

City of London Corporation Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC454361
Inspection date	27/03/2013
Inspector	Jackie Graves
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	Corporation of London, PO Box 270, LONDON, EC2P 2EJ
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Telephone number	02073321219
Email	Chris.Pelham@cityoflondon.gov.uk
Registered person	City of London
Registered manager	POST VACANT
Responsible individual	Pat Dixon
Date of last inspection	N/A

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The City of London Corporation is a unique service. It does not provide a traditional local authority fostering service itself, but uses external providers via Pan London when a fostering placement is required. This is because the City of London receives only a very low number of referrals.

The City of London is geographically a very small area of 289 hectares with only a very small residential population of 7,412 people (at the time of the 2011 census). Of the population, there were 684 children aged 0-17 which equates to 9% of the total population, substantially lower than the England profile of 21% among this age group. It is rare for children from the resident population to become looked after and require a foster family; the majority of those currently in foster placements are unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

The London Borough of Hackney is commissioned to provide an out-of-hours emergency duty service to City of London children. If a child requires accommodation out of hours, Hackney will provide this using their own fostering resources, with only one child being accommodated in the past two years. A joint Safeguarding Children's Board is established between the City of London Corporation and Hackney. There is a service level agreement between Hackney Local Authority and Homerton Hospital for the health of looked after children.

At the time of inspection, eight children are placed in foster care and three care leavers remain in their foster homes. All are placed outside of the City of London. No disabled looked after children receive a service through the City of London commissioning arrangements.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This is the first inspection of the service. The inspection focuses on how the City of London discharges its responsibility for looked after children with regards to fostering

arrangements and how it meets children's needs through the commissioned placements, currently with five independent fostering agencies (IFA).

At 31 March 2012, of 8 looked after children, 100% were in foster placements. This compares favourably to statistics across England where the proportion of looked after children in foster placements was 75%. Currently, all looked after children experience family life in foster placements, with no use of residential care.

Through providing placements only with providers judged to be of high quality by the regulator, the City of London ensures children achieve outstanding outcomes, receive a good quality service and experience good arrangements to keep them safe. The service carefully monitors the arrangements it has with the agencies it commissions to ensure that children are safe in their foster homes, experience placement stability and strong attachments to their carers.

Management arrangements are good. Managers and staff work very creatively within these unique arrangements to make sure children's needs continue to be met in their placements and they are making sufficient progress in all areas of their lives. Close relationships between children and their social workers help children feel safe and secure. There is excellent support to meet children's ethnic, language, cultural and religious needs. The staff, management team and members of the Corporate Parenting and Young People's Task Group show commitment to improving children's lives and helping them do well.

Staff are recruited through a mostly strong recruitment process. However, references do not always include a statement from each referee as to their opinion of the person's suitability to work with children and references are not directly checked. The opportunity to take feedback from children to contribute to staff appraisals is not currently taken. However, these are relatively minor shortfalls which do not impact on children's welfare.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references (NMS 19.1)
- make sure where possible that references include a statement from each referee as to their opinion of the person's suitability to work with children (NMS 19.3)
- ensure staff appraisals take into account any views of children the service is providing for. (NMS 24.6)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Outcomes are exceptional through the City of London's careful commissioning of quality placements and systematic monitoring of these arrangements. All children benefit from living with foster carers. Staff make sure that children feel safe and settled in their placements. Children feel that they are 'one of the family' and have a sense of belonging. They experience positive family life through strong relationships with their carers, other looked after children in their placement and with foster carers' birth children. Siblings benefit from living together when this is in the children's best interests.

Children experience the security of significantly stable foster placements. Moves are very rare, planned and only when in the child's best interests. Pathway planning and review of arrangements supports children to remain in their placements and only move on when they are ready to do so. They are helped to make a very successful transition to adulthood, with all engaged in education or training. Children are very positive about their preparation for independence, for example, learning to shop within a budget and prepare meals.

All children are in an education placement, do not experience exclusions and make very good progress. Attendance is very good with any absence only for valid reasons, such as illness. Those attending school enjoy attending establishments judged as high quality by the regulator, ensuring they get the support they need to make progress. Children have aspirations and ambitions to improve their prospects through their education. Care leavers continue their education, for example to obtain qualifications at college or by attending university, with financial support from the City of London. Those children who are seeking asylum make rapid progress in acquiring English as an additional language. They assimilate into the local culture to help them feel settled, for example, through having mentors who share a common language or through extra support with their education.

Children enjoy a wide variety of normal life events, for example, holidays at home and abroad. They take part in hobbies and pursuits with their foster families and schools; this supports them in all aspects of their development and learning. Significantly, no children are engaged in risk-taking behaviour or offending and are living settled lives.

Children experience positive outcomes from contact arrangements. There is a balance between children maintaining their connections to the City, for example with links to friends and family, and integrating into the areas in which they live. Those children seeking asylum benefit from being located to areas where they may meet others of a similar cultural or religious background; this gives them a further sense of belonging somewhere. Effective arrangements with other agencies, for example the Red Cross and the Refugee Council ensure children can seek information about their birth families when they feel ready to do so and make sense of their past lives.

Children are healthy. They learn to live healthy lifestyles with attention to being active and improving their diet. Children take responsibility for their own health and

learn about potential risks to their health. No behaviour which may put children's health at risk occurs and there is no teenage pregnancy, which improves children's long-term health outcomes. Children are helped to understand the impact of past experiences on their health and well-being. They get the health services they need to improve their well-being, including counselling. Some exceptional practice has included providing specialist health services in children's first language so they can discuss health matters easily with a professional.

Due to the small size of the City of London service, children benefit from frequent, quality contact with their social workers and from warm relationships with them. Children's views are highly valued; their views are considered in all aspects of their placements and plans for the future. They also give their views on their care and progress to managers and corporate parents, so that leaders can be sure children's needs continue to be met in their commissioned placements.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

The quality of service is reliant on the City of London commissioning, and then monitoring, high quality placements made through independent fostering agencies. Effective monitoring of the performance of these agencies ensures that the quality of placements is maintained and continues to meet children's needs. No placements are made in the geographical area of the City, but this does not have a detrimental effect on the children currently placed. Children receive most services in their local area or their home, reducing the need to travel distances.

Social workers know the children very well. Children trust them and confide in them. Sensitive work is done to help meet children's individual needs. One example is the appointment of an independent social worker to conduct age assessments so the child's relationship with their own social worker is not compromised by this process.

Children's social workers have good working relationships with agency social workers and foster families so all are working together in children's best interests. Foster carers are regarded as partners and invited to attend all personal education plan, review and medical meetings with the children so that all involved in children's lives may contribute. The City provides additional support to enhance placement stability. For example, by funding specific training to help carers meet particularly complex behaviours. Social workers also help carers in their support of children, for example by offering and funding summer holiday activities.

The City of London Corporation secure good quality education placements, looking at Ofsted ratings, to ensure children's opportunities to progress and achieve are maximised.

Although the possibility of using families or friends to provide homes to looked after children is always explored, none have been assessed or approved to provide a service to children. Suitable plans are in place to commission support and training for

such carers should an assessment commence.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Through their commissioning arrangements, the City of London only places children in registered agencies which have been assessed to be of high quality and without safeguarding concerns. The services are closely monitored to ensure they continue to provide safe places for children to live and fully protect them. Children feel safe in their foster homes. Their social workers visit frequently - exceeding statutory levels - to make sure children are safe.

When considering a suitable placement for a child, City social workers look for carers able to meet children's individual requirements, for example, those experienced in caring for the particular needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children. This helps children to feel safe and secure in their placement with carers who have empathy for their experiences. Managers check that children have further support networks in addition to the City of London. For example, they check that there are opportunities for looked after children to meet others placed within the same IFA where they can build friendships.

The service recognises the risk to children who go missing from their foster home, adopting a suitable policy for staff to follow should this occur. However, incidents of children going missing are extremely rare so children placed through the City's commissioning arrangements are not placing themselves at risk.

Staff and management understanding and experience of child protection is very good. All staff are either working towards or have completed Achieving Best Evidence training as well as safeguarding training, so they have a clear focus on keeping children safe. Staff make sure that children's care plans identify the impact that abuse or neglect may have on them, then monitor to make sure children's carers are able to meet any related needs. Children rarely experience bullying. However, if this does occur, social workers make sure there is effective information sharing between schools, carers and other professionals in order to challenge bullying and support the child.

The City's recruitment procedures protect children. These ensure that prospective staff are checked through the Criminal Records Bureau and that references and other checks are obtained before they have contact with children. However, references do not always include a statement from each referee as to their opinion of the person's suitability to work with children, and references are not directly checked.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **good**.

Management and staff's expectations are high and they want each child to feel

happy where they live and do well. Management is vigilant in their monitoring of the services they commission.

Due to the unique nature of this service, managers have very detailed knowledge of each child, their progress and development. For example, the team manager visits placements and has met all the looked after children so has good knowledge of the children her team supports and the quality and safety of placements. Also, the responsible individual quality assures each placement commissioned; for example, they look at the standard of carers' training and support to ascertain if placements are suitable to meet children's needs and are likely to be sustained, to avoid placement breakdown and disruption to the child. Managers also have good oversight of the strengths and areas for development in the City of London Corporation.

Children are well supported by fully qualified, registered social workers. Social workers are skilled in working with IFA social workers in children's best interests. Children say their social workers are, 'Great, but wish they could stay.' However, the recent appointment of staff to permanent posts has improved stability in the staff team. Also, as the service is so small, children benefit from knowing other staff and social workers in the team who they may feel comfortable speaking to if their social worker is unavailable, providing continuity. Good working relationships with other agencies, for example the City of London Police and health services help improve the care of children who live with foster families.

Staff find management supportive and approachable. Staff are given many opportunities to refresh and extend their skills and knowledge to develop professionally. They have regular, good quality supervision and annual appraisal to support their direct work with children. However, the appraisal process does not yet include seeking children's views to ensure these are considered.

Children play some part in the development of the City of London Corporation, for example, the care leaving policy was amended following consultation with care leavers. Management is sensitive to the fact that as so few children are in foster care, they may not wish to be consulted too frequently.

There are appropriate systems in place to find out if children have any complaints, worries or concerns, for example through children's six monthly contact with their independent reviewing officer, through independent visitors or by frequent social worker visits. Nevertheless, no complaints have ever been made by children in foster care.

An appropriate Statement of Purpose sets out what the City of London Corporations aims to achieve for looked after children so that people know what to expect from the service.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of local authority fostering agencies.