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Dear Mr Henderson

Monitoring visit to Croydon local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Croydon local authority children's services on 16 and 17 October 2019. The visit was the seventh monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2017. The inspectors were Louise Hocking and Brenda McLaughlin, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Concerted and dynamic leadership continues to drive rapid progress in the quality of services for children in Croydon. Improvements were evident in almost all areas of practice reviewed during this monitoring visit. Progress over the last eight months has been sustained and is continuing to gain further momentum.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Services for children who receive support through a child protection plan or a child in need plan.
- Services offered to children who have a plan for adoption.

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

Overview

The leadership provided by the executive director and the director of early help and children's social care continues to drive progress at a sustained and rapid pace. This is reaping considerable rewards, and services for children are consistently improving.

Almost all children receive at least a reasonable level of service, and some practice is strong. Work with, and for, children is increasingly positive and purposeful, and staff are becoming more confident in their practice. Senior leaders and managers undertake regular and extensive audit activity to understand the experiences of children, and they have a clear and direct line of sight on practice. They are fully aware of the variability that remains in the quality of practice. This includes a group of children and families in receipt of child protection services who previously experienced poor practice, including drift in planning, and who are in need of skilled and purposeful attention. Appropriate action is now being taken to address this.

Findings and evaluation of progress

This monitoring visit predominantly focused on services for children with a child protection or child in need plan in the social work with families service. This is a large service, comprising 13 teams, which undertakes a wide range of work, including child in need, child protection, public law outline pre-proceedings work and care proceedings, and also supports some children in care. The scale and nature of the service, alongside the degree of risk being managed and the legacy of poor practice for some children, present some challenges. These challenges are clearly understood by the responsible managers.

Progress is evident in all areas of practice in this service. Many children benefit from thoughtful and persistent child-centred work that is making a difference to their lives. Children's views and voices increasingly inform the work undertaken. Direct work and positive engagement with children and families are evident in most cases, although this is not always fully reflected in the written records. Social workers know children well, and speak confidently about their role.

Children on either a child protection or a child in need plan are now visited more regularly, and social workers are more confident in the work that they are undertaking. All children have a plan in place, and these are appropriately developed through core group meetings. Some cases include strong evidence of partnership working. For some children, the written plan is too generic; these plans need to be clearer and more targeted to the specific areas of concern.

While most measures, including the frequency of visits and the review of plans, show significant improvement, variability and inconsistency remain. Progress for some children has been negatively affected by staff turnover and a legacy of drift. As a result, a small number of children have spent an extended period of time on child protection plans without purposeful work being undertaken, resulting in little or limited impact. Recent work is making a difference, and progress is beginning to be seen for some of these children. These cases demonstrate that thresholds for continuing or ending child protection plans have not been applied effectively. Managers and child protection chairs need to ensure that thresholds are clearly understood and that children only remain on a child protection plan when the relevant thresholds are met.

The process of cases being transferred from the assessment service to the social work with families service is not working smoothly for all children. Parallel planning does take

place, but the permanency planning meetings are not yet providing an effective forum for assisting social workers to think through the options and actions for robust permanency planning at the earliest stage.

Concerted oversight by senior leaders and managers has seen a reduction in the number of children on a child protection plan or child in need plan, as well as in the amount of pre-proceedings work being undertaken under the public law outline. The director of early help and children's social care is ensuring more robust decision-making at important thresholds. This includes chairing a weekly care panel, overseeing decisions to initiate care proceedings and providing oversight for children who have been on a child protection plan for more than 12 months.

Inspectors looked at a small number of cases of children with a plan for adoption. Casework shows that some improvements have been made to this area of practice. Active family finding is taking place, and potential matches are being pursued. Children, particularly young children, are being successfully placed in their adoptive homes. Managers have carried out a recent audit of cases for children who have a plan for adoption, and ensure an active oversight of adoption practice through file checks by the head of service. However, work is not consistently timely for all children. Permanency planning meetings are not yet driving planning with the necessary urgency or focusing sufficiently on assisting social workers with creative solutions to family finding.

Staff report being very happy working for Croydon. They are well supported and now have manageable caseloads. Staff commented very positively on the progress under the current leadership, describing a culture of open communication and a dedication to positive change. Staff valued the accessibility, availability and feedback from senior leaders and managers alike. The current average caseload in the social work with families service is just over 14, which is below the local authority's target of 16 for the service. Social workers have the time and space to undertake work with children, and an environment has been created to embed consistently positive work. Components of a learning culture and organisation are evident.

Significant progress has been made in supervision practice. Supervision now takes place regularly and is clearly recorded. Reflection and analysis are increasingly evident, although there is some variation in the recording of decisions and rationale. Staff value the reflective space of group supervision and commented positively on the range of training and development opportunities available to them. There are very positive early signs of the implementation of the recently launched systemic practice model, with some positive impact seen for children as a result of consultations between social workers and the systemic lead.

Senior managers have a comprehensive understanding of service developments, and they regularly and accurately update written self-assessments. The improvement plan is also regularly updated and is used effectively as a live document to measure progress and change. The plan is underpinned by an accurate analysis of strengths, improvements and challenges. Senior managers take prompt and concerted action to

tackle the challenges, demonstrating their determination to ensure positive and sustained improvements to outcomes for children.

Performance management systems have been considerably strengthened, and they provide leaders with reliable data on performance. These systems are underpinned by a comprehensive quality assurance framework and an extensive programme of audits, practice weeks, file reviews and appreciative inquiry reviews. Audit activity is effective in supporting the wider performance management and quality assurance framework. Impact can be seen through the local authority grading of casework that accurately demonstrates steadily improving practice generally, and through individual post-audit casework. An agreed process for 'closing the loop' to ensure that required actions are completed after all audits would strengthen this practice further.

Staff recruitment continues to be a challenge in Croydon, despite the persistent, widespread and creative efforts of the leadership team. The staff vacancy rate is over 40%, and some services, including the social work with families service, have vacancies. However, there are positive signs of progress and a stable, permanent, management team has been established. Agency staff are well supported and caseloads remain manageable.

In summary, senior managers are making consistent improvements, which are continuing to gain momentum. Senior and middle management teams are well placed to embed the changes and to ensure greater consistency in practice. The overall improvements to compliance, together with signs of strong practice, mean that they can now focus on improving the consistency of the quality of practice for all children.

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

Yours sincerely

Louise Hocking
Her Majesty's Inspector