

Scrutiny Report for Elected Members

Children's Social Care: an update

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1. Introduction

This document provides members with a summary assessment of the status and circumstances of Croydon Children's Social Care and Family Support Service. As a starting point a national and local context to providing statutory child protection services, is given. The report then summarises the recent organisational developments and current operational performance. There is a brief summary of recent work by the Local Safeguarding Children Board, along with an analysis of the current challenges facing the service, and plans for the year to come. This report focuses on children's social care and does not cover the work of early help services.

2. Setting the scene

Nationally, the social work profession, especially as it is represented in statutory Children's Social Care (CSC), has, over recent years, been under a constant state of change¹. For example; in the past three years the profession, (as a result of the death of Peter Connelly 'Baby P'), has undergone a total review (Munro: 2010, 2011 & 2012), which, through its acceptance by government, reset the national expectations for social care, shifting the emphasis from assessment and statutory intervention, to the quality of intervention by social workers to facilitate positive change in families. Central government continues to deliver new guidance, such as a new national framework for safeguarding, 'Working Together' in April 2013. The national inspection regime has also significantly changed, with OFSTED implementing a new framework for the inspection of children's social care, (published in October 2013 and implemented in November 2013) which further raises the bar of expectation. Local Authorities across the country have seen a rise in referrals, an increase in child abuse, domestic violence and in children coming into the care system (e.g. Community Care: 2013). At the same time media criticism has led to a tendency to 'pathologise' professionals (Cooper *et al*; 2003) which has helped to produce a difficult national market in which to recruit social care professionals.

Children's Social Care has responsibility to support children who are identified (by partners such as Police, Education and Health, families and members of the public) as achieving the threshold of being 'in need' or in 'need of protection from significant harm'. Where children achieve one of these two thresholds then Children's Social Care are mandated to intervene and provide services. Where the intervention fails to improve the child's welfare or where the child is still being significantly harmed then Children's Social Care is mandated to take legal action in order to compel parents to comply with an agreed care plan². If parents fail to comply then alternatives must be found for children such as placing children with extended family members, or in foster care or, in an increasing number of cases, for adoption.

What we are discovering nationally and locally is that the circumstances of vulnerable children are becoming increasingly complex. In Croydon social workers and colleagues

¹ The repetitive cycle of change can have the effect of masking the needs-resources tension. (Hughes & Pengally; 1997).

² Significant harm is the legal threshold used by local authorities to initiate care proceedings.

across the multi-agency network are increasingly confronted with complex cases of child abuse and neglect. In Croydon the demographic makeup of the borough is changing as more and more vulnerable families move into the borough as inner London housing costs increase and benefit payments reduce. For example over the past year there has been a 20% increase in the numbers of 'transfers' of children into Croydon who are subject to child protection plans, from other boroughs. Children and families who are coming to the attention of police and social care have increasingly complex needs often featuring one or more of the following issues: immigration difficulties, domestic violence, cultural differences and expectation in parenting (e.g. physical chastisement, child labour, female genital mutilation, honour based violence and forced marriage), the intergenerational transmission of child abuse, child poverty or a combination of these factors. Greater complexity in the needs of children places increased pressure on CSC to recruit social workers who hold the required level of skill to work within this complexity. This increase in complexity is reflected in crime statistics for issues such as violence (including sexual violence) against women and girls, GBH and ABH where children are the victim and the levels of children who temporarily go missing. This means Croydon Children's Social Care and Family Support Service (CSC) is under increased pressure to meet an increasing complex level of demand.

3. Service developments

Croydon Children's Social Care and Family Support Service is on a journey of improvement, modernisation and development. The service was last inspected in May 2012 when it was found to be adequate, with good capacity to improvement. Given the improvement needs, combined with the increasing demand and complexity of cases, and the constraints of the resource environment, the journey to enable the service to be functioning at a consistently 'good' level is only part-way through. Much has been achieved, and these achievements are summarised below. However, challenges remain, especially in attracting quality professional and experienced social workers and managers to Croydon. The senior management team are currently driving through numerous organisational, structural and practice changes to meet the demands identified in this report.

a. Restructure

During 2013 the service went through a major restructuring to enable it to become fit-for-purpose for the new national agenda. As part of this process a layer of front line management was removed.

b. Training and development

Improving the quality of practice to deliver the new national agenda is a major task. During 2013 there were three major initiatives to support staff to develop their practice:

⌚ The restructure provided the opportunity to establish a small team of so-called

consultant practitioners, experienced social workers who work alongside front-line social workers to model and support practice.

- ⌚ A programme of training and support was commissioned to enable social workers to develop their thinking and practice in terms of their role in working with families. This enabled social workers, for example, to develop hypotheses about issues in their families and to develop appropriate interventions in relation to these hypotheses.
- ⌚ A programme of systemic family therapy training has been commissioned, to strengthen the analytical tools used by social workers. Taster sessions have been provided for all social workers and the first cohort of 50 social workers is currently going through this training. By using this theory in practice it is expected that social workers will increase their ability to become '*agents of change*' thereby increasing the resilience of the organisation. In turn, managers will use systemic theory when planning interventions as well when managing organisational change.

c. Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub

In 2013 Children's Social Care, working with the partnership, established a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub. This hub co-locates professionals from social care, the Police, probation, education and health (along with their relevant data systems), who receive referrals and share information so that the appropriate route of intervention can more quickly be determined. Croydon's MASH is located in Bernard Weatherhill House, and went live in October 2013.

d. Strengthening Families model for child protection conferences

In early 2013, after consultation with partners, the service introduced a new model for conducting child protection conferences. This new model, referred to as the Strengthening Families approach, seeks to better recognise the strengths of the family, and to better engage and involve the family, as well as partners, in the child protection conference process. This new process has been externally evaluated and reported to the Local Safeguarding Children Board, and this evaluation has indicated significant benefits to the new model as a result of its more productive approach.

e. Children's Recording System (CRS)

An important tool for social care is the electronic social care record. The system which had been in place in Croydon was recognised as being so 'clunky' that it was no longer fit for purpose. A major project has been underway to install a new system and to migrate all the previous file notes into the new system. In October 2013 Croydon CSC went live with CRS. CRS is an electronic case file system which is based on a work flow system. It is a

proven system and provides highly sophisticated performance related information and is considered a fundamental tool to manage cases, to manage staff as well as to allocate resources and identify gaps in systems and practices. CRS also allows any practitioner to look at any case at any time, meaning case work is transparent and social workers and managers can more easily be held to account.

e. Recruitment

Like all local authorities, Croydon Children Social Care is experiencing difficulties in recruiting suitably skilled and knowledgeable professional social workers within its frontline services. This means that we remain dependent upon agency staff to a greater extent than we would wish. The mean across the entire service for agency social workers is 42% over the past eight months and 38% for managers for the same period. Croydon Council has recently mounted a national recruitment and retention campaign, which includes a range of retention packages for experienced social workers who want to work within the children in need and looked after services. This recruitment strategy should ameliorate, in the medium term, (3 – 6 months) the identified concerns over budgetary pressures and the quality of practice. There are additional strategies to recruit and retain social workers and managers in operational teams by encouraging agency staff to assimilate into permanent roles. We are also participating in the national Frontline initiative, training 12 graduates on the job, with very positive feedback from the national organisation about Croydon’s engagement in this process.

d. Quality Assurance

We are working to strengthen our culture of quality assurance and learning. One strand of this is to use the opportunities provided through the implementation of the new Children’s Recording System to be able to improve operational performance management. As another strand of this work we are seeking to strengthen the understanding of the experience of the child and family by social workers, managers and elected members. We regularly need to take stock of children and families experiences of social work services in Croydon in order to improve our service delivery. A more systemic process of data gathering is being developed to inform managers about the quality and gaps in practice which in turn will inform our on-going learning and development framework.

4. Operational performance

OVERVIEW

	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	2013/14 YTD
# of all contacts	2,196	2,188	2,205	2,189	2,043	1,772	1,517	1,635	1,125	16,870
# contacts not relating to open cases	1,870	1,871	1,962	1,964	1,856	1,609	929	996	752	13,809
# of referrals	324	353	251	252	220	236	320	390	347	2,693
# of completed	313	284	213	136	138	119	115	213	266	1,797

assessments										
	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	2013/14 YTD
Total # CIN*	527	563	549	495	469	414	458	455	416	416
(New CIN)*	17	14	15	13	9	15	14	12	16	125
Total # CPP	315	298	304	312	332	339	301	385	385	385
(New CPP)	31	22	42	43	31	31	30	24	14	14
Total # LAC	727	727	734	752	769	774	779	809	819	819
(New LAC)	18	32	26	49	42	34	34	45	29	29
No. LAC also subject to a CPP	11	11	13	22	24	17	20	21	15	15

CIN: Child In Need. CPP: Child Protection Plan. LAC: Looked After Children

In comparing data from April to September 2012 to the same time this year there has been an increase in contacts by 600. (Contacts are requests for a service, many of which will not achieve CSC’s threshold and will be diverted to early help and preventative services, but which nevertheless require consideration). In 88% of contacts the children were not previously known to Children’s Social Care. Again comparing the data in the same time frame contacts progressing to referral have declined. The mean for contacts progressing to referral in the six months of April – September 2012 was 18.6% whereas in the same time in 2013 the mean was 11.5%. There are at least two hypotheses that can be drawn from this:

- ⌚ that the so-called ‘step down’ process is working and that cases are being stepped down to appropriate early help services³;
- ⌚ and/or that s.17 and s.47 thresholds are being more rigorously enforced through the MASH.

In benchmarking the number of referrals to social care with other London boroughs, Croydon appears to sit around the average, sharing referral numbers with Camden and Haringey. As with the national experience, the Police is the main referrer. In Croydon, Health Services are the second largest referrer. Numbers of referrals are low for YOT and Prison / Probation. The data does highlight a large number of referrals from other Local Authorities. These referrals will include requests for a transfer-in child protection conference. The data above can be linked to the high level of referrals in Croydon which relate to physical abuse/likelihood of physical harm from domestic violence and families where substance mis-use and mental health are factors where children are considered to be in need or at risk of significant harm.

³ A more systematic process is now in place across the thresholds or tiers of services from 1 (universal) 2 (Targeted services for vulnerable children) 3 (complex needs) and 4 (statutory child protection, children with disability, children with severe mental health problems, care proceedings). The idea is that following a social care intervention cases are stepped-down to a supportive less formal intervention managed through a CAF (Common Assessment and Team Around the Child).

There has been a reduction in the numbers of open Children in Need cases. This has occurred mainly due to the planned approach to close down (CIN) cases that have been open longer than one year and where a CIN service is no longer appropriate. The purpose of this is to ensure that social work resources are more effectively targeted on active, shorter-term interventions for Children in Need. Where appropriate, CIN cases have been 'stepped down' to other early help services. All remaining CIN cases have an up to date plan.

The overview shows us that the numbers of children subject to child protection plans is rising. There are a number of reasons for this, for example:

- ⌚ There has been an increase in the number of families whose children are subject to child protection plans elsewhere in the country who have moved into Croydon.
- ⌚ There is an increased need in the borough (as evidenced through both increasing numbers of children and increasing levels of deprivation) and or professionals are identifying an increase in harm to children and reporting it appropriately.
- ⌚ Partner agencies may escalate concerns because they are not yet sufficiently confident to work with an issue as part of an early help package. The partnership is working to support developments in this area, e.g. in autumn 2013 a new strategy for children's emotional well-being and mental health was developed; and updated guidance is currently being produced to clarify early help pathways (in the light of the introduction of the MASH).

In terms of the numbers of children who are looked after, again we have seen a steady increase. Again there are a number of hypotheses for this: There has been an increase in the numbers of unaccompanied minors requiring accommodation, in particular from Albania. There has been an increase in care proceedings. We are working to strengthen the work to reunify children with their families especially in working with young people aged 12 – 15 where there has been a family breakdown.

REFERRALS LEADING TO ASSESSMENT

	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	2013/14 YTD
No. of referrals	324	353	251	252	220	236	320	390	347	2693
... of which the no. leading to an assessment (Referrals outcomed as requiring an assessment)	291	310	217	226	207	213	264	302	251	2281
% of referrals leading to an assessment	90%	88%	86%	90%	94%	90%	83%	77%	72%	85%

The data above shows only a small percentage of Croydon's overall referrals result in 'no further action', with the large majority of referrals progressing to a single assessment.

TIMESPAN OF COMPLETION OF ASSESSMENT FORMS

	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	2013/14 YTD
1 -15 days	185	189	109	49	29	17	19	157	137	891
16 - 25 days	44	20	24	3	8		8	32	19	158
26 - 35 days	17	46	24	11	9	12	10	13	24	166
36 - 45 days	21	13	23	1	7	7	8	2	37	119
45 days +	44	15	33	70	82	78	70	9	49	450
Grand Total	311	283	213	134	135	114	115	213	266	1784

The national review by Professor Munro emphasised the importance of the quality of assessment, rather than the previous focus on the timeliness of completion of assessments. The national expectation is that social workers now have to complete an assessment within 45 working days. Due to the pressures of increased demand, the service did not achieve this deadline in too many cases; however there has been a significant improvement in completion within timescales recently.

CHILD PROTECTION PLANS

DURATION OF PLANS

	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	2013/14 YTD
No. of children currently subject to a CPP	315	298	304	312	332	339				339
% subject to a CPP for 0-12 months	80%	79%	79%	78%	79%	81%				81%
% subject to a CPP for 12-24 months	16%	17%	17%	17%	17%	15%				15%
% subject to a CPP for 24+ months	4%	4%	4%	5%	3%	4%				4%
No. CPP ceased in the month	20	39	28	41	9	25				162
No. ceased CPPs that lasted 2yrs+	3	1	0	0	0	2				6
% ceased CPPs that lasted 2yrs+ NI 64	15%	3%	0%	0%	0%	8%				4%

The rates of children becoming subject to child protection (CP) plans has increased year on year. Data from the same period last year indicated that the mean of children being placed on CP plans each month was 27.5. Over the same period this year the mean has risen to 33. There may be a variety of reasons for this increase, including the implementation of MASH (which enables the identification of issues more quickly), the changing nature of the child population in Croydon and increasing identification of

vulnerable children.

For those children who have become subject to a plan for a second time, the mean is 3.1 per month.

The data highlights a high percentage of cases, with domestic violence as a key feature. The concerns around substance misuse and parental mental health are also identified and are known features in serious case reviews. The conference process identifies resources, such as parenting classes, drug mis-use agencies and groups for perpetrators of domestic violence, to ensure risks are addressed for parents where parental capacity and behaviour was identified as a risk to children.

For September only 32% of children subject to a CP plan were visited within 20 working days. The mean for the last 6 months is 38.5% per 20 working days. That means in September 229 children were not seen in 20 working days with a mean for the 6 months of 164.5 children subject to a plan not seen in 20 working days. However there is some evidence to indicate that social workers are visiting children but not recording the visit – particularly in the early part of the above period when the old recording system was in use. The service is working to ensure all children, who are subject to a child protection plan, are seen regularly. For example all children who were subject to a child protection plan had been seen within a reasonable timescale by the end of November.

The Safeguarding and Quality Assurance team within CSC undertook an audit of child protection cases in Croydon in late 2013. The audit discovered, unsurprisingly, that the progression (quality) of work, in a timely manner, was largely dependent on the stability of the social worker and unit manager.

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

SUMMARY OF MOVEMENT IN LAC NUMBERS

	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	2013/14 YTD
Current indigenous LAC	420	416	418	430	445	442	432	446	449	449
Current UASC LAC	307	311	316	322	324	332	347	363	370	370
Current LAC total	727	727	734	752	769	774	779	809	819	819

PLACEMENT STABILITY - NO. OF PLACEMENTS

	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	2013/14 YTD
Total no. LAC with 3+ placements in last 12 months	78%	75%	67%	69%	64%	67%	72%	70%	65%	65.00%
Overall % LAC with 3+ placements in last 12 months	11%	10%	9%	9%	8%	9%	10%	9%	9%	9.00%

As noted early the service has witnessed a steady increase in the numbers of children becoming looked after. In 2013 we established a small 'rapid response' team to better prevent children coming into care, and this work is currently being evaluated. Placement stability remains relatively stable at 9% but we are not complacent about how we support placements to reduce placement breakdown.

The services work on Looked After Children is regularly reported to members via the Corporate Parenting Committee. Children's Services Corporate Parenting Strategy has nine priority areas for 2014, which are:

1. Increase Placement Stability (i.e. preventing children being moved from one foster placement to another because their behaviour is too difficult to manage).
2. Increase quality assurance in LAC services so the service can learn from complaints, learn from feedback as well as its KPIs.
3. Ensure all children with disabilities contribute to their reviews
4. Promote good attachments to carers
5. Ensure Permanence Plans for Adoption, Fostering, Special Guardianship Orders and Residence Orders are appropriate and timely
6. Safe Care delivery partnerships again to ensure that the quality assurance activities feed into learning and service improvement in LAC.
7. Ensure the views of LAC inform the improvement and design of services
8. Maintain low numbers of LAC involved in criminal activity
9. To reduce the numbers of Croydon and out of borough LAC going missing

5. Croydon's Local Safeguarding Children's Board

The last Annual Review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board was presented to the September 2013 Cabinet.

Some key developments to note since then include:

- 🕒 Children who go missing and who are at risk of sexual exploitation. Our partnership with the London Safeguarding Children's Board and the Metropolitan Police to develop practice to reduce the numbers of missing children has further strengthened. This is a particular issue for Croydon as there are many foster carers who provide foster placements for other London boroughs. We are seeking to develop new solutions to working with these other boroughs when the children go missing from Croydon.

- ⌚ Quality assurance: the partnership is working to further strengthen its quality assurance framework, for example through drawing in a wider range of data from partner agencies and by taking more account of the voice of the child and family.
- ⌚ Training and development: In autumn of 2013 the LSCB agreed a learning and development plan. This is being backed up by the bringing together of the LSCB training resource and the social care training resource into a joint Training and Development unit. This unit will support the implementation of the quality assurance framework and the learning and development framework for not only social workers but for all those professionals who work with children and families in Croydon by organising and quality assuring all training whilst also developing feedback systems with children and families and staff as well as coordinating audits and other data gathering activities to measure safeguarding practice improvements and to identify further gaps.
- ⌚ Serious Case Reviews: A series of training sessions on the learning from Serious Case Reviews (locally and nationally), were held for all partner agencies in Croydon in the later stages of 2013. As part of the evaluation of this training colleagues, partners who attended this training from across the Croydon partnership, identified other areas of safeguarding learning which have been added to the learning framework for 2014.
- ⌚ The board has reviewed and reframed its sub-groups, for example creating a group of oversee the work of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub; and bringing together the quality assurance and learning & development functions into one group.

In summary the CSCB is in an increasingly stronger and more confident position to lead safeguarding improvements across the Croydon Partnership.

6. Challenges and areas for further development

The challenges for the service relate to the increasing demands upon the service and the complexity of case work. This has implications for social workers as well as the wider partnership.

In brief the current challenges include:

1. Increased demand in numbers and complexity, which produces on-going and increased strain on service provision.
2. Recruiting, training and developing a permanent workforce. We need to ^{maximise} the impact on the current recruitment programme to recruit the necessary suitably qualified social workers.
3. Ensuring continuing improvement in operational issues and consistent delivery of standards, such as all child protection visits taking place in required timescales, and

for all child protection reports are shared with families prior to the conference.

4. Maximising the electronic recording system to its full potential, for example improving performance management and quality assurance within the service.
5. Considering the use of resources across the system, including early intervention. One strand of this work is to more effectively reduce the number of children coming into care. Another strand of this process is to further modernise the in-house Fostering service, by extending its capacity to provide support to foster children with complex needs. The department needs further focus on providing a quicker, more joined up response to reunify children, (especially the 11 – 15 age group), when they come into care in a crisis.
6. Ensuring we maximise the impact of current training and development programmes to support continuing improvements in quality, for example Implementing meaningfully systemic family therapy into case work.
7. Preparing for inspection under a new framework which raises the bar of expectations.

Managers are working to rigorously address the above issues.

Croydon's Children Social Care and Family Support is part way through its journey and process of transformation. Much has been achieved; however there is still a significant amount of work to be done to achieve a consistently good service.

7. The involvement of elected members

Elected members have an important role in scrutinising the safeguarding function, and formal scrutiny arrangements are part of this. The quality of scrutiny is enhanced to the extent that members also use other mechanisms to understand the service. We would like to discuss the sort of opportunities that members would like to engage with to help this process. Some suggestions are made below:

1. Visits and observations to the service, e.g. the MASH and Triage team.
2. Meeting children and families to understand their experiences of the services. Officers are keen for all layers of management and members to have direct 'line of sight' of the experience of children and families. Examples of how this might be achieved include:
 - a. attending the Children In Care Council,
 - b. accompanying social workers on home visits,
 - c. visiting foster carers to talk with both the carers and the children for whom they care.

Members could then feedback their experiences and their learning, which would contribute to the service's overall appreciation of the experience of children and families.

3. More safeguarding-focussed sessions as part of the member training programme.

Officers would welcome members' responses to the above suggestions as part of the scrutiny discussion.

References

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