

LGC Awards 2025

Nomination Croydon – a story of remarkable progress, in the face of extraordinary challenge

Category Most Improved council

Nomination date 16/12/2024, 14:23

Submission Drivers for change

(up to 1000 words)

In September 2020, a Report in the Public Interest (RIPI) uncovered catastrophic failures in finance and governance.

A non-statutory government rapid review followed, and the council issued the first Section 114 Notice in London for 20 years. In 2021, the government appointed Croydon’s Improvement and Assurance (IAP) Panel.

In February 2021, a national ITV report highlighted the need for urgent housing services transformation. A further RIPI relating to historical matters followed in January 2022.

Both RIPIs uncovered substantial issues in leadership, governance and financial management. They highlighted a toxic organisational culture characterised by detached leadership, silos, and widespread bullying and discrimination.

Improvement goals and milestones

Commissioners have never been appointed at Croydon, nor has the council had any decision-making powers removed. Instead, the government has recognised our progress and demonstrated their confidence in our ability to lead our own recovery.

Croydon has embarked on one of the most ambitious improvement programs in local government, guided by corporate plans such as the Mayor’s Business Plan (2022-24), Improvement Plan (2022-27), the IAP’s Exit Strategy and Future Croydon Transformation Plan 2024-29. These programs are underpinned by measurable milestones and consistent monitoring. Listening to Croydon – an Executive Mayor commitment - runs throughout.

In January 2024, Minister for Local Government Simon Hoare MP welcomed ‘an increase in pace of improvement across the Council, with strengthened governance arrangements, improved capacity and capability and a commitment to implement transformation and culture change’.

Our October 2024 Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) found that ‘the Council has made significant progress in the last four years.’

- The Future Croydon Transformation Plan 2024-29 builds on our improvement to:
- become the most efficient and cost-effective council in London
 - significantly reduce our operating costs through new digital technology enabling more effective business processes
 - fundamentally transform how we engage with communities, fostering trust and promoting independence.
 - provide a new customer experience; interacting with us is seamless.

Key achievements and outcomes

1. Leadership and governance
 - Our CPC recognised significant strides in leadership, governance, and partnerships, highlighting a marked improvement in culture.
 - A new governance framework ensures robust control, risk management, and financial assurance.
2. Financial stability
 - Achieved £137m in savings since 2021, with plans to deliver an additional £30m by 2025/26 - more than other London boroughs and statistical neighbours.
 - Balanced the budget for two consecutive years with government support for historic debt.
 - Introduced Spend Control Panels, shared services initiatives and stronger budgetary control.
3. Housing improvement
 - Secured £58m in Greater London Authority funding to regenerate Regina Road estate - 450 sustainable homes with 225 at council rents.

- Implemented a co-designed Residents' Charter and Resident Engagement Strategy (2024-29)
- Launched a new housing IT system and appointed new repairs contractors alongside an in-house contact center.

4. Children's services

- In October 2024, Ofsted rated Croydon's children's services as 'Good' and found the council had improved in most areas despite our challenges.

5. Education and SEND

- Negotiated a £27.4m Safety Valve agreement with the Department for Education to support children with SEND and eliminate the High Needs Funding deficit by 2025/26.

6. Adult social care

- Selected as one of six national Frontrunner pilot sites, with 800k government investment to free-up hospital beds by providing care in the community.
- Magic Notes technology is transforming social workers' interactions with residents and improving efficiency.

7. Culture and Community

London Borough of Culture (LBOC) 2023:

- 600,000+ audience, £3.6m of inward investment
- Increased Croydon-based Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisations (NPOS), with £4.8m awarded to six organisations.

Leading change

The chief executive's appointment in September 2020, a corporate restructure, and permanent corporate director appointments, have been pivotal in driving change.

In May 2022, Croydon elected its first Executive Mayor. An opposition councillor chairs the council's scrutiny committee; there is an independent chair of audit committee, ensuring robust challenge.

Our CPC found: 'the Mayor and Chief Executive are well-respected and provide strong, visible leadership' and relationships between them, and Cabinet and CMT 'are positive and effective, underpinned by mutual respect for their respective roles and trust.'

Workforce engagement

Our People and Cultural Transformation Strategy was co-created with 250+ staff. The Chief Executive has championed a culture of transparency, inclusion and growth. Initiatives include:

- revitalised communications including all-staff webinars with open Q&A
- a leadership community, with monthly in-person meetings of 100+
- a new staff recognition programme and awards (delivered at nil cost)
- a network of Guardians offering confidential advice and support
- managers as change champions; 400+ co-designed the new Managers' Development Programme
- investment in a Director of Transformation
- Boston Consulting Group, Newton and Impower are supporting our transformation, with staff at all levels involved in service redesign, developing a target operating model and customer experience programme.

Our CPC found our 'dedicated workforce' who 'now feel proud to work for Croydon Council' are 'passionate about delivering quality services to residents and their role in helping the Council to improve.'

Change enablers

Our improvement journey has been defined by:

- Seeking external review, promoting transparency and accountability - commissioning independent investigations by PwC, Penn and Kroll into historical failures; the Executive Mayor's Opening the Books exercise in 2022; peer reviews in public health and adult social care.
- Strong leadership: Permanent appointments of senior executives and the council's first Executive Mayor have delivered stable, cohesive leadership.
- Resident-first approach: annual residents' surveys and a commitment to public engagement ensure Croydon remains responsive to local people.

Lessons for other councils

We still have lots to do; as with all councils, the financial and demand challenges are significant. Particularly so in Croydon, where we are in continued conversations with

government to find a solution to our historic debt to enable financial sustainability.

However, our trajectory is one of sustained improvement and pace. Our story demonstrates how, even in the face of adversity, councils can achieve remarkable progress through:

- embracing transparency and external scrutiny
- building robust governance frameworks.
- actively engaging staff and listening to residents.

With our one council approach and unwavering commitment to putting things right for residents, Croydon is setting a benchmark for change in our sector today.

100-word Summary

Croydon has changed at an unprecedented scale and speed. We are rebuilding our council after one of the most challenging financial and governance crises in local government. We own our past, but we are not defined by it. This is a new chapter for Croydon. We are tackling our challenges, with sound financial management and robust governance. We are transforming to become a modern, cost-effective council, that puts residents first. Through our commitment to transparency and accountability, we are rebuilding trust. The government has recognised Croydon's progress; through our relentless focus and commitment, we have improved – and at pace.

What private sector partners do you work with (if any)?

- Boston Consulting Group
- Impower
- Newtons
- Unibail-Redemco-Westfield
- Croydon Business Improvement District
- New Addington Business Improvement District
- Purley Business Improvement District
- Palace for Life Foundation
- Develop Croydon
- Whitgift Foundation

Supporting material #1

https://evection.s3.amazonaws.com/customer/b4289942-d924-4d3d-9044-2b4131d4ae91/event/2a9486d6-3c30-4954-b2ef-945578811e9e/responses/f6424324-116c-4fae-bda0-baef6e527763/0K5C3WOZNL2DT5R_Peer_Challenge_Final_Report.pdf

Supporting material #2

https://evection.s3.amazonaws.com/customer/b4289942-d924-4d3d-9044-2b4131d4ae91/event/2a9486d6-3c30-4954-b2ef-945578811e9e/responses/6a2926f9-c5a7-4c8c-b398-3adc8f979ada/0K5C3WOZNL2DT5R_Croydon_Inspection_of_local_authority_childrens_services_Oct24.pdf

Supporting material #3

https://evection.s3.amazonaws.com/customer/b4289942-d924-4d3d-9044-2b4131d4ae91/event/2a9486d6-3c30-4954-b2ef-945578811e9e/responses/c1c665fa-35b4-403c-8a25-b385e9f630fa/0K5C3WOZNL2DT5R_Letter_from_Jim_McMahon_MP_to_Executive_Mayor_of_Croydon.pdf
