

City of London

Department of Community and Children's Services

Quality Assurance Annual Report 2023-24

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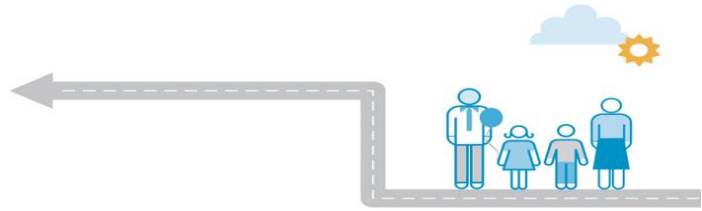
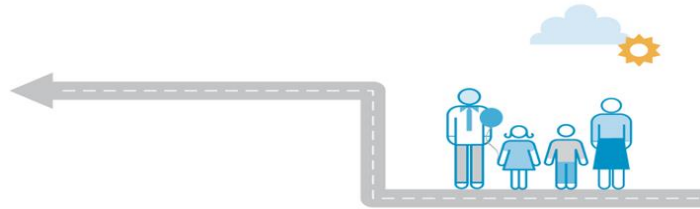


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1. Introduction

The Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service sits within the People's Directorate, within the Department for Community and Children's Services. It provides scrutiny, challenge, and support to the operational children's service. To ensure that practice is not only inline with statutory expectations and our own practice standards ([Children's Social Care Practice Handbook 2022.docx](#)), but is going above and beyond to provide excellent services for children, young people and families to promote the best outcomes possible for them.

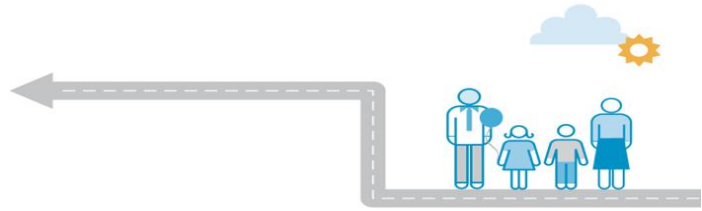
Since being graded as an Outstanding Authority in March 2020 and following the Focused Visit in November 2022, we have continued to work hard to ensure we know ourselves, understand the experiences of children, young people, and families in the City of London, provide services which contribute to improving the daily lived experiences of these groups, and continually challenge ourselves to work in more efficient and effective ways.

We recognise that we do not work in isolation with children, young people, and families and that our multi-agency partnership work, relationships, and commissioning arrangements are key to providing a holistic and wrap around service which fully meets the needs of those who use our services. Therefore, our quality assurance processes must also have an external focus to best understand how relationships with partner agencies is supporting our work, and where there may be barriers or competing needs which requiring addressing at a strategic level. Our strong engagement with the City and Hackney Children's Safeguarding Partnership (CHSCP - [chscp | City & Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership](#)) supports this approach.

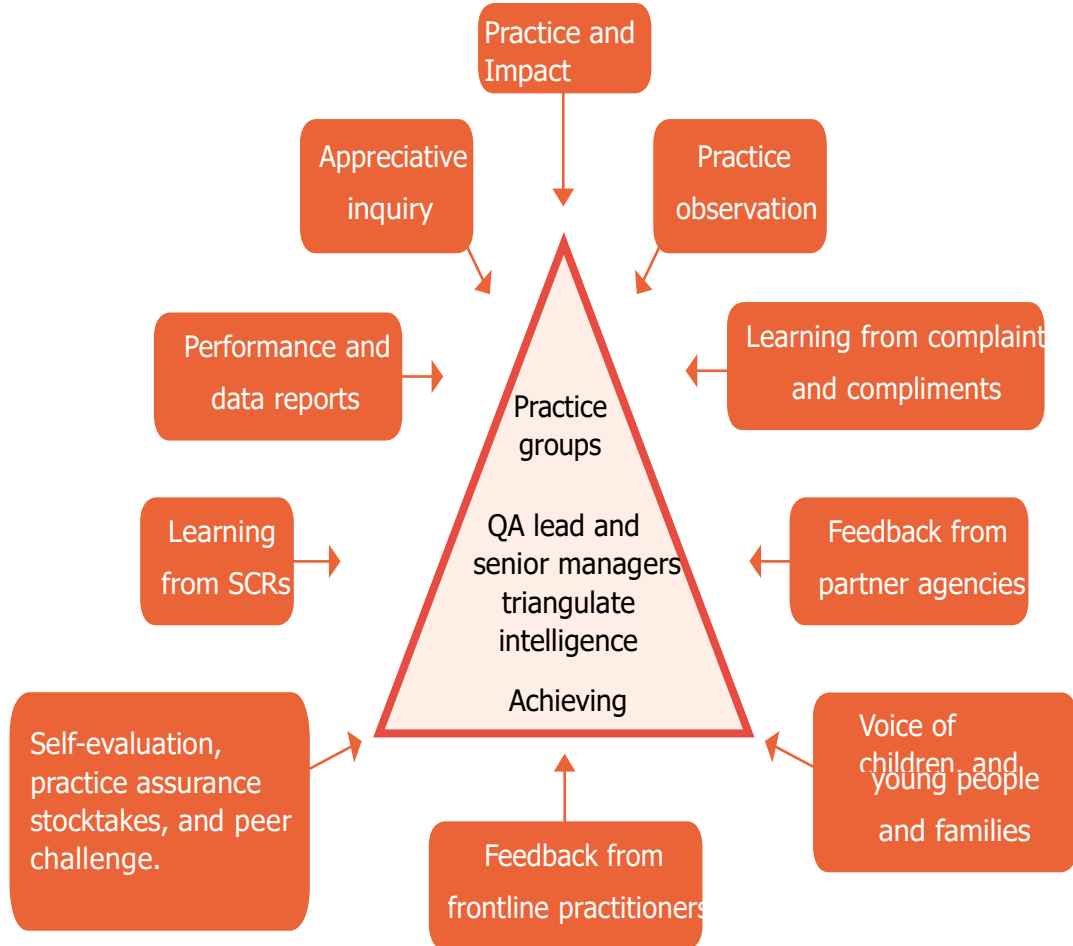
2. Quality Assurance Framework

The Quality Assurance Framework was last reviewed and updated in March 2023. The principles and purpose of the quality assurance framework are aligned with the journey of children and families through the services they receive, their lived experience and the outcomes achieved. This being attained through being:

- **Child Centred:** focusing on the experience of children and young people, making sure that they are safe and protected from harm, and that their voice is heard clearly.
- **Restorative:** quality assurance will be restorative. This approach reflects the significant investment and training in systemic thinking and practice. Instead of a 'top-down' approach, quality assurance work will be based on working with staff and managers and building relationships. As a restorative process, quality assurance will be characterised by high support and high challenge.
- **Outcomes Based:** the focus of quality assurance will be on outcomes rather than processes. While processes play an important part, the real test is on the impact of our services for each child and family. We expect staff to have a relentless focus on impact and outcomes.
- **Positive:** our approach to quality assurance will be positive. By doing so, we shall inform and encourage improvement and support the development of staff and services.
- **Reflective:** our quality assurance framework is designed to promote reflective practice and shared learning.
- **Creative:** having a pioneering and 'can do' culture.



Using a mixed methodology to triangulate information, data, and feedback to complete an honest self-assessment of our performance and outcomes.

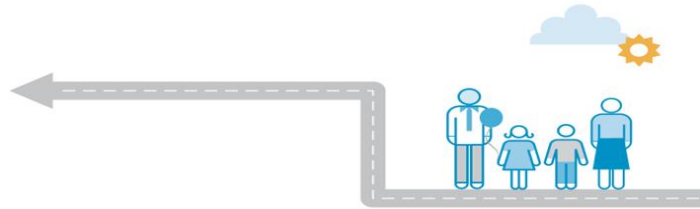


The Quality Framework utilises external review to provide a different perspective and distance from operational work, given the small numbers in the City children are often well known across the management team. This creates debate and challenge in a small system, which is healthy and needed. Also refines our narrative as to why we work in the ways we do, given some of the uniqueness of our context.

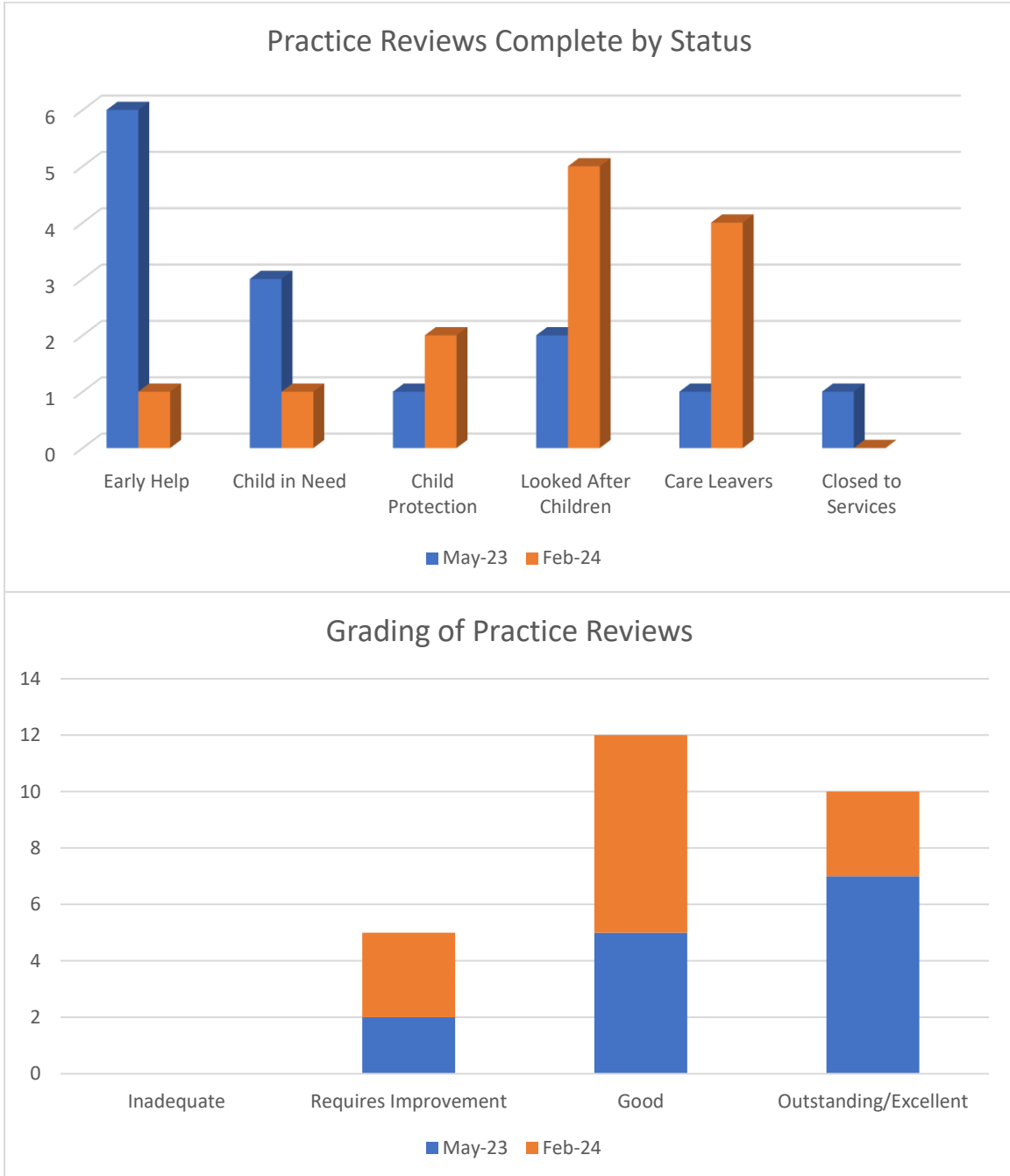
3. Quality Assurance Activity in the year

Practice Reviews

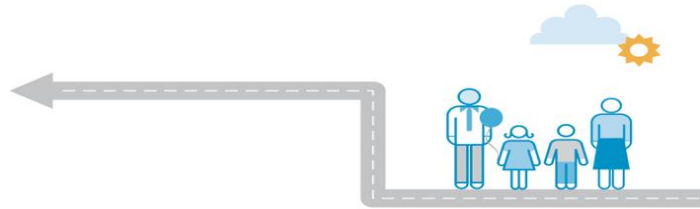
This year we have utilised our external practice review partners, Aidhour, to complete 2 sets of practice reviews of up to 15 children and families each time, at approximately 6 monthly intervals. In May 2023 they reviewed 14 children and families, who were allocated within the below areas/had the following support statuses. The common theme amongst these children and young people were that they all had Special Educational Needs.



From 29th January up to 9th February 2024 13 practice reviews were completed, 11 by Aidhour and 2 by the Head Safeguarding and Quality Assurance. These were a mix of children and young people across the service, with no specific themes or link in common.



It is very positive that no practice reviews were found to be Inadequate throughout the last year. Most practice reviews were graded as Good or better, there was a changing with grading terminology between the two rounds of review between Excellent and Outstanding, as Outstanding is the standard Ofsted terminology.



In each round of practice reviews there have been a small number of reviews found to be Requiring Improvement. Where a review is judged to be anything less than Excellent/Outstanding we ensure that there are clear, tangible recommendations made which will improve outcomes from the child/young people. Where there are systems blocks to providing the support children and families need, these are also incorporated into service level recommendations.

During this year we have implemented a monthly recommendation tracking and impact meeting with managers, to review that recommendations have been actioned, and what the impact has been for the child of doing this. This has supported the feedback loop in terms of ensuring learning from quality assurance is acted upon and results in service development and improvements in service delivery and the overall experiences for children, young people, and their families. Through these meetings we are confident that the recommendations from the May round of case reviews have been completed or are in progress. From 20th March 2024 we will start tracking the implementation of the recommendations from the February reviews.

Practice Observation Week

In June 2023 we held a Practice Observation Week the purpose of this observation was for Senior Leaders to gain insights into the daily tasks, challenges, and approaches employed by workers working in children and families, and the experience of those children and families of the services they receive.

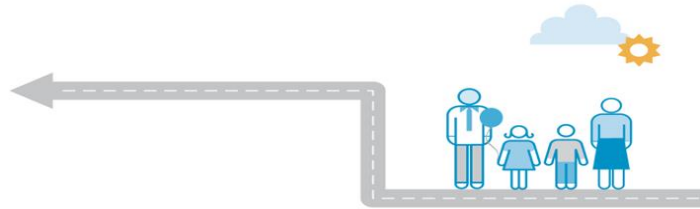
Practice observations were carried out over a period of one week, during which time 4 Social Workers and 1 Early Help Practitioner were observed while performing their duties. The activities included a Looked After Child Review meeting, direct work with children, and home visits. The observations were undertaken by the Executive Director, Assistant Director, and various Heads of Service. In addition, practice development workshops in Direct Work, Role Play and Clinical Systemic Group Supervision were also provided for practitioners. Feedback was also requested from children, where age appropriate, parents and carers, and care leavers over the age of 18 years.

The practice observation revealed that several workers exhibited notable strengths, including effective planning, skilful use of age-appropriate tools, age-appropriate communication skills, holistic assessment abilities, understanding of child needs, and the establishment of positive working relationships with the children and their parents. These strengths contribute significantly to their effectiveness in addressing the complex needs of the children they work with and play a crucial role in promoting their overall well-being and development.

Given the small sample size (5) it was a challenge to draw tangible and realistic recommendations in relation to areas for development. Things that did arise which resonated with findings through other quality assurance work were in relation to; concerns about accommodation options and timeliness of securing permanent housing, understanding and support in relation to the broad range of needs of Autistic children, the coordination and link up between Social Care support and Special Educational Needs support, and understanding/assessment of risks over time.

Peer Challenge Events

The Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance is part of the East London Peer Review Group. The group last met in July 2023 and there are plans to meet in April 2024, to review and reestablish the terms of the group. The aim being that this is a space in which Local Areas can ask for independent peer review and challenge in relation to current or proposed quality assurance processes. In the last



meeting there were helpful and interesting approaches shared to moderation processes, and what areas have found effective and efficient in doing this.

City will be hosting the group in April 2024 and will be seeking views on the practice review template, and moderation process of the reviews completed, by reviewing a sample of completed reviews. This will support us to continue to develop our framework, considering different approaches and procedures. Given the contract with Aidhour is long standing this will provide helpful scrutiny to ensure this remains the best method of providing independent scrutiny which meets current need and service delivery models.

Senior Leaders also attended a Peer Challenge event hosted by London Councils on 20/02/2024 with two other neighbouring Local Authorities, focusing on our Care Leaver Offer. This provide an opportunity to showcase our services, be questioned about what our gaps or areas for development are, but also hear what is working well in other areas, what innovations have been successful or are being piloted, and think about how these could be adapted to a City context. This provided some helpful reflections, but also reassurance about the quality of the offer in the City for Care Leavers.

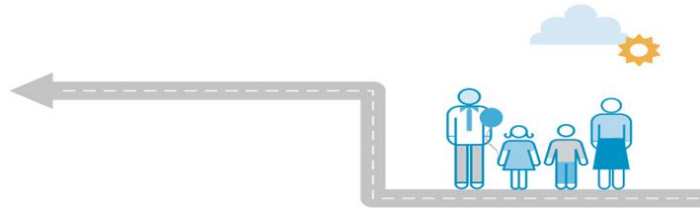
Multi Agency Case Audits (MACA)

These are audits coordinated by the City and Hackney Safeguarding Children's Partnership, for further information see [Case Audits | chscp](#). The volume of cases considered within these thematic audits tend to be Hackney cases, so therefore the relevance of the recommendations to the City context can be small. However, we recognise that we benefit from reviewing our processes from a partnership perspective. In this spirit we held a scrutiny event between Children's Social Care and City Police on 13/03/24. This involved reviewing a mixed sample of contacts from the City of London Police to Children's Social Care and Early Help made in the past 6 months, including contacts which progressed to Assessment, or allocation, those contacts in relation to open cases, and those that resulted in no further action. These were critically analysed by the group considering; the quality of information initially provided, communication between agencies, the appropriateness of the decision making, feedback from Children's Social Care and Early Help around decisions made and next steps, and any lessons learned, or training needs identified.

Scrutiny of Care Arrangements

Due to the size and demographic of the City our looked after children and care leavers are generally provided care and accommodation outside of City borders, through commissioned services. We are keen to strengthen the quality assurance of these arrangements from a safeguarding perspective. To this end regular Contract Monitoring meetings have been reestablished with our most used care providers, attended by both commissioning colleagues and the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance. These whilst in their initial stages have provided useful and take a dual approach of contractual review underpinned with safeguarding rigour, to ensure the needs of our children and young people are being appropriately considered and responded to.

The second stage of this approach will be to embed a series of in person visits by Senior Managers to care providers across the coming financial year. This will enable first-hand experience of the care and accommodation our children in care and care leavers are provided, qualitative information about the feel of the home, the presentation of the staff, and enable us to respond honestly to the questions 'as a Corporate Parent would this be good enough for my own child?'



Practice Assurance Review

From 29th January to the 9th of February, we undertook a two-week Practice Assurance Review to self-assess areas of strength and excellence across Children’s Social Care and Early Help, analyse and review data reports and identify areas of development and make plans to address these if they are not already in place.

The process was overseen by an Independent Reviewer, Marcie Taylor, who is the Independent Chair of the Achieving Excellence Board, she then provided an overview report at the end of the process, outlining findings of strength and suggestions for areas of improvement. Alongside the Independent Reviewer, 13 case reviews were completed as outlined above in Case Review section.

Performance data was scrutinised by the Independent Reviewer, to consider if there are any specific themes or trends within this, and compared with findings from previous case reviews completed, feedback from the Annual Survey, the Service Evaluation Framework, Service Development Plans, and any other associated feedback or quality assurance information. The whole process included the involvement of allocated workers, line managers, Senior Leaders including the Deputy Lead Member, as well as seeking direct feedback from children, young people, and families.

It was a robust process, and the findings were consistent with quality assurance activity in that relationships between workers and families are strong, needs are well understood, and there is strong multi-agency working. There were recommendations made in relation to improving the consistency and moderation of practice reviews, developing the focus of risk assessments, strengthening senior management oversight and that of the Independent Reviewing Officer.

4. Feedback and Consultation

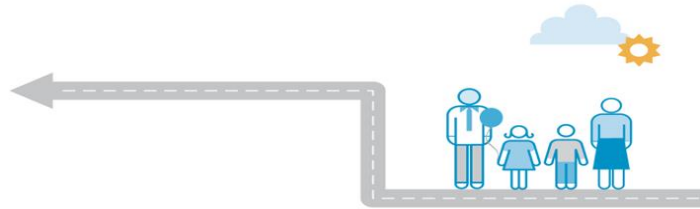
Annual Survey

In July 2023 Action for Children, undertook an Annual Feedback Survey. This involves individually contacting all children, parents and carers, looked-after children, and care leavers, who have received services from Children’s Social Care and Early Help. A tailored survey of questions is spoken through with each person, dependant on the type of service they have accessed. This enables the service to receive anonymous feedback, which is independently collated and analysed, to demonstrate service performance, direct service user experiences, and inform service development.

Feedback in general remains positive: there are clear strengths identified by our service users, particularly in Early Help and Children in Need, where overall satisfaction of families increased to 66% from 53% last year; and 100% of these families feel included in the development of their Child in Need Plan and its review and believe that this has been explained to them adequately.

The strength of relationships for children in care is notable: 100% of children in care spoken to feel able and comfortable in contacting their social workers. Children in care also unanimously feel safe where they are living, and happy with the support they receive from a range of professionals, including the Independent Reviewing Officer, participation worker and Virtual School.

The largest cohort of survey participants are care leavers: 91% feel ‘comfortable and easy’ to contact their worker, 83% feel that they see their worker at an appropriate frequency; 81% of care leavers



are happy with where they live; and 75% feel that the education they access is good or very good, which is an increase from 59% last year.

There are some common themes of concern in relation to accommodation issues, such as: lack of space; awaiting permanent accommodation; location of available accommodation options; and social isolation due to this. Moving through services, and workers leaving, are also areas that some respondents find difficult, particularly those who have been involved with services for many years. There is also feedback around lack of clarity in relation to some processes and how services worked together, specifically in relation to children with Special Educational Needs and the Education, Health, and Care Plan process.

To support participants understanding of what their feedback does in terms of service development and delivery a You Said, We Did, feedback mechanism is being put in place. This outlines how feedback has been acted upon and will hopefully support the good take up rate of feedback and response gather through this process.

5. Impact and Outcomes

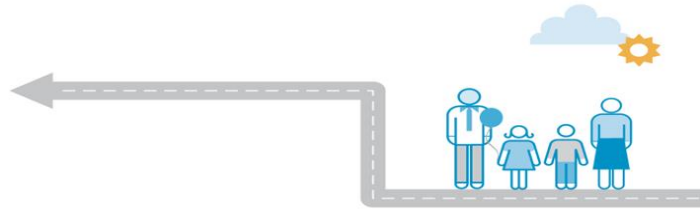
The Quality Assurance activity across the year has been regular, thorough, and far reaching. This has enabled us to identify some specific areas for development, as well as recognising the range of excellent work that is done which results in impactful outcomes for children, young people, and families.

We've worked hard to ensure that there is a consistent and clear feedback process from quality assurance work, and that there is evidence available in one place which demonstrates the action taken in relation to recommendations made and the impact this has for children. This has been done through the establishment of a Recommendation and Impact Tracker, which is updated by the Head of Service for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance will all child level and service level recommendations from quality assurance activity. Managers then meet monthly to provide updates on the progress of the recommendations, and the impact this has had for the child or young person. Meetings are held until all recommendations are completed.

This process is also supporting the strengthening of clear and SMART recommendations being made in the Practice Reviews, as if it is challenging to evidence that the recommendation has been implemented and what impact this has had for the child or young person, then it is potentially too nebulous an action.

Service Level recommendations received from quality assurance activity are either monitored through the monthly meetings, or if it a larger piece of work might be moved to the Service Development Plan where progress is scrutinised by the Achieving Excellence Board. Recommendations have led to or supported pieces of active service development, for example, the Care Leaver Offer and information in relation to housing pathways is being updated, there is development of workshops in relation to the transition to adulthood and independence for children leaving care to support their understanding of the processes, and exploration of new accommodation pathways which will support earlier identification of permanent housing.

All workers in Children's Social Care and Early Help have been provided with training from an Autism specialist in relation to communicating with children with Autism and additional communication needs, ensuring children's views are clearly informing plans and support, which will support



intervention to be fully child centred and informed. Workers have increased skills which they can use to support parents in implementing good routines in the home. There is continued development about our learning offer for staff in this area. There is also a range of specialist support which families have been signposted to. This also led to discussion with health colleague across Hackney and the City about the development of more City based parent/carer support groups, which is being considered.

There has been a large amount of work undertaken in relation to updating, standardising, and collating operational procedures. Given the mixed nature of the workloads in Children's Social Care and Early Help, it is recognised that workers don't necessarily do certain pieces of work regularly, therefore consistency can be harder to achieve. To this end it is recognised that we need to support staff to have clear and easy to access guidance, and have been updating our Trix Document Library to make it more streamlined, up to date, and easy to navigate; [The City of London Children and Young People's Services... \(trixonline.co.uk\)](http://trixonline.co.uk). The same principle applies for our partners and therefore this year we have developed guidance in relation to Child Protection Conferences, a standardised report template, a LADO Risk Assessment Template, and leaflet for employees and volunteers, these are hosted on the CHSCP website.

6. Oversight

CHSCP Quality Assurance Subgroup and Safeguarding Partnership

Quarterly reports are taken to the CHSCP Quality Assurance Subgroup which outline the practice review activity in the last quarter, feedback received and performance data, this provides independent multi-agency scrutiny of activity, learning and action taken. This information is then fed up to the CHSCP as part of wider feedback about service delivery and development.

Achieving Excellence Board

The Board meets quarterly and is Chaired independently by a scrutiny partner, it is there to provide challenge and external feedback on how we understand ourselves as a service, the experiences and outcome for children and young people, and robustness of plans to improve and develop services and operational practice. The Independent Chair has been working closely with the Head of Service to review current quality assurance arrangements and consider how these could be strengthened going forward.

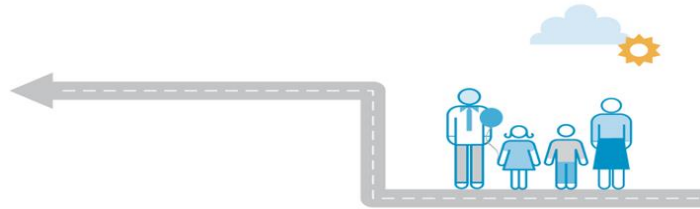
Safeguarding Sub-Committee

The Quality Assurance Framework and Annual Report are taken to the Safeguarding Sub-Committee for consideration of Members, to ensure that Children's Social Care and Early Years are continually learning from the children, young people, and families they support, best practice evidence, and updated guidance, to provide excellence services which achieve the best possible outcomes for all.

7. Priorities for the next 12 months

Updating the Quality Assurance Framework

Learning from the activity undertaken this year we will be refreshing the framework to continue to refine and develop processes which support learning and lead to improve practice, good experiences of services, and positive outcomes. We recognise the need to assure practice not just from file reviews but also through observation of direct work. Direct line managers are keen to have more



opportunity to undertake observation and this is something that will be explicitly incorporated into the future Quality Assurance Framework.

Learning from the Practice Assurance Review we will develop our Practice Review Template, to ensure prompt questions help reviewers focus on the experience of children, provide clear evidence for the grading rationale, as well as focused actions which demonstrate impact for the child with clear timescales applied. This will be linked with the implementation of clear moderation process so that consistency of Practice Reviews is increased, as well as the understanding across the Leadership team as to what 'excellence' looks like.

The sequencing of Practice Reviews will also be considered, and whether a smaller number of reviews being conducting more frequently might be trialled to assess the impact on workers, service delivery, ability to moderate, and greater inclusion of internal managers completing these.

Maximise the Voice and Experiences of the Children, Young People, and Families

Maintaining an increased focus on ensuring that the voices and experiences of children, young people, and their families, are sought and where this is provided ensuring that feedback is given about what impact this has. There has been more consistent use of You Said, We did, documents to demonstrate the impact feedback has had on service development. Over time we will be able to measure whether this approach supports continued engagement and helps participants feel we are being transparent about what we do to respond to feedback and improve experiences of our services.

Whilst the Annual Survey provides a rich source of information greater efforts will be made to elicit feedback during Practice Reviews, and from other points of service contact e.g. service closure feedback forms, feedback in Plans, feedback from Looked After Reviews or Child Protection Conferences etc. Enabling a 360° triangulation of experiences at various points of interaction with the service, and more focussed feedback about specific functions which can then be acted upon.

Quality Assurance of Commissioned Care Providers

From April 2024 it is proposed that we implement a series of in person visit by the Senior Leadership Team to commissioned care providers. This will take the form of one visit a month, with a written report then completed, agreed with the provider and progression of any recommendations monitored by the Commissioning Service and Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

This will provide a more consistent and robust approach to the monitoring of the quality of services and the daily lived experience of children in care and care leavers across our system. It will also make Senior Leaders more visible to children in care and care leavers and demonstrate an authentic will to hear and act upon any concerns they may have, and to firsthand experience what their life is like.