

26 July 2021

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Dear Debbie

Focused visit to Croydon local authority children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Croydon local authority children's services on 15 and 16 June 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Brenda McLaughlin, Louise Hocking and Christine Kennet. Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door'.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the interim director of children's services (DCS) agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. This visit was carried out on site.

Headline findings

Despite the immense challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the significant changes to the permanent senior leadership team and the considerable, ongoing and far-reaching local authority financial challenges, staff at the front door are making safe and appropriate decisions on most referrals. Three areas for improvement were identified, as listed below.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Work with the police to ensure adherence to the statutory safeguarding guidance.
- The effectiveness of the emergency duty team in terms of response times and quality of practice.
- The quality, frequency and effectiveness of supervision.

Main findings

There have been over 32,000 cases of COVID-19 in Croydon, with a peak in January 2021. Services to children were quickly reconfigured in response to the first lockdown, with all open cases risk-assessed, and face-to-face visits maintained for those children identified as being at the highest risk. Additional support was provided to staff, and performance management information was enhanced to ensure that cases progressed.

In November 2020, a section 114 notice was issued in accordance with the Local Government Finance Act (1988). Senior leaders have responded positively to the statutory spending restrictions placed on them by the government, reassessing services to reduce spend, while maintaining statutory responsibilities and trying to minimise the risk of adverse consequences for children and families. As a result, some services have been reconfigured and reduced. This has led to some experienced social workers and managers leaving the service. The highly experienced interim DCS, appointed in October 2020, is working diligently to galvanise the safeguarding partnership and to protect frontline staff and services to children.

Good-quality early help assessments lead to clear, specific, achievable and realistic plans, helping to reduce harm and risk to children. Children and their families have access to a range of universal and early help targeted services provided by skilled and committed staff. Cases are reviewed regularly by early help managers to ensure that any emerging risks are suitably escalated to the social care daily trajectory meeting.

However, early help services are becoming stretched as the impact of financial constraints takes hold. Senior leaders are actively working to limit the impact of the savings that they are required to make on frontline services, but all teams will be expected to absorb additional work previously handled by other services. For instance, the family group conference service has been reduced and there are also significant reductions in the resources available to support vulnerable adolescents. Systems are in place to support children and families waiting for early help services; these include regular proactive calls and access to a duty worker.

Unacceptable delay in responding to some safeguarding referrals out of hours by the emergency duty team means that some children do not receive timely help and protection.

Contacts and referrals for children in need or at risk of harm are managed effectively in the single point of contact (SPOC). Social workers routinely seek information from partner agencies and take account of family history when making decisions about levels of risk. SPOC managers are taking appropriate action to improve the consistency and quality of multi-agency information-sharing. Most children receive the right level of help and protection. When there are concerns about risk to children, decisions to hold child protection strategy meetings and subsequent child

protection enquiries are appropriate and timely in most cases. However, some strategy meetings are delayed due to the lack of police availability. Decisions at strategy meetings are well recorded, with clear management rationale about what needs to happen next.

In a small number of cases, children and families experience unnecessary stress due to police undertaking inappropriate single-agency action. Prompt, formal action by the interim DCS and the Chair of the Children's Continuous Improvement Board (CCIB), together with Croydon's Safeguarding Children Partnership, has been taken to address this issue.

Children who require further help and protection are transferred swiftly from the SPOC to the Croydon Supporting Families (CSF) service. This system requires caseloads to remain low to enable social workers to carry out intensive work with children over a 16-week period. However, the departure of key senior staff, together with the financial constraints, led to further resignations and a rise in caseloads. Caseloads are now reducing as permanent staff are appointed, but there has been a dip in the timeliness of assessments.

Despite the challenges, social workers and their managers in CSF remain determined to provide vulnerable children in Croydon with the help and protection that they need. Increasingly, children are being seen face to face. Throughout the pandemic, the most vulnerable children were seen face to face and social workers continued to undertake effective direct work to gain an understanding of children's views and experiences.

CSF social workers have strong relationships with children. They see them regularly and alone, according to assessed needs. They strive to understand their lived experiences and take action to make changes that help and protect children and their families. However, there is some variability in the quality of assessments and practice. Stronger assessments demonstrate a resolute focus on the child's lived experiences. Risks and strengths are carefully tested and analysed, but this is not consistent. A small number of children have been subject to multiple and ineffective assessments and interventions without evidence of sustained change.

Insufficient exploration by managers in supervision of alternative ways of working and an absence of contingency thinking and planning contribute to delay for some vulnerable children. In some cases, a lack of professional curiosity, over-optimism plus adult-focused work have led to a 'start again' approach to vulnerable children who have lived with chronic neglect, sometimes for many years.

Team managers are fittingly proud of their team's commitment, professionalism and determination to do the right thing for children throughout the pandemic. Staff morale is good, and this was reflected in conversations with practitioners and managers during the visit. Several agency staff are keen to pursue permanent

contracts as they feel well supported and are enjoying the opportunities to work with different communities and cultures.

A key challenge in the CSF is balancing staff capacity and workload with the competing demands of short-term targeted work alongside longer, more complex, interventions. This is currently being safely managed but team managers are concerned about sustainability, given the impact of the weakened financial position. They cited the considerable reduction in resources and are worried about the increase in caseloads, which is not conducive to their systemic practice or to effecting positive change for children.

Croydon's adolescent service is being restructured to create an adolescent support team, with much-reduced resources. It is too soon to see the impact of these changes on exploited children, those missing from home, trafficked or affected by serious youth violence. Direct work with adolescents is currently effective, with most children receiving services that are suitable for their needs. Children at the highest risk receive fuller consideration through assessments and child protection strategy discussions. Missing children considered to be at lower risk receive a more variable response. Insufficient checks with partner agencies limit the quality of information about children and their circumstances, meaning that some risks may not be identified.

Visible, highly committed service managers and the head of service at the front door are fully cognisant of the emerging pressures and are working assiduously to find solutions, albeit within limited resources. Staff report that they feel listened to and supported.

Through audits and performance information, senior managers have identified that more work is needed to improve responses to children who experience chronic neglect or who live in homes where there is poor parental mental health or high levels of conflict and violence. Many of these children have been known to numerous services, sometimes for many years. A credible improvement action plan is in place, overseen by the CCIB strategic and operational boards.

Homeless young people receive a prompt assessment if they cannot live with family or friends, and come into care if appropriate. This has increased the demand on the teams that work with care experienced children and young people.

At the time of the visit, there were approximately 850 children living with parents in temporary accommodation in Croydon. Recent rapid reviews in Croydon of children who suffered significant harm or who died have shown that they often lived in unstable homes and moved around between London boroughs. The CCIB has instigated a review of the needs of children in temporary accommodation. The relationship with housing is being strengthened, and a safeguarding housing officer has recently been appointed to the SPOC.

Senior leaders are making strenuous efforts to mitigate the impact of the necessary changes on their staff and vulnerable children and they recognise the importance of strong partnership alliances with stakeholders in this process. Leaders need to maintain an unwavering focus on the needs of children as they continue to work in the context of financial restrictions and changes to the workforce.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
Her Majesty's Inspector