

# Inspection of Croydon local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 14 to 25 October 2024

**Lead inspector:** Christine Kennet, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection in 2020, the local authority has improved services for children in care and care leavers. Although senior leaders have improved services for children at the 'front door', not all children who need help and protection receive a consistently effective service. Leaders recognise areas where improvement is needed, and this is reflected in an accurate self-evaluation with realistic plans for change.

Children's services have experienced significant challenges with a high turnover of staff, financial difficulties, increased demand and an ambitious transformation programme. Despite this, progress has been made in most areas and many children receive effective care and protection. Particularly strong areas of practice are the young ambassadors project, independent visitors and early permanence work.

The stable and committed senior leadership team is supported by elected members, who have continued to invest in services with the aim of improving outcomes for children in the borough. In some areas of practice, such as the out-of-hours service, the pace of change has been too slow or it is too soon to see a positive impact for children and families.

## What needs to improve?

- Services to children out of hours.
- Consistency of practitioners for children and families.
- Sufficiency of accommodation for children in care and care leavers.
- Waiting time for early help support.

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Despite some strong areas of practice in help and protection, not all children in Croydon receive a consistently effective service. Leaders are aware of the strengths of the service and all areas for development, and plans are under way to address variability, but it is too soon to see the impact of these plans for all children.
2. Families in Croydon benefit from a large range of universal and commissioned early help services, and the presence of early help triage in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) has helped coordinate this provision. Some children have had to wait too long for an assessment of their needs in order to receive the right help and support. Once completed, early help assessments are of good quality and lead to plans that help to improve children's lives.
3. Children appropriately step up and step down between statutory and early help services. For some children who step down to early help, delays in receiving a service mean that they quickly step back up to children's social care. This has impacted on children's experiences and has created an unhelpful 'start again' scenario.
4. Skilled and experienced social workers in the MASH screen contacts and referrals thoroughly and quickly. Managers have oversight of all contacts and referrals from the earliest point, providing appropriate direction as to the next steps in a timely way. The support of skilled and curious independent domestic violence advisers in the MASH adds value to the quality of social work assessments and contributes to safety planning for children.
5. The responses by the out-of-hours service to children in emergency situations are inconsistent. There is insufficient staff capacity to answer calls out of hours, which limits the amount of information they collect from referrers and means that out-of-hours workers are unable to fully assess and prioritise their work. A lack of capacity in the emergency duty team means workers are not always able to visit children, for example when children are in custody overnight. Leaders are aware of the current pressures and have transformation plans in place. The pace of change in this service has been too slow. In response to concerns raised during the inspection, leaders have recognised a need to

further strengthen recording and oversight of children who have been held in police stations overnight. They have also strengthened oversight of out-of-hours activity through a weekly review meeting.

6. Social workers respond quickly when they become aware of allegations of significant harm. Most strategy meetings are effective, and child protection investigations are thorough and reach timely and proportionate decisions. There are sometimes delays in initial child protection conferences taking place, and interim safety planning, pending multi-agency decision-making, is variable in quality. Once held, initial child protection conferences enable effective information-sharing to inform plans to help, protect and support children.
7. When children, including disabled children, need statutory help, assessments, although not consistently completed in a timely way, are mostly detailed and provide an analysis of the help and support that children need.
8. Skilled and experienced social workers visit children subject to child protection and child in need plans regularly. Inspectors saw some excellent examples of direct work undertaken with children that informs assessments and safety plans. Social workers use a range of skills to communicate with children and build positive relationships with them. The quality of direct work is more variable for a minority of children who have experienced several changes of social worker.
9. Most child protection and child in need plans are having a positive impact on children's experiences and safety. Parents are offered lots of different interventions, which are helping them to better understand risks and the impact for their children. Relationship-based practice provided by the in-house systemic therapy team is helping to improve children's relationships with their parents. Many children experiencing neglect receive responsive social work interventions that are making a positive difference.
10. Regular child in need reviews, core groups and child protection reviews help to ensure that children's plans are kept up to date and monitor whether the plans are making a difference for children. Changes in workers for some children have meant that planning has lost focus at times.
11. A small number of children have been the subject of child protection plans for too long without their experiences improving or escalation to pre-proceedings as part of the Public Law Outline. Although senior leaders have recognised this and have implemented improved oversight and panels to address it, it is too soon to see the full impact of this for all children.
12. When concerns increase for children, plans are appropriately escalated into pre-proceedings. Effective work within pre-proceedings is providing families with the opportunity to improve their children's experiences, and social workers support families to stay together if it is safe to do so. If risks do not reduce, escalation to legal proceedings follows promptly.

13. Initial responses in the MASH to children who go missing and who are at risk of exploitation are robust and lead to clear recommendations about next steps to safeguard children. There is sometimes a delay in strategy meetings taking place and in children being seen to enable timely safety planning.
14. Children at risk of harm outside of the home who transfer to the specialist adolescent service receive robust and effective support that is helping to improve their safety. Intensive, relationship-based help and support provided by the edge of care workers are helping to improve children's family relationships and, if it is safe to do so, they remain living in their family networks.
15. Support provided to children who are privately fostered is appropriate. However, when Disclosure and Barring Service checks are delayed, a lack of interim police checks and safety plans limits the assurance of children's safety in this interim period.
16. Children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless receive an effective, rapid response and, if needed, are placed in appropriate accommodation to meet their needs. All these children are offered advocates to support their decision-making and to help them understand their rights and entitlements.
17. Disabled children receive a responsive and sensitive service from their social workers, who advocate strongly to ensure that services meet their needs.
18. There is a strong commissioned offer available for young carers. However, although siblings of disabled children are considered in assessments, they do not all receive an individualised service in their own right.
19. Arrangements to manage allegations against professionals are responsive and effective and are delivered by experienced and knowledgeable staff.
20. The local authority has appropriate oversight of pupils receiving elective home education and takes appropriate action when safeguarding concerns are identified. Leaders work effectively with a range of partners, including schools, social care and community groups, to identify children missing education. The number of children missing education has substantially reduced since the previous inspection.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care: good**

21. Children come into care when it is in their best interests to do so, and this safeguards them from further harm. Social workers carefully explore both prior to, and when they are in care, whether children can move to live in their family and friends network. As a result, many children move to live with people whom they already know and trust via kinship placements or special guardianship orders.

22. When children cannot be safely cared for by wider family or friends, social workers consider the full range of permanence options and, for many children, this is achieved quickly with strong consideration and use of early permanence placements for very young children. A small number of children have waited too long to be formally matched with long-term foster carers to provide them with reassurance about their living arrangements.
23. Management oversight of children's situations is consistent, including for those children placed with parents. Records indicate a clear rationale as to why decisions are made for children and why they are felt to be in their best interests, so that any child reading their records in the future will be able to understand why these decisions were taken.
24. Most children have a clear plan of permanence and are carefully matched with suitable carers. The newly formed court and early permanence team is supporting strong adoption work, with children being appropriately matched in a timely manner with families where their cultural and identity needs can be met.
25. Later-life letters and life-story books are a real strength and are completed in a timely way. Social workers produce beautifully crafted books and letters that are prepared in conjunction with adopters and birth parents and are supporting children to understand their journey into care and their life history.
26. Dedicated and skilled social workers know their children well and have positive relationships with them. Children are engaged through fun activities and direct work that helps them to build trust, with a positive impact on their well-being. Historically, some children have experienced frequent changes of workers, and inspectors heard directly from some children how difficult it is to start again and continually repeat their story. More recently, this has significantly improved.
27. Children in care are visited regularly at a frequency that allows positive relationships to flourish. Social workers carefully record their visits to capture children's experiences, and creative, sensitive direct work and life-story work is routinely completed with children. This is helping children to understand their history and identity and why decisions were made on their behalf.
28. Social workers regularly update assessments, and independent reviewing officers (IROs) ensure that children's voices inform their plans. IROs have strong oversight of children's plans through visiting children and completing midway reviews to track children's progress and monitor progression of children's care plans. A very impressive number of children have access to independent visiting services and advocates to help them understand their rights and to be heard about what matters most to them.
29. Children are supported and encouraged to pursue their hobbies and interests, many supported in activities by their independent visitors. Social workers understand the importance of family time, and this is organised well, taking

place in appropriate and fun settings. Social workers and foster carers support children's identity needs well by encouraging and supporting birth families' involvement in visits and shared care arrangements, even when children cannot continue living at home.

30. Staff in the virtual school have high ambitions for children. They maintain close oversight of children's development so that children make strong educational progress from their starting points. Children benefit from having a named education officer, which has resulted in positive relationships and improved outcomes. Personal education plans are rigorously quality assured, and because of this, the majority are of a good standard and support looked after children's education journey.
31. Children's emotional and mental health needs are supported by the in-house clinical therapy team and any concerns regarding their emotional well-being are identified quickly and addressed. Children have regular health checks to ensure that their health needs are met, with any needs supported through appropriate services and by diligent foster carers.
32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from experienced and knowledgeable social workers who, with the support of the virtual school and the looked after children health team, ensure that their educational and health needs are quickly identified and addressed. Social workers support these children with their leave to remain applications and ensure that services meet their unique identity, cultural and religious needs.
33. Disabled children in care live with committed carers or in residential provision where their complex health needs can be best met. Social workers are skilled in communicating with children and are supported by having the right tools and techniques to communicate effectively according to each child's needs.
34. Social workers ensure that children in care who are at risk of exploitation receive a thorough and timely assessment of risk. This helps to address risks and supports children to receive the right services to improve their lives, including working with children to create their own safety plans to secure their engagement.
35. Most children live in foster homes that meet their needs well and are making positive progress. Many children live outside of Croydon as this is the most appropriate placement, but for others, this is due to a lack of suitable homes locally. Wherever children are living, they receive a comparable level of support, and most children who met with inspectors said that they are happy in their homes.
36. The assessment, support and supervision of foster carers are mostly undertaken effectively to support foster carers in caring safely for children, to help them make progress and have positive experiences.

37. Adopters spoke very positively about their experiences in relation to assessment, training and support, both in relation to the regional adoption agency (Adopt London South), and also in relation to the child's social worker. Adopters who spoke to inspectors described early permanence workers as 'pockets of excellence' and 'exceptional'. All adoptive carers spoke positively about their experiences of being matched with children and that when children have an individual need, funding and provision of therapy are put in place from the start and are making a positive difference. This is evident by the fact that adoption disruptions are very rare.
38. Leaders are fully sighted on sufficiency challenges, and this is resulting in a small number of children living in unregistered children's homes. Leaders' grip and oversight of children living in these settings are effective, while searches to identify more suitable placements are undertaken.
39. Effective social workers in the 16+ teams provide a service similar to that of personal advisers (PAs), to ensure that children learn independence skills and access important documents. Children are provided with information about the local offer and what they can expect when they are 18 in terms of their rights and entitlements. This supports effective transitions where there may be delays in the allocation of PAs.
40. Children in care are actively involved in participation opportunities to help improve services through the Children in Care Council. The Children in Care Council meets regularly, and children participate in a range of activities, have fun and make friends with peers who have shared experiences.

### **The experiences and progress of care leavers: good**

41. The experiences and progress of care leavers have significantly improved since the last inspection. For some care leavers, they have not benefited from being allocated a personal adviser (PA) early enough to enable them to develop a trusted relationship by the time they reach adulthood. Leaders have recognised this, and additional resources deployed in recent months are starting to address this issue. Positively, social workers in the 16+ service continue to be involved post-18 to seek to ensure continuity of relationships where this is in care leavers' best interests.
42. PAs are tenacious in their work with care leavers. They work effectively to engage them and to ensure that they get the right help and support that they need. Workers know their young people well and understand their care histories and individual needs. They keep in regular contact through text, calls, emails and visits, supporting positive and trusting relationships. PAs report that they sometimes have responsibility for too many young people and are not always able to be as responsive to their urgent needs as they would like. This mirrors what inspectors were told by young people. An increase in capacity, to account for absences, is beginning to address the level of support available to young people, although it is too soon to see the full impact.

43. Most care leavers who are also parents are supported well by their PAs, helping them to prepare in advance of the birth and seeking appropriate support and resources to ensure that they are prepared for parenthood through parenting courses and early help services.
44. Care leavers aged over 21 years continue to be offered a service if they are working with their social workers and PAs and there is an ongoing need or they want continued support. Revised assessments of their needs support ongoing planning and support, particularly for those more vulnerable care leavers who are more difficult to engage.
45. Care leavers are actively engaged in a range of initiatives to ensure that their voices are heard and their needs are understood, through the appointment of care-experienced ambassadors. Ambassadors are involved in a range of strategic meetings and initiatives, including the development of the Croydon Cares app, a digital platform for young people to access the recently revised and improved care leavers local offer and other useful resources and links. They have access to advocacy and are well supported to make a complaint if they feel they are not receiving their entitlements.
46. Pathway plans are routinely completed with young people and accurately reflect their views and entitlements. Plans are written sensitively to them, contain essential information and are informed by the social worker's or PA's views on progress in addition to the young people's wishes and feelings.
47. Most care leavers are given access to their health histories when they are 18 years old, and their national health service numbers are included in pathway plans. Young people are supported to be healthy, including being given gym membership through the local offer. There are also several local resources to support young people's emotional health needs and for substance misuse support.
48. Care leavers in Croydon benefit from a strong local offer. The offer has recently been revised and improved, with Croydon ambassadors actively involved in this process. The offer is available online in seven different languages and is translated for others as needed.
49. Securing appropriate accommodation for young people leaving care in Croydon is a challenge, and some have to wait too long to secure a permanent tenancy. The recently implemented housing panel has started to make a difference, and there is a strong corporate focus on expanding affordable accommodation options. However, some care leavers told inspectors that they do not always feel that the accommodation they are placed in is of sufficient quality and does not always routinely offer a secure base from which they can develop in their adult lives quickly enough. When it is in their wishes and interests to do so, care leavers are being supported to 'stay put' positively with their former foster carers, beyond 21 years of age if required.



50. When care leavers are in prison, PAs continue to keep in touch. They visit and work closely with offender managers, prison staff and other professionals to plan for the care leaver's return to the community.
51. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers benefit from strong, effective and purposeful relationships with their PAs. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are mostly well supported in their applications for immigration status, with their education and employment and in developing meaningful local community links, for example groups to support their identity and religious needs.
52. PAs hold high aspirations for care leavers and most young people are in education, employment or training (EET). When young people are not in EET, they are offered effective help from the virtual college at the drop-in based at the Turnaround Centre to support them to achieve this. The Ambassadors scheme, which began in November 2023, has incorporated children in care and care leavers into a range of internal roles, enhancing their own work experience and providing valued scrutiny and developmental support to relevant council initiatives.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good**

53. Stability of leadership at senior level, coupled with effective external scrutiny and positive engagement of elected members, has enabled the council to deliver good services for most children in the borough. This is against a background of particular financial challenges and an increasing child population. Croydon has the largest child population in London; it is also home to the national asylum intake unit and has 1,000 school-aged children from outside of the borough who are supported by Croydon's education division.
54. Where there are areas that still need improvement, leaders are aware and inspectors saw well-devised plans to tackle these, particularly to improve the out-of-hours service, the turnover of workers for children, families and carers, sufficiency to prevent the use of unregistered provision, housing for care leavers and better support to achieve permanence for all children. In some areas, noticeable progress is evident, but the redesign of the out-of-hours service has lacked sufficient energy.
55. Services for children and families benefit from strong cross-party political support, which has meant continued commitment to identify and strengthen provision. Quality assurance processes have identified areas for improvement, and transformation plans show how leaders intend to or are already addressing these areas of practice.
56. The chief executive, lead member and the mayor, alongside the senior leadership team, advocate strongly for children, and corporate parenting is a strength, with children and care leavers fully involved and listened to. There is

an active range of Children in Care Council/Care Leaver groups who meet regularly. There is an impressive Ambassadors Scheme, and inspectors were able to meet some of the young people and observe them presenting at the Croydon safeguarding children partnership executive meeting. Care leavers' views are heard and listened to, with a strong commitment from leaders reflected in their co-chairing of the corporate parenting board. Young people told inspectors that they do feel listened to and are able to contribute, and some care leavers have benefited from mentoring by senior leaders, supporting their progress into training and employment.

57. Croydon refreshed its well-established performance and quality assurance framework operating in May 2024. This sets out the scrutiny and practice development groups running through the organisation to understand practice better, learning from practice and supporting a positive impact on outcomes for children and families. Leaders are linking work across the service from case audits, reviews/safeguarding practice, practice observations, performance and data reporting, use of feedback, complaints, compliments, research and inspection as part of this process. The new framework is bringing additional scrutiny and support to social work practice and informing leaders where work needs targeting and improving.
58. The children's social care performance and practice review meeting and the transformation and improvement oversight group are both held monthly. These meetings are led by the director of children's services and provide oversight and scrutiny through a range of other meetings on performance within the service. This is giving strong support and is setting high expectations with high challenge.
59. Peer reviews and diagnostics have shaped plans, and leaders have welcomed and implemented recommendations for stronger practice. Croydon has been successful in its application to be part of the Department for Education's sector-led improvement partners, resulting in work with another borough to support continued improvement.
60. Leaders continue to strive to improve services through a range of quality assurance activity, including 'window into practice' audits and thematic audits. Window into practice audits are establishing strong and constructive feedback on practice, and there is dissemination and learning through practice improvement consultants, aligned to areas of practice to support improvement.
61. Strategic partnership work is strengthening, for example with housing and police colleagues. However, health partners are not fully integrated and stronger partnerships are being formed. Partnership work at an operational level is mainly positive, although health partners are sometimes absent from important decision-making meetings. The Children and Families Court Advisory and Support Service and the family judiciary reported a mainly improving picture, with particular strength in pre-proceedings work, but some areas for ongoing development are linked to the turnover in the workforce.

62. Leaders have ambitious plans to improve services, with much work under way and some areas of success. Examples are work on sufficiency through the care leavers' housing plans agreed recently, the development of new residential provision and developing supportive shared living for care leavers. There is a review of fostering services to establish stronger support to both mainstream and connected carers, with the development of the fostering 'hub' in offering support to maintain children's placements.
63. Leaders have been consistent over a significant period in Croydon, which is helping longer-term planning and stability. Staff find senior leaders and managers approachable and available. Leaders have successfully increased the permanent workforce to 80%, a great achievement in the current employment market, but it is too early to fully see the impact of this. Leaders have responded to the fluctuations in demand by being flexible in increasing capacity to respond to need. Overall, caseloads are manageable, allowing social workers to undertake effective social work with children and families.
64. Supervision and management oversight on children's case files have significantly improved from the last inspection and are strong. The addition of reflective group supervision with the support of clinical leads or practice improvement consultants is supporting social workers in their planning and support for families. The systemic model is embedded, and inspectors saw this reflected across supervision, consultations and children's assessments, reports and planning.
65. Croydon has supported social workers to be trained in systemic practice, systemic supervision and leadership. Action learning sets for staff who have graduated from the systemic supervisors course further embed the model into practice and are supporting staff to work in a consistent way. Croydon is actively supporting newly qualified workers with an invest to save strategy agreed to recruit 15 supernumerary newly qualified social workers. Staff views are valued through staff surveys, and staff are celebrated through 'team of the year' awards. Staff told inspectors that they like working in Croydon, particularly because of the diversity of the borough, and they enjoy good management and peer support.

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