

14 March 2019

Robert Henderson
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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 19 and 20 February 2019. This visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2017. The inspectors were Louise Hocking and Nigel Parkes, Her Majesty's Inspectors, and Tracey Nurse, Ofsted inspector.

A permanent executive director and a permanent director of early help and children's social care have recently taken up posts in Croydon. They have quickly and accurately evaluated the current quality of practice, and they have identified appropriate priorities for improvement, although it is too soon to gauge the impact.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress of children receiving early help services, and those whose cases had been 'stepped down' following an assessment that risks had reduced. This included the experiences of:

- Children who had moved from a child protection plan to a child in need plan.
- Children who had been stepped down from child in need to early help support.
- Children who had returned home from being in care.
- Children and their families who receive an early help service.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, and they met with social workers, team managers, senior leaders, early help

practitioners and the new interim service lead for early help. We also considered information from improvement board minutes, revised strategies for improvement, and performance information and data.

Overview

Services for children in Croydon continue to improve. The newly appointed permanent senior leaders have quickly identified key issues and have acted promptly to make changes. Although very recent, there are signs of an acceleration of pace, with a concerted focus on key priorities. Staff morale is improving, with increasing confidence in the improvement journey under the new leadership. Staff turnover remains a challenge, but senior managers are making a concerted effort to ensure that the workforce is well equipped and well supported. Caseloads have been reduced, and some are lower than they have been for several years. Staff are benefiting from the clear strategic direction set by the executive director and from the director of early help and children's social care, who has a dedicated focus on frontline practice.

Many children now receive a service that meets their needs, but some variability remains. For a small number of children, the service continues to be very poor. Some aspects of practice, such as the quality of plans for children, case recording, including written evidence of decision-making, and the frequency and quality of supervision and management oversight, remain stubbornly weak in many cases.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The executive director took up his post in December 2018. The new permanent director of early help and children's social care joined him in January 2019, together with a new interim lead for early help. The new senior leadership team has brought drive, energy and focus to the improvement journey. Members of this team have quickly analysed and evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the service and have developed a coherent set of priorities to improve outcomes for children. Many actions are already in place or underway, with a range of methods being used to ensure that staff are updated and consulted.

The recent self-assessment of key issues to be addressed shows an acute awareness of priorities and of the need to accelerate the pace of progress. Strategic priorities are ambitious and realistic, with a systematic and sequential plan to tackle remaining or entrenched areas that still require improvement.

Thresholds across the range of services for children considered during this visit are broadly accurate, with most children receiving a service at the right level of intervention. For the majority of children, the decision to 'step down' is appropriate, and accurately reflects a reduction in risk. However, the rationale for the 'step down' is not always clear on case records.

The early help service has undergone a full review, with a reconfigured service launched in November 2018. The new early help service is therefore in its infancy,

with much still to do to consolidate and develop the service and to fully embed the early help offer. An extensive programme of awareness-raising is underway in the local authority and with statutory and non-statutory partners. Referral pathways have been simplified and strengthened and there has been significant investment in training.

The early help service is currently under-utilised and is mostly used for young children. Plans are underway to align the early help service with services for older children, to provide a more inclusive offer. Managers and staff are generally enthusiastic about the progress so far. As one said, 'We used to hear a lot about the commitment to early help, but now we can see it.'

While it is too soon to evaluate the impact of the recent changes, it is clear that most children and families who are in receipt of early help are being well supported. Key workers are making good use of the family assessment and outcome planning tool to understand how best to help, support and safeguard children and families. There is a clear focus on children's wishes and feelings, and the progress and experiences of different children in the same family are carefully considered. Needs and risks are clearly identified and lead to clear and straightforward plans. Team around the family (TAF) meetings are well attended. Packages of support are well coordinated, and management oversight is clearly evident. Early help practitioners are competent and confident and demonstrate a sophisticated awareness of practice, including trauma-informed work and the impact of history on parenting.

Good communication between the early help locality managers and the single point of contact (SPOC) at the front door is helping to ensure that children and families get the right support at the right level. In early help services, if concerns increase or new risks emerge, cases are promptly and appropriately stepped up to children's social care.

Many children whose services have been stepped down within children's social care have a positive outcome and benefit from the intervention and services offered. However, practice remains variable. Some children experience a thorough professional response to risk and needs, with good engagement with the child and their family, including fathers who are not living in the household. Strong and sensitive direct work is undertaken in highly complex circumstances by skilled social workers. In other cases, there is a lack of focus and purpose, with insufficient analysis, some drift or delay in response, and a limited sense of the child's identity or needs. For a small minority of children, the service remains very poor. This is compounded by staff turnover, which impacts on the quality of the social work relationship.

The practice for children who return home from care to live with their families is highly variable. Better practice includes well-planned transitions with a comprehensive support package; poorer practice is evident when social workers do not provide prompt support or give sufficient consideration to any remaining risks. A new policy and practice guidance document on reunification, approved on

31 January, provides practitioners with a clear expectation of practice, although it is too soon to see the impact.

Children do have written plans, but these are not always evaluative or outcome-focused and tend to focus on processes rather than the needs of the child. Plans are unclear about key risks or issues, and about what needs to change. This is particularly the case for children in need. The mixed caseloads in the care planning service have led to priority being given to child protection and court work, with children in need receiving less attention. An increasing number of child in need visits are now made on time, but the impact of the lower priority can be seen in the poorer quality and timeliness of child in need plans, the ongoing analysis and the frequency of reviews.

Social workers are generally positive about working in Croydon and morale is improving. They are encouraged by the increased visibility of and consultation offered by senior managers, and staff have greater confidence in the local authority's plans and strategy. Staff consistently refer to reduced caseloads, with most reporting that their caseloads are manageable. The average caseload is 15, although the range can mean that some staff have higher caseloads or carry an imbalance of more complex work.

Despite the improvements, staff turnover remains a challenge, and senior managers continue to focus on recruitment and retention. They have recently nominated a manager to undertake exit interviews so that managers can gain a better understanding of why people leave, and how people in post may be better supported. Senior managers are taking proactive and decisive action to ensure that they recruit and retain the right people. There is a new and extensive learning and development offer with an impressive range of courses, and a new career progression pathway.

Not all staff receive regular supervision. Staff have found 'workarounds' to manage if supervision is not taking place regularly, either by using the skill and expertise of colleagues or by seeking out managers for immediate case direction. Senior managers are aware of the need to embed a culture of a protected space to have reflective supervision and they have already begun to ensure that this is available and is seen as a priority for staff. There is evidence of management oversight on the vast majority of children's records, but this varies from fully reflective and analytical discussion through to a briefer factual list of actions.

In summary, the local authority is continuing to make progress and the pace of improvement has accelerated recently. Senior leaders are beginning to create a culture with a focus on systemic and strengths-based practice, with the experience of the child at the centre.

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