

For general release

REPORT TO:	Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Date 12th March 2019
SUBJECT:	Update on the Early Help and Children's Social Care Improvement Programme
LEAD OFFICER:	Robert Henderson, Executive Director, Children, Families & Education
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Learning
PERSON LEADING AT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING:	Robert Henderson, Executive Director, Children, Families & Education

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 is contained in the Sub-Committee's work programme.
BRIEF FOR THE COMMITTEE:	To consider the progress update on the Children's Improvement Programme

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the Improvement Programme in children's services, including:

- A progress update on the Improvement Plan as at February 2019
- High level feedback on the recent Ofsted monitoring visit in advance of the publication of the formal feedback letter
- An overview of vacancy rates across children's social care between December 2017 – December 2018
- An update on the learning and development offer for staff in early help and children's social care.

2. Progress update on the Children's Improvement Plan

2.1 In November 2018 the Children's Improvement Board agreed a simpler, shorter Improvement Plan with a sharper focus on the right priorities at increased pace.

2.2 The plan is made up of four workstreams overseen by task groups, reporting to a programme board chaired by the Chief Executive to monitor and challenge progress across all work streams and ensure there is sufficient corporate support, focus and resource to drive improvement activity and deliver the plan.

The workstreams are:

1. Management & Practice covering actions to improve management grip and the quality and consistency of social work practice
2. Workforce covering actions to recruit and retain staff and learning and development activity
3. Partnerships covering actions to develop a partnership early help offer, improve partnership working and strengthen the local safeguarding board
4. Platforms covering actions relating to corporate support services including finance, performance, children's recording systems, commissioning and business (administrative) support

2.3 Underpinning these is a priority to create a culture of shared ownership and social work values, which is developed and overseen by the Staff Reference Group.

2.4 Progress is monitored and reported across the improvement programme each month using the strengthening families approach: what is working well, what are we worried about and what are we doing about it.

2.5 Overall progress as at February 2019

Key achievements and what's working well

- Positive feedback from Ofsted on leadership changes, increased pace, more manageable caseloads, threshold decisions, Early Help practice and good examples of social work practice
- Positive feedback from staff reference group and staff at the early help and children's social care staff conference on 31st Jan on the leadership changes, vision for the service and an improving 'feel' in the department, also observed by Ofsted when they spoke to staff
- The Family Group Conferencing service has received 49 referrals, completed 28 FGC's and received some really positive feedback from children and families involved
- Bureaucracy busting workshops started on 8th February to identify and address unnecessary or cumbersome admin or processes that get in way of early help and social work practice

What we are worried about

- Recruitment & retention; high staff turnover and percentage of agency staff particularly in care planning and assessment

Planned actions:

- Recruitment and Retention package agreed for 2019/20 to help retain talented staff and convince locums to become permanent.
 - Additional HR capacity agreed to focus on performance management (in place), locum conversion and creative recruitment strategies (e.g. social media campaign).
 - HR to work with performance team to gather intelligence about the impact staff turnover is having on children.
- Not enough staff are benefitting from regular reflective supervision with their managers

Planned actions:

- Collating good supervision examples and video role plays with the Director are now live on the children's practice library
 - commissioning systemic training for all managers to start in April 2019
- Child in Need work is being 'squeezed out' as identified by Ofsted, which will be addressed through establishment of 'Brief Intervention teams', linked into the assessment service

Planned actions:

- proposal being developed to create dedicated brief intervention teams in the assessment service to work on CIN cases to be in place from 1st April 2019
- The need to improve practice and performance in services for looked after children [both local and unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)] and fostering at pace
 - New Head of Service (18/2/19) taking robust approach to improving performance and practice with support from an HR specialist
 - Rising numbers of local looked after children and UASC are causing significant financial and placement pressures
 - Work underway by the performance team to understand the growth in demand

2.6 More detailed feedback for each of the workstreams is included at appendix 1.

3. Feedback from the fifth Ofsted monitoring visit

3.1 The fifth Ofsted monitoring visit on 19th and 20th February focused on plans stepped down when risks reduce including:

- Step down from child protection to child in need
- Step down from child in need to early help
- Children returning home from care

In addition inspectors reviewed the provision of early help in its own right.

3.2 The following recommendations from the July 2017 inspection were tested in the visit:

1. Recommendation 1: management oversight and supervision
2. Recommendation 2: Establish a stable workforce; provide targeted training for frontline staff and managers so that they have the right skills and knowledge; ensure the workloads of social workers are manageable
3. Recommendation 5: plans and planning including support for children returning home
4. Recommendation 6: the understanding and application of thresholds
5. Recommendation 11: the provision of early help support, early help strategy and thresholds

3.3 Written feedback on inspectors' judgements will be published on the Ofsted website on Thursday 14th March. At the end of the visit inspectors gave verbal feedback which is summarised below. It should be noted that Ofsted apply robust internal quality assurance to ensure judgements are backed by inspection evidence. This can result in changes in the letter compared to the verbal feedback, so at this stage it should be treated with some caution.

3.4 Overall the feedback recognised some strengths in practice including some sophisticated work going on on our Early Help Service by confident and capable practitioners. Some examples of good social work practice were seen with workers who inspectors would be 'happy to have in my team', who knew their children well and had good relationships with them. However, inspectors agreed with our self-assessment that we still have a long way to go for practice to be consistently good across the service. As many of the areas for development fed back by the inspectors were included in our self-assessment there are a number of actions planned or already underway.

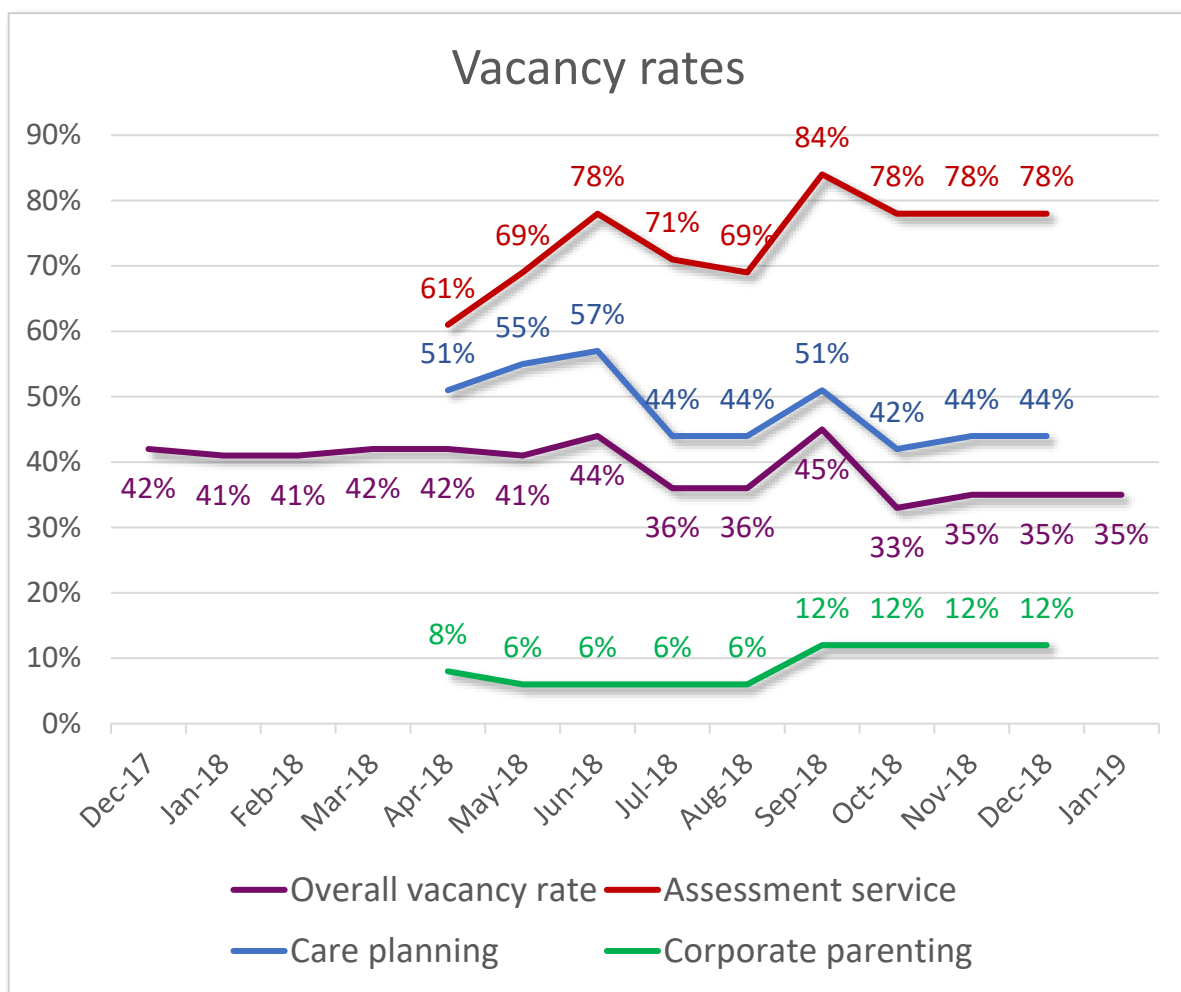
Positives

- **Leadership:** a renewed drive and energy from the new leadership, recognition that Croydon knows itself well and is taking 'brave' and 'bold' decisions to improve the service. Leaders are moving quickly to focus on the right things in the right order.
- **Caseloads:** recognition that there has been a tangible reduction in caseloads in the care planning service since their visit in July 2018
- **Early Help:** early positive signs that the new model is welcomed by staff and that we are on the right trajectory. Inspectors saw practice that was of good quality.
- **Thresholds:** our thresholds are broadly right, children's cases are being worked at the right level and step down decisions are appropriate.
- **Examples of good social work practice and direct work:** inspectors spoke to social workers who knew their children well, had built good relationships and did strong child-centred work; they highlighted good examples that will be celebrated and shared.
- **Staff morale:** staff were more positive and feeling encouraged, appreciating the increased visibility of senior leaders and a more culturally diverse senior leadership team

Areas for improvement and planned actions

- **Reflective supervision:** inspectors told us that supervision is not happening consistently for all staff and whilst managers may be available and accessible this is not the same as creating a reflective space to discuss practice
Planned action: a substantial professional development programme on systemic supervision skills starts in April for managers at all levels from the Executive Director and Director through to frontline team managers. This will focus on the quality and impact of supervision.
- **Plans and planning;** whilst plans exist for children, many of these need improvement to be SMART, focused on key issues and outcomes focused
Planned action: following the senior leadership team's focus on what is a good assessment over February and March, the next focus will be on planning and plans that lead to purposeful work with families.
- **Management oversight of decisions:** evidence of management oversight of step down or return home decisions was not always evident on case files
Planned action: closer monitoring of step down oversight, to be discussed and challenged at the Director's weekly performance and practice clinics at service level.
- **Auditing:** although audits were seen as 'broadly useful documents' inspectors felt that some were not thorough enough
Planned action: case audits are completed every other month. The feedback will inform a strengthening of the audit process for the March cycle
- **CIN work being 'squeezed out':** inspectors found CIN plans that were not up to date. In addition the quality of CIN work is not where it should be.
Planned action: the proposed realignment of the care planning service will create three dedicated brief intervention teams to do targeted work with children in need and their families.

4. Staffing and vacancy rates



4.1 The graph above shows the overall vacancy rate for children’s social care disaggregated into service areas, between December 2017 and December 2019.

4.2 Overall rates peaked in September 2018; however the data needs to be contextualized with the rapid increase in the children’s social care workforce over the same period. For example, additional teams of social workers have been added to the care planning service to meet the volume of referrals. These have been filled by locum staff, pushing up the vacancy rates.

4.3 The higher number of vacancies in the assessment and care planning services makes these particular areas of focus for focused recruitment and retention activity.

4.4 More detail on the starters and leavers in service areas over this time period will be presented to the committee to facilitate a more detailed scrutiny.

5. Workforce Development update

5.1 We are committed to providing our workforce with the opportunities to deliver outstanding social work practice and are committed to investing in the development of all our staff to achieve this. The learning and organisational development strategy for Croydon Early Help and Children's Social Care was reviewed and refreshed in October 2019. The strategy sets out the Council's short, medium and long term approach to embedding a sustainable learning and development offer to ensure we achieve our vision to develop a skilled and competent workforce.

5.2 The new learning and development programme for 2018-2019 was launched in October 2018 and offers a comprehensive range of training opportunities and professional development. The offer demonstrates our commitment to a 'whole system' approach through drawing on the expertise of colleagues within the organisation as well as commissioning bespoke learning opportunities from experts in the field and accredited Continuous Professional Development post graduate programmes with leading universities. The programme was warmly received by the workforce who shared that they thought it was an excellent offer.

5.3 In November 2018 career progression pathway was launched for qualified social workers. The career pathways provides social workers with simple clear grading structures and offers progression routes to Head of Service level. Career progression for some grades was also simplified and made less bureaucratic.

6 Leadership and Management Transformation Programme

6.1 To create the conditions for social work practice to flourish in Croydon we have invested in a Leadership and Management Transformation Programme that reflects systemic approaches and ideas. In 2019, all leaders and managers, from Executive Director to Team Manager, will be undertaking systemic training through the Institute of Family Therapy.

6.2 The British Association of Social Work have also been commissioned to provide a number of bespoke action learning sets for team managers. The sets will provide reflective opportunities as well as supporting team managers to embed the children's social care manager practice standards. Outward Facing Development Opportunities

6.3 As well as our learning and development offer, we are also actively engaged in ensuring our staff have access to a range of outward facing development opportunities. This includes the following;

6.4 In 2018 the Department for Education launched a national practice supervisor programme, which is being delivered by Research in Practice. The purpose of the programme is to support managers to develop knowledge and skills in relation to the Knowledge and Skills statements issued by the DfE, which form part of the National Assessment and Accreditation System, likely to be launched in 2020. Children's Social care have 3 manager's accessing the programme.

6.5 As part of our Teaching Partnership with Kingston University we also have five practitioners who co design and teach on the social work degree programme. Two practitioners are also undertaking a Coaching and Mentoring post graduate programme through the University and one manager is undertaking a joint University and British Association of Social Work leadership programme.

Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)

6.6 In October 2018 two ASYE Assessors were appointed to support newly qualified social workers (NQSW) progress through their ASYE programme. This new delivery model has ensured a more robust and timely response to the developing needs of our NQSWs and 9 out of 10 would recommend our programme to their colleagues.

Routes into Social Work

6.10 To support our recruitment and workforce planning, we offer a range of opportunities for student social workers. This includes:

- Providing learning and development opportunities for social work students from a number of local Universities. Currently we have 18 students on placement throughout children's social care.
- We offer the Department for Education Step Up to Social Work Programme.
- In September 2019 we will be introducing a Frontline social work student unit.
- Commissioning five Social Work Degree Apprenticeship placements for our differently qualified staff. This will be launched in January 2020.

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Background Documents: None

Appendices: Appendix 1: Improvement Plan Workstream progress reports, February 2019