

Report to the Minister of State for Children and Families on ways forward for children's services in Croydon

January 2018

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Summary of Contents

This is the report of the Secretary of State's Commissioner's work in Croydon covering the period September to December 2017. It contains:

- Executive Summary
- Introduction and context (Sec 1)
- Terms of reference, process adopted for the work (Secs 2 and 3)
- Structure and leadership of children's services (Secs 4 and 5)
- Background and reviews undertaken during 2016/ 2017 (Secs 6, 7 and 8)
- Ofsted inspection 2017 and the Council's response (Secs 9 and 10)
- Performance management and service issues (Secs 11 and 12)
- Corporate support and workforce issues (Secs 13, 14 and 15)
- Partnership, Croydon Safeguarding Children Board and Serious Case Reviews (Sec 16, 17 and 18)
- Analysis of progress, capacity for improvement and conclusion (Sec19 and 20)
- Options and recommendations (Sec 21)

Executive Summary

This report covers a period of 3 months following an Ofsted inspection of children's services and review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board in June – July 2017, which judged services in Croydon to be inadequate. I was appointed as Commissioner in September to undertake the review. I have looked specifically at what went wrong, the steps taken by the Council to deal with the concerns, the impact this has had, and whether this has been sufficient to give confidence in the Council's capacity and capability to make improvements rapidly going forward, or whether alternative arrangements need to be considered.

The report considers the circumstances in the Council and specifically in children's services leading up to the period when the inspection took place. The areas covered include political and corporate leadership, the organisation of children's services, significant service issues and partnership contribution. The Chief Executive and Executive Director People (the Director of Children's Services DCS) had both been appointed to their roles about a year previously. The Labour administration had been running the Council since the previous elections in 2014, and the lead member had held the role since then.

There is considerable background information which has helped inform the review. This includes a report of a Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) during 2016, looking at the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect, and various reviews commissioned by the current Executive Director. These included looking at the scope of the Executive Director's role and capacity to fulfil the responsibilities of the DCS, early help arrangements, the functioning of the Croydon children's safeguarding board (CSCB), and Children in need. In addition, there were internal reports describing the quality of services.

All of the background reports raise similar issues about the quality of practice. The letter following the JTAI notes that some aspects of multi-agency work were delivering well for children and young people but, in other service areas, multi-agency and individual agency work required significant improvement, particularly in respect of performance data and in response to children who were not at immediate risk. The previous Executive Director had set up an internal Improvement Board to over-see the response to the JTAI. The current Executive Director continued chairing this group and extended its role to consider the wider service issues exposed through the reviews commissioned. An Improvement Plan was developed in February 2017, but the pace of improvement was slow. Limited management capacity and expertise, insufficient infrastructure support, plus the extent of the issues across the service will have reduced the potential impact.

The Inspection in June 2017 was the first inspection other than the JTAI since 2012, when services had been judged to be adequate. The inspectors identified serious concerns about the quality of practice across children's services and judged each aspect of delivery including leadership and management to be inadequate.

It is clear that the outcome of the inspection was a shock to the leadership of the Council. Once the scale of the problem was understood, the Chief Executive acted quickly to bring in capacity and expertise, including an independent chair to lead a multi-agency Improvement Board, and a new interim chair for the CSCB. The Director Early Help and Children's Social Care, who had been in the role for nearly 4 years, resigned and an experienced interim Director was appointed and took up post in October 2017.

The Chief Executive, with the backing of the Leader and lead member also ensured that children's services improvement became the number one priority for the Council. This has enabled longstanding issues of poor business support, insufficient attention to recruitment and retention, and inefficient use of the case recording system to be addressed. Additional finance has been allocated to children's services to meet initial identified needs, plus a further £10 million has been agreed to increase the base budget for 2018/2019.

The independent chair of the Improvement Board is ensuring a rigorous approach to over-seeing the development and delivery of a comprehensive Improvement Plan. However, it is very early days and the scale of the challenge is just beginning to be understood. This report describes some of those issues which include rising demand, high workloads in parts of the service, poorly coordinated early help arrangements, an ongoing high level of agency staff and dealing with the legacy of poor practice and drift.

The service has recruited 2 new permanent Heads of Service, both of whom are experienced in other authorities and started in November, alongside a new interim Head of Service for Quality Assurance. This will bring some much-needed additional management capacity into the service. Whilst there are some good social workers and managers in Croydon delivering a good response to children and families, too often this is not the case. The quality of practice is inconsistent and not good enough. There is a real need to take action quickly and effectively to begin to significantly improve outcomes for Croydon's most vulnerable children, many of whom have not been well served in recent years.

The Leadership of the Council has demonstrated their commitment to children's services in their response to the inspection. The scale of the challenge is such that it is likely that it will take a period of at least 18 months to 2 years to bring about the degree of change needed in all aspects of service delivery. Croydon is just at the beginning of a comprehensive improvement programme, and will need to sustain the commitment and focus over this period of time and beyond, if improvements are to be embedded and sustained. At this time, I believe the Council should retain responsibility for managing children services and should be given time to drive the improvements forward. However, I do not consider that they have the necessary capacity and expertise within the service, to undertake this effectively and quickly without support.

During the period of the review I have considered with the Council options for securing such support. The political and officer leadership are positive about this way forward and keen to develop an agreement with another London authority to provide intensive peer support. Camden Council have been approached and have expressed a willingness to help. Camden have very recently been inspected and judged good, with outstanding for leadership and management. Initial discussions have taken place, to explore priority areas for involvement. This is a very positive first step. I would propose that a 3-month period is allowed for initial work with Camden and to give time to develop a more substantive proposal and arrangement to help Croydon for a minimum period of at least a year.

1. Introduction and context

I was appointed by the Secretary of State for Education as Commissioner for children's services on 4th September 2017, as part of the Statutory Direction to Croydon Council in relation to children's social care. My responsibilities required me to support the improvement of children's social care and review the council's capacity and capability to improve children's services going forward.

The Council has been extremely welcoming and co-operative, and has sought to provide full support to enable me to undertake this task. I am very grateful for this.

2. Terms of reference

The Direction states that the Secretary of State has carefully considered Ofsted's report of 4 September 2017 of its inspection carried out between June and July. The inspection report found that children's social care services are 'inadequate' overall. The three sub-judgements for children who need help and protection, children looked after and achieving permanence and leadership, management and governance were all rated as 'inadequate'.

The Direction appointed me as Commissioner, requiring me:

- a) To issue any necessary instructions to the local authority for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the authority's delivery of children's social care; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements.
- b) To bring together evidence to assess the council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the council.
- c) To advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the local authority, taking account of local circumstances and the views of the council and key partners.
- d) To report to the Minister of State for Children and Families by 4 December 2017.

3. Process

In the 3 months leading up to delivery of this report I have sought, as far as possible, to use existing forums and observation of practice, not to put additional pressure on the service to attend meetings or gather information that they would not otherwise be doing. There is a significant amount of background information already available, which I have reviewed and refer to here, as well as more current information presented to the Children Services Improvement Board and other key Council and multi-agency fora.

During this period, I have met frequently with the political and officer leadership of the Council. I have worked with the Executive Director People (the DCS) and the interim Director Early help and Children's Social Care, as well as the independent chairs of the Improvement Board and the Croydon Safeguarding Children's Board (CSCB) to support them with planned and developing improvement activity, to identify any additional areas for improvement and development and to advise them on how best to address those.

4. Leadership

Political Leadership

Council control has shifted over the past 15 years between the Labour and Conservative groups. The Conservatives won the majority of seats (43 out of 70) in 2006, taking over from a Labour administration. In 2010, Labour gained six seats, reducing the Conservative majority on the Council to four seats. At the last election in 2014, Labour won with a majority of 10 and formed the current administration. Subsequently there has been a review of ward boundaries with the new ward boundaries scheduled to come into force at the May 2018 local elections.

Given the political history and the further uncertainty of the impact of boundary changes, it is important that there is Council wide support for the plans relating to children's social care, to support future sustainability of improvements made.

The lead member has been in the role since 2014. She has responded proactively to the outcome of the inspection and has accepted support from the LGA and other experienced lead members to help her ensure that going forward she offers much stronger challenge and support to the service and the wider system. She is passionate about improving outcomes for the children and young people in Croydon, and is keen to ensure that this remains the highest priority for the Council.

The priorities of the Council are captured in the corporate plan 'Ambitious for Croydon'. The ambitions for children and young people are focussed mainly on educational achievement, safeguarding and achieving independence. Achievements are reported to cabinet. In the July 2017 report it is noted that:

'Improving educational attainment is a top priority of this Council and makes a major contribution to the improvement of life chances and the reduction of inequality. Performance in early years improved, attainment in primary and secondary education was at or above the national average; and more parents were offered one of their top 3 school choices. Educational attainment by age 19 at levels 2 and 3 is at or above the national average.'

Housing is a major challenge in Croydon. The same performance report states that there has been a reduction in the number of families with children in B&B for more than 6 weeks to 37, the lowest level for some years. This reduction has continued in the first quarter of 2017/18. Whilst the reduction is helpful, no children should be living in bed and breakfast accommodation. There is still a significant number of families. The need for support for the children in these families should be considered.

The same report comments that *'working with our partners to ensure children and vulnerable adults are protected remains a high priority of this Council. Following the Joint Targeted Area Inspection of the multi-agency response to child abuse and neglect in May 2016, which praised much of Croydon's practice, a number of services were reviewed to identify priority areas for improvement and a Children's Improvement Plan was developed. Implementation over the last six months has led to improvement in the effectiveness of referrals and timeliness of decision-making. The transformation of children's social care is also expected to deliver further improvement in outcomes for vulnerable children.'*

Given the findings of the inspection that was taking place at the same time, this was a considerably over optimistic view of the current situation.

Senior Officer Leadership

The current Chief Executive and Executive Director of People had both been in their roles for just over a year in the case of the former, and the latter just under a year, when the Ofsted inspection took place. The Chief Executive was not new to Croydon having previously been the Executive Director of Place. The Executive Director of People was an experienced Director having held similar roles in two previous authorities, with a background in social work and managing children's social care. During her first few months she commissioned a number of reviews to help her understand the strengths and weaknesses of services and systems in Croydon. This included a Test of Assurance which is a requirement under the statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director and Lead Member of Children's Services (DfE April 2013) in circumstances where the DCS has additional responsibilities, to ensure the DCS is still able to focus sufficiently on the key responsibilities of the DCS role.

Test of Assurance February 2017

Croydon undertook an internal Test of Assurance in October 2015, six months after the DCS and Director of Adult Social Services (DASS) functions were combined. This Test of Assurance concluded that the 'capacity of the DCS to meet the statutory obligations of the role are assured'.

The previous Executive Director retired in July 2016 and the current Executive Director was appointed to the role. There had been a number of changes, including the addition of Public Health to the People Directorate which also included adult and children's social care, education, housing needs and welfare.

In November 2016, the new Executive Director of People commissioned the LGA to undertake a second Test of Assurance. The main focus of the review was the governance arrangements and leadership capacity for the People Directorate, through from the Council's leadership to the directors and their direct reports. This review was undertaken in the context of considerable challenges for the Council and its partners to deliver transformation and change at a time of increasing financial and demographic pressures.

The report was completed in February 2017. A number of challenges were identified in both adult and children's services. The key challenge facing children's services was summarised as:

'Despite the undoubted commitment of managers and leaders at all levels, services are under pressure. Many of the managers are relatively inexperienced in their roles and managers and front-line staff describe a social work workforce that needs higher degrees of support because of high proportions of newly qualified staff and a high turnover of both permanent and agency staff.'

In respect of adult services, the report identifies significant issues to be addressed including partnership and integration with health, market management: choice and quality of services, delivering savings, demand management and service transformation. The reviewers also noted that the newly appointed tier of senior managers in adult services

reporting to the Director, appointed following a recent restructure, had yet to evidence their effectiveness in these roles.

They concluded that ‘there are significant leadership challenges facing Croydon and considerable demands on senior management capacity. The current arrangements appear robust due to the considerable experience, knowledge and skills of the Directors of Children and Adults services (including the Interim Director for Adults Services), and Public Health. They provide capacity to support the Executive Director, whose span of responsibility is diverse, broad and complex.’

One of their recommendations to the Council was *‘To consider temporary capacity at a senior level to support the Executive Director of Peoples’ Services on the significant transformation and integration agendas.’* This was agreed but it was several months before an individual was identified to take on this role, by which time the Ofsted inspection was only weeks away.

The capacity of the Executive Director and other senior leaders was further stretched during the latter part of 2016 and the first few months of 2017 dealing with a local disaster, and an international issue significantly impacting on Croydon, and in particular on children’s services. In November 2016 a tram crashed in Croydon resulting in seven people suffering fatal injuries in the accident, and many others being badly affected. Around the same time the clearance of the ‘jungle’ camp in Calais led to the arrival of significant numbers of young unaccompanied asylum seekers. Croydon had a leading role on managing their immediate arrival and dispersal to other local authority areas, as well as sending social workers to France to support the assessment of young people.

5. How children's services are organised

Children's services in the Council are led and managed by the Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care who reports to the Executive Director of People. At the time of the inspection the post-holder had been in that role for about three and a half years. He had followed a Director who had spent less than three years in Croydon but in that time, had made considerable changes to the service, re-structuring and bringing in a model of systemic practice. The new case recording system, Liquid logic, was also purchased and introduced during that period. Many people both in the Council and from partner agencies have described this period as one of very strong, passionate leadership, but also robust and demanding. The Director who followed took a more collaborative approach. He found that the systemic model and the new I.T. system had not been well established in the service.

Croydon is a complex borough with a large, diverse and in many areas deprived population. There were in post a very small number of senior managers, who had limited support and who struggled to cover all the operational demands facing them, and inevitably this will have impacted on their ability to engage with strategic planning and service development. There were 3 permanent Heads of Service in post, managed by the Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care:

1. Head of Service Children in Need - the MASH, Assessment and the Care Planning service
2. Head of Looked After Children and Resources - Looked After Children services, Fostering, Adoption and Leaving Care.
3. Head of Service Safeguarding and Quality Assurance – Independent Reviewing officers (IROs), Child Protection Chairs, LADO service, Missing and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), Learning and Development, and lead for IT.
4. A fourth Head of Service post responsible for Early Help was covered by an interim manager.
5. The 0-25 service for Children with Disabilities and Special Education Needs was managed within Adult Services under an Assistant Director responsible for an all age 0-65 disability service.
6. The previous Director Early Help and Children's Social Care created a further Head of Service post to manage the Youth Offending Service, missing and CSE. This post and the Head of Service Early help post (to include responsibility for the MASH) have only now been appointed to with permanent experienced managers taking up post in November 2017.
7. A Principal Social Worker (PSW) role was created in May 17. Previously the Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care had held this responsibility. The current PSW is expecting to manage a team of 7 consultant practitioners, however currently only 4 are in post. These practitioners will be linked to teams and are not expected to hold cases.

Service Delivery Leads report to Heads of Service and in turn have a number of Unit Managers (the Croydon name for Team Managers) reporting to them.

In the self-assessment completed for Ofsted in June, the model of social work is described as systemic practice with a strengthening families approach for child protection conferences, a recognised form of systemic practice introduced in Croydon over 3 years ago, but insufficiently resourced. The model should be supported by consultant practitioners, providing supervision and support on complex cases. However, demands

on the service meant that fewer consultant practitioners were appointed, and those that were, were allocated cases. This was one of the factors impacting on the quality of practice. In 2016 increasing demand led to an agreement to establish 2 additional teams in Care planning including one to focus on court work. This was partly funded by a reduction in consultant practitioner posts.

In 2015 business support was centralised, moved to corporate management and subsequently provided through an internal service level agreement. This was part of a Council drive to save money and the number of posts was significantly reduced. For example, administration support for Heads of Service was removed, and support for social workers and their managers reduced.

Prior to the current Executive Director joining Croydon, responsibility for education functions had not rested with one senior manager but with a number of heads of service. She was able to create a Director of Education post which was filled in April 2017, and is intended to strengthen relationships with schools and improve educational outcomes for all children, including the most vulnerable children. This is a much-needed role to work alongside children's social care in a much more collaborative way than was previously the case.

6. Background

External inspection and assessment

Summary of external judgement and assessments from 2011-2017:

Type of inspection	Date published	Overall outcome
Annual Performance Assessment	2011	Performs well
Adoption	Mar 2012	Good
Fostering	Jan 2011	Good
Adoption	Dec 2012	Good
Safeguarding and looked after children	May 2012	Safeguarding effectiveness – adequate Looked after children effectiveness – adequate Capacity for improvement - good
Joint targeted area inspection of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect (JTIA)	June 2016	A letter was sent to senior leaders after the inspection outlining some strengths in the arrangements and areas needing attention
Single inspection of LA children's services and review of the LSCB	June 2017	Overall – inadequate. Children who need help and protection, Children looked after and achieving permanence, Leadership, management and governance, LSCB – all judged inadequate. Care leavers and adoption – requires improvement

Ofsted Safeguarding inspection (May 2012)

Croydon was not subject to an inspection in the period between 2012 to 2016. At the time of the last Ofsted Safeguarding inspection in May 2012, Ofsted judged leadership and management to be adequate. Ofsted considered that senior managers in children's social care services had a well-informed understanding of the weaknesses in services and resource deficits. They had addressed one of their key issues which was recruiting experienced social workers and managers and had been effective in increasing the number of social workers in permanent posts. The proportion of permanent staff had increased significantly and was at 85%, compared to 40% in 2009. However, many of the social workers were relatively newly qualified.

Whilst services were considered to be adequate, Ofsted did make a number of recommendations, which are worth listing here as many of those that relate to the quality of practice were similar issues found both by the JTIA in 2016, and the Single Inspection in 2017. The key ones are:

Immediately:

- ensure effective management oversight of contacts to children's social care services so that contacts are not signed off until the associated tasks are completed.

And within three months:

- analyse the content of contacts to ensure that thresholds are understood and that agencies are clear about levels of risk that require referral or notification, improve the analysis of risk and protective factors in assessments, and ensure that assessments are completed in a timely way
- improve record keeping and chronologies so that they are up to date and of good quality
- ensure that social care assessments are completed in a timely way and are of good quality
- ensure that supervision in the looked after children and leaving care teams is timely and is of consistently good quality

Joint targeted Area Inspection of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect in the London Borough of Croydon May 2016 (JTAI)

Between 16 May and 20 May 2016, Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation undertook a 4-day joint inspection of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect. This inspection included a 'deep dive' focus on the response to child sexual exploitation and those missing from home, care or education.

In the letter to all the service leaders in the area they outlined their findings about the effectiveness of partnership working and of the work of individual agencies. Their overall conclusion was that partners were working together effectively in many areas of practice to meet the challenges of increasing demand and complexity in the local population. Some aspects of multi-agency work were delivering well for children and young people but, in other service areas, multi-agency and individual agency work required significant improvement. They did note that Croydon as a local area is unique, in some respects. There are high numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), who make up almost half of the population of children looked after, high numbers of children placed by other local authorities in the borough (550) and increasing levels of deprivation. The borough also has very high numbers of missing children. The demand for services was increasing the pressure on the police, health services, probation services and the local authority to ensure that there were sufficient resources to meet needs.

They noted some positive practice, particularly in relation to work with newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. They also noted that, *'in most cases seen, risks were reducing as a result of joint working. Action to protect children at risk by commencing care proceedings is sufficiently swift to ensure that risk is reduced and, where there is identification of risk around missing and child sexual exploitation, agencies are referring concerns to children's social care in a timely way. In some cases, the perseverance and the skill of individual workers is engaging children and their families well, resulting in effective work to help family relationships and parenting styles to improve, and therefore to reduce risk. There were some good examples of health*

practitioners listening to the voices of young people that resulted in additional help, such as referral to the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHs)'.

However, they also raised concerns including: 'when cases are assessed as not urgent, there are sometimes delays in decision making about the next steps. The quality of frontline practice with children and their families to respond to and prevent child sexual exploitation is too variable. This means that responses to children are inconsistent and this is especially evident in those cases where the risk is less immediate. Some assessments do not consider the wider circumstances and holistic needs of young people, or include robust analysis of known risks. This means that decision making is too often reactive rather than proactive, as agencies respond to the most recent or evident concern. Management oversight by children's social care of plans and reviews is not always sufficiently robust to ensure that progress is being made in all cases'.

It is of particular concern that an issue identified by Ofsted in 2012 as requiring immediate action, was still a problem. They found that Social work managers in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) did not have the capacity to ensure systematic oversight of decisions by social workers to close contacts, and not all social workers in the MASH received regular supervision. This means that decisions to close contacts were not routinely reviewed and agreed by managers, which could result in potential risks being missed.

At strategic level the inspectors concluded that:

Senior managers across the partnership, children's services, police, and health and probation services do not currently collate and use a full and appropriate range of management information across all areas to help them understand the services they provide, to enable them to set targets and monitor performance. Without this information, it is a challenge for the partnership to develop strategic approaches to manage demand, or to set and monitor targets for performance.

The quality of performance data received by the LSCB is neither sufficiently comprehensive nor robust. This means that the partnership does not have effective oversight of all areas of practice, in particular the 'front door' of services. Consequently, the quality of the work, outcomes for children and demands for service is not sufficiently well understood by all senior leaders.

The previous Executive Director established a Council internal Improvement Board to oversee improvements in children's social care, relying on the LSCB to address the multi-agency issues. The messages in the feedback letter are mixed, with some positive practice noted, but real concern about inconsistencies and decision making. Over the following months the focus was mainly on addressing the need to improve the decision-making processes relating to contacts and referrals, and improving performance management with little attention paid to the wider issues of risk management and drift and delay at later stages in children's journeys.

7. Reviews undertaken during 2016 and 2017

A number of reports were written during 2016 and 2017, as well as reviews commissioned by the new Executive Director to inform improvement planning. The key ones are summarised below. Overall there was considerable information collated on the issues and about services and clear evidence of widespread poor practice across the service. Pulling this together demonstrates the challenge facing children services to tackle this effectively and at pace.

Early Help

An independent consultant was commissioned to undertake a review of Early Help arrangements in November 2016. The review was thorough and comprehensive, giving clear recommendations on what should happen to improve co-ordination and delivery of early help. Her main conclusion was that whilst there is evidence of commitment to working together in partnership and to seek to innovate, there was no overarching strategic approach to the development or delivery of services leading to a fragmented system that is difficult to navigate. There was a recognition that there are a number of families with complex needs that were not being reached early enough by services. A high number of contacts to the MASH resulted in no further action, leading to a hypothesis that some MASH contacts could be dealt with by early help.

The Council delivers a range of early help services including 1) Best Start Family Intervention and Support Service - implemented in 2016, with support from key partners, bringing together midwives, health visitors, children's centres, Family Nurse Partnership (FNP), family support, social care, mental health and other key services into blended teams, working with families with children under five years. 2) Family Resilience Service (FRS) – National Troubled Families initiative in Croydon. 3) Functional Family Therapy (FFT) – evidence based programme of intervention aimed at diverting young people from the care and criminal justice systems. 4) Youth and Play community engagement and specialist programmes (11-19) – Targeted community outreach and youth service. 5) Family Justice Centre (FJC) – Universal access advice service for victims of domestic abuse. 6) A Children in Need (CIN) Team of social workers had recently moved into the Best Start service for 12 months to pilot social work intervention as part of an early help team.

Not all areas of Council early intervention services are located within the Early Intervention Service. School improvement, Educational Psychology and Educational Welfare Services are commissioned through another organisation, Octavo, whilst social work and education services for children with disabilities and Special Educational Needs (SEN) are located within a 0-26 all age disability service.

The report also noted that early help services lacked good performance monitoring, sufficient management oversight and evidence of impact. Taking forward the recommendations from the review was intended to be driven through the Executive Director's monthly Improvement Board but progress seems to have been slow with little evidence of change in relation to the key findings. The minutes from the May meeting is still talking about what needs to happen, for example the lead for early help is reported as saying that *'the challenge is to develop an early help approach for Croydon for all children and all families'*

In July Ofsted found that the range and coordination of early help provision for children and families was still underdeveloped, and that partner agencies were at the early stages of working together to develop a new, shared approach to delivering services

Children in Need

An internal review of Children in Need (CIN) cases was undertaken in response to increasing numbers of CIN cases. Findings were reported in early 2017. The main conclusions were that the rise in numbers is probably a result of drift in plans with fewer cases closing than the number coming in to the service. Findings of case audits showed that CIN cases were remaining open longer than required, and were not being stepped down to lower levels of intervention in a timely way. Recommendations in the report included: additional work with managers to develop performance management information to ensure systematic oversight into the workflow. In addition, it was recommended that resources within the Care Planning service should be reviewed and re-allocated.

Review of Croydon Children's safeguarding board (CSCB)

This review also took place in November 2016 and was conducted by an independent consultant. His summary was that *'overall the evidence is that the CSCB is not good. When measured against the SIF criteria, performance is on the cusp of inadequate and requires improvement. Most importantly this means the partnerships response to safeguard children is not assured.'*

He also commented that the review had not been supported well by partners and felt that this raised questions about agencies' commitment to the Board. However, he felt that the Board had the capacity to improve and made 10 recommendations which he considered would achieve this including:

- *Review the work force capacity of the LSCB Business unit to ensure key priorities and the routine day to day business operation of the Board is sufficient to get the job done.*
- *Annual report – tackle the key points set out in this evaluation to ensure compliance and rigour and inform the scope of the business plan priorities such as domestic violence. Then consider the 'other areas' for improvement for the Annual report and other issues raised to achieve quick wins.*
- *Governance – review the structure of the LSCB, Partners accountability and consequences for inaction, focus on core business, work plans, monitoring performance and action plans, to improve grip.*
- *Accelerate current work to develop the multi-agency data set to demonstrate oversight of performance overtime leading to evidence of impact and improvement.*
- *The Section 11 process lacks rigour; the Board is over reliant on self-evaluation so the Board cannot be assured of the level of compliance of frontline service delivery across the sector.*

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) annual review

This report was produced in November 2016. Inconsistency in the quality of practice was again noted, with a number of key recommendations included intended to address this:

- Challenge drift and delay in the Care Planning process, ensure permanence decisions by second review issues are addressed.
- Ensure cases in proceedings are progressing appropriately.
- Develop the expertise and practice of staff to improve the outcomes for the LAC population.
- Capture the voice of children.
- Concerns regarding transition planning to Leaving Care Service and preparation for adulthood and independence

Practice weeks

Practice weeks were introduced by the new Executive Director. The first took place in December 2016 and during the week 82 cases were fully audited and returned. Auditors also completed:

- 29 observations including initial and review child protection conferences; homes visits and meetings with families in Croydon social care offices, placement breakdown meetings, looked after children reviews, supervisions and multi-agency professional meetings.
- 28 parents and grandparents were interviewed
- 26 children were interviewed

The Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance wrote a very long detailed report, which included some strengths but overall gave a concerning picture. Again, the key message was the need to improve the quality and process of planning in all parts of the system. In particular;

- Children in Need practice and processes are not being applied consistently.
- The pre-proceeding process is not being used.
- There are delays in permanency planning.
- Pathway Plans are often being completed a few weeks prior to the young person's 18th birthday.
- Cases are transferred too often across systems depending on case status and changes of social worker.

Drift and delay was identified as a pattern in all service areas often caused by changes in social worker or internal transfer processes. Changes in staff (managers and practitioners) was identified as a primary factor impeding the quality of practice in Croydon. Other contributing factors were identified as: inconsistent case recording and a lack of procedural application and delays caused by case transfer protocols throughout the system.

The second practice week took place in May shortly before the Ofsted inspection and was not written up in detail.

LSCB Step up step down (SUSD) multi-agency audit

This was an independently led audit commissioned by the LSCB during 2016/ 2017. 12 cases were looked at in detail with agency frontline managers undertaking single agency audits in the first instance then collectively examining the cases as a to look at multi-

agency themes. Nine themes relating to good practice were identified plus 17 themes relating to practice requiring improvement, including:

- Lack of information sharing and multiagency working.
- SUSD processes not clear.
- Lack of contingency planning.
- Failure to challenge practice between agencies.

LSCB audit of strengthening families approach in child protection conferences

The social work approach in Croydon is described as systemic practice with a strengthening families approach in Child Protection conferences and core groups. A number of staff and managers were unclear about the model of social work, and had understood that the introduction of consultant practitioners was part of the intention to develop the model across practice, but due to pressures on those roles and the service, this did not happen. This review of the use of the Strengthening Families Framework in Child Protection conferences, also undertaken during 2016/2017 found that:

- Practice overall is inconsistent affecting the quality of the parent/child's experience, meetings, plans and core groups (identified in earlier audits and reviews).
- Staff turnover within agencies, particularly social workers and managers, since implementation in 2013, is an ongoing factor affecting quality.
- Management information and quality assurance arrangements need to be better coordinated to inform continuous improvements

Fostering Panel

An independent consultant was commissioned to review the functioning of the fostering panel. The report was completed in March 2017 and again points to concerns about the quality of practice, and the responsiveness of managers to key issues.

He writes that *'according to the panel members and the Chair, the quality of the reports submitted to the panel are often times poor and the presentations of most supervising social workers is lacklustre and uninformative at best.'* He concluded that these issues contribute to the panel's inability to make informed decisions in relation to vitally important decisions that will have long-lasting effect on the lives of children. He also notes that during the interviews the panel members and the Chair shared their views and frustrations. For example, the Chair shared that in spite of the number of written comprehensive feedback forms sent to the Agency Decision Maker, (ADM) that raise very serious issues or concerns, the issues do not get resolved and continue year on year.

The failure to address the concerns raised by the chair of the Panel is of particular concern given that Croydon had recently completed a serious case review relating to foster care. This SCR had identified weaknesses in care planning and fostering support that failed to keep the child at the centre of the work.

8. Improvement Board established after the JTAI

In June 2016 the previous Executive Director established an internal monthly improvement board to respond to the JTAI. Two meetings were chaired by him before he left the authority. The new Executive Director retained the Board but widened the agenda to consider service issues beyond the MASH. The Board met monthly, then bi-monthly in 2017.

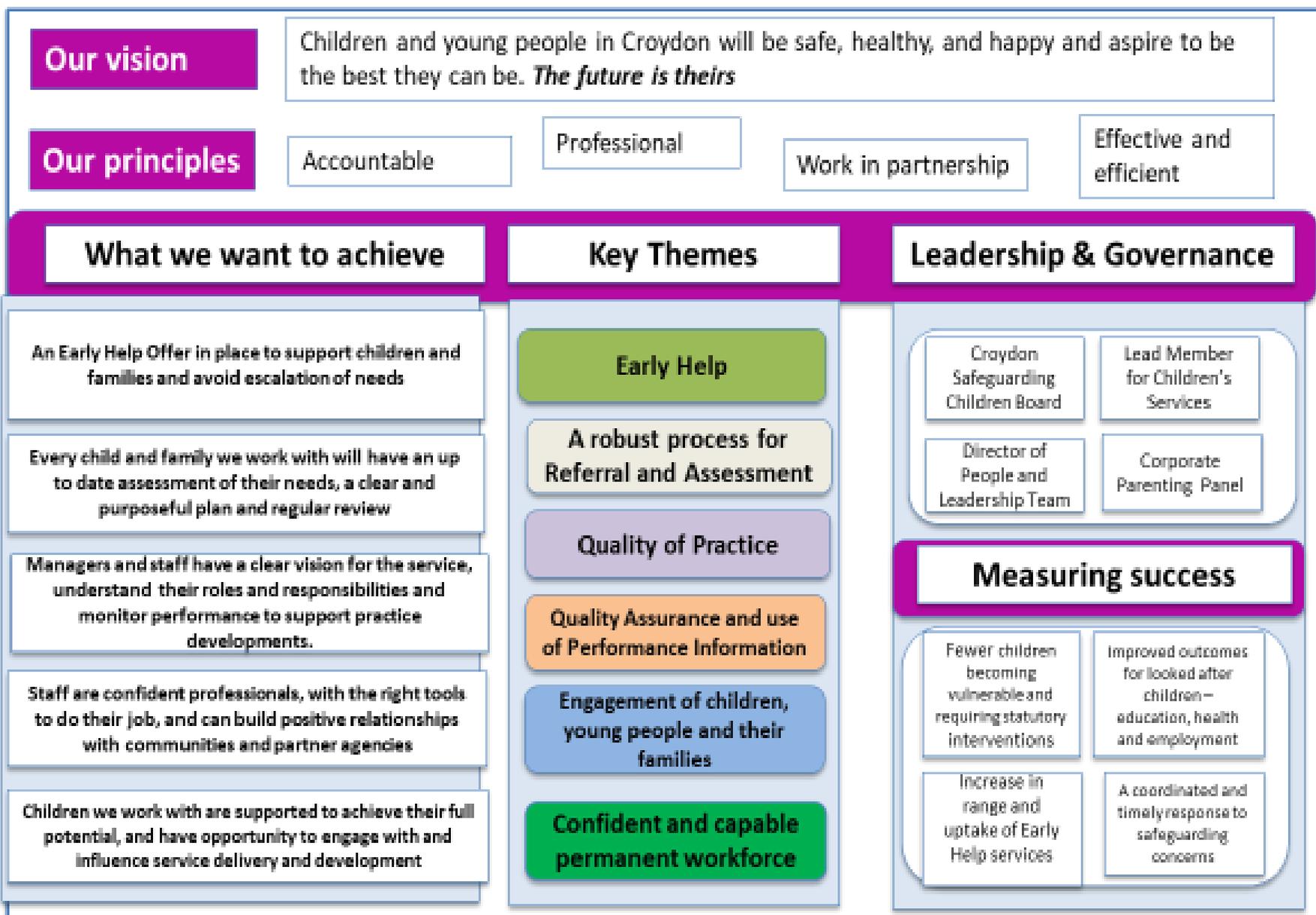
As stated above, a number of reviews were commissioned, including Early Help, the MASH, Children in Need, Leaving Care and the CSCB. The outcome of these reviews, triangulated with weekly and monthly performance reports and the outcome of the Practice Week QA activity, informed an Improvement Plan for the service, which in turn was intended to inform individual service plans.

The self-assessment produced for the Ofsted inspection summarises the intention as follows. *'The focus of improvement is on getting the front door working effectively, with application of clear thresholds, understanding of demand and robust decision making, ensuring the basics of quality practice are well embedded (assessment, plan, purposeful intervention and review), and engaging partners in provision of a continuum of services, from early help through to intensive interventions, with a good level of knowledge and understanding of the thresholds for statutory children's services. In addition, there is a need to continue to improve the overall governance arrangements through the Improvement Board, scrutiny from elected members, and the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board and its sub-groups.'*

The plan agreed in February 2017 is summarised on a page:

Croydon Children's Social Care Services Improvement Plan 2017-2018

Champion for Croydon's Children – *the future is theirs*



The action plan produced at this time shows who is responsible for delivery. Croydon at the time had a very lean management structure and the actions are primarily led by the 3 Heads of Service, 2 of whom had significant operational issues to deal with on a daily basis. Though they did have the support of an independent consultant brought in for 14 days a month from March, the capacity to drive through the necessary improvement was limited.

The last meeting in May 2017 of the Improvement Board prior to the inspection did record progress on a number of areas including:

- Average of 135 MASH cases now subject to triage monthly – none previously
- Contacts completed within 24 hours – now 96% up from 28% in December 2016
- Assessments completed within 45 days – now 86%, up from 80% in 2016-17
- Initial Child Protection Conference held within 14 days of end of the S47 enquiry - now 78% up from 56% in January 2016
- Time taken in legal proceedings – now 32 weeks average, improved from 53 weeks in 2015
- 12 social workers were appointed to permanent SW posts in March and April. The current vacancy rate across the service is now 17%, although this varies between Children Need (36%) and Looked After Children and Resources (3%).
- Communications – monthly newsletter and weekly Director's message sent to all staff

Whilst it is good to see the beginnings of progress, the scale of the problems was such that this would not have had significant impact on the known practice concerns, in particular drift and delay, management of risk and poor management oversight.

9. Ofsted inspection findings 2017

The Single Inspection of Local Authority children's services and review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board took place in June and July 2017. Overall Ofsted judged services for vulnerable children in Croydon to be inadequate. They found widespread and serious failures in the services provided to children and their families in Croydon that left some children at risk of significant harm. Senior leaders had identified a legacy of poor practice and weak managerial oversight at all levels but had failed to ensure that basic social work practice was of a good enough standard. The inspectors considered that the serious and widespread issues across the service had not been fully understood by elected members or senior managers until the inspection and this corporate failure had led to a lack of prioritisation and timely action. This resulted in too many children remaining at risk of escalating or actual harm characterised by drift and delay.

The report comments that: *'management oversight at all levels is weak. Supervision is ineffective in the majority of cases seen by inspectors. For some, there were long gaps in the frequency of supervision, and records show a lack of reflection and clarity about actions required in a significant number of cases. This leads to a lack of direction and purposeful work with children, and contributes to unnecessary drift and delay. Senior managers have not created good conditions in which social workers can flourish. A number of social workers told inspectors that they are not clear about what they need to do.'*

They did note that work has taken place with partners since the JTAI to strengthen the effectiveness of work in the MASH and improve performance management information. This now included a comprehensive monthly dashboard, performance clinics and performance meetings. However, this monitoring did not lead to action that improves practice. Managers, in particular, did not provide enough guidance or direction to social workers to ensure improved outcomes for children. Conference chairs and IROs did not routinely or effectively challenge poorer practice.

The inspectors noted that the corporate parenting panel had been effective in championing some issues that had led to better outcomes for children looked after, for example improved placement stability and access to education, employment and training. The corporate parenting panel expressed a commitment to improving the lives of children. However, the local authority overall had not prioritised and planned sufficiently to improve outcomes for enough children.

The local authority had begun to implement a new recruitment and retention strategy, but work to date had been ineffective in addressing vacancy rates and staff turnover, and in ensuring that there was appropriate support for newly qualified social workers. Work was taking place to give children a greater strategic voice, but this was yet to translate into practice. The lived experience of a high number of children was unknown or not clearly understood and advocacy to support children was limited.

In total Ofsted made 21 recommendations, the majority of which relate to improving the quality of practice, strategic leadership and improving the environment in which social care is practised.

10. Council's response

The outcome of the inspection was a considerable shock to the senior leadership as they had believed that whilst not good, the service was not inadequate. When the Chief Executive first realised the extent of the problem she took immediate action. She set up and initially chaired an internal improvement board and succeeded in recruiting a very experienced independent chair for the improvement board and a new also very experienced interim chair for the safeguarding children board. The main initial focus was on increasing capacity but also bringing in children social care expertise. Achieving for Children were commissioned to develop a quality assurance framework. The Chief Executive ensured that children services became the top priority of the Council with other directorates directed to contribute to improvement. This included reviewing corporate support to improve business support, the social care I.T. system and securing additional finance for identified immediate need.

The Director of Early Help and Children Social Care resigned after the inspection and an experienced interim replacement was appointed. He took up post in October 2017. The Chief Executive also made the decision to reduce the additional responsibilities of the Executive Director People, transferring housing needs and public health to other Executive Directors, and appointing an interim manager already working in Croydon to take over as the DASS for a period of 6 months from October 2017, to enable the Executive Director to focus on children's services. The Council overall management structure is now under review to enable decisions to be made within 6 months on future responsibilities.

An initial transitional plan started to be developed during the third week of the inspection when the inspectors made it clear that the outcome was going to be an inadequate judgement. The Plan covered three key areas: people, practice and performance. It covered the issues of span of control of the Executive Director of People, as well as focusing on what needs to change in front line practice, workforce issues, plus engagement with judges and other partners, and provision of corporate support. This was put together very speedily. It was recognised that auditing had not been good or detailed enough and 2 independent auditors were appointed to work with the principal social worker.

The report on the Test of Assurance comments that *'there is also an open culture and accessibility to senior management, modelled by the Chief Executive. This was recognised across the services and staff interviewed'*. In the weeks following the inspection the Chief Executive has personally led a number of engagement sessions with children's services staff, and has subsequently maintained direct regular contact with a number of managers in the service to help her better understand the views of the service and what is needed.

Many of those I have spoken to across the Council have commented that children's services had been difficult to engage with prior to the inspection. It seems that the service was isolated, probably not seeking or offering support as needed, and conversely not receiving or being offered support which might have helped.

Children Services Improvement Board

The new independent Chair was appointed in August 2017, and has held meetings on a monthly basis since then. The format has been comprehensive, with a first session for

Council managers and members to look in detail at the performance and finance position, then a multi-agency Improvement Board focussing on those issues but on a wider basis, and finally a session for the Council and key partners to consider in depth some aspect of practice such as management of pre-birth concerns. At this time the weaknesses in the service are known and understood so deep dive sessions may prove more effective in a few months once there is some progress on tackling the serious practice issues.

The independent Chair has brought a necessary rigour and a clear holding to account of the Council corporately and its partners.

11. Performance and Quality Assurance

The JTAI and other reviews including that of the CSCB had criticised the fact that data was not routinely collected and used to inform service development. The Improvement Board set up by the Executive Director had started to address those issues. Responsibility for performance information is managed corporately. There had previously not been enough co-operation between those dealing with the information and the service. This has significantly improved, with managers from both areas working closely together.

Performance data was not previously routinely considered within the service. This was just beginning to change during 2017. For example, it was reported to the Improvement Board in February that there was the beginning of a cultural shift in the organisation, with managers starting to take responsibility for data and actions to move forward.

The interim Director of Early Help and Children social care is a very recent appointment but he has already brought a much more focussed approach to the analysis of performance information. The September data that was presented to the Improvement Board in November includes a number of key performance indicators where there is a need for significant improvement. This includes:

Assessment completion dropped in September both in terms of volume and percentage completion within the regulatory timescale of 45 working days. (237 and 78.5% respectively). Caseloads within the assessment services are high and are a major contributory factor. There are delays in cases transferring out of the assessment service; which is contributing to caseload volumes. Overdue assessments have been a focus for challenge and improvement with a reduction from 253 overdue assessments to 150 at time of the Board meeting.

	April 17	May 17	June 17	July 17	Aug 17	Sept 17
Percentage of C&F assessments completed within 45 working days	71.3%	85.8%	90.1%	88.8%	85.8%	78.5%

Regulatory compliance in relation to CIN cases is a cause for concern with only 50% of children subject to a CIN plan having been visited within the last four weeks. Alongside this CIN reviews are not being completed with the necessary frequency (75% on time in September). This is likely to be contributing to drift and delay in case progression with 245 CIN cases having been on continuous allocation for upwards of twelve months without a care or Child Protection episode.

	Apr 17	May 17	June 17	July 17	Aug 17	Sept 17
Percentage of CIN* for whom a visit has taken place within last 4 weeks	70%	58%	67%	59%	49%	50%

Performance in relation to children looked after is also of concern. Whilst placement stability is reasonably good, the proportion of reviews held within required timescales has actually fallen in recent months. Performance on this indicator should be very near to 100%.

	Apr 17	May 17	June 17	July 17	Aug 17	Sept 17
Percentage of LAC cases which were reviewed within required timescales	83%	70%	77%	75%	69%	65%

Achieving for Children have been commissioned to develop a comprehensive quality assurance framework. A very detailed draft was presented to the November Improvement Board, covering auditing processes, practice standards, the role of managers, scrutiny and leadership. This draft will now be consulted on with staff and it is intended to be fully implemented early next year.

The Heads of Service meet with their Service Delivery and Unit managers on a weekly basis to go through the performance information. This should help drive improvements in practice but progress is hindered by the size of caseloads in some parts of the service, the quality and consistency of management oversight and the additional demands on social workers and managers due to a legacy of reduced business support and inefficiencies in the I.T. system.

The Council has also strengthened the role of scrutiny since the inspection. Over-view and scrutiny committee will monitor the delivery of the improvement plan and a children and young people scrutiny panel has been set up to look at issues in more depth. The Chair of over-view and scrutiny is committed to improving the effectiveness of the committee and he has recently attended LGA training to assist him. It will be important to work with the Improvement Board to co-ordinate activity and share information to avoid duplication of effort.

12. Other service issues

Public Law Outline and legal proceedings

Demand is also increasing, in particularly in relation to legal proceedings. This is likely to be partly due to a previous failure to use Public Law Outline pre-proceedings now being addressed. The numbers have risen from 76 S.31 proceedings in 2015/16 to 113 in 2016/17.

This represents a 49% increase and is in line with figures provided by CAFCASS for the whole of the London Boroughs. For this year demand in Croydon is increasing at a higher rate with currently over 100 cases in proceedings.

The previous Director Early help and Children social care did not actively support the use of PLO and this can be seen in the reduction from 24 cases in 2015/16, to only 4 cases in September 2016. This is likely to have contributed to the relatively high number of cases where emergency action has had to be taken to safeguard children. The Executive Director has reinforced the need for PLO to be used where appropriate and as of 30th October 2017 the number had risen to 27 cases.

Children with disabilities

Support for children with disabilities and Special Educational Needs moved from children's services to adults in November 2016 as part of a newly formed 0-65 disability service. The Council had made the decision the previous year to set up this service. A new Assistant Director post was established and appointed to, to manage the service. It was intended that this would provide a seamless transition into services for over 18s, but with clear links to Children's Social Care who were to provide supervision and oversight of statutory child care processes. The service suffered from similar issues as other parts of children's services, characterised by poor data and poor performance on key indicators such as visiting.

The Assistant Director has brought in a new Head of Service for children's social care to implement a detailed action plan to improve the quality of practice. Performance is being monitored alongside the rest of children's services, and the relationship between the two parts of the service is being reviewed and strengthened.

The Council has recently decided that the Special Educational Needs responsibilities are better placed under the Director of Education to ensure stronger links with schools and this will transfer in January 2018.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) and care leavers

Croydon has high numbers of looked after UASC as a result of the Home Office presence in Croydon. At any time about 50% of the children in care are UASC. Currently there are 332 UASC under 18s in care. The vast majority of those are boys and the highest numbers originate from Albania (123) and Afghanistan (95). The same mix is represented in Croydon's care leaver group. Of the total of 725, 526 are boys. 160 (26 girls) originated from Albania and 122 (1 girl) from Afghanistan.

The Council has made representations to government about the financial cost of the large UASC group as national funding does not tend to cover the full cost of their care and support. This group is supported by dedicated social workers and managers. Ofsted noted in their inspection that they generally receive a good service.

Looked after children

The high proportion of UASC and the issues this raises for the Council seems to have had more focus than the issues presented in relation to the needs of local Croydon looked after children and the outcomes they achieve. For example, of the over 100 care leavers attending university only 10% do not come from a UASC background. Once the UASC numbers are taken out the percentage of looked after children is relatively low, which may be linked to poor planning, and drift and delay in allocated cases. It is likely that this number may rise, as has been seen with legal proceedings, as practice begins to improve.

The population of local looked after children is lower than statistical neighbours. As of March 2017, there were 400 local looked after children and 393 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. In this reporting period, the numbers of local looked after children and UASC have increased marginally. When separated, the local looked after children number is lower than London and national averages, however, the combined number is higher.

The service produced a detailed sufficiency strategy in relation to looked after children earlier this year. In the light of all the challenges facing the service that are now better understood, it is timely and sensible to review this strategy, and in particular the actions relating to its delivery to ensure that good planning is in place to meet the needs of both local looked after children and UASC effectively.

The voice of children and young people has not been sufficiently sought and used to help drive improvements. Recently the lead member and the Executive Director have re-launched the Children in Care Council and are reviewing and strengthening the Corporate Parenting Panel. The lead member is determined that this panel will be more effective at working with young people and ensuring their issues are addressed.

Missing children

Croydon performs poorly on its response to missing children and ensuring that they are identified, are offered return home interviews (RHIs) and are supported effectively. As the London authority with the highest number of young people, Croydon has the highest number of children reported missing. This is a significant issue for the Council and its partners. The numbers are affected by the large number of looked after children placed within the Authority, both those looked after by Croydon and those placed within Croydon by other Local Authorities.

Overall, in 2016-17, there were 2,672 reports of children being missing to the police in Croydon. These referred to 574 separate individuals of which 41.5% were children looked after by LB Croydon, 19% were children looked after by other authorities, 40.5% were regarding children living at home. In any month about 100 children are reported missing and 30% were being offered a return home interview. The service has now started to address this and has established a dedicated missing team, comprising business support staff and two RHI staff, following up on improved daily reporting.

13. Council Corporate Support

Finance

The service faces significant financial challenges. In February the Test of Assurance report noted that *'there are considerable financial pressures with increasing budget overspends. The overspend includes looked after children placements, the underfunded costs for unaccompanied asylum seekers, additional costs arising from a high use of agency staff, additional staffing to meet demand and to support a newly qualified permanent social work workforce, and court ordered assessments in Care Proceedings. Plans to reduce expenditure include better demand management and reducing agency staff through investing in newly qualified social workers.'*

It will take time to address these issues which remain very similar to date.

Positively, the Council has acted since the inspection to provide additional resource and therefore greater security to children's services. Over £2 million has been allocated for this year to fund additional social work staff, quality assurance and performance management support, support for the ICT systems and improvements in response to children who go missing, those at risk of CSE and youth violence.

In addition a provisional allocation of £10 million growth has been agreed to go into the 18/19 budget to be allocated to: meeting demand, increasing size of staffing structure, increased business support, commissioning and support for early help / prevention.

ICT and business support

A new electronic social care recording system, Liquid Logic was brought in to the service in 2014, partly in response to the issues identified in the 2012 Ofsted inspection. This is a system used by many authorities providing good performance and management information, and relatively easy for social workers to use. However, in Croydon it was poorly implemented and aspects of the system that simplify recording for social workers were not included. For example, forms that are essential to the social work task are not embedded in the system so information cannot be pulled across to other documents, and those forms tend to be saved as word documents which social workers then have to spend time scanning onto children's records.

Since the inspection the Director of Customer and Corporate Services and the Head of Business Support and customer are working with the service to address this and other issues. However, the number of changes needed is significant and it will take months to deliver what is needed. In the meantime, agreement has been given to increase the level of business support in the service.

14. Workforce

Since the inspection there has also been a significant increase in the level of corporate HR support to assist with the range of children's services workforce issues. Prior to this much of the recruitment responsibility had been devolved to the service and was an additional task for operational managers to deal with. There was also insufficient knowledge about the workforce and analysis of the challenges facing the service.

This has now changed and the Improvement Board is receiving up to date detailed and accurate information. However, that detail is not available for previous years. The Council recognises that the lack of workforce planning in the last 3 years contributed to the service failings. The new focus on analysis of data and the stronger working relationship between the service leads, human resources and the performance team is a key factor in anticipating a positive change in understanding and addressing the workforce issues.

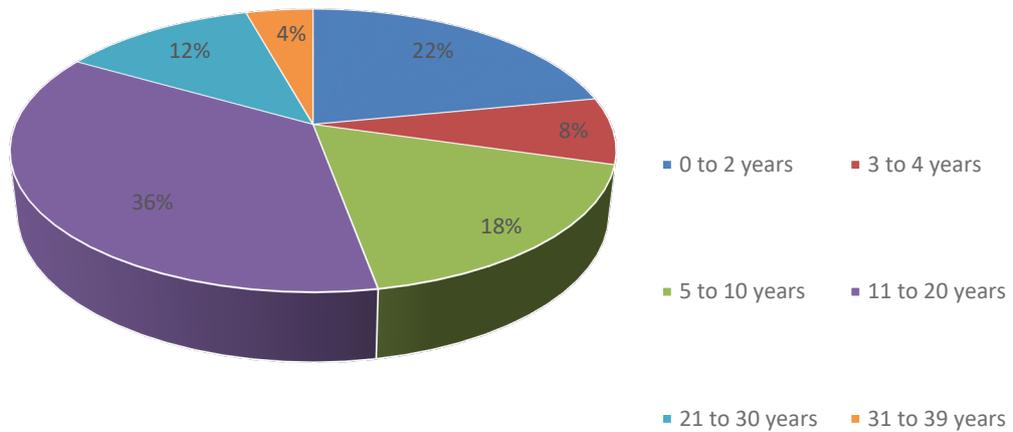
Currently Croydon's social care workforce tells two stories; a salaried workforce with more than 50% of Social Workers with 10 years or more experience and a high agency locum rate (37.7%) with 24% of these assigned to Croydon for longer than two years, demonstrating some stability within its workforce.

Social care has struggled with recruitment and retention of social workers for some years. In 2016 it was decided to try to improve the ratio of permanent staff through the recruitment of high numbers of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs). This is a common approach in many authorities as it is hard to recruit experienced staff. However, it is critical that NQSWs are well supported and given managed and limited caseloads in their first assessed year of practice (ASYE). Croydon's recruitment of ASYEs during 2016 was poorly coordinated. Between the period June 2016 – September 2017 42 ASYE's, including 16 Frontline graduates joined children's social care, including the children with disabilities team. The majority of this cohort who came in 2016 have now completed their one-year programme. Their ASYE journey has been challenging with high caseloads and inconsistent experience of supervision and training which was highlighted in the Ofsted Report.

Arrangements for the intake of Newly Qualified Social Workers to an ASYE year in 2017 has reflected on these experiences and learning from feedback from the 2016 cohort. The programme of learning and support has been reviewed and improved. An ASYE Forum has been established, chaired by Executive Director People and attended by the Lead Member. These will meet bi monthly over the next year.

Workforce and coordination of case data with the performance team within the Council is enabling the development of a recruitment strategy; identifying vacancies and targeting where recruitment is necessary. The strategy will be a blend of recruitment and retention activity intended to create a stable and sustainable workforce, from placement and supported ASYE practice through to revised career pathways; and a strong but honest recruitment branding to attract new talent.

Chart showing the % of social workers across the service and the # of years experience they have



Employee relation casework within Children’s Social Care is high, with a total number of 20 cases recorded as at April 2017. Sickness levels as reported in the statutory return has increased. The absence rate is above the overall Council’s target of 7 days absent per year.

There are 127 agency Social Workers including managers, representing 37.7% of the total social work workforce.

Headcount of Social Workers			
	30 September 2015	September 2016	September 2017
Total No of Social Workers Salaried	188	209	210
Total number of agency workers	92	92	127
Total Workforce	280	301	337
Agency % of workforce	32.9%	30.6%	37.7%

Croydon’s turnover rate with permanent staff has generally fallen under the 2016 national turnover rate of 15.1%. Turnover did increase in 2016 with 26 resignations, 2 age retirements and 2 dismissals (long term sickness and disciplinary).

Post Inspection more detailed workforce data monitoring has focused on workforce in specific teams to better understand where the biggest pressures are.

October 2017 Data Monitoring				
Team	Total No of Social Workers October 2017	Headcount Agency Social Workers	Headcount Salaried Grade 11+ Social Workers	Headcount ASYE - 2017 Programme
CiN - Assessment	32	16	9	7
CiN - Care Planning	65	34	24	7
LAC - Permanence	45	11	34	0
Children with Disabilities	21	12	7	2
Total	226	91	119	16

Whilst levels of agency staff are high across the whole service within Child Protection and Children in Need, 51% are agency workers. In contrast, 24% of the workforce within Looked After Children service are agency.

Caseloads vary across the service with the highest average caseload held in the assessment teams. In September average caseloads in those teams was 28, but 18.5 across the whole service. In care planning it was 17, permanence 14, children with disabilities 19. The average caseload for ASYEs is high at 22.9, as many ASYEs are in the assessment teams. In care planning teams the complexity of cases is also a factor, which with the low level of business support and inefficiencies of the case record system, make it more difficult for social workers to have sufficient time to undertake good intervention with children and their families.

15. Views of staff

Following the inspection, the Chief Executive, Executive Director and new interim Director held a number of sessions with all staff in early September, to talk about the findings and how they would be addressed. For a number of weeks informal 'sprint sessions' (one hour drop in sessions to talk about specific issues such as recruitment) were held. A board has been put up in the office for staff to put post it notes of suggestions and comments. Further staff sessions are planned and staff are being consulted on specific matters such as the developing quality assurance framework.

The Executive Director has established a staff reference group and one of the social workers represents this group as a member of the Improvement Board. In his view the actions taken since the inspection are yet to impact on the front line. Staff are concerned about workload and this has a negative impact on morale. The comments below come from these sessions or have been told to me directly:

'Change in Croydon slow, not enough of us to do what's needed well'

'Disconnect between corporate and children's services, chief executive probably had no idea '

'Ludicrous situation of SWs having to answer phones and scan documents'

16. Partnership

Croydon as an outer London authority is funded less well than its inner London neighbours and this creates challenges for the Council, health and schools to develop and retain services to meet the demands of a population with a high level of need. All agencies talk about the pressures of workloads, for example the expected caseload for a health visitor is a maximum of 400 children, but in Croydon this is more likely to be 650. In these circumstances it is essential that there is good collaboration to make best use of stretched organisations to maximise co-ordination and joint working. Comments from health, police, head teachers and CAMHS all indicate that good strategic planning for children and young people has not been in place in Croydon in recent years. I was told that there are *'so many meetings going on, improved governance needed to reduce duplication and having right people round the table. Too often we are dealing with crisis high risk end, but need to get more involved in prevention. How do we get collective decision making on what needs to happen?'* Given the scale of the problems to be addressed it is urgent that the Council take a lead in moving this forward.

There is good representation at the Improvement Board and at the CSCB and an expressed commitment to tackle this. The Chief Executive has pushed for children and young people to be the priority for the Local Strategic Partnership. This intent needs to be supported by clear direction and greater clarity on how agencies will work together better on issues such as early help, tackling serious youth violence, supporting families experiencing domestic violence.

17. Croydon Safeguarding Children Board (CSCB)

The CSCB was judged by Ofsted to be inadequate. The failings were in line with the independent consultant who had reviewed the Board earlier in the year.

It is likely that the Board had not operated well for some years. The independent chair who had held the role prior to the chair in post at the time of the inspection, resigned in February 2016 giving as her reasons that neither the then Chief Executive nor the then Executive Director had responded sufficiently to her concerns. Her concerns related to both practice issues and to the lack of performance information.

A new independent chair was appointed in March 2016 to lead both the children and the adult's boards. Immediately after the inspection the Chief Executive accepted the resignation of the chair, and appointed an experienced interim chair to lead the Children's Safeguarding Board forward. A decision was taken, in discussion with key statutory partners to separate out the adults Safeguarding Board and the CSCB and recruit separate Chairs for the next 2 years. This is in recognition of the extent of improvement needed in children's services, whilst ensuring the safeguarding needs of adults are not neglected.

The Board had published its annual report covering the period 2016/17. This is a very comprehensive and descriptive report. There is mention of some positives including effective work by the LSCB to engage with young people and respond to identified need, clear commitment from the CSCB partners to work together to protect vulnerable children and effective practice to support Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. However, there is little evidence of activity of the Board that demonstrates improvement to services and outcomes for children. The relatively high number of serious case reviews and learning reviews will have been time consuming. Board members have commented on this and the difficulty in responding effectively to the range of recommendations and lessons learnt.

The new chair has held a Development day with Board members, reviewed the priorities of the Board and streamlined the structure of the sub groups, including establishing an executive group comprising the Local Authority, police, and the CCG to drive forward the business of the Board. Under the new chair the Board has agreed to focus on effective challenge and appropriate prioritisation, scrutiny and monitoring of frontline practice, a focus on outcomes and making a difference for children. The agreed priorities are CSE and missing children, developing and using a multi-agency data set, and monitoring the effectiveness of early help, in addition to progressing a neglect strategy and looking at the common themes from the Serious Case Reviews to prioritise learning. Under the strong direction of the new chair it is much more likely the Board will be purposeful and help drive the improvements needed.

18. Serious Case Reviews (SCRs)

Since 2013 the CSCB has initiated or been party to 10 serious case reviews, 2 of which were published during 2017. 4 were commissioned during 2016 /2017. 3 were joint with another authority. In addition, there were 2 learning reviews this year, one joint with another authority, 2 domestic homicide reviews and one that has been published this year.

Many of the reviews identify similar concerns regarding quality of practice that are covered elsewhere in this report. Undertaking this number of reviews has been a substantial workload for the Board. There has been insufficient analysis of themes and lessons, and not enough attention to using the knowledge from the reviews to inform and improve practice. The new chair has made this one of the priorities for the Board.

19. Analysis of progress, capacity and improvement

In 2012 children's services were judged by Ofsted to be adequate. There was then a long gap of 5 years before a further inspection, which was the limited joint targeted area inspection during 2016, looking at the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect. The JTAI in 2016 did result in focused attention on the MASH and front door, but overall seems to have been considered as a much more positive outcome than close reading of the letter suggests. Indeed, in a report to cabinet in July this year it was described as an inspection '*which praised much of Croydon's practice*'.

Prior to the Ofsted inspection this year there were clear indications that the quality of practice was not good enough, with too much drift and delay, insufficient clarity on managing risk, and inconsistent management oversight on cases. This is a common theme in the reviews undertaken by the incoming Executive Director People. However, those issues were identified in the JTAI and were known within the service before then. Croydon had not developed a strong performance culture and has only recently improved the accuracy of its data, and processes whereby managers were expected to account for the performance of their teams.

The self-assessment prepared for the recent Ofsted inspection was over optimistic about the quality of practice. Whilst there was recognition of the need for improvement, there was too little sense of the need for urgency to address longstanding problems. Ofsted inspectors described a lack of prioritisation and timely action which resulted in too many children remaining at risk of escalating or actual harm characterised by drift and delay

Both the lead member and the chair of scrutiny have recognised during the period of this review that neither role was being fulfilled with enough rigour and focus to provide effective challenge to the service. The Croydon Safeguarding Children Board had a high number of reviews to progress and did not develop effective monitoring of the wider safeguarding system to provide appropriate challenge and delivery of change.

The new Executive Director had a large workload as described in the Test of Assurance she commissioned. In addition to the challenges facing children's services there were significant strategic matters in adult services requiring attention. At that time the pressures were added to by the need to respond to the local tram disaster, and leading the national response to the closing down of the Calais 'jungle'. The specific reviews covering children's services including early help, the LSCB, and children in need all required considerable action and impetus to follow up quickly and effectively. However, at the time the management of children's services was very lean and responsibility for action mainly fell to the small group of senior managers.

The ability of social workers in Croydon to do a good job is hindered by a number of factors. The reduction of business support left social workers and managers spending time on administrative activities rather than on direct work with children and families. Whilst liquid logic had been seen as the key to practice improvement the fact that it was poorly implemented meant that the use of the system was compromised. There were too many inexperienced newly qualified social workers recruited to meet rising demand who had insufficient support and too many cases to do a good job. Key practice issues were not addressed over recent years, including limited use of the Public Law Outline, lack of clarity in relation to thresholds and access to early help, improving management oversight of decisions and meeting basis performance standards.

Corporate interest and support for children's services has changed markedly since the inspection. This has had some immediate positive impact such as securing financial investment and additional business support. The Leader and Chief Executive have been clear that children's services are now the corporate priority, and children and young people will also be the priority of the Local Strategic Partnership. This is important and encouraging but it is too early to say if this level of commitment and support can be maintained for the period it will take to turn around services and sustain future high quality. The responsibilities of the Executive Director People have been reduced for a period of 6 months to allow her to focus on the DCS role. A new interim Director of Early Help and Social Care, plus 2 new experienced permanent Heads of Service have joined the service recently bringing much needed capacity and expertise.

Going forward it will be essential to put in place robust quality assurance, supported by good Council wide governance arrangements, with opportunities taken to bring in external support and challenge. Given the recent history it will take time to restore confidence in the service but this will be assisted by better knowledge of the service, and of the wider children's system, and assurance that concerns are understood and being addressed. The culture of the service will need to change to one where there are much higher expectations in relation to standards, and staff are expected, supported and encouraged to respond positively to this. Croydon also needs to develop an environment where passion for making a difference for children, professional curiosity and an openness to learning and challenge is the norm. A place where everyone has an active role to play and the conditions for good social work to thrive are firmly established.

The independent chair of the Improvement Board is experienced in this role and will ensure good and challenging over-sight of the delivery of the Improvement Plan. Alongside this the new chair of the CSCB is clear about the changes needed in the way that Board operates. Both Boards are multi-agency and provide the forums to understand and secure partner contribution going forward. Under the current Ofsted framework, where children's services have been judged inadequate, the Council will be subject to monitoring visits at 3 monthly intervals, which will provide additional external scrutiny of progress.

From experience we know that it will take at least 18 months to two years to address the scale of the change needed in Croydon in relation to practice, the infrastructure to support good social work, and the embedding of multi-agency effective system leadership.

20. Conclusion

In undertaking this review, I was required to bring together evidence to assess the council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the council.

It is clear that over a number of years there has been insufficient attention paid to the experience of social workers in Croydon Council, too little understanding of what was happening within the service, and limited awareness of the negative impact this was having on children and young people. The effectiveness of action to address known concerns has been hindered by the scale of the change needed and the limited management capacity to drive this forward.

The Leadership of the Council has demonstrated their commitment to children's services in their response to the inspection. The scale of the challenge is such that it is likely that it will take a period of at least 18 months to 2 years to bring about the degree of change needed in all aspects of service delivery. Croydon is just at the beginning of a comprehensive improvement programme, and will need to sustain the commitment and focus over this period of time and beyond if improvements are to be embedded and sustained.

At this time, I believe the Council should retain responsibility for managing children services and should be given time to drive the improvements forward. However, I do not consider that they have the necessary capacity and expertise within the service, to undertake this effectively and quickly without support.

21. Options and Recommendations

During the period of the review I have considered with the Council options for securing such support. The political and officer leadership are positive about this way forward and keen to develop an agreement with another London authority to provide intensive peer support. Camden Council have been approached and have expressed a willingness to help. The focus is likely to be mentoring, coaching and supporting managers and practitioners, in addition to providing clear evidence of processes and systems that work. Camden have very recently been inspected and judged good, with outstanding for leadership and management. Initial discussions have taken place, to explore priority areas for involvement. This is a very positive first step.

Further work is needed to consider the potential scope, timing and resourcing of support, and whether this will be sufficient to provide the capacity and expertise needed to help deliver the Improvement Plan.

Recommendations

1. Croydon Council should work with Camden Council to agree how Camden managers can provide immediate support in the areas of highest priority. This is likely to include developing the front door response, and providing mentoring support for key Croydon managers.
2. Over the next 3 months Croydon Council should work with Camden Council to develop a more substantive proposal and arrangement to help Croydon for a minimum period of at least a year.
3. The DFE should provide support for a period of at least 3 months to help facilitate the establishment of agreed longer term intensive peer support arrangements.
4. If it does not prove possible to agree an arrangement with Camden as proposed, alternatives will need to be considered.

Eleanor Brazil

Children's Commissioner in Croydon

4th December 2017

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