

# Executive Summary

This Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) has been written on behalf of children and young people, multi-agency services, practitioners, family members and the community in Croydon. There was a desire to bring these voices to the fore - their voices have been reflected throughout this report. This CSPR has been a long review involving multiple strands which has included extensive information gathering and consultation. Throughout the process, multi-agency services have learnt from what has emerged and services have adapted and evolved in order to make a difference to children and families in real time.

The CSPR is focussed on seven children/young people who were charged in association with the deaths of three children in 2021, these tragic deaths were not linked. The CSPR panel recognised the dynamic interplay between victim and perpetrator and therefore concluded that referring to these children/young people simply as a perpetrator would be misleading. During almost the entire period of multi-agency interventions all but one of the children/young people were under eighteen. The panel recognised that although it is common/preferred practice to refer to adolescents as 'young people' the term children/young people will be used throughout in recognition of the legal definition, and unique vulnerabilities, of a child.

There has been active and committed involvement of multi-agency services and community representatives including over sixty front line practitioners. On behalf of Croydon Safeguarding Children Partnership (CSCP), the Independent Reviewer was privileged to meet with four parents and a child. These meetings were a humble reminder of the trauma and immense grief that follows from serious youth violence both from the perspectives of parents who lost their son and from the perspective of parents whose son was charged in association with the death of another child. All were open and frank about what needs to change and were grateful for the opportunity to tell their story and be heard. Their perspectives have been included in this report.

## The six Key Lines of Enquiry (KLE) were agreed at the start of this CSPR.

### KLE 1

Review the support provided.

### KLE 2

Identify where/why support ceased and any learning outcomes.

### KLE 3

Include the voice of the child, understand his daily life, and consider reasons why support may not have been accessed or effective.

### KLE 4

Review current community support provision, especially where it may be possible to empower parents of young people.

### KLE 5

Learn from the families (including the families of the children who died)

### KLE 6

Learn from the experiences of front-line practitioners in terms of what works well and what more may be needed locally and nationally to improve outcomes for young people affected by SYV.

## Key Line of Enquiry 1: Review the support provided

A wide range of services and interventions were provided to six of the children/young people over several years and persistent attempts were made to engage them. The overriding message is that by the time statutory services were involved it was too late – more robust early intervention was needed at an earlier point in the child/young person’s life. However, as suggested by the national picture, it is not entirely clear what interventions would have made a discernible difference – there is little hard evidence about the effectiveness of interventions.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, exclusion from school and managed moves was a key feature of their lives - all six were either excluded from school or the subject of a managed move. There was a strong call to do more to avoid managed moves/exclusion and be persistent in avoiding negative language when referring to children who are displaying help seeking behaviour- negative labels can shape perceptions of self and frame the response by practitioners/ services. A consistent message was the need to identify any learning needs, in particular any speech and language difficulties, as early as possible and there were concerns about the lack of availability of, and lack of engagement with, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The work across all services illustrates the importance of relationship-based practice and the need to strengthen an approach that sees young people exposed to serious youth violence/extra- familial harm as children in need of safeguarding at the earliest possible point.

Unsurprisingly, the vital importance of school and doing more to avoid managed moves/exclusion was emphasised. Consistent, reliable, and trustworthy relationships with children and families is key and there is a need to cease negative labelling and avoid expectations that multiple services/multiple practitioners are helpful.

## Key Line of Enquiry 2: Identify where/why support ceased and any learning outcomes.

In addressing this KLE, the CSPR has been severely hampered by the way in which multi-agency services focus primarily on factual recording of services provided/interventions. There is no facility built into the recording systems to record the unique outcomes for a child as the result of an intervention/service. As a result, records are largely limited to detailing what and when a service was provided and the ending of this provision – records detailing impact/outcomes are few and far between. This impacts on the ability to test what works. It is a systemic issue that is not unique to Croydon.

Families, practitioners and members of the community, stressed the need to intervene early instead of at a point of crisis. Gaining consent was identified as an important issue resulting in engagement and non- engagement and the revolving door of service provision. The report stresses the need for services to be resilient in seeking engagement and observes the need to pay attention to intersectionality, intergenerational experiences of poverty, discrimination and previous experiences of state intervention in family life and how this might influence engagement with statutory services.

The importance of positive role models and envisioning a different future is emphasised alongside avoidance of negative labelling or adultification – seeing the child as in need of protection, kindness and care rather than an adult making ‘lifestyle choices’.

This is particularly relevant to Black British children.

The findings from this KLE emphasises that consent must be pro actively sought and used to ensure engagement, not as a means/excuse to disengage – services need to be resilient in the face of non- engagement. How professionals describe a child and a family, and outcomes of interventions, matters – this impacts not only the engagement of children and families but on the engagement of professionals.

**Key Line of Enquiry 3: Include the voice of the child, understand his daily life, and consider reasons why support may not have been accessed or effective.**

Practitioners understood the children’s lived worlds and the systemic context in which they lived. The importance of nurturing hopes and dreams, and a sense of belonging, was stressed.

The importance of hearing a child’s voice was widely understood and professionals could easily recall the children’s voices, but routine recording of the child’s voice on casework notes was inconsistent. If this voice is held largely in the memory of the professionals who have been involved, the child’s voice can be lost to future professionals/services.

Building positive identities including promoting healthy masculinity and seeing the importance of father/father figures in their lives was seen as an area that should be strengthened. Practitioners, panel members, children and families and members of the community felt strongly that the recent changes in Croydon town centre may be eroding a positive sense of community and belonging.

The findings from this KLE emphasises the importance of ‘place’ as a reflection of self and a source of identity and belonging. How positive identities are formed and maintained, and the societal influences on identity, are important to understand and ways should be found to mitigate the risks of negative stereo typing.

**Key Line of Enquiry 4: Review current community support provision, especially where it may be possible to empower parents of young people.**

The importance of relationships that are human (rather than bureaucratic) and trustworthy was identified as key - providing practical support that improves the day-to-day life of a family can be a critical way to provide meaningful support and nurtures engagement/trust. The importance of empowerment through the provision of community-based services that provide positive role models, nurtures belonging and builds a positive identity was stressed. The council and partners working alongside the community in a respectful relationship is key.

The findings from this KLE highlights the importance of creating and maintaining flexible opportunities for the council and partners to work closely with the community and to seek ways to support families and communities that are founded on an understanding and appreciation of the day-to-day challenges of ordinary life. One practical step would be to publish a comprehensive directory of services in Croydon that supports a whole family, positive enhancement approach rather than a list of agencies to support families when there are challenges.

## **Key Line of Enquiry 5: Learn from the families (including the families of the children who died)**

Families set out key areas they felt needed attention in schools and across multi-agency services. They spoke about the need to provide interventions as early as possible in a child's life and were keen for these interventions to be provided within the community, alongside the community and as far as possible by the community. Many of the issues raised by families were shared by practitioners and members of the community.

Parents spoke about the need to have a swift and robust response when children carry knives or are at risk of involvement in Serious Youth Violence (SYV). Delays in children facing the consequences of their actions, through the courts, was identified as a key area that required attention.

The findings from this KLE emphasises the importance of continuing to nurture and sustain trusted relationships with families and involving them in the co-production of future service developments.

## **Key Line of Enquiry 6: Learn from the experiences of front-line practitioners in terms of what works well and what more may be needed locally and nationally to improve outcomes for young people affected by SYV.**

Again, the key message was the need to provide consistent and trustworthy relationships. Many examples of what works well were identified alongside what may be needed nationally and locally - and at a strategic and operational level.

The findings from this KLE emphasises the quality and often innovative work with children at risk of SYV. The value of an experienced workforce with the time to engage effectively was stressed. In summary, preventing harm caused by serious youth violence are complicated systemic challenges. The learning reaches across systems and hierarchies illustrating that a whole systems partnership approach is needed hand in hand with children and families and the community. However, as articulated by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)<sup>1</sup>:

**“Yes, we need to understand and act on individual risk factors, such as being out of formal education or early exposure to violence in the home, but unless we turn our attention to wider societal determinants, young lives will continue to be lost on our streets; research clearly shows there are links between higher levels of inequality and increased violence.”**

<sup>1</sup> ADCS Discussion Paper *SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE AND KNIFE CRIME* July 2019 The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd