

LONDON BOROUGH OF CROYDON

REPORT:	Cabinet	
DATE OF DECISION	4th December 2024	
REPORT TITLE:	Outcome of the Ofsted Inspection - Local Authority Children's Services	
CORPORATE DIRECTOR:	Debbie Jones, Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education	
LEAD MEMBER:	Councillor Maria Gatland, Lead Member for Children and Young People	
KEY DECISION?	No	N/A
CONTAINS EXEMPT INFORMATION?	No	Public
WARDS AFFECTED:	All	

1 SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report advises Cabinet of the outcome and findings from Ofsted's inspection of Croydon's Children's Services which concluded on 25th October 2024 and judged the Council's services for children as 'good', retaining the grade from the previous Ofsted judgement in March 2020 and ensuring Croydon continues to be in the majority of London boroughs achieving the 'good' judgement.
- 1.2 This judgement recognises how children's services have improved since the last inspection in 2020. Unusually for Ofsted, this report has highlighted the context in which Croydon has been operating, "against a backdrop of significant challenges", including the well documented legacy of financial mismanagement and governance failures.

This inspection outcome supports the Mayor's Business Plan priority for children and young people to.

- ensure children and young people have opportunities to learn, develop and fulfil their potential.
- make Croydon safer for young people.
- work closely with health services, police and the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector to keep vulnerable children and young people safe from harm.

Inspectors were notably impressed by the voices of children and young people being actively included through the Ambassadors programme influencing service development. Young people who spoke with inspectors said that they felt listened to and were able to contribute.

The report identifies the strong executive and political leadership enabling a stable senior leadership team to support tenacious, skilled and committed staff working with children and young people in the borough.

1.3 The Ofsted report is included at Appendix 1.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

For the reasons as set out in the report and Appendix 1, the Executive Mayor and Cabinet is recommended to:

2.1 Note and consider the outcome and findings from Ofsted's inspection of Croydon's Children's Services which concluded on 25th October 2024 and judged the Council's services for children as 'good'.

2.2 Note that improvement plans will be reviewed and refreshed to ensure they address all the issues raised in the inspection report.

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 With Children's Services being a priority for the Council and Croydon residents, the Ofsted judgement is being reported to the Executive Mayor and Cabinet Members, together with next steps.

4 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

4.1 A full standard ILACS (inspecting local authority children's services) inspection took place between the 14th and 25th October 2024. A standard inspection was undertaken to ensure inspectors had sufficient opportunity to explore our practice system in depth, within the challenging context Croydon has experienced since the last inspection in 2020.

4.2 The full inspection concluded on the 25th October 2024 and the lead inspector, together with the inspection team, provided verbal feedback on the findings to:

- The Executive Mayor
- Lead Member for Children and Young People
- The Council's Chief Executive
- Children's Services Panel Member on the London Borough of Croydon Improvement and Assurance Panel.
- Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education
- CYPE Directors: Education; Quality, Commissioning, Performance & Improvement; Children's Social Care

- 4.3 The inspection report was published on Ofsted's website on 3rd December 2024 and is included at appendix 1. The Ofsted gradings for the judgement areas in the ILACS framework for Croydon were as follows:
- Overall effectiveness – **'Good'**
 - The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection - **'Requires improvement to be good'**
 - The experiences and progress of children in care - **'Good'**
 - The experiences and progress of care leavers - **'Good'**
 - The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families - **'Good'**
- 4.4 Ofsted recognised that since the previous inspection Croydon has significantly improved services for children in care and care leavers. The experiences and progress of care leavers must be good for overall effectiveness to be judged good. To achieve this outcome reflects the substantial improvements made for children in care and care leavers since 2020 and the sustained commitment of elected members and senior leaders across the Council as corporate parents.
- 4.5 Staff in the virtual school have high ambitions for children. They maintain close oversight of children's development so that children make strong educational progress from their starting points. Children in care benefit from having a named education officer within the Virtual School and this has resulted in positive relationships and improved outcomes. Personal Education Plans are rigorously quality assured and as a result of this the majority are of a good standard and support children's education journey. The local authority has appropriate oversight of pupils receiving elective home education and takes appropriate action when safeguarding concerns are identified.
- 4.6 Inspectors reported that there is an active range of Children in Care Council/Care Leaver groups who meet regularly. There is an impressive Ambassadors Scheme, and inspectors were able to meet some of the young people and observe them presenting at the Croydon Safeguarding Children Partnership executive meeting.
- 4.7 Care Leavers' views are heard and listened to, with a strong commitment from leaders reflected in their co-chairing of the Corporate Parenting Board. Young people told inspectors that they do feel listened to and are able to contribute, and some care leavers have benefited from mentoring by senior leaders, supporting their progress into training and employment.
- 4.8 However, it was noted that although we have improved services for children at the 'front door', not all children who need help and protection receive a consistently effective service. In some areas of practice, such as the out-of-hours service, the pace of change has been too slow, or it is too soon to see positive impact for children and families. Inspectors acknowledged that leaders recognise areas where improvement is needed, and this is reflected in an accurate self-evaluation with realistic plans for change.

- 4.9 The 2020 inspection report identified areas for improvement in the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection. Inspectors recognised that Croydon has experienced significant challenges since the last inspection including a high turnover of staff, financial difficulties and significantly increased demand for social care services alongside the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable children and families. The legacy of high staff turnover and increased caseloads in 2021/22 required a targeted approach to increase capacity for help and protection and ensure caseloads were manageable for staff. In 2024, inspectors found that plans are under way to address variability in practice in this area, but it is too soon to see the impact of these plans for all children.
- 4.10 Despite these challenges, progress has been made in most areas and many children receive effective care and protection. Where there are areas that still need improvement, leaders are aware, and inspectors saw well-devised plans to tackle these.

IMPROVEMENTS SINCE THE LAST INSPECTION

- 4.11 Good progress was reported against the recommendations for improvement made in the 2020 inspection:
- 4.12 Inspectors found that children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless receive an effective, rapid response and if needed are placed in appropriate accommodation to meet their needs. All these children are offered advocates to support their decision-making and to help them to understand their rights and entitlements. Inspectors described this area as a strength.
- 4.13 The quality of plans for children and young people has improved. Inspectors noted that most child protection and child in need plans are having a positive impact on children's experiences and safety, and most children in care have a clear plan of permanence and are carefully matched with suitable carers. In addition, pathway plans are routinely completed with care experienced young people and accurately reflect their views and entitlements.
- 4.14 Care leavers benefit from a strong local offer which has recently been revised and improved, with Croydon ambassadors actively involved in this process. There are also several local resources to support young people's emotional health needs, and for substance misuse support.

THE IMPACT OF LEADERS ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- 4.15 A number of strengths were identified in this domain:
- Stability of leadership at senior level, coupled with effective external scrutiny and positive engagement of elected members, has enabled the Council to deliver good services for most children in the borough against a background of particular financial challenges and an increasing child population.

- The Executive Mayor, Lead Member and Chief Executive, alongside the senior leadership team, advocate strongly for children. Corporate parenting is a strength, with children and care leavers fully involved and listened to.
- Quality assurance processes have identified areas for improvement, and transformation plans show how leaders intend to, or are already, addressing these areas of practice.
- Young people told inspectors that they do feel listened to and are able to contribute and some care leavers have benefited from mentoring by senior leaders, supporting their progress into training and employment.
- Peer reviews and diagnostics have shaped plans, and leaders have welcomed and implemented recommendations for stronger practice.
- Leaders have ambitious plans to improve services, with much work under way and some areas of success.
- Leaders have successfully increased the permanent social care workforce to 80%, a great achievement in the current employment market.
- Supervision and management oversight on children's case files have significantly improved from the last inspection and are strong.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

4.16 Inspectors made four recommendations for improvement:

1. Services to children out of hours.
2. Consistency of practitioners for children and families.
3. Sufficiency of accommodation for children in care and care leavers.
4. Waiting time for early help support.

4.17 Ofsted reported that where there are areas that still need improvement, leaders are aware and inspectors saw well-devised plans to tackle these, particularly to improve the out-of-hours service, the turnover of workers for children, families and carers, sufficiency to prevent the use of unregistered provision, housing for care leavers and better support to achieve permanence for all children. In some areas, noticeable progress is evident, but the redesign of the out-of-hours service has lacked sufficient energy.

4.18 Current improvement plans will be reviewed and refreshed to ensure they address all the issues raised in the inspection report, including a cross-council action plan to tackle the weaknesses identified in the out-of-hours offer to Croydon residents including vulnerable adults and children.

5 CONTRIBUTION TO EXECUTIVE MAYOR'S BUSINESS PLAN

5.1 This judgment and report from Ofsted supports the delivery of the following main outcome in the Executive Mayor's Business Plan 2022-26:

Outcome 3: Children and young people in Croydon have the chance to thrive, learn and fulfil their potential. Priority 1: Ensure children and young people have opportunities to learn, develop and fulfil their potential.

6 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

6.1 No alternatives were considered, please see legal comments.

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 As detailed in paragraph 4.2.

8 IMPLICATIONS

8.1 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this noting report.

Comments approved by Allister Bannin, Director of Finance and Deputy S151 (Date 03/12/24)

8.2 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.2.1 The framework for Ofsted inspections of Children's Services is set out in sections 135-142 of the Education and Inspection Act 2006 ('the Act') and associated Employment and Education Act 2006 (Inspection of Local Authorities) Regulations 2007 ('the Regulations').

Comments approved by Doutimi Aseh, Head of Social Care & Education Law on behalf of the Director of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer. (Date 03/12/24)

8.3 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

8.3.1 There are no direct or specific equalities impacts arising from the content of this report, as the recommendations are for noting.

Comments approved by Helen Reeves, Head of Strategy and Policy (Date 03/12/24)

9 APPENDICES

Appendix A: Inspection of Croydon local authority children's services 3rd December 2024