR THE COMMITTEE:	An overview of progress, challenges and future plans across the Cabinet Member portfolio since February 2020

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report sets out the successes, challenges and future plans for early help and children's social care, and education. Over the past year services have acted swiftly and decisively to continue to support children, families and schools throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Update on Early Help and Children's Social Care

Supporting children and families through the Covid-19 pandemic

- 2.1 The approach to working directly with children and families developed following the first lockdown in March 2020 has been sustained over this year. Casework has been assessed according to the levels of risk, adjusting these as appropriate to ensure children's needs are continually assessed. Home visits for child protection cases and those where key workers assess that face to face contact is required are taking place to ensure that good quality work continues with families. Performance is reported and monitored at service and team level to ensure compliance, with support provided to managers as necessary where this has dipped.
- 2.2 Over the next few months a phased return to full visiting will be taken, as part of a pan-London approach, with alternating virtual and face to face visits for all families from April.
- 2.3 Staff have adapted well to flexible working patterns, with supervision and support taking place virtually coupled with regular on-line team and service meetings. Particular attention has been paid to social care staff who live alone, to provide opportunities to 'de-brief' on challenging casework. The systemic clinical service with the linked clinicians for each service area has provided support in this area.
- 2.4 PPE has been made readily available to all staff to ensure safe contacts with families, and more recently personal alarms have been offered to staff who feel they would benefit.

Quality of Practice

- 2.5 Service performance and quality is reviewed and challenged through the Windows into Practice quality assurance framework. The cycle of meetings is underpinned by heads of service weekly performance meetings, and weekly and monthly performance dashboards that report performance across the whole child's journey through care services.
- 2.6 In the most recent bi-monthly case audits, 67% of cases were graded outstanding or good, 30% were requires improvement and 3% inadequate. The 1 inadequate case was escalated to the relevant service manager. There is more to do to secure improvements equally across all service areas, however two thirds of casework judged good or better indicates that practice improvements are being sustained.
- 2.7 The CSCP Safeguarding Practice Review Group (SPRG) undertakes Rapid Reviews gathering evidence of learning to inform improvements for single and multi-agency safeguarding practice. This learning is shared across the partnership and embedded through multi-agency learning and development opportunities. Over 2019/20 seven Rapid Reviews were undertaken and the outcomes disseminated to inform practice.

Children's social care challenges

- 2.8 Children's services improved dramatically after the appointment in early 2019 of a skilled and experienced Executive Director for Children, Families and Education and a new Director for Early Help and Children's Social Care, as well as other senior managers.
- 2.9 Unfortunately both directors have since left the department. Experienced interim appointments have prevented any loss in continuity of leadership and there is strong management oversight, however the impact on staff confidence, morale and turnover is being closely monitored. Permanent recruitment to the Director post has commenced with a strong longlist, indicating that despite the current difficulties Croydon remains an attractive place to practice social care.
- 2.10 The recruitment of a permanent Executive Director, the statutory DCS, will commence as part of the management restructure led by the interim Chief Executive.
- 2.11 In September 2018 over 40% of social workers were agency staff. Key actions to tackle this issue included the establishment of the Social Work Academy and a renewed partnership with Frontline to 'grow our own' permanent staff; the systemic practice model backed with an exciting learning and development offer for staff at levels; welcome and retention payments and overseas recruitment.
- 2.12 Agency rates reduced to 15% by January 2021, rising to 24% in February. The service cannot be complacent. The turnover of permanent staff is being closely monitored and strategies to recruit and retain staff in a competitive local market are currently being refreshed.
- 2.13 Changes of social worker make forming effective relationships with children and families more difficult, and this has an impact on the quality of front line work. In addition, each locum social worker costs over £20,000 more per annum compared to a permanent member of staff, so there is a strong financial as well as quality imperative to attract and retain good quality permanent staff.

Children's social care opportunities

- 2.14 Linked to the savings and growth proposals are the following
- Complete the transformation of the 'front door' to better engage with partners, manage risk and reduce referrals
 - Work with partners including the voluntary sector and schools to reshape early help, simplifying the offer for families
 - Sustain and build upon the systemic model of practice, embedding expertise within services

3. Update on education

- 3.1 Addington Valley Academy opened in a temporary site this year for year 7 pupils and St Nicholas SEN school officially opened their new building for delighted pupils and their families. In addition in January 2021 Cabinet approved the closure of Virgo Fidelis Convent Senior School. Schools remained open during the lockdowns for vulnerable and key worker children and young people.

- 3.2 A Level and GCSE grades were awarded by Centre Assessed Grades.
- 3.3 The department welcomed colleagues from the Early Learning Collaborative to the education directorate this month, significantly expanding the department's early years' expertise.

Education Challenges

- 3.4 Pressures continue on Dedicated Schools Grant high needs budgets overspend. The DfE Deficit Management Plan is to be submitted following approval at School Forum.
- 3.5 With the very recent national announcement on the lifting of the current lockdown, the service will be working closely with headteachers across the borough to ensure children fully return to schools.
- 3.6 The past year has seen a significant rise in parents notifying the local authority of elective home education. Resources will need to be deployed to ensure children are thriving and achieving whilst being electively educated at home.
- 3.7 The education of most children has been disrupted over the past year. The service will need to focus on ensuring that our pupils are on the right learning pathways and that they are not negatively impacted by the pandemic.
- 3.8 Close working across education and children's social care will be needed to respond to a possible increase in safeguarding and mental health and well-being concerns following the extended time out of school and the return to full-time on site education.

Education Opportunities

Linked to the savings and growth proposals are the following:

- Widening the implementation of the 'New approach' to SEND Inclusion funding with schools
- Closer working with schools to support Early Help
- Develop our Early Years strategy alongside a redesign of the Children's Centre model
- Continuing the positive relationship with all our schools

4. Budget update

4.1 Dedicated School Grant Deficit Management

The year end 2019/20 financial accounts shows a deficit on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) carried forward to the 2020/21 year of £14.6m, which includes the cumulative overspend on the High Needs element of the DSG of £18.5m as at year end 2019/20. LAs with DSG deficit are required to have in place a DSG Management Plan.

In line with the SEND strategy and the latest Department for Education (DfE) guidance, Croydon is revising their existing DSG Recovery Plan and is

planning to bring the High Needs Block expenditure within the High Needs Block funding allocation in the medium term with recovery of the cumulative deficit to follow in future years.

This draft of this plan is due to be presented to GPAC on 4th March.

4.2 Quarter 3 Budget Monitoring

Table 1: Quarter 3 Budget Monitoring

SERVICES	Current Budget £'000	Projected Expenditure	Projected Variance £'000
CFE DIRECTORATE	9,050	8,783	-267
PERFORMANCE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE	881	531	-350
CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE (includes Asylum Seekers)	83,853	108,931	25,078
EDUCATION (excludes HNB Deficit)	11,899	10,657	-1,242
TOTAL	105,683	128,902	23,219

Table 2: Overall movement between Q2 and Q3:

SERVICES	Current Budget £'000	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Q2 to Q3
		Projected Variance £'000	Projected Variance £'000	Cumulative Variance £'000
CFE DIRECTORATE	9,050	-124	-267	-143
PERFORMANCE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE	881	-433	-350	83
CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE (includes Asylum Seekers)	83,853	25,599	25,078	-521
EDUCATION (excludes HNB Deficit)	11,899	-775	-1,242	-467
TOTAL	105,683	24,267	23,219	-1,048

5. Responding to the Council's financial challenge

- 5.1 The service transformation that lifted children's social care from an inadequate Ofsted rating to good in March 2020 was underpinned by significant investment, although the children in care and care leavers services were rated as requires improvement with key recommendations to be addressed.
- 5.2 Whilst some of the additional investment has been removed, children's services are still higher cost compared to other good council services. We must now review how we deliver children's social care and education in Croydon to

reduce the cost of services and work within the council's available resources. This will help the council achieve the overall spending reduction required and put children's services in Croydon on a sustainable financial footing in the future.

5.3 The overall objective is to reduce Croydon's expenditure to the London average or below for children's social care services by March 2024. At the same time we must continue to fulfil our statutory responsibilities and sustain the improvements made in the quality and impact of services on outcomes for children and families. The plan aligns to the following Croydon Renewal Plan priorities:

- We will live within our means, balance the books and provide value for money for our residents.
- We will focus on providing the best quality core service we can afford. First and foremost, providing social care services that keep our most vulnerable residents safe and healthy.

5.4. The key high cost drivers in children's services are:

- More children in care compared to London and statistical neighbours;
- More unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers compared to all other councils;
- Significant investment in additional staff to reduce caseloads and increase management oversight across all care services;
- Insufficient or outdated commissioning frameworks for placements and packages of care for children in care and with disabilities;
- Children attending independent special schools outside of the borough

5.5 The location of the Home Office Asylum Intake Unit (AIU) at Lunar House effectively makes Croydon a national point of entry for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). Croydon has accepted responsibility for UASC and taken into the council's care for a number of years. This has resulted in a disproportionate number in Croydon compared to other councils, and a very high proportion of care leavers who were previously unaccompanied children. Given the council's serious financial position this expectation cannot continue, and negotiations are advanced with the Home Office, Department for Education and MHCLG to reach a fair solution for the borough.

5.6 The department has developed a delivery plan to meet the financial challenge as part of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) over 2021-24, which includes growth in the first year alongside significant savings over the MTFS. The key deliverables for this plan are:

- Re-base placement budgets to address demographic and historic pressures in 2020-21, with no further growth required;
- Reduce the numbers of local children in care to a target of 430 from 484 on the 31st January 2021 and improve value for money to reduce spend to the London average or below by 2024;
- Increase the number of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) educated in the borough; 1608 in borough and 544

out of borough;

- 5% budget savings each year on placement and care package costs for children with disabilities over 2021-24, challenged against benchmarking to London or national average;
- Improve the efficiency of the practice system whilst sustaining the effectiveness.

5.7 The overall MTFS proposals are set out below:

PROPOSAL	2021/22 (£,000's)	2022/23 (£,000's)	2023/24 (£,000's)
Reconfiguration of Early Help Services	(424)	(185)	-
Reconfiguration of Adolescent Services	(1,608)	-	-
Review of Children with Disabilities Care Packages	(384)	(384)	(384)
Reduction in the numbers of children in care	(794)	(1,654)	(1,385)
Review Support for Young People where Appeal Rights Exhausted	(295)	(560)	(142)
Improve Practice System Efficiency	(1,065)	(1,450)	(385)
Embed Systemic Practice Model	(272)	-	-
Release of one off investment / full year effect of savings from 2020/21	(1,462)	-	-
Staffing Review	(1,471)	-	-
Review Children's Centres Delivery Model	(660)	(240)	-
Reduce Non-Statutory Education Functions	(587)	(221)	-
Early Learning Collaboration Contract	(82)	-	-
Cease Family Group Conference Service	(203)	-	-
Croydon Music & Arts (CMA)	(126)	-	-
Children, Families & Education - Efficiencies	(9,433)	(4,694)	(2,296)
Children Looked After Placements - fund Demographic and Cost Pressures	8,211	85	77
Leaving Care - fund Demographic and Cost Pressures	2,031	-	-
Asylum Seekers Budget Correction	220	-	-
Children with Disabilities - fund Demographic and Cost Pressures	6,477	-	-
Realignment of Budgets where other funding sources have ceased	1,719	-	-
Realignment of Budgets from 2020/21	909	-	-
SEND Strategy - support inclusion and access to local provision	866	-	-
Children, Families & Education - Growth	20,433	85	77
Children, Families & Education - Net	11,000	(4,609)	(2,219)

5.8 A children's continuous improvement board was re-established in November 2020 when the scale of the financial challenge for the council became clear. Chaired independently and attended by the council's partners as well as representatives from the DfE and Ofsted, the board meets monthly to:

- Ensure that the substantial improvements made since 2017 are consolidated and progress is made in areas that still require improvement;
 - Support the implementation of the MTFS and oversee the development of new, more cost effective, ways to ensure effective help and protection is provided for vulnerable children and families, for children in Croydon's care and for care leavers;
 - Receive assurance that throughout the service changes risks to outcomes for children and young people are identified and mitigated;
 - Receive assurance that front-line practitioners, children and families and partners are being appropriately engaged in progressing the plans for change.
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BACKGROUND DOCUMENT: None

APPENDICES: None