

Final Internal Audit Report

Child Protection Conferences

May 2025

Distribution: Director of Quality, Commissioning & Performance (Deputy DCS)
Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance
Head of Performance & Business Improvement
Corporate Director – Children, Young People & Education
Strategic Head of Finance
Director of Finance & Deputy S151 Officer
Corporate Director, Resources & S151 Officer

Assurance Level	Issues Identified	
Limited	Priority 1	2
	Priority 2	2
	Priority 3	0

Confidentiality and Disclosure Clause

This report ("Report") was prepared by Forvis Mazars LLP at the request of London Borough of Croydon and terms for the preparation and scope of the Report have been agreed with them. The matters raised in this Report are only those which came to our attention during our internal audit work. Whilst every care has been taken to ensure that the information provided in this Report is as accurate as possible, Internal Audit have only been able to base findings on the information and documentation provided and consequently no complete guarantee can be given that this Report is necessarily a comprehensive statement of all the weaknesses that exist, or of all the improvements that may be required.

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Please refer to the Statement of Responsibility in Appendix 3 of this report for further information about responsibilities, limitations, and confidentiality.

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. A child protection conference is a meeting held between family members, professionals, and social workers to discuss the wellbeing of a child.
- 1.2. A conference is organised by Croydon Council (Council) following an investigation under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, which takes place when the local authority, police or another agency has concerns about the child's welfare. The conference must take place within 15 working days of the meeting at which the Section 47 enquiry was agreed. Before the child protection conference can take place, a core group meeting must be held by those involved in the case, within no more than 10 working days.
- 1.3. The conference will involve a discussion of whether the child is at risk of serious harm which might require the intervention of the local authority. One of the possible outcomes of a child protection conference is that a child protection plan will be put in place for the child.
- 1.4. The conference is chaired by a Child Protection Chair, who is a social worker independent of the relevant local authority's children's social care team. Family members of the child attend the conference, including the child if appropriate, as well as professionals who know the family such as health visitors, teachers, doctors, specialised police officers or other health and education professionals. Professionals are required to submit reports to the chair of the conference in advance.
- 1.5. The Council makes use of the Working Together to Safeguard Children Guidance 2023 and London Safeguarding Children Procedures to manage Children Protection Conferences.
- 1.6. This audit is being undertaken as part of the agreed Internal Audit Plan for 2024/25. The agreed Terms of Reference and scope can be found under Appendix 1.

2. Key Issues

Priority 1 Issues

Review of a sample of ten Section 47 enquiries received between 1 April 2024 and 16 December 2024, that had been progressed to a child protection conference, identified that in five cases the initial child protection conference took place more than 15 working days after the strategy meeting. **(Issue 1)**

Review of a sample of 10 Section 47 enquiries received between 1 April 2024 and 16 December 2024, that had been progressed to a child protection conference, identified that in eight cases the outline plan and the decision letter

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was sent more than one working day following the Child Protection Conference. **(Issue 3)**

Priority 2 Issues

Review of a sample of 10 Section 47 enquiries received between 1 April 2024 and 16 December 2024, that had been progressed to a child protection conference, identified that:

- In one case, the Child and Family Assessment was not shared with the conference attendees prior to the conference; and
- In three cases, the conference reports were shared with attendees on the day of the conference. **(Issue 2)**

Review of a sample of 10 Section 47 enquiries received between 1 April 2024 and 16 December 2024, that had been progressed to a child protection conference, identified that:

- In four cases, the first core group meeting was held more than ten working days following the Initial Child Protection Conference. (19, 19, 20 and 33 working days); and
- In one case, with an initial conference date of 15 November 2024, the first core group meeting had not been held as of 15 January 2025 (41 working days). **(Issue 4)**

There were no Priority 3 findings.

3. Actions and Key Findings/Rationale

Control Area 2: Scheduling and Planning of Child Protection Conferences

Priority	Action Proposed by Management	Detailed Finding/Rationale - Issue 1
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased oversight and challenge by the CPC service managers to escalate S47s which are nearing the deadline. Actions to be recorded on the child's file. Reason for late notification to be recorded clearly on child's file and authorised by CPC manager. Team managers in the social work teams to ensure they are using the available data to track timeliness of concluding strategy discussions and open s47s nearing the due date. Where there needs to be purposeful delay the child's service manager should record 	<p>Expected Control</p> <p>The London Safeguarding Children Procedures and Practice Guidance (2024) details that, <i>"the maximum period from the strategy meeting / discussion of an enquiry to the date of the initial child protection conference is <u>15 working days</u>".</i></p> <p>Finding/Issue</p> <p>Review of a sample of 10 Section 47 enquiries received between 1 April 2024 and 16 December 2024, that had been progressed to a child protection conference, identified that in five cases the initial conference took place more than 15 working days after the strategy meeting. These cases were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2184068 – 21 working days (6 days late, due to QA capacity) 2606644 – 24 working days (9 days late, due to QA capacity) 2577956 – 18 working days (3 days late, due to late notification by SW team) 2537851 – 23 working days (8 days late, due to late notification by SW team) 2549899 – 26 working days (11 days late, due to late notification by SW team) <p>Risk</p>

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	<p>this on the child's file and ensure there is a safety plan in place.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice improvement consultant to undertake dip sampling to ensure the above actions are complied with. Monthly report to be completed by the CPC service manager on performance on the previous month (exception report) and this to be presented at CSLT. This will include a review of the data and an analysis of the cause of the delay. 	<p>Where child protection conferences are not held within 15 working days of the initial strategy meeting, there may be a delay to the Council resolving any safeguarding issues and ensuring the child's welfare. This could result in the child suffering harm in the intervening period.</p>
Responsible Officer	Deadline	
CPC service manager	April 2025	

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Control Area 3: Professional Reports and Other Submissions

Priority	Action Proposed by Management	Detailed Finding/Rationale – Issue 2
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team managers and service managers to track pending CPCs and ensure that social workers are completing and sharing reports within the required timescales. CPC service manager to draft a monthly report on the previous month's performance to be shared with CSLT. CP chairs to discuss this within the conference pre-meeting with the social worker and team manager. CPC service manager to use performance data to monitor this and address as needed with CP chairs. Paper to be completed for the Quality Assurance Group (subgroup of the CSCP) to outline current 	<p>Expected Control</p> <p><i>The London Safeguarding Children Procedures and Practice Guidance (2024) details that, "all agencies working with the family should provide the conference with a written, signed report setting out the details of their involvement" and that, "it should also be made available to the conference Chair and other attendees <u>two working days</u> in advance of an initial conference".</i></p> <p>There are a number of reports that might be considered by a child protection conference, depending on the situation of the child. These include a child and family assessment by a social worker, as well as reports from health workers or teachers.</p> <p>Finding/Issue</p> <p>Review of a sample of 10 Section 47 enquiries received between 1 April 2024 and 16 December 2024, that had been progressed to a child protection conference, identified that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In one case, the child and family assessment was not shared with the conference attendees prior to the conference (2577956); and In three cases, the conference reports were shared with attendees on the day of the conference (2549899, 2577956 and 2616795). <p>Risk</p> <p>Where the necessary reports are not completed prior to the conference, there is a risk that attendees will not be adequately informed to make an effective decision regarding</p>

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	performance of the multi-agency and to develop an action plan.	the child's safety or have the time to review all evidence. This in turn could lead to the child being put at risk due to ineffective decisions.
Responsible Officer	Deadline	There is a further risk that, if procedures are not followed, it may affect the perceived fairness of the proceedings, and families may be able to challenge the outcome of the child protection conference.
CPC service manager and managers in the social work teams	May 2025	

Control Area 4: Documentation of Outcomes and Decisions

Priority	Action Proposed by Management	Detailed Finding/Rationale - Issue 3
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SQA service lead to review the recording process on the child's record including when the minute taker is unable to complete the action in the work flow and to develop a tracking and oversight system. SQA service lead to address any systems issues and individual practice issues as required. SQA to raise with CPC service manager any delay created by the CP chair Targets to be set for the completion of decisions within 24 and 48 hours and reporting system established. Paper to be written for DCS to consider whether there should be a review of information sent within the 	<p>Expected Control</p> <p>The London Safeguarding Children Procedures and Practice Guidance (2024) details that <i>"the outline plan, signed by the conference Chair, should be sent together with the decision letter, to all those who attended or were invited to the conference, including the parents and where appropriate the child, within <u>one working day</u> of the conference."</i></p> <p>Finding/Issue</p> <p>Review of a sample of 10 Section 47 enquiries received between 1 April 2024 and 16 December 2024, that had been progressed to a child protection conference, identified that in eight cases, the outline plan and the decision letter was sent to all those who attended more than one working day following the Child Protection Conference. These cases were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2184068 (2 working days) 2616795 (2 working days) 2606644 (2 working days) 2549899 (2 working days) 2155597 (4 working days) 2537851 (8 working days) 2510745 (10 working days) 2577956 (2 working days)

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	decisions letter to better enable timescales to be met.	Risk Where outcomes are not communicated to Conference attendees there is a risk of the implementation of the Child Protection Plan being delayed. This in turn could lead to the child being out at risk.
Responsible Officer	Deadline	
SQA service lead	April 2025	

Control Area 5: Creation and Implementation of Child Protection Plans

Priority	Action Proposed by Management	Detailed Finding/Rationale – Issue 4
2	Heads of service for the social work teams – Social Work with Families (SWwF), Children with Disabilities (CwD) and AST to continue to drive the timeliness of core group meetings.	<p>Expected Control</p> <p>Before the Child Protection Conference can take place, a core group meeting must be held by those involved in the case.</p> <p><i>The London Safeguarding Children Procedures and Practice Guidance (2024) details that, “the date of the first core group meeting must be within <u>ten working days</u> of the initial child protection conference.”</i></p> <p>Finding/Issue</p> <p>Review of a sample of 10 Section 47 enquiries received between 1 April 2024 and 16 December 2024, that had been progressed to a child protection conference, identified that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In four cases, the first core group meeting was held more than ten working days following the initial Child Protection Conference. These cases were 2577956 (19 working days), 2616795 (19 working days), 2510745 (21 working days) and 2549899 (32 working days); and • In one case, with an initial Conference date of 15 November 2024, the first core group meeting had not yet been held as of 15 January 2025. <p>Risk</p> <p>Where a child protection plan is not supported by a core group meeting there is a risk that the steps required to protect the child will not be implemented. This in turn could lead to the child suffering harm.</p>
Responsible Officer		Deadline
Head of SWwF and Head of Specialist services		30 April 2025

AUDIT TERMS OF REFERENCE

Child Protection Conferences

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 A Child Protection Conference is a meeting held between family members, professionals, and social workers to discuss the wellbeing of a child.
- 1.2 A conference is organised following an investigation by the local authority under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, which takes place when the local authority, police or another agency has concerns about the child's welfare. The conference must take place within 15 working days of the meeting at which the Section 47 enquiry was agreed.
- 1.3 The conference will involve a discussion of whether the child is at risk of serious harm which might require the intervention of the local authority. One of the possible outcomes of a Child Protection Conference is that the child will be made subject of a Child Protection Plan.
- 1.4 The conference is chaired by Child Protection Chair who is a social worker independent of the relevant local authority's children's social care team. Family members of the child attend the conference, including the child if appropriate, as well as professionals who know the family such as health visitors, teachers, doctors, specialised police officers or other health and education professionals. Professionals are required to submit reports to the chair of the Conference in advance.
- 1.5 Croydon Council makes use of the Working Together to Safeguard Children Guidance 2023 and London Safeguarding Children Procedures to manage Children Protection Conferences.
- 1.6 This audit is being undertaken as part of the agreed Internal Audit Plan for 2024/25.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

- 2.1 The overall audit objective was to provide an objective independent opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of controls / processes.
- 2.2 The audit for each control / process being considered:
 - Walked-through the processes to consider the key controls;
 - Conducted sample testing of the identified key controls, and
 - Reported on these accordingly.

3. SCOPE





- 3.1 This audit, focused on Child Protection Conferences, was undertaken as part of the 2024/25 Internal Audit Plan. The specific scope included the following areas and recommendations:

Control Areas/Risks	Issues Raised		
	Priority 1 (High)	Priority 2 (Medium)	Priority 3 (Low)
Legislative, Organisational and Management Requirements	0	0	0
Scheduling and Planning of Child Protection Conferences (incl. decisions around invitees)	1	0	0
Professional Reports and Other Submissions	0	1	0
Documentation of Outcomes and Decisions	1	0	0
Creation and Implementation of Child Protection Plans	0	1	0
Total	2	2	0

Definitions for Audit Opinions and Identified Issues

In order to assist management in using our reports:

We categorise our **audit assurance opinion** according to our overall assessment of the risk management system, effectiveness of the controls in place and the level of compliance with these controls and the action being taken to remedy significant findings or weaknesses.

	Full Assurance	There is a sound system of control designed to achieve the system objectives, and the controls are constantly applied.
	Substantial Assurance	While there is basically a sound system of control to achieve the system objectives, there are weaknesses in the design or level of non-compliance of the controls which may put this achievement at risk.
	Limited Assurance	There are significant weaknesses in key areas of system controls and non-compliance that puts achieving the system objectives at risk,
	No Assurance	Controls are non-existent or extremely weak, leaving the system open to the high risk of error, abuse and reputational damage.

Priorities assigned to identified issues are based on the following criteria:

Priority 1 (High)	Fundamental control weaknesses that require immediate attention by management to action and mitigate significant exposure to risk.
Priority 2 (Medium)	Control weakness that still represent an exposure to risk and need to be addressed within a reasonable period.
Priority 3 (Low)	Although control weaknesses are considered to be relatively minor and low risk, still provides an opportunity for improvement. May also apply to areas considered to be of best practice that can improve for example the value for money of the review area.

Statement of Responsibility

We take responsibility to London Borough of Croydon for this report which is prepared on the basis of the limitations set out below.

The responsibility for designing and maintaining a sound system of internal control and the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities rests with management, with internal audit providing a service to management to enable them to achieve this objective. Specifically, we assess the adequacy and effectiveness of the system of internal control arrangements implemented by management and perform sample testing on those controls in the period under review with a view to providing an opinion on the extent to which risks in this area are managed.

We plan our work in order to ensure that we have a reasonable expectation of detecting significant control weaknesses. However, our procedures alone should not be relied upon to identify all strengths and weaknesses in internal controls, nor relied upon to identify any circumstances of fraud or irregularity. Even sound systems of internal control can only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance and may not be proof against collusive fraud.

The matters raised in this report are only those which came to our attention during the course of our work and are not necessarily a comprehensive statement of all the weaknesses that exist or all improvements that might be made. Recommendations for improvements should be assessed by you for their full impact before they are implemented. The performance of our work is not and should not be taken as a substitute for management's responsibilities for the application of sound management practices.

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