

London Borough of Croydon

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 3 February 2020 to 14 February 2020

Lead inspector: Tara Geere
Her 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children's services in Croydon have improved dramatically since the last inspection in 2017, when they were judged to be inadequate. Services for children and their families have been transformed as a result of strong corporate and political support, substantial investment, and the appointment of highly experienced senior managers. The current executive director for children, families and education and the director of early help and children's social care were appointed towards the end of 2018. Building on the changes that had already been made, they quickly grasped the full extent of the improvements that were required, and they have systematically and effectively tackled the weaknesses.

Services for children in need of help and protection are now good, and services for children in care and care leavers are improving well. Senior managers have ensured that they are well informed about the quality of services through performance management information and directly engaging with frontline staff. They are fully aware of the areas that still require improvement and demonstrate a relentless determination to deliver high-quality services to all children in Croydon. They have created an environment in which staff feel valued and enjoy working in the borough.

What needs to improve

- The quality of written plans for children in need, children in care and care leavers.
- Services provided to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds.
- Services for care leavers, particularly the range of suitable accommodation, responses to emotional health needs and preparation for independence.
- Placement sufficiency for children in care, and accommodation for care leavers.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. The vast majority of children and families receive the help that they need in a timely way. Early help is offered through a broad range of good-quality universal and targeted services. These include the new purpose-built Croydon youth zone, named by the young people as 'Legacy', which is having a positive impact on children's experiences. The interface between early help services and social care is well understood, with clearly defined step-up and step-down arrangements. Some families have to wait too long for early help services, and managers are taking appropriate action to reduce delay.
2. A vastly improved understanding of thresholds, together with co-located partners at the 'front door', known as the single point of contact (SPOC), means that almost all children who are at risk of harm are swiftly identified and receive the right support. Well-established relationships and effective information-sharing with partners, with a shared focus on children's needs, have strengthened decision-making and improved the quality and timeliness of strategy discussions. Responses to presenting need and risk are consistently triaged and prioritised, and for the vast majority of children, the decisions are appropriate.
3. The work of the assessment teams has been transformed by a whole-system review, additional capacity, and effective management oversight at all levels. High-quality, child-focused assessments, increasingly strengthened by the use of research, now contain a good understanding of the child's lived experiences. Equality and diversity issues are well considered and recorded in assessments and plans. Risk is well understood and clearly identified, and proportionate responses demonstrate a thoughtful and sensitive consideration of children's needs and vulnerabilities.
4. Social workers understand the purpose of their involvement in children's lives, and they describe clear and focused plans. Child protection plans are mostly well targeted and specific, but written plans for children in need are more variable, and are not consistently timebound or outcome-focused.

5. Effective use of the family group conferencing service leads to timely identification of members of the wider family to offer support or to provide care to children. Increasing use of assessment tools with families in identifying and understanding the impact of neglect is helping to ensure that children receive a timely and well-coordinated service.
6. Pre-proceedings activity under the public law outline has significantly improved since the last inspection. Timescales and final outcomes for children are monitored, and managers are aware of the need to further develop the tracking tool. Most letters to families in pre-proceedings are clear about risks and the potential outcomes if risks do not reduce. If circumstances do not improve, decisive action is taken to safeguard children. The judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) were complimentary about the improvements in both pre-proceedings and care proceedings work.
7. Children receive effective support from the out-of-hours service. However, this is not always well recorded, and managers are aware of the need to strengthen information-sharing between the out-of-hours service and the daytime teams.
8. Since the last inspection, there has been a total transformation in management oversight across all levels of work. Management authorisation and the rationale for decision-making are routinely in place, although there is some variability in the quality of recording. Regular performance information is used well by managers to track the timeliness of cases and to prevent delays for children.
9. Social workers know their children well. The turnover of social workers has reduced, meaning that they have the opportunity to build more trusting relationships with children. Children are regularly seen and seen alone.
10. Services for disabled children are delivered by knowledgeable, passionate social workers with high aspirations for their children. The restructure and relocation of disabled children's services into children's social care have been valued by the staff and the changes have led to improvements. Workers understand the needs of individual children and demonstrate good awareness of risks resulting from children's additional vulnerabilities. Caseloads in this service have risen recently and managers are monitoring this closely.
11. Services for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are significantly under-developed and result in poor experiences for these young people. Managers took immediate action to address deficits in the very small number of cases found during the inspection. Senior managers have recently developed a strategic plan and pathway and are aware of the need to have greater oversight to embed the processes.
12. The management of allegations against adults working with children has improved. Formal tracking systems are now in place. Responses are timely, and

strategy meetings are held when needed and are well recorded. Links are made with any other known information, and themes are quickly identified.

13. Senior managers have developed effective processes for the oversight of children living in private fostering arrangements. The recently developed statement of purpose provides clear pathways and guidance, and a new private fostering panel has improved management oversight, with a focus on children's lived experiences. Managers are taking action to improve record-keeping, and a private fostering worker has recently been appointed to ensure more timely visits to children. However, developments still need to be embedded to ensure that assessments record the child's wishes and feelings regarding the arrangements, and include safety planning and risk assessments.
14. The investment shown in understanding the risks for adolescents is very evident. Improvements can be seen through the raised profile and significant volume of work undertaken, including the Vulnerable Adolescents Thematic Review, published in 2019. The strengthened arrangements to identify and respond to young people at risk of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, are ensuring increasingly swift and well-targeted responses to reduce risk.
15. Children at risk of exploitation benefit from effective multi-agency information-sharing. Action plans developed through the multi-agency complex adolescents panel are increasingly comprehensive and well targeted. Risk assessments are not yet consistently used and the quality of subsequent action plans to reduce risk to children is variable. Well-targeted work to identify adults who may present a risk to children leads to successful disruption activity.
16. Children who go missing from home receive a timely and appropriate response. This is less consistent for children who go missing from care and care leavers. Senior managers are currently improving the processes for strategy meetings for all children who go missing. Return home interviews for children who go missing have improved in both quality and timeliness, and most result in meaningful actions to reduce risk. Information from these conversations is systematically collated and used effectively to inform safety plans.
17. The number of children who are electively home educated (EHE) has increased rapidly in Croydon over the past 18 months. Historically, oversight of these arrangements has been weak. However, senior managers are now increasing the capacity of the EHE team. Effective systems are now in place to engage with parents who educate their children at home, and to ensure that the welfare of those children is monitored. Additional oversight is given to monitoring vulnerable children, including those who have an education, health and care plan; reviews of provision for these children are now carried out on an annual basis.
18. For children missing education, services have been remodelled effectively, with the welfare of the child at the centre. Departments work in a joined-up way to minimise the risk to young people who are out of education. Tracking systems

maintain good oversight of all pupils missing education. Strong partnership work with schools ensures that appropriate provision is quickly identified.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

19. Services for children in care have improved since the inspection in 2017, and some aspects are strong. Services for care leavers are improving, although some weaknesses remain.
20. Social workers work hard to enable children to remain in the care of their families. When this is not possible or appropriate, decisive action is taken, including effective pre-birth planning, so that the majority of children come into care in a timely manner. Children who return home from care, including those placed with parents, have robust plans in place to support such arrangements. All decisions for children to enter or leave care are overseen by a care panel which is chaired by a senior manager, to ensure sound and consistent decision-making.
21. Arrangements to work with adolescents who are on the edge of care are well embedded and effective. Staff in the edge of care team deliver bespoke and creative interventions, and these are further supported through the targeted youth support service.
22. The majority of workers know the children well and are focused on building meaningful relationships. Children are now seen regularly, and records of visits increasingly outline a purpose and focus on key aspects of the care plan. Careful consideration is given to the diverse needs of all children and young people, and this is embedded in day-to-day practice. Social workers are skilled in direct work and in engagement with children. However, the effectiveness of this work is undermined by the high turnover of staff and the frequent changes of social workers for children in care. Some children are reluctant to engage meaningfully with a new worker as they feel that the worker will move on quickly. Senior managers know this and they are unrelenting in their efforts to recruit and retain a more stable workforce.
23. Social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) are focused on ensuring that children's health and emotional well-being needs are met. However, case records do not consistently contain information about health appointments. Children's services and health professionals are committed to improving the timeliness and quality of initial and review health assessments for children in care. A recently established operational health group is focused on improving processes and developing training across services. The current absence of shared data is limiting progress in identifying and understanding the impact of delays in assessment and provision of appropriate health services. This is particularly pertinent in Croydon, due to the high levels of children who have experienced neglect.

24. The emotional health needs of children in care are appropriately identified and met through a range of services, support and therapy. Senior managers have worked closely with health partners to strengthen the offer to children in care, supported by a planned co-location of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for children in care with children's social care in April 2020.
25. Children in care and care leavers increasingly benefit from access to a strengthened participation offer. Children's achievements are celebrated well. Empire (empowering, memories, positivity, inspiring, respect and educational), the high-profile children in care council, has well-established links with the corporate parenting board and this is improving the prioritisation of the needs of children in care and care leavers. Alongside this, children have access to a vast array of clubs and activities that they enjoy, supported by foster carers.
26. Children benefit from good support from advocates, independent visitors and learning mentors, who listen to them and help them to share their views and opinions.
27. Children benefit from regular reviews, and letters to children from IROs are increasingly child-focused and written in sensitive, child-friendly language. However, this is not yet consistent. Plans for children in care are not always written so well and are template-orientated rather than providing a bespoke account of clear actions to support the child.
28. The large cohort of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Croydon benefit from effective multi-agency work to ensure that their needs are assessed and responded to promptly. Assessments contain a clear analysis of identity needs and any potential discrimination that children might face. Managers are addressing the need to strengthen recording when children transfer to other local authorities, to ensure that the decisions made and the actions taken are clear.
29. Senior managers have recently restructured and increased capacity in the commissioning and placements services to improve processes. A placement and accommodation needs analysis is underway, to inform the commissioning strategy. Managers are focused on increasing the range of good-quality placement arrangements to meet individual children's and care leavers' needs.
30. When children are placed out of borough, placement matching is not routinely informed by consultations with host authorities. Further work is required to ensure that notification letters to host authorities explain how the placement will meet the child's needs. The recent development of a post to oversee this activity is intended to provide greater oversight.
31. Foster carers are provided with a good learning and development offer, and they are positive about the support that they receive. Senior managers have made

improvements to the fostering service and are currently working with an external organisation to increase foster carer recruitment and retention levels.

32. Senior managers have used the learning from the Ofsted monitoring visit in October 2019 to focus on placement stability and securing permanence for children in care in Croydon. Although relatively recent, inspectors saw improved strategic planning and decisive actions being taken to ensure positive impacts for children in care. The revised and clear permanence policy, and a robust meeting structure that includes permanence planning meetings and adoption tracker meetings are helping to drive improvement. As a result, appropriate plans are being put in place and there is now good consideration of early permanence and prompt action for some young children.
33. Work on life stories and later-life letters is developing and improving. However, managers are taking steps to ensure consistency in both quality and timeliness.
34. Croydon is now part of the Adopt London South regional adoption agency. The arrangements are relatively new, and managers are working together to develop a more detailed overview of family finding for Croydon children.
35. A multi-agency approach, delivered through the complex adolescents panel, is ensuring more effective oversight of young people at high risk, including those who are missing. Young people are being helped to recognise risks such as grooming, and outcomes for individual young people are improving. However, actions and minutes from the complex adolescents panel are not systematically followed up to ensure that actions to reduce risks to children are consistently effective. 'Missing' strategy meetings for children in care are not always sufficiently specific, detailed or timebound, and in addition, risk assessments are not currently being completed for all children in care and care leavers who go missing.
36. Since the last inspection, the virtual school has been transformed and the education provision for Croydon's children in care is good. Critical to this success has been the excellent leadership and implementation of a staffing model that is fit for purpose. As a result, there have been recent improvements, in particular the achievements of children in care at key stage 4, and provision for post-16 students.
37. When children and young people come into care, they make good progress in overcoming many of the barriers that they face in engaging with learning. Staff from the virtual school work closely with partner services, schools and colleges to ensure that children get the right level of support with their learning, grow in confidence, and improve their behaviour and attendance. Consequently, overall attendance levels are now broadly in line with the national average and fixed-term exclusions are below average. School staff speak highly of the quality of support that they receive from the virtual school and the impact that this has on the children.

38. Children now benefit from regularly updated personal education plans (PEPs). Emphasis is given to ensuring that the PEP process is of good quality. Most PEPs are effective at charting the pupil's journey in a holistic way, providing a live tool for ongoing improvement and having a positive impact on children's attainment.
39. Targeted support for pupils in Year 11 and through the transition process is benefiting 16- to 18-year-olds, with improving levels of entry into education, employment or training. Work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is having a strong impact, as their needs are assessed early on and provision is made to get them school-ready. The picture is not as strong for 18- to 25-year-olds. Senior managers recognise that more work is needed to enable more young people to benefit from education, employment and training and to be equipped to access suitable apprenticeship opportunities.
40. Social workers and personal advisers in the leaving care teams are committed to the young people they work with and know them well. While caseloads for social workers and personal advisers in these teams have reduced since the last inspection, they remain high in this service. Workers are in touch with the majority of care leavers and most visits to care leavers are regular. However, records of these visits do not always do justice to the work undertaken. They are not always sufficiently comprehensive and do not routinely include an analysis of the young people's wishes, feelings and experiences.
41. The quality of pathway planning and plans for care leavers is variable. Pathway plans are not always sufficiently specific about risks and vulnerabilities. Consequently, actions to address and reduce risk and vulnerability are not prominent. There is little evidence of pathway plans being co-produced with young people. However, the new pathway plan format is helping to reflect young people's views and strengthen planning. Implementation of this new approach is incremental, targeting those who have been assessed as having greater vulnerability, but it is still in its early stages and senior managers are aware that they need to accelerate the pace of recent developments.
42. The health needs of care leavers are well considered in direct work, but this is not always reflected well in plans. Senior managers are in the process of implementing health passports to ensure that children in care and care leavers have access to a comprehensive summary of their health histories. Consideration of the emotional needs of care leavers is variable and there is limited systematic and effective consideration of young people's past trauma.
43. While preparation for independence takes place, Croydon does not currently have a systematic process or cohesive offer to ensure that care leavers are helped to develop their skills in preparation for adulthood and for maintaining tenancy arrangements.

44. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. However, senior managers recognise that the range and availability of this offer need to be broader. Staying put arrangements are promoted effectively and offer support to an increasing number of care leavers.

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

45. Since the last judgement inspection in 2017, services for children and families in Croydon have improved dramatically. There is now a clear and determined focus on continuous improvement. The chief executive, political leaders, strategic and corporate leaders have all worked together to ensure that services for children and families are a priority. An ambitious and comprehensive improvement programme has been underpinned by significant investment. The appointments of a skilled and experienced executive director for children, families and education and other senior managers have enabled the development of services that focus on the needs of children and families and this is changing the culture within the organisation.
46. Leaders and managers have embraced and made good use of a wide range of improvement support, including a robust improvement board, strategic partnerships and formal monitoring of progress.
47. Senior managers have taken an effective, measured and considered approach to achieving change, and this has resulted in the establishment of a core sustainable infrastructure and resources to improve practice. They now have the staff with the right skills and experience to continue to change the culture of the organisation to one where staff feel valued and supported, thus creating the right conditions for effective social work.
48. Partner engagement has been re-invigorated, supported by the improvement board and the Croydon safeguarding children partnership. Representatives from Cafcass, the local judiciary and schools have noted better communication and improved practice since the last inspection, resulting in more timely improvements to children's experiences and progress.
49. Senior managers are fully aware of the current quality of practice and are realistic about the challenges ahead. This is reflected well in their self-assessment, which sets out clear objectives, actions and expected impact and outcomes. The areas identified for development, practice and partnership priorities reflect a clear understanding of the need for momentum and continuous improvement to provide the best for children in Croydon. Senior managers were already aware of the areas for improvement identified during this inspection.
50. Operational management, frontline decision-making and the frequency and quality of supervision have all improved significantly. Managers at all levels consistently drive improved practice for children and support staff in developing their understanding of the reasons for their involvement in a child's life.

51. Performance management arrangements have been considerably strengthened since the last inspection. Managers routinely access the self-service performance reports, including the interactive weekly 'Croydon Five' report to track the timeliness of cases and prevent delay. This is further supported by the monthly performance clinics that are held routinely for all service areas.
52. Further work is needed to embed the learning from the regular quality assurance auditing programme and to inform the training and development of staff. A 'windows into practice' quality assurance model, designed to strengthen learning and development through a reflective coaching and mentoring approach to auditing, is due to be implemented in April.
53. Senior managers have a detailed knowledge of their services and the local community. Commissioning arrangements have been restructured since the last inspection, recognising the importance of integrated commissioning in meeting the needs of complex and vulnerable children and young people. An accommodation strategy, focused on sufficiency and need, is being further developed and work is underway to increase the range of high-quality placements to meet the diverse needs of children in care.
54. The local authority is a highly committed corporate parent. Elected members have received training about their role and the qualities of being a corporate parent. Members of Empire, the children in care council, routinely attend the corporate parenting panel and are engaged with improving and developing services.
55. Senior managers are maintaining a sustained focus on increasing stability and capacity in the workforce. This has resulted in very positive impacts on reducing turnover and lessening the reliance on agency staff. Significant investment has resulted in manageable caseloads in the assessment, social work with families, and adolescents teams, enabling staff to have more time to undertake direct work with children. However, caseloads remain too high in the care leavers teams.
56. Staff morale is high. Workers value the systemic model of practice, the training offer and the new culture that is being embedded. Staff report that they are well supported, and they speak very highly about managers and visible senior leaders. They report that the increasingly regular supervision helps them to meet the needs of the children that they work with. Workers take a real pride in their work to meet the needs and improve the experiences and progress for children and families. Staff told inspectors that they enjoy working in Croydon.



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