

For General Release

REPORT TO:	CABINET - 26 February 2018
SUBJECT:	Children's Services Improvement Update report
LEAD OFFICER:	Barbara Peacock, Executive Director, People Department Kerry Crichlow, Programme Director, Children's Improvement
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Learning
WARDS:	All
CORPORATE PRIORITY/POLICY CONTEXT Croydon Corporate plan 2015-18 The recommendations address the following Corporate Plan priorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To help families be healthy and resilient and able to maximise their life chances and independence• To create a place where people feel safe and are safe	
AMBITIOUS FOR CROYDON & WHY ARE WE DOING THIS: The Independence and Liveability Strategies 2015-18 set out how the Council will achieve the commitments made in the administration's 'Ambitious for Croydon' election manifesto in respect of independence and liveability.	
FINANCIAL IMPACT £3.5m has been invested from earmarked reserves to support targeted improvement work over 2017-18. In 2018-19 £10.9m has been allocated to base budgets to continue this work.	
FORWARD PLAN KEY DECISION REFERENCE NO. This is not a key decision.	
1. RECOMMENDATIONS The Cabinet is asked to: 1.1 Note the Children's Services Commissioner for Croydon's advice to the Minister of State for Children and Families that the Council should retain responsibility for managing children's services and be given time to drive the improvements forward. 1.2 Note the Minister's response agreeing the Commissioner's advice and requiring Croydon Council to work with Camden Council to develop a proposal for intensive peer support over a minimum 12 month period to drive front line improvements.	

1.3 Note the outcomes from the first Ofsted monitoring visit carried out in December 2017.
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2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 Following the publication of the Ofsted report on children's services in Croydon on 4th September 2017 the Secretary of State for Education (the Secretary of State) issued a Direction to the Council to co-operate with Eleanor Brazil as the Children's Services Commissioner for Croydon (the Commissioner), who was charged with making recommendations to the Minister for Children and Families (the Minister) on the best course of action for the future of children's services in Croydon. The Commissioner's report was submitted to the DFE on 4th December 2017 and a letter was sent to the Leader of the Council on 19th December setting out the Ministerial response to the Commissioner's recommendations.
- 2.2 A revised Direction was published by the DFE on 25th January 2018 alongside a copy of the Commissioner's report, revoking the previous Direction and requiring Croydon to agree an intensive peer support proposal with Camden Council. The Commissioner's contract has been extended until 31st March 2018 to broker appropriate support arrangements between Croydon and Camden Councils and provide an assessment of the proposals including a view on the appropriateness of these to address the shortcomings in Croydon's performance identified by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).
- 2.3 Areas for immediate support, advice and expertise between Camden and Croydon have been agreed as phase one, with actions underway between February and the end of March 2018. At the same time senior officers will develop and agree a one year intensive support plan to be implemented from April 2018 as phase two, supported by the Commissioner as broker.
- 2.4 Ofsted carry out quarterly monitoring visits to children's services departments judged inadequate to assess progress. The first monitoring visit to Croydon took place on 12th and 13th December 2017. Initial monitoring visit reports are not published but are shared with the Local Authority and the DFE. Subsequent monitoring visit letters will be published on the Ofsted website.
- 2.5 This report provides an update to Cabinet on the Commissioner's report, the Minister's response and the revised Direction for Croydon and the outcomes of discussions between Croydon and Camden Council senior officers on the programme of support. It also provides an overview of the findings of the first Ofsted monitoring visit, and the implications for the children's improvement programme.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Secretary of State's Direction to Croydon issued on 4th September 2017 required co-operation with the appointed Children's Services Commissioner for Croydon, Eleanor Brazil, making officer and member time available as well as premises, practical support and any documents needed in order to enable her to fulfil her role.
- 3.2 The Commissioner was tasked with reporting to the Minister by 4th December 2017 against three areas:
- Croydon's improvement priorities for children's social care, identifying any immediate actions required to secure improvement, on-going improvement requirements, and recommending any additional support required to deliver these.
 - The Council's capacity and capability to improve itself in a reasonable timeframe, and advise on whether the evidence for this was sufficiently strong to achieve sustainable improvement to children's social care should the services remain in the Council's control.
 - Advise on alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's services outside of the operational control of the council, taking into account the views of the Council and key partners.
- 3.3 The then Minister considered the Commissioner's recommendations and sent a written response to the Leader of the Council together with a draft revised Direction on 19th December 2017.

4. COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN'S REPORT

- 4.1 In preparing her report to the Minister the Commissioner looked at what went wrong, the steps taken by the Council to deal with the concerns, the impact this had had to date and whether this had been sufficient to give confidence in the Council's capacity and capability to make improvements rapidly going forward.
- 4.2 The Commissioner found the Council to be extremely welcoming and co-operative, providing full support to enable her to undertake her task. Over the three months leading up to the delivery of the report frequent meetings were held with the political and officer leadership of the Council as well as the independent chairs of the Improvement Board and Croydon Safeguarding Children Board. Existing forums and scheduled meetings were used to observe practice, gather information and seek the views of staff and partners. A large amount of background information was scrutinised including previous inspection reports and

a number of service reviews commissioned by the Executive Director (People), as well as more current information as presented to the Children's Improvement Board and other key Council and multi-agency forums.

- 4.3 The Commissioner's assessment is that the Council has demonstrated their commitment to children's services in the response to the inspection. The Leader and Chief Executive have been clear that children's services are now the corporate priority, and through their influence children and young people will also be a priority of the Local Strategic Partnership. Immediate impact was visible in the securing of additional in-year resources to underpin the improvement programme including appointing additional social workers, the reduction in the span of control for the Executive Director (People) to increase senior leadership oversight of children's services, and additional business support for frontline staff.
- 4.4 The Commissioner noted that the effectiveness of actions to address known concerns identified in the past had been hindered by the scale of the change needed, and limited management capacity to drive this forward. The swift appointment of a highly experienced interim Director of Early Help and Social Care plus two new Heads of Service has therefore brought much needed capacity and professional expertise to the service, and positioned it to respond to the challenges raised by the Ofsted judgements as set out in the Improvement Plan. Her advice to the Minister is that the scale of the challenge is such that it will take a period of at least eighteen months to two years to bring about the degree of change needed in all aspects of service delivery.
- 4.5 The commissioner's advice to the Minister was that the Council should retain responsibility for managing children's services and be given time to drive the improvements forward. However she also concluded that support is needed to undertake these improvements effectively and at pace, as the service does not currently have the necessary capacity and expertise to lead, manage and direct improved day to day practice alongside the improvement programme.
- 4.6 During the period of the review the Commissioner explored options for securing such support with senior officers and members who were positive about this way forward and keen to develop an agreement with a high performing London Council to provide intensive peer support. Camden Council, who were recently judged as good with outstanding leadership, management and governance by Ofsted, have expressed a willingness to provide this support. The commissioner's recommendations therefore focus on the development of a formal agreement with Camden for peer support in the areas of highest priority over the next three months, and this is reflected in the revised Direction to Croydon from the Secretary of State as set out in the section below.

5. MINISTERIAL DECISION

- 5.1 The then Minister wrote to the Leader of the Council on 19th December 2017 setting out his decision on the next steps for Croydon following the submission of the Commissioner's report. The letter notes that whilst the report makes for difficult reading in some areas, where the weaknesses found by Ofsted across the service and the lack of capacity to rectify these in the past are described, nonetheless he is encouraged by the commitment the leadership of the Council has demonstrated following the inspection, and the evidence of action to better resource and build capacity in children's services.
- 5.2 The Minister agreed the recommendation that Croydon continue to manage children's services, subject to the requirement that Croydon agree intensive peer support arrangements with Camden Council. A fully developed proposal for this support needs to be submitted to the DFE by the end of March 2018
- 5.3 A revised Direction was published by the DFE on 25th January 2018 revoking the previous document. The updated Direction requires Croydon to co-operate with the Commissioner as before, and requires Croydon to work with Camden Council to develop a proposal for intensive peer support over a minimum of a twelve month period and submit that proposal to the Secretary of State by the end of March 2018.
- 5.4 Revised terms of reference for the Commissioner extend her contract by three months to broker the necessary arrangements with Camden, and provide an assessment to the Minister of the resulting proposals including a view on the appropriateness of the proposals to address the shortcomings in children's services' performance.
- 5.5 Officers and members have been swift to access the support on offer from Camden. The Lead Member for Children, Families and Education and the Executive Director People have visited Camden's Corporate Parenting meeting to observe best practice and inform the review of Croydon's Corporate Parenting panel.
- 5.6 Focused meetings to work up the intensive support proposals have commenced between the statutory Directors of Children's Services and their respective Directors with responsibility for children's social care in both Councils, chaired and facilitated by the Commissioner. A staged approach is being taken. In the first phase plans have been agreed in four areas for immediate support, linked to the Children's Improvement Plan and taking place between February and the end of March 2018. These are:
- Challenge and support to plans to create the single point of contact and integrated front door for services

- Quality assurance: improving case auditing and moderation
- Management development with an initial focus on Heads of Service and Service Leads
- Young people at risk, to include reviewing the effectiveness of the Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation Panel

5.7 With this support, advice and expertise for front line practice underway, senior leaders will be supported by the Commissioner to agree the areas to be included in phase two, the intensive support plan from April 2018 – March 2019, building upon the immediate areas identified above and developing these further into actions that will lead to sustained improvement.

5.8 In addition Camden's Director for Children's Safeguarding and Social Work will join Croydon's Children's Improvement Board.

6. OFSTED MONITORING VISIT

6.1 The first Ofsted monitoring visit took place on the 12th and 13th of December and was focused on the Front Door, including the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and assessment service. During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of help and protection, including:

- the identification of risk and the timeliness of responses to assessing risk, in the assessment service
- the understanding and application of thresholds, management oversight and decision-making, and support of and guidance to social workers in the assessment service
- Consideration of the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) response, as part of looking at the assessment work undertaken.

6.2 During the visit inspectors considered a range of evidence including electronic case records and sampled casework alongside social workers. The Children's Improvement Plan and performance information for October 2017 were reviewed. Inspectors spoke predominantly to social workers in the assessment service and to a small number of managers. Positively, inspectors noted that staff morale is generally much improved and staff say that they feel better supported and that they are being listened to.

6.3 Feedback from the visit was varied, with positive feedback on the prompt action taken by senior leaders to establish the strategic infrastructure for improvement, secure additional financial investment and ensure sufficient senior management capacity. The strong corporate focus on improvement was noted. Continued improvement in the MASH and some examples of good social work practice were also highlighted.

- 6.4 Nevertheless, there were also some strong messages on the identification of risk, variable quality of social work practice, high caseloads in the assessment service, weak management oversight and a lack of rigour in quality assurance (auditing) which led to inspectors downgrading cases which were internally graded as 'requires improvement'.
- 6.5 Inspectors noted that Croydon is not in an unusual position at this first visit, and reinforced the challenge of moving forward in delivering parallel improvements on infrastructure and practice at pace. They also acknowledged the pressures presented by increased demand at the front door; a higher number of referrals coming in to the assessment team, and recognised that senior managers have taken steps to reconfigure resources and add capacity to address this.
- 6.6 The council accepts the feedback from the monitoring visit and senior managers have begun to address the issues inspectors raised, reflecting the findings and building upon the good practice observed as part of the wider children's improvement plan activity. A new Quality Assurance Framework and approach to auditing was launched in January to increase the rigour of the audit process, for example, and this will be further strengthened to reflect the specific feedback received.
- 6.7 The second monitoring visit on 20th and 21st March will assess how effectively risk is identified and addressed for vulnerable children and young people, including those who go missing from home or care, those at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE), gang involvement, serious youth violence and other crime.
- 6.8 A number of actions in the Children's Improvement Plan relate to the areas of focus for this visit and these have been closely monitored to ensure they are achieved. In addition, a tight and robust action plan has been put in place to ensure that risks are clearly identified, including areas where practice needs to improve, and mitigating actions are in place that will lead to long term, sustained improvements. The phase one partnership support from Camden Council is a feature of this work.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 A communication and engagement plan has been developed to underpin the improvement activity, with the following objectives:
1. To communicate how we are improving children's services in Croydon over the next two years
 2. To inform our staff, stakeholders and partners about our improvement plan – progress, key decisions, activities and dates

3. To encourage staff, children and partners that they are a vital part of the journey and the solution and to create confidence in them that we can run an effective and safe service – we are people focused.
 4. To help create the environment for effective culture change through communication and engagement
 5. To help in the recruitment and retention of key children's service staff – by showcasing Croydon as a great place to work through creating a strong 'We are Croydon' brand
- 7.2 A Council staff reference group has been established and feeds into the improvement board through the chair of the group, a social worker, who sits on the board bringing practitioners' perspectives.
- 7.3 Consultation and engagement with children and young people is central to social work practice and service improvement. Croydon has a range of mechanisms to engage and consult with children, young and their families. This includes the Youth Engagement Strategy which sets out a number of initiatives to ensure that children and young people have a voice, and the Children in Care Council.
- 7.4 Listening and responding to the experiences, wishes and feelings of children and young people is one of the priorities of the improvement plan and will be central to the improvement programme. The plan includes actions to strengthen how the views and experiences of children, young people and their families influence service design. This feedback will also help monitor the impact of improvement activity.

8. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1 Transformation funding has been increased to £3.5m to support and resource children's improvement work. This funding will support the areas of work identified in the Ofsted Report as needing investment and are detailed in the table below. This has increased from the £2m reported to cabinet in November, primarily because the service has experienced exceptionally high demand at the front door. A business case for a temporary six month structure with larger teams and increased management capacity. It is hoped that this surge in demand will stabilise as work continues on the improvement
- 8.2 The draft 2018/19 budget includes growth of £10.2m in the People (Children's base budget) and £0.7m in Resources (Business Support base budget) to ensure the staffing structure and budget support both the level of demand being experienced and also the areas of focus for improvement. The budget report presented to Cabinet in February sets out how this is allocated.
- 8.3 Approved by Richard Simpson, Executive Director Resources

9. COMMENTS OF THE COUNCIL SOLICITOR AND MONITORING OFFICER

9.1 The Solicitor to the Council comments that there are no legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

9.2 Approved by Jacqueline Harris-Baker, Director of Law and Monitoring Officer.

10. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

10.1 It is recognised that in order to improve outcomes for children in Croydon we need to attract and retain a skilled and committed workforce with manageable workloads and good management oversight. The high level of locum staff and increased demand of referrals are a key factors for consideration in improving support for workforce planning and development in the service.

10.2 Approved by Sue Moorman, Director of Human Resources

11. EQUALITIES IMPACT

11.1 Equalities and diversity considerations are a key element of social work practice. It is imperative that help and protection services for children and young are sensitive and responsive to age, disability, ethnicity, faith or belief, gender, gender, identity, language, race and sexual orientation.

11.2 Croydon has a diverse population of children and young people. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 57%, compared with 30% in the country as a whole. The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language across primary schools is 44% (the national average is 18%).

11.3 Social workers recording and planning in relation to inequalities is inconsistent and therefore the action plan addresses the additional work which needs to be done to ensure that children's diversity and identity needs are met.

12. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

12.1 There are no direct implications contained in this report.

13. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

13.1 There are no direct implications contained in this report.

14. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS/PROPOSED DECISION

N/A

15. OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

N/A

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS: None