

City of London

Department of Community and Children's Services

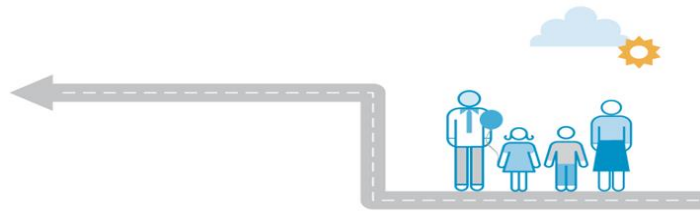
Quality Assurance of Care Providers Annual Report 2024-25

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Introduction

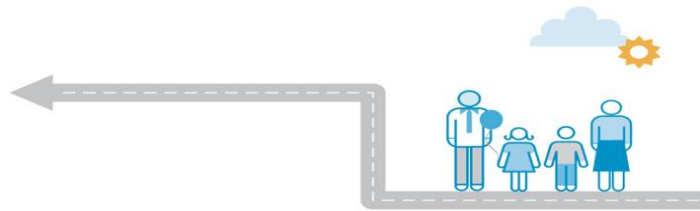
In March 2024 it was agreed that in order to strengthen the quality assurance of the care provided to our children in care and care leavers that senior leaders would undertake in person visits to care providers to experience firsthand the day to day lives of our children and young people and speak with them about their experiences. Due to the unique nature of the City of London in terms of the small geographical size and therefore limited residential population, it is not feasible to run an in-house fostering service and therefore all our care arrangements are commissioned through external providers. This means that many children in care and care leavers do not live within the City boundaries. As a strong Corporate Parent, we have a duty to ensure that the care arrangements that are commissioned are high quality, supportive, adaptable to meet the individual needs of our children and young people, safe, caring, and compassionate.

It was envisaged that visit would take place monthly and would be supported by Young Inspectors. This would be alongside the standard Commissioning Review meetings on a quarterly, half-yearly or annual basis (dependent upon placement volume), social work visits and feedback, and IRO oversight where applicable. Each visit would be written up the agree template (Appendix A) and shared with the Care Provider for their comments and action if needed, placed on the child or young persons Mosaic record, and shared with Commissioning to monitor the progress of recommendations made via the Commissioning Review meetings, or more immediately if required.

Quality Assurance Visits

Visits started in April 2024, Care Providers were chosen based on the number of young people they care for, those who are caring for particularly vulnerable children e.g. those with special educational needs or disabilities, provider who may be newer to working with the City, or where concerns have been raised by young people of their social workers, and those that are high cost. Over the year 6 visits have been completed to care providers supporting approximately 22 children and young people from the City of London, which is 39% of the children in care and care leavers we support.

On the 23rd April My Life were visited by Assistant Director for People's Services, Chris Pelham, this was a stand alone flat where one care leaver was residing, the care leaver and the service manager were met with and spoken to at the visit. My Life support anywhere between 10-15 young people from the City of London generally in stand alone properties with outreach keywork support as needed. No concerns about the accommodation or support provided were raised and the young person stated that they were happy with the accommodation and amenities and felt safe in the area in which they lived. However, they shared concerns about their housing application, immigration status and general stability for the future once they turned 25. Several recommendations were made in terms of strengthening management oversight of commissioning arrangements and stable care leavers plans, as well as sharing information and supporting the young person to feel more secure about their future.



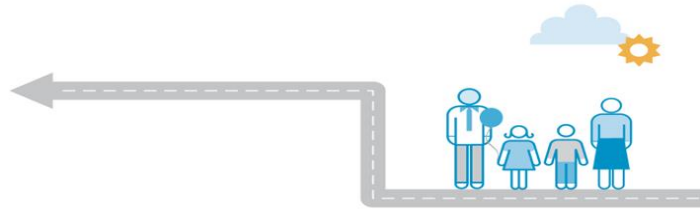
The second visit was undertaken on 26th June by the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, Laura Demetriades. This visit was to Growhaus in Harrow where they support 5 City of London young people in independent studio flats which are part of a converted office block called Kap House. 2 young people were met with one the day and one occupied flat and one empty flat seen, and the manager was also met with who provided a tour of the building. Overall, the visit was positive both young people said they felt well support by Growhaus, they liked where they lived although both were looking forward to getting a permanent tenancy and hopefully a larger property. Both young people and the care provider manager cited difficulties regarding the wider maintenance of the block and security, which had been addressed prior to the visit, and a recommendation was made to monitor this no other recommendations were identified.

A third visit was conducted on 9th August by the Executive Director, Judith Finlay, to Pathfinders. 2 young people were living in the semi-independent support terrace property that could accommodate up to 4 people. Both were spoken to, and the Director and 3 members of staff were met with. There were no concerns identified within the visit, both young people reported being happy with their living arrangements and the support they received.

A fourth visit was completed on 18th December by the Head of Children's Social Care and Early Help, Rachel Talmage. This was to a residential semi-independent property where one City young person was living several other young people from various Boroughs. This care provider was chosen as it had been identified by the Emergency Duty worker and is a provider that we have previously chosen not to use. Whilst there were no serious concerns about the property there were concerns about the approach of the staff, how the actions in young people's Care Plans were being progressed, and the feedback from our young person was not positive about his experiences. However, another young person from a different Local Authority reported positive experiences about living in the home. Several clear recommendations were made to the care provider to immediately improve the experience of our young person, alongside other wider recommendations.

The fifth visit was completed on 11th February by the Strategic Director of Education, Deborah Bell. This was to a high-cost specialist residential school where one child who has a range of complex needs lives full time. The child was support by known and trusted staff members to engage in the visit, despite his limited communication and was observed to be at ease and confident in his surroundings and relationships with others. The visit was very positive in terms of the facilities of the school, the skill and knowledge of the staff team, and how well the needs of the child are understood and attended too. No recommendations were made.

The final visit of the year was conducted on 19th March by the Head of the Virtual School, Debby Rigby. This was to a high-cost specialist residential school where one child who has a range of complex behaviours and recently diagnosed additional needs lives full time. Whilst the child can struggle to identify positives about his home when others point these out he does agree that there are positives. The home is well maintained and staffed by committed and well-trained professionals. One safety issue regarding an external fence was noted but action is already in place to address this.



Commissioning Review Meetings

Alongside the Quality Assurance Visits this year has seen more consistent establishment of Commissioning Review meetings with care providers on a quarterly, half-yearly or annual basis, dependent upon the number of children and young people living with each provider. These are led by the Commissioning Team supported by the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance with feedback from social workers and the Independent Reviewing Officer.

These meetings focus initially on the outcomes of the children and young people living with the care provider, giving them an opportunity to share their knowledge of the children and young people they support, any concerns they have and celebrate their successes. Attendance from the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance means that feedback from practice reviews, Children in Care Council feedback, and quality assurance visits can inform this discussion.

The meeting also covers contractual compliance such as staff recruitment, retention, training and payment, safeguarding notifications, LADO referrals, complaints, coproduction and acting upon feedback, and social value. The meeting is also a forum for care providers to give feedback about the City of London to improve working relationships and outcomes for children and young people. As the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance is also the LADO and lead for Workforce Development this knowledge informs the discussion and questions asked of care providers to ensure that their processes are robust, and staff are supported to work professionally, effectively and positively with our children and young people.

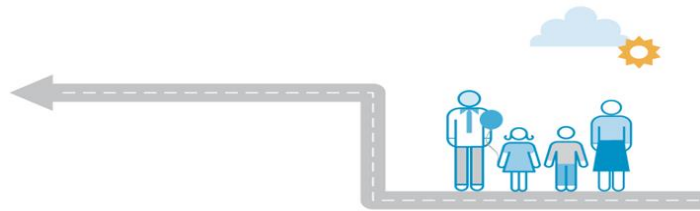
Notes from the meetings are recorded on children and young people's Mosaic records and where action is required this is flagged with social worker to take forward.

Impact and Outcomes

The Quality Assurance visits have brought senior leaders closer to the daily experience of children in care and care leavers and provided opportunities to make direct improvements to the lives of children and young people as well as service level changes which support ongoing improvement. Children and young people also have direct access to senior leaders during these visits and are able to share direct feedback which otherwise they may not have the opportunity to do.

In relation to direct impact for children and young people one visit was able to escalate a young person's housing position and ensure that a move to permanent accommodation took place prior to their 25th birthday. Agreed actions on a child's care plan were able to progress following delay in this and a plan made to move him to more suitable care arrangement post his 18th birthday.

More widely with one care provider we have been monitoring the facilities management of the building which recently has deteriorated, and we are now in discussion with them about relocating out young people, recognising that the support provided by the agency is strong and we want this to continue. In another case we made a service wide decision to not use a care provider again as we did not feel that the services provided were child focused, empathetic or considerate enough for our children and young people. The care provider acknowledged and



responded to our feedback and observations and provided an action plan to address our concerns.

Other visits have reinforced the strength of the provision and benefits this has for our children and young people, providing them with bespoke support that meets their individual needs and recognises their unique talents and interests.

The visits have fed into the commissioning review meeting and vice versa leading to a joined up approach which provides a holistic overview of the care and accommodation provided to our children and young people. This is triangulated with feedback directly from children and young people and their social workers. It demonstrates to care providers that there is robust processes in place to test the services being delivered.

Feedback from care providers has also resulted in internal service delivery changes ensuring Pathway Plans are provided in a timely manner, sharing of the Care Leaver Offer, this being online and translated so that keyworkers can support young people in their care to access and understand their entitlements. Ensuring senior management oversight on transition plans for care leavers about to turn 25 and leave the service. Plus the embedding of consistent Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance in commissioning arrangements.

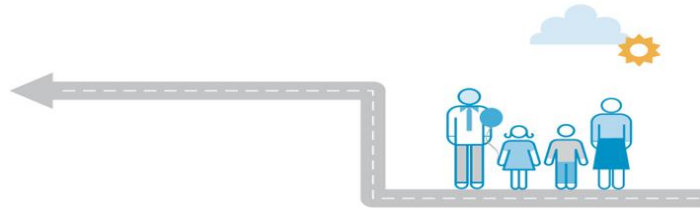
Social workers are now fully aware of the Quality Assurance Visits and Commissioning Review Meetings and without prompt contact the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance if they have concerns about a care provider that they feel needs to be escalated and addressed. This has led to meetings being held outside of the above frameworks to address urgent issues as they arise, which provides a supportive system for children and young people, social workers and care providers to ensure issues do not escalate and lead to increased concerns or worse harm to children or young people, or staff members.

Focus on children with Special Educational Needs

Recognising that children with additional needs have specific vulnerabilities and often require a high level of skilled care, we have chosen to ensure that the children in care who have an Education, Health, and Care Plan are visited as part of this work. Also given the specific needs of these children they are often living at some distance from their family homes which could lead to them being more isolated from their families and services.

Of the two children in care with and EHCP both were visited in their specialist residential school home by Senior Leaders who also have an education background. Both are supported to have regular time with their families and receive frequent visits from professionals. The visits were both very positive in terms of the education provision and care being received by these children. Whilst one was less enthused about his living arrangements he was able to identify aspects of his home that he enjoyed, and feedback from the school and other professionals does validate the progress he has made since living at the school home.

Future work will continue to ensure that children with additional needs are prioritised for quality assurance visits, so that their direct feedback and observations of their daily lives can be ascertained and their safety and positive progress verified.



Learning

Whilst we had originally envisaged monthly visits this was not practical or achievable in terms of coordinating diaries between senior managers and care providers, plus given the number of children and young people we do not use a great range of care providers. A break had always been planned in August and given our Ofsted Inspection in September there was a break in visits. However, on reflection 6 visits within the year has felt proportionate and reasonable.

During this year we have not managed to add Young Inspectors visits into the timetable this is for various reasons including capacity in the participation officer role, interest and understanding of young people in the Young Inspectors programme and competing priorities.

Overall, the accommodation and support being provided to children and young people is of a high standard which meets their needs well. Where this has not been the case immediate and longer-term action has been taken.

Senior Leaders have appreciated the opportunity to be more closely connected to the experiences of our children in care and care leavers. Care providers have been supportive of the visits and recommendations made.

Future Plans

- Quality Assurance visits will continue at a similar rate of 6 per year, this can be increased as needed. A visit is already in place for April 2025 to a new care provider.
- Commissioning Reviews will take place regularly with all care providers with input from both commissioning and the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance. Meetings are in the diary for 2025-26.
- The Young Inspectors Programme will be revisited and if viable included in future plans in relation to Quality Assurance Visits to commissioned services.