

Sent via email to:

Please ask for/reply to Stuart Collins

Date: 25/06/2025

Dear James

The Children Act 2004 requires every upper tier local authority to appoint a Director of Children's Services (DCS). I write to you as that Statutory Director of Children's Services for the London Borough of Croydon.

L.B. Croydon Children's Services are 'Good'. Not only did we retain the 'Good' earned in 2020, but in 2024, we strengthened the quality of that 'Good' whilst also making £7m worth of financial savings during that period.

"Since the last inspection in 2020, the local authority has improved services for children in care and care leavers".

"Leaders recognise areas where improvement is needed, and this is reflected in an accurate self-evaluation with realistic plans for change". (Ofsted October '24)

Financial and economic benchmarking of London Boroughs published by Ernst and Young in January 2025 shows Croydon children's services to be placed 17 of 18 in the level of growth between 2020-21 and 2023-24 and to be placed 13/30, in gross expenditure in children's social care for children under 18.

Amidst the challenge of implementing the national DfE led transformation of social care reform detailed in the Children's Education and Wellbeing Bill, and Families First Partnership (FFP) programme, L.B. Croydon children's service also has a robust detailed transformation and £3.5m costed savings plan in place, plans which have been agreed by the IAP.

As part of our *"realistic plans for change"* LB Croydon is addressing our sufficiency (of placement) challenges, including by developing our own in-house children's homes provision, increasing our (already higher than stat neighbours) numbers of in-house foster carers (over 40% of LBC children in care are in in-house fostering provision) and, swimming against the tide to reduce the (national) crisis in SEND transport costs.

"the numbers qualifying for transport were relatively stable suggesting reasonably robust vetting of the service is in place", (IAP letter to SoS April '25)

In addition, Mr McCardle, chair of the Panel, advised me that L.B. Croydon Safety Valve programme is in the “top two” Local Authorities programmes nationally.

Government intervention to amend the ‘belongings’ guidance for children in care with SEND who are placed out of borough, would have an immediate impact on reducing our revenue costs for both provision and home to school transport.

Staff are our most valuable resource and all the evidence from Josh McAllister’s review shows that by managing demand and ensuring caseloads are safe an Authority can improve retention and better manage risks to children.

“The service has been successful in recruiting and retaining permanent social work staff but is also committed to reducing the number of agency staff, currently about 20% of the [social work] workforce, as part of agreed savings” (IAP letter to SoS April ‘25).

The evidence base for early intervention continuously developed since 2010 consistently shows that early help provision is fundamental to reducing and removing delays in identifying or addressing abuse and neglect, managing the cohort of children in care and ultimately reducing risk, leading to improved long-term financial and social costs and arresting escalation into crises requiring intensive intervention.

L.B. Croydon is one of the 75 local authorities with Family Hub provision and the success of our model is reflected in the strong partnership working and positive impact on our families. Our plans to develop the FFP are being developed with new and existing partners, and our targeted early help to reduce adolescent risk and violence against women and girls in partnership with the VCFS, will place us amongst the most advanced and forward thinking in London.

The view of the panel in Croydon was always that Croydon are an outlier in respect of spend, however this came without reflection on the scale, size and diversity of the borough. All of which impacts a local context of increasing risks of exploitation, increasing numbers of EHCPs and the impact of Covid on children’s learning. On page 6 of the panels April ‘25 letter they discuss benchmarking data and suggest that

“overall expenditure per resident is 16.1% higher than the average of its nearest neighbours, with all major services exceeding the average”.

While they do however go on to note that in the children’s service

“recent benchmarking showed that the savings made, and with no additional growth in 2023/2024, has resulted in Croydon now being more in line with similar authorities”.

Context is critical. The most recent LiiA data shows Croydon to have the highest number of children in care (551 including 100 UASC in the final Q of 2024/25). However, as you will know Croydon has the largest population of children under 18 as well as the highest number of unaccompanied children and unaccompanied care leavers of any London borough, therefore our position reduces to 11th when factored as a per 10,000 of the relevant population, and places us even lower when

considered in light of Croydon's historically high levels of support and therefore high numbers of unaccompanied children.

The panel noted that

"Ofsted inspected in October 2024, with the Council retaining the judgement of 'good' overall, with noted improvements recognised in services for children in care and care leavers".

"This has been achieved in the context of increased demand at the front door and increasing costs particularly for placements for children in care..... the service is also affected by the scale at which other local authorities are placing children in Croydon, (c.1,000 children at any one time) reducing the number of local better value options for Croydon children". (IAP letter to SoS April '25).

Children's services are essential for protecting vulnerable children, providing early interventions that prevent harm escalation and statutory services to help reduce risk and keep children safe.

As the corporate director of Children, Young People and Education and statutory DCS, my responsibilities include all children and young people receiving education or children's social care services in L.B. Croydon and all children looked after by L.B. Croydon or in custody (regardless of where they are placed).

My staff work tirelessly to ensure that children young people and families receive the best possible service. We pride ourselves on our ability to create and develop partnerships that keep children safe and help them to thrive. I will not waiver from this duty.

LB Croydon Children's Services are able to show that we are doing everything that we can to reduce risk, keep children safe and live within our means.

In my view, the responsibilities entrusted to me in my statutory role is the single most important role of any senior officer in any local authority, and as the statutory DCS I would support a best value review to devise the most effective way to restore financial sustainability whilst ensuring statutory services for children are delivered safely.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stuart Collins', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Stuart Collins,
Corporate Director,
Children, Young People and Education