

Inspection of Redcar and Cleveland local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 1 to 12 December 2025

Lead inspector: Rachel Fairhurst, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Following the last inspection in 2022, there have been improvements in the quality of practice. Most children, young people and their families in Redcar and Cleveland receive effective services within a context of high demand and high levels of deprivation. A stable, skilled workforce clearly understands the model of practice and is delivering quality assessments and plans for children. For a number of children, sufficiency issues result in a lack of choice and stability in placements, and they are living in homes that are unregistered or not in line with their identified care plan.

This leadership team has driven improvements with pace. It has enabled a change of culture that has improved experiences for most children. The implementation of specialist teams in areas of complex need and specialist support has been effective. The previous areas for improvement have predominantly been addressed; there does remain further work to do in some areas to maintain consistency and quality of practice. Leaders are aware and have identified these in the continuous improvement plan.

What needs to improve?¹

- The sufficiency of homes for children in care. (outcome 4, national framework)
- Consistency in the recording of contingency plans. (outcome 2, national framework)
- The response to children who are privately fostered. (outcome 3, national framework)

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Through the effective delivery of early help services, children and families are receiving the right help at the right time. Family hubs allow families to access support within their communities. Early help assessments and plans are detailed and regularly updated. There is a strong emphasis on helping families to identify and use support within their own networks, preventing the escalation of need for many children. When needs change, a seamless process means they can step up to or down from statutory services with minimal disruption to families.
2. Contacts received into the multi-agency children's hub (MACH) are screened by experienced and qualified practitioners. They apply professional curiosity and analysis of family histories to make effective decisions. There is a good understanding of the complexity of consent issues, and practitioners make decisions based on what is in the best interest of the child. Parents are helped to understand what they are consenting to and how information will be shared.
3. There is high demand at the 'front door', and partners understand the thresholds for professional involvement in family life. The response to referrals from the MACH is proportionate and timely. The work with the safeguarding partnership, and the introduction of effective triage, has further strengthened this. Children's voices and experiences inform decision-making, and the right decisions are made at the right time. There is clear management oversight to ensure that children are prioritised and there is an appropriate response to risk and need.
4. Professionals have a strong understanding of domestic abuse and they provide appropriate support through further assessment and child in need plans when needed. The response is supported by specialist advisers in the MACH.

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

5. The emergency duty team provides an effective response to children outside office hours. The liaison and exchange of information with day services is consistent to prevent any unnecessary delay in further support progressing.
6. When safeguarding concerns are identified, strategy discussions are well attended by relevant agencies. Appropriate information is shared, which facilitates proportionate outcomes without delay. Children receive help and safety planning at the earliest juncture.
7. Whenever the outcome of a strategy discussion is to progress to child protection enquiries, clear actions are identified. The outcomes of child protection enquiries are appropriate. Children are seen, and their voice and experiences, along with strengths in the family, influence decision-making.
8. Social work assessments, including pre-birth assessments, are detailed. There is consideration of family history and use of chronology to determine cumulative harm. Assessments contain strong analysis, reaching the right conclusion and intervention for most families. Management oversight of assessments ensures that recommendations are balanced, timely and effective.
9. Historical and less-effective assessment and planning have led to a very small number of children living in neglectful situations for too long. More recent practice shows a greater awareness of the enduring and cumulative impact of neglect. Recent training and a dedicated toolkit to support the neglect strategy, although not yet fully embedded, have started to strengthen practice and management oversight at key decision-making points.
10. Social workers form meaningful relationships with children through regular visits, undertaken in line with need. Direct work includes sensitive conversations, and social workers explore the child's experiences and use these to inform the support provided. Detailed recordings are made, some of which are written directly to the child, with a view to increasing the child's understanding, both now and in the future, of the interventions being undertaken.
11. Child-centred social workers develop plans that meet and address need and risk for children, including disabled children. The recording of contingency plans on the child's case record is not consistent. Although social workers could articulate the contingency plans for children, these are not always explicit on the case file, creating a difficulty in locating and accessing them. Most plans engage the wider family network in supporting children effectively. Interventions are regularly reviewed in well-attended multi-agency meetings that involve parents and the wider family. This enables situations to progress, which ensures that risks are reduced and need is met.
12. When concerns for children increase, they are escalated appropriately to child protection conferences. Detailed recordings of these meetings show effective information-sharing and application of the model of practice, leading to proportionate decisions. Social workers are alive to the use of family networks

in being able to support and sustain change to reduce risks to children. For those in child protection planning, child protection chair oversight is detailed and is measuring the progress of child protection plans effectively. Decision-making at child protection conference is clearly recorded, including a detailed rationale.

13. When children's experiences are not improving, children benefit from timely decisions to escalate into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) or legal proceedings. Senior managers maintain a thorough and effective overview of the PLO. While some letters before proceedings contain unhelpful jargon, in the main they are suitably detailed, identify the concerns and inform families what they need to do to avoid further action. Families in the PLO are in receipt of a range of assessments and interventions that aim to divert children away from care proceedings.
14. There is a very small number of children living in private fostering arrangements. While the private fostering regulations are well understood by leaders, the consistency of practice in this area is not as strong. There is variability in the quality of work for these children, including the recording of the work completed and the quality of management oversight. Leaders are aware of this and are actively progressing plans to improve consistency for these children.
15. The identification of and response to young carers is not consistently strong. Some children who have caring responsibilities are identified early, and this forms a part of assessments and plans. For a small number of children, their needs as young carers are not well considered, leading to delays in identification of children's young carer status and the progression of appropriate referrals to services to meet this need. Leaders are aware of the need to strengthen practice in this area, following recent themed audit activity.
16. While some improvements are noted in the response to children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless, there is more to do to ensure a consistent approach. Children are made aware of their rights and entitlements, but for a small number of children, the support offered was not timely.
17. The response to managing allegations against professionals by the local authority designated officer is effective. The threshold for intervention is understood and applied appropriately. Ongoing work is tracked and monitored, with strong oversight, preventing drift and delay.
18. The response to children who go missing or are at risk of exploitation is strong and further strengthened by the safeguarding adolescents from exploitation (SAFE) team. The improved missing-from-home return interview process is reducing risk through understanding triggers, and information mapping and sharing. Working alongside social workers, SAFE team practitioners manage risk effectively and support safety for those at risk of harm outside the home.

Safety planning and work to reduce risk are relationship based and are conducted in collaboration with the young people experiencing the risk.

19. There are effective procedures in place to make suitable and timely checks to be assured of the appropriateness of arrangements for children who are electively home educated. When children are missing from education or not in receipt of full-time education, the local authority uses a range of measures to check on their location. Ongoing oversight of those not in school full time is regular and focuses on increasing their engagement in education at a suitable pace for the child.

The experiences and progress of children in care: requires improvement to be good

20. Children come into care when it is the right plan for them. Children are safeguarded by use of legal orders when needed and appropriate. Assessments are detailed and explore whether children can remain with their parents. When this is not possible, early consideration is given to family members and wider family networks. Support for extended family carers is strong, ensuring stability for children within their family.
21. Social workers formulate plans that are meeting the needs of children in care, including assessments of brothers and sisters being placed together. Care plans have appropriate, measurable outcomes, driven by actions and targets, and are subject to regular, comprehensive review and oversight by the independent reviewing officer (IRO).
22. The IRO footprint is evident on records through clear ratification of plans, escalation when progress stalls and comprehensive notes that track actions. Reviews of care plans include IROs writing directly to the child, acknowledging their contributions and celebrating their success. Midway reviews and visits by the IROs are well recorded, demonstrating curiosity and challenge. While most disputes are resolved informally, when formal disputes are raised leaders do not have a system in place to analyse the effectiveness of IROs' challenge.
23. Leaders maintain oversight of all children in care to secure permanence as early as possible, and for most, this is achieved. All permanence options are considered, including adoption for older children. Permanence tracking arrangements are mostly effective, and many children have their permanence secured via legal arrangements at a time that is right for them.
24. When homes for children are at risk of breaking down, support is put in place to stabilise the placement permanently or for long enough to match most children well to their future home. Learning is taken from these situations to further strengthen planning.
25. Historical decisions to close children's homes have created a legacy of insufficient in-house provision and limited local choice for children. This has

resulted in an increased, and relatively high, use of unregistered settings, often in emergencies, meaning some of the most complex and vulnerable children live in arrangements that are not registered. Leaders are actively encouraging providers to register while searches for registered provision continue. The current leadership team is seeking to address the current insufficiency of placements, but this will take some time to achieve.

26. In response to the use of unregistered provisions, leaders have created clear guidance and lines of authorisation that ensure there is robust oversight and monitoring, alongside quality assurance monitoring with commissioning. This is with a view to mitigating the risk of placing children in unregistered provisions, and the appetite for securing registered provision for children remains an ongoing priority. Children receive increased visiting and monitoring in recognition of the heightened vulnerability. Despite these measures, some children experience drift and delay in achieving permanence, and some face additional moves while waiting for registered provision. Exit plans are pursued, including the payment of retainers to secure registered placements, but sufficiency remains a significant challenge.
27. Sufficiency has further impacted on placement decisions for younger children to live in children's homes. For some children, this is a purposeful decision to meet their needs, and they are thriving. For others, the decision is resource-led due to a lack of suitable foster homes, leaving their long-term plans uncertain. For some children living in unregulated provision within their wider family network, these placements, although unlikely to meet regulation for fostering, were mostly the right placement for children. Where they were not, concerted efforts are made to secure a move to registered provision, but for some, not soon enough.
28. Leaders are aware that the recruitment of foster carers has not been sufficient to meet the ever-increasing number of children in need of foster homes. Support for foster families has increased to include an additional support hub, and foster carers are invited into a community of support. Feedback from foster carers confirms the efforts by the service to provide a good level of support and advice.
29. Children leave care in circumstances that are in their best interests, including returning to live with their parents. These arrangements are monitored by senior leaders and informed by detailed assessments that fully consider family history, parenting capacity and the parent's ability to safely care for their child. When these plans are successful, care orders are discharged in a timely way. This means families are not subject to statutory intervention for longer than is necessary.
30. The Borough of Redcar and Cleveland is a member of the regional adoption agency, Adoption Tees Valley. The service is meeting the needs of children with a plan of adoption. The quality of assessments and support for adopters is good and benefits from the scrutiny of a quorate panel, and an experienced panel

chair and agency decision-maker. Adopters receive good support from social workers and training to maximise their family's future stability.

31. Adoption and special guardianship order (SGO) planning is timely and sensitive. Birth parents are supported through trauma-informed approaches and encouraged to contribute to children's life-story work. Adopters and carers receive therapeutic support to manage transitions of children into their homes. SGO plans are appropriate and in line with the needs of children, and children move to proposed special guardians at the earliest appropriate opportunity, enabling arrangements to be 'tested' before final hearings. Kinship care is prioritised, and assessments are thorough. There is an increasing proportion of children achieving permanence through SGO and living in homes with people they know.
32. Responses to safeguarding concerns for children in care are timely and analytical. Strategy discussions and child protection enquiries are appropriate, and multi-agency forums provide effective oversight of risk. Missing and exploitation pathways and meetings record detailed analysis and actions, helping workers tackle complex issues. Social workers are managing the presenting needs and risk posed to children through sensitive direct work and challenging conversations, which is enabled through effective relationships.
33. Social workers in the disabled children's service have a good understanding of the needs of disabled children in care. Regularly updated assessments and effective planning mean that disabled children in care have positive experiences and make good progress in all aspects of their lives.
34. The identity needs of children are well considered, including those of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and disabled children. Consideration is given to children's religious and cultural needs, sexuality and gender identification. Care plans include how need will be met, incorporating children's health needs, with support for their emotional and mental health through effective and expedient in-house therapeutic work, which is available to all children in care who require it.
35. Children are supported to explore their hobbies, interests and pursuits to ensure they have fun and can form social relationships with peers and help them thrive. Ongoing family time and staying in touch with those that are important to children are actively encouraged and facilitated in their care plans.
36. Skilled and experienced social workers provide consistently strong support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care through a specialist team. Children are helped to develop links and support systems and to live in bespoke accommodation that meets their needs. Well-recorded visits, at a frequency in line with need, evidence support and sensitivity. These visits have a focus on helping children settle, progress and feel safe. Cultural and language needs are understood well. There is a positive range of work and social opportunities for these children.

37. The virtual school ensures that children in care are supported to make progress in their education. The virtual school is suitably focused on making sure that children in care attend education. There continues to be effective work to reduce suspensions, which show signs of improvement. Focused work to improve consistency of personal education plans (PEPs) is evident. When needed, the virtual school provides a range of help to children and schools to support and sustain their education journey positively.
38. Social workers visit children in care regularly, increasing in line with need, and including those placed out of area. Visits are recorded in detail, with a summary written and provided to the child. Social workers undertake ongoing, interactive life-story work, increasing the child's understanding of their journey into and through care and promoting their sense of identity. Managers also complete visits to children to ensure they also know them and to assure themselves about the quality of the child's home.
39. Children and young people know their voices really do matter, and there is a renewed focus on participation. The 'Children in Our Care' voice group meets on a regular basis and has been involved in activities with members of the Corporate Parenting Board.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

40. Social workers who know children well start the child's pathway planning and inform the initial pathway plans. Children are then introduced to their personal advisers (PAs) early, who are active in their care planning before they leave care. This allows children to form effective relationships with their PAs and supports preparation for the transition to adulthood.
41. Early consideration of additional needs or vulnerabilities is in place for disabled children and those in need of transitional safeguarding arrangements. Early introduction to adult services allows for effective planning and support into independence, including those who are vulnerable or may need ongoing support. Arrangements such as 'staying put' are considered early for those children wishing to stay with their carers. This provides additional time to develop their independence skills and move on to independent living at a time that is suitable for them.
42. The local offer and care leaver strategy is informed by what young people have told leaders is important to them. The care leaver offer is wide ranging and regularly reviewed to reflect the changing needs of care leavers. Young people have the care leaver offer shared with them at an early stage and can access it via paper copies, on a website or through an app. The app also includes information on other organisations that can provide assistance and employment and training opportunities. The offer is actively discussed with young people, and they are involved in shaping its development.

43. Investment in support for care leavers is in place with the development of the 'Target Hub', a welcoming, recently refurbished space where young people can access their workers and a range of facilities. This space supports engagement with peers, developing skills and the opportunity to seek advice and support from regular specialist workers, such as the virtual school and housing advice.
44. Managers and PAs have strong and supportive relationships with most care leavers and know them well. Where relationships are harder to develop, PAs are tenacious in developing these. PAs are proud of the achievements of care leavers and celebrate these. They are consistent advocates and are ambitious for their young people.
45. Pathway plans are undertaken collaboratively with young people, and the young person's voice is evident in their plan. While not all plans are reviewed regularly, or when circumstances change, they are detailed, easy to read and allow for all important factors in the young person's life to be considered. Plans have a focus on lifelong links and relationships that are important to young people. Actions are clear and link to risk and need and contain honest reflection on difficult issues. Plans explicitly identify support needs, including health, education, training and employment and how these will be met. Care leavers over 21 do not close to the service, but 'step back' when they feel ready to. Those who need continued support are actively encouraged to remain supported by their PA. When care leavers come back to the team for support, they are welcomed.
46. Developing support for accommodation options is a high priority. This includes the development of the 'Next Chapter' supported tenancy scheme, regular housing and accommodation panels, development of a bespoke accommodation provision for separated children and the development of a joint policy with housing to confirm priority status. Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation, and support is provided where required. Links with housing workers ensure access to higher banding and support to bid for housing when they are ready.
47. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who are care leavers receive a high level of support from workers, who know them exceptionally well. They live in accommodation that meets their needs relating to their culture and ethnicity. They receive effective help and support to manage the complexities of their individual circumstances, including asylum claims, health needs and identifying family links. They are encouraged to download the care leavers app so that they can access documentation about their rights and entitlements in their own language. The weekly orientation group is a significant strength. It is attended by young people and practitioners and has social and educational elements. This is crucial in reducing isolation and developing peer support networks.
48. PAs place a strong emphasis on the safety and wellbeing of care leavers, and safety planning is evident throughout pathway plans and other records. Strong

multi-agency work helps to safeguard care leavers and to encourage them to make positive choices. Practice in this area is enhanced by the relational approach used by PAs.

49. Most care leavers in custody receive ongoing visits and financial support where this is approved by the prison. The service is also supporting drop-in sessions for care leavers from across the country in two local prisons. In most cases, PAs support planning for release, try to ensure that care leavers have access to education, employment or training and handle difficult conversations with sensitivity and empathy.
50. Managers and PAs articulate their 'corporate grandparenting' responsibility and offer bespoke planning and support to care leavers who are parents. There are specific resources available within the hub for care leavers' children, and they receive support and advice if they are navigating child in need or child protection processes for their children.
51. Care experience is now recognised by the local authority as a protected characteristic, and leaders have committed to developing the care leavers' covenant. There are ring-fenced apprenticeships, employment and work experience opportunities within the council, and the free council tax offer has been extended to those care leavers living outside Redcar and Cleveland.
52. Leaders have recognised the importance of young people's participation and have recently invested in a specific worker for care leavers who will facilitate the monthly care leavers' forum. Priorities for service development have been informed by collecting young people's views. The council has supported care leavers to become peer mentors and young ambassadors, valuing the contribution of experts by experience. Peer ambassadors actively influence the design of the service and the local offer.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

53. Leaders have ensured that services have improved, and the pace of improvement has increased since the appointment of the director of children's services (DCS) in late 2024. Leaders are experienced and have positive relationships with partners. They have addressed many of the areas for improvement since the last inspection and have turned some into areas of strength.
54. Cross-party political and corporate support is in place. The chief executive, new in post, is cognisant of the challenges and is supportive and confident in the approach from children's social care leadership and the cross-council commitment. There is an ambition and a shared responsibility to secure children's safety and improve their outcomes and experiences. Significant additional investment to improve services and support demand is subsequently improving experiences for children and families. Leaders respond well to the

presenting issues and needs and have reacted with well-considered and measured priorities, supported with resources.

55. The drive on improving children's experiences and the quality of practice and services is a focus for council leaders. Scrutiny and accountability are in place through various committees and cabinet meetings. Training and induction for all elected members has been put in place to embed corporate parenting responsibilities. Voice groups for children in care and care leavers are shaping services, and care leavers are also involved at a national level with the care leavers' covenant.
56. Sufficiency is a priority, and it is recognised by these leaders as needing further development with pace. Previous sufficiency strategies have not delivered what is required, and as a result, there are a number of children in unregistered provision, used in an emergency, but on a frequent basis. Historical decisions regarding the closure of children's homes in Redcar and Cleveland have led to a lack of current in-house provision. The increase in need and demand, alongside sufficiency needs not being addressed historically, has resulted in limited local provision and a lack of choice for children. The current leadership team has a clear grip on this issue and is taking steps to redress the shortfall. Leaders have sought and secured additional funding for further investment.
57. Leaders recognise that overdependence on the external independent market can be expensive. With investment from corporate and council executive, alongside commissioning arrangements, they are securing additional provision. As part of the strategy, work is also being undertaken across the North East region to shape the market, but it is too soon to see the impact of this work. It is recognised that this will take time, and although the current sufficiency strategy is starting to produce additional capacity, it will not secure provision for a number of children who require it now.
58. Partnership arrangements in Redcar and Cleveland are mature, effective and well developed. The right priorities are identified for the South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership, and focused strategies have been developed. Delivery is supported by coordinated, multi-agency partnership working and shared training.
59. A number of specialist teams have been established and are offering support to children's services, providing tailored and effective responses. These teams include the Pre-Birth Team, Asylum Through Care team and the SAFE team. These teams have been resourced and established by leaders in direct response to identified need in these areas and have been effective in reducing risk and developing effective practice.
60. A relationship-based practice model has been adopted and supported by practice standards. The model is underpinned by systemic theory and focused on strength-based practice approaches. This is well embedded and understood

by the workforce, seen in practice and evidenced in children's records, reflecting children's experiences.

61. The senior leadership team has an outward-facing approach and an appetite for learning from experience and is using this to drive forward plans for improvement. The self-evaluation provided by leaders gave a realistic account of the strengths and challenges that the local authority faces. They know their services well and have used external support and advice effectively. The inspection has not identified any practice issues that leaders were not already sighted on and addressing through improvement plans.
62. The quality assurance (QA) framework is embedded, and QA activity is used to determine areas of need and actions to address emerging trends. The QA activity is restorative and collaborative. Use of audit activity on a quarterly basis offers a line of sight into practice for all levels of managers up to the DCS. The learning identified is shared at the continuous improvement board, chaired by the DCS, and drives improvement via the continuous improvement plan. Learning and engagement are further enhanced through practice weeks, and there has been noticeable improvements in the work and quality of services provided to children and families.
63. Leaders have an understanding of the impact of the social care reforms, and planning through the transformation programme has been shared with the workforce and partners. Leaders are using the support in place from pathfinders and the Department for Education. This has not yet shaped services or team structures as the focus and drive is on the quality of practice and existing service delivery.
64. The quality of supervision to workers, with useful reflection, management direction and voice of the child, is a strength. Although there is some inconsistency in how this is recorded, leaders have been proactive in seeking ways to drive improvement in this area. Management oversight at key decision-making points, recorded on children's records, ensures that clear rationale and oversight of practice are in place.
65. A key element to the recruitment and development of workers is the Children's Social Work Academy. The academy has a dedicated principal social worker providing support and oversight. This effective learning environment is having a positive impact on workforce stability and providing capacity for the future. 'Graduates' from the academy are supported to become part of the workforce, understanding the priorities and culture of work in Redcar and Cleveland.
66. The workforce is a priority, and workers who spoke with inspectors unanimously feel valued and supported with access to training and progression opportunities. Workload continues to be monitored through performance management activity, and staff talked about the supportive environments enabling them to manage the workload and prioritise their work. They value the support and the availability and accessibility of the leadership team. They are

proud to work for Redcar and Cleveland and state clearly that it is 'a canny place to work'.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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