

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Robert Henderson
Executive Director, Children, Families and Education
London Borough of Croydon
8 Mint Walk
Croydon
London
CR0 1EA

Dear Mr Henderson

Monitoring visit to Croydon local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Croydon local authority children's services on 10 and 11 July 2019. The visit was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2017. The inspectors were Louise Hocking and Tracey Scott, Her Majesty's Inspectors, and Tracey Nurse, Ofsted Inspector.

Children and young people are beginning to receive a better quality of service, and the pace of improvement is accelerating. In a relatively short period of time, the new executive director and the director of early help and children's social care have improved morale, raised the visibility and impact of leaders and managers, started to embed a practice model and created conditions that are enabling steadily improving practice and outcomes for children. Some entrenched issues of concern are starting to change. These include providing a better response to risk for children, and embedding a culture of regular supervision and more consistent oversight by operational managers.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of:

- Services for children at the 'front door', including contacts, referrals and assessments undertaken by the dedicated assessment service. These aspects of the service were also the focus of the first monitoring visit in December 2017.
- Services offered to disabled children.

- Services for children who are privately fostered.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records and reviewing casework alongside social workers. In addition, we spoke with managers and senior managers. We reviewed performance data and information and a range of documents relating to the improvement journey and service development.

Overview

The leadership provided by the executive director and the director of early help and children's social care has resulted in an acceleration of pace and progress over the last six months. They have a strong and clear understanding of practice in Croydon and are taking concerted action to address any barriers to progress. Senior leaders are confidently setting out a clear and ambitious vision for the future, while simultaneously addressing immediate areas for improvement. There is considerable political support for continued improvement, including significant financial investment to support wholesale change.

Impact can be seen in the improvements to the overall quality of practice for children, including disabled children, as shown through accurate and insightful service reviews, individual case audits of children's experiences and stronger performance in measuring compliance. Leaders have a comprehensive understanding of what is happening for children and are leading by example, including being involved in individual case discussion when appropriate. Staff report feeling valued and well supported and caseloads have been reduced to a manageable level. Staff have confidence in the senior leaders and speak very highly of them, describing them as visible, available and acting on feedback.

A safe and solid 'front door' service ensures that children receive a timely and appropriate response when their needs first become known. The quality of work in the assessment service has significantly improved since the first monitoring visit in December 2017. The majority of disabled children receive an appropriate and well-informed social work service. However, some variability remains and further developments are needed to provide a consistently strong service to all children.

Children living in private fostering arrangements receive a poor service. The view of inspectors matches that of a recent local authority review of the service, and a dedicated improvement plan, which includes restructure of the private fostering service, is underway.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Services for children at the 'front door', through the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), have consistently been a stronger area of practice in Croydon. Significant structural changes, including the implementation of a single front door (the single point of contact, known as the SPOC) have resulted in further improvements. The SPOC was launched in March 2018 and incorporates the MASH service, the emergency duty team and the more recently co-located police child abuse investigation team. The SPOC is well-resourced and well-managed and involves a wide range of appropriate partner agencies.

Partners in the SPOC spoke positively about the steadily improving practice. Working relationships are effective and partners feel valued as MASH colleagues, describing a culture in which they can challenge and be challenged. Thresholds are broadly understood by referring partners, although the volume of contacts and referrals is high, and ongoing work is taking place with partner agencies to ensure that contacts and referrals are appropriate. Most referrals are of a reasonable quality, although the level of detail is variable.

Children's needs are responded to quickly and are appropriately prioritised according to risk. The early help offer, which is relatively new, provides a helpful alternative, ensuring that children and their families are supported or stepped down to a non-statutory service if this best meets their needs, and this is being increasingly used as a suitable option. Repeat referrals are decreasing, although senior managers are aware that this continues to be an area requiring ongoing attention. Management oversight and sign-off are visible at each stage in the SPOC service, and managers ensure that the consideration of children's needs progresses smoothly and promptly. Some cases would benefit from a clearer management rationale for decision-making, particularly when the information is first reviewed.

Strategy discussions take place within the SPOC service in a timely way and with consistent multi-agency representation. Immediate actions to safeguard children are clear and are promptly implemented. Joint investigations are undertaken as needed. Practice could be further developed by the setting out of a more comprehensive safety plan in addition to the immediate tasks.

The assessment service is sufficiently resourced by six teams. This ensures that social workers have time to visit children and understand their needs before being on duty again. Caseloads have significantly reduced since the first monitoring visit, to an average caseload of 18 children, and the quality of practice has markedly improved. The threshold for assessment is appropriate for the majority of children, and children are seen in a timely way. Immediate risk is understood, direct work is undertaken to engage children and their families and some analysis is evident to understand their needs and to formulate future plans. Significantly, all cases seen had an appropriate outcome, with evidence of management oversight and sign-off. This contrasts positively with previous practice and is a strong indicator of progress.

Although some key performance measures have improved, the quality of practice is still inconsistent. In some cases, assessments and plans have not benefited from consideration of each child's history, and chronologies are not purposeful. Practitioners are not sufficiently confident in their direct work and use a limited range of techniques and approaches with children. A small number of assessments are taking too long or children are remaining in the assessment service for longer than necessary, awaiting case transfer to another service. Case records do not routinely include the manager's rationale for decisions relating to step-up and step-down.

Although casework shows an appropriate understanding of thresholds, the proportion of cases that are deemed 'no further action' for both referrals into the SPOC service and for children who have had an assessment in the assessment service is high. Currently, nearly

half of the children who have an assessment do not go on to receive a service. Senior managers have already undertaken work to understand the reasons for this, with a fuller piece of work planned for September to interrogate this further.

Services for disabled children were moved back to children's social care from adult services this year and have recently been reviewed. The review provided an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the service, which undertakes a wide range of complex work, including statutory social work. New eligibility criteria for the children with disabilities social work team were published in May 2019, providing a clear and comprehensive overview, and responding to feedback from families. The majority of disabled children receive a service appropriate to their level of need. The average caseload is 15. All children are visited frequently, with positive engagement with children and their families and good liaison with other relevant agencies. Management oversight is visible, and workers understand the needs of disabled children and advocate well when necessary. However, there is some variability in practice and a small number of children have experienced drift and delay to their plans.

The local authority has not fulfilled its statutory responsibilities for children who are privately fostered, and this area of practice is poor. Visits to children and assessments have not been completed within expected timescales. Many children do not have plans in place to ensure that their needs are met or that their situations improve. Some children have had difficult life experiences and they have not been helped to understand their family history and current circumstances. A small number of children are in private fostering arrangements where no-one is exercising parental responsibility for them, and a small number of children have been incorrectly assessed as being privately fostered. Senior managers have recently undertaken a full-scale review of all children known to be in private fostering arrangements and were aware of the deficits in practice prior to the monitoring visit. There are now clear plans in place to ensure that individual children's needs are met and to significantly strengthen this area of practice.

Senior leaders continue to give very high priority to the recruitment and retention of staff. This is reaping some rewards, but remains a challenge. Overall, the vacancy rate is 40%, but this reaches 80% in the assessment teams. Inspectors met skilled and committed locums, both new and longstanding, who are fulfilling these roles, but this remains an area of vulnerability. Three of the six team managers in the assessment service are permanent, including a locum manager converting to a permanent role. Additionally, there has been successful recruitment to senior and middle management roles, with eight of nine head of service posts now permanently appointed to, and a whole new group of service managers. The new systemic practice model has recently been launched, with the practice lead now in post.

In summary, the local authority is now making sustained progress under the rigorous drive and direction of the current senior leaders, with some clear indicators of improvement. Pace has accelerated, practice for children is becoming consistently better and staff feel appreciated and supported.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hocking
Her Majesty's Inspector