

Atkinson Unit

Devon County Council

The Atkinson Centre, Atkinson Close, Beacon Lane, Exeter EX4 8NA

Full inspection

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this secure children's home

This home is managed by a local authority and is approved by the Secretary of State to restrict children's liberty. The home can accommodate up to eight children aged between 10 and 17 years under Section 25 of the Children Act 1989. Admission of any child under 13 years of age requires the approval of the Secretary of State.

The commissioning of health services in this home is the statutory responsibility of NHS England under the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Education is provided on site in dedicated facilities.

At the time of this inspection, six children were living in the home.

The manager is registered with Ofsted.

Inspection dates: 13 to 15 January 2026

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

Children's education and learning **good**

Children's health **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The secure children's home provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 26 November 2024

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Recent inspection history

Inspection date	Inspection type	Inspection judgement
26/11/2024	Full	Good
12/09/2023	Full	Outstanding
07/06/2022	Full	Good
09/02/2022	Full	Good

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make good progress and feel settled and happy living at the home. They speak positively about the support they receive from staff. Relationships between staff and children are meaningful and are based on trust and respect. Staff actively promote children's individual interests and hobbies and support them to extend their skills. For example, children confidently wrote and performed a play especially for the inspectors during the inspection, and one child played a tune on a keyboard.

Children benefit from nurturing relationships with the staff. Staff speak with children about difficult and sensitive topics, creating a safe and respectful environment in which children feel listened to and understood. Conversations are approached with curiosity and empathy, allowing children to share their thoughts and feelings in their own time. This helps children feel secure, reduces anxiety and supports them to express themselves. Children's views are valued and their emotional wellbeing is promoted.

Children undertake visits into the community, which supports them to build independence while taking part in a range of activities. Visits include work experience, restaurants, cinema, hair salons, local parks, horse riding, climbing and the gym. Children told inspectors they enjoy and look forward to these trips and visits.

Children are helped to understand their personal history through well-planned and sensitive life-story work. This work is informed by guidance from the psychologist, ensuring a trauma-informed approach that is matched to the child's emotional needs and level of understanding. Staff help the children to explore their experiences at an appropriate pace, using clear and honest explanations. As a result, children are developing a stronger sense of identity and are increasingly able to make sense of their past and current circumstances.

Children told the inspectors that they felt safe. Staff provide clear boundaries and reinforce positive behaviour, which promotes respectful relationships. Staff are vigilant in identifying and responding to bullying behaviours. They challenge inappropriate language and behaviour promptly and consistently, helping children to understand the impact of their actions on others.

Children's diversity is respected and celebrated. Staff provide a positive and inclusive environment. Any discriminatory language is addressed immediately and appropriately, with staff offering clear guidance to help children understand the importance of treating others with kindness and respect.

Children's education and learning: good

Education staff provide opportunities for children, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, to participate in good-quality education that

prepares them well academically, socially and emotionally for life beyond the home. Children study curriculum subjects such as English, mathematics, science and ICT. They also have good opportunities to study vocational subjects such as art, bike maintenance, cooking, hair and beauty, sport, and health and social care. Most children attend and engage well with their education.

When children arrive at the home, caring and kind education staff take the time to get to know them well. They spend time identifying what children know and can do academically, their wellbeing needs and their interests. Staff use this information effectively to develop a personalised curriculum plan. Children benefit from a personalised timetable and a curriculum that are well structured to meet their individual needs.

Children make good progress in their education and develop new knowledge, skills and behaviours. Tutors understand each child and their interests well. They use a range of appropriate teaching techniques to engage children and teach the curriculum. For example, in hair and beauty, children learn how to apply gel nail varnish, including curing gel using an LED lamp. Children produce work to a good standard. Staff use effective strategies in lessons, which helps to ensure that learning environments are calm and enjoyable spaces for children. Children are mostly taught individually but occasionally in pairs to promote tolerance and group work.

As part of the curriculum, children achieve accredited qualifications. This includes vocational subjects, English, mathematics and Koestler Arts Awards. For many children, this is the first time they have achieved formal qualifications or attended school consistently. Staff frequently celebrate children's achievements, and most children receive internal awards for improvements in their attendance, behaviours and attitudes.

Children receive helpful careers advice and guidance. They participate in careers interviews with a qualified adviser, write a CV, undertake external work experience and visit education settings, where they may continue their studies. Many children aspire to have careers and know the steps and further learning they need to take to achieve their ambitions.

Leaders provide some opportunities for children to participate and develop new knowledge in personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) and life skills education. This includes drug awareness, crime and law, wellbeing, managing money, budgeting, hair care, making a bed and keeping their room tidy. However, leaders recognise there is more work to do to make sure that children consistently develop significant new knowledge, skills and behaviours across a broader range of topics to develop their independence, make informed decisions and build positive futures.

Children's health: outstanding

Health outcomes for children are exceptional. Children benefit from a well-coordinated, clinically led and trauma-informed health service. Skilled practitioners from psychology, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy work closely together from

admission, enabling staff to build a comprehensive and compassionate understanding of each child's needs. High-quality formulations and timely neurodevelopmental assessments ensure that children's needs are identified early and responded to without delay.

Children receive comprehensive health assessments and interventions that take place sensitively and at a pace that reflects each child's emotional readiness. Staff demonstrate a strong understanding of children's communication styles, sensory needs and individual preferences. Their approach helps children feel safe and able to engage meaningfully in their assessments and therapeutic work.

Children access a broad range of targeted interventions that support improved emotional regulation and overall wellbeing. The therapeutic environment extends beyond formal sessions. For example, the regulatory garden, backed by national research, provides a calm, sensory-rich space where children can practise grounding strategies and reduce physiological stress. As staff observe how children respond to this environment, they gain deeper insight into individual sensory preferences, triggers and regulation patterns, which further inform personalised therapeutic planning. These experiences are thoughtfully integrated into daily routines, contributing to lowered anxiety and greater stability. This supports children to make significant and sustained progress in their self-regulation, physical health and emotional development.

Occupational therapy and clinical psychology provide significant strength and shape the home's therapeutic culture. Children benefit from personalised planning and responsive cognitive and emotional wellbeing support. Innovative practice such as video interaction guidance and use of the 'Just Right State' programmes (the use of sensory activities to help children learn how to self-regulate their emotional states and behaviour) supports the understanding of children's needs. This enhances the service provided, while clinical supervision and reflective practice strengthen staff confidence and ensure that children receive consistently attuned care.

Medication management is safe and well governed. Staff are confident, well trained and work effectively, supported by a digital recording system. Children receive clear, age-appropriate explanations that help them understand their treatment. Following any restraint or separation, children are routinely offered wellbeing reviews that escalate appropriately through the emergency care pathway when required.

Children demonstrate sustained progress across key indicators, including emotional regulation, physical health, sleep and diet. Effective early identification and swift assessment pathways contribute to children's stability and engagement in therapeutic work. Strong transition planning, supported by comprehensive Health and Wellbeing Passports, promotes continuity and emotional safety. Staff work collaboratively, show deep insight into neurodevelopmental needs and maintain a commitment to evidence-based, research-informed practice.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children told inspectors that they feel safe and always have someone that they can talk to if they are worried about something. Relationships between children and staff are consistently positive. It is evident from children's interactions with staff that they feel safe.

Children's plans are clear and provide strategies for staff to follow. All children have safety support plans, which are updated daily to ensure they remain relevant and accurate. Positive behaviour support plans clearly detail how a child may present at different stages of emotions and how staff should support these stages. This supports consistency in care being provided to children.

Children are supported and helped to stay safe through implementation of the home's safeguarding procedures when there are any incidents. There is good liaison and consultation with the local authority designated officer, who also visits the home regularly. One staff member delayed reporting a concern to managers. Managers have discussed this with the staff member so that learning was attained and practice improved. There was no impact on the child. Following allegations, records do not always show a clear summary or evaluation of the actions taken, though managers have plans in place to address this.

When safeguarding incidents occur, meetings take place to ensure that there is clear oversight. All incidents are reviewed by managers, including physical restraint, single separation (a child locked into an area alone due to serious risk to self or others) and managed away (a child locked into an area due to serious risk to self or others but is always with a staff member). Actions are taken, which are then reviewed to ensure these are completed in a timely manner. There are a limited number of incidents that are not clear about the time the intervention ended and why. Changes to the management structure have recently been made to ensure additional scrutiny of safeguarding concerns.

Managers have implemented new systems to review physical restraint incidents. This means learning is identified to address concerns or emerging patterns. The learning is then shared with staff to assist practice development. This is a new system that is still being embedded, but shows a proactive approach to try and address any potential triggers or risks.

Children understand how to make complaints. Prompt actions are taken when children raise concerns. Children receive letters detailing the outcome of their complaint. This supports children feeling listened to.

Several CCTV cameras show limited areas of children's bedrooms. Children's privacy has not been compromised. Managers took immediate action and cameras have been adjusted, though a more permanent solution needs to be developed.

The practice of searching children's bedrooms has become routine rather than a risk-led process. One child expressed that having their room searched routinely is a negative experience for them. However, children do appreciate that staff tidy their bedroom for them routinely.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager is an experienced, dedicated leader and positive role model. She speaks about the children with deep affection and a strong sense of responsibility, consistently advocating to ensure that children receive high standards of care and support. When there are difficulties or challenges, she ensures that these are addressed and resolved in a timely manner. The manager and the team are a driving force in ensuring that children receive good care.

The manager invests in staff to maintain and continually improve the quality of care provided to children. Her strong and respectful leadership has created a positive and supportive team culture. Staff are highly committed to the children and one another. When children come to stay, they benefit from a team of staff who are consistent and genuinely happy in their work.

Staff receive a high level of support through regular wellbeing meetings. They also benefit from team meetings, as well as daily support and guidance from the management team. Discussions about wider safeguarding issues do not routinely take place. For example, there are no discussions with staff to ensure their awareness of relevant topics such as 'closed cultures'. Some one-to-one sessions lack sufficient reflection on practice. This is a missed opportunity to further develop a staff team with strong skills and enhance staff's work with children.

Quality assurance systems are effective in most areas (see 'How well children and young people are helped and protected'), addressing shortfalls and taking action to improve as needed. While there are some areas where oversight could be strengthened to identify shortfalls more promptly, managers are responsive when issues are highlighted.

Staff have completed all the relevant mandatory training and also receive child-centred training, such as trauma-informed care. This ensures that children are provided with the care and nurture they need to develop trusting relationships with staff. Training also equips staff with the confidence to appropriately challenge practice that does not meet expected standards, regardless of their role. This creates a culture of professional curiosity and accountability, where staff work together to maintain consistent care and positive outcomes for children.

The safeguarding children partnership (SCP) has not carried out a review of all methods of restraint as defined by the Children's Homes Regulations 2015. The SCP, therefore, does not have a view on whether practices at the home are appropriate so that, in turn, staff can learn and improve practice as necessary.

The average occupancy level has been at 80%. The number of children currently living at the home is less than the number of available places because places are used to support children who require higher levels of support away from others.

What does the secure children's home need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that a child's bedroom is only searched if the child has been informed or asked for their permission. Immediate searching may be necessary where there are reasonable grounds for believing that there is a risk to the child's or another person's safety or wellbeing. ('Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations, including the quality standards', page 16, paragraph 3.20)
- The registered person should ensure observation, monitoring or surveillance of children does not remove reasonable privacy, and should allow as much privacy as is possible, including in dressing, washing and using the toilet. A record must be kept of all observations in bedrooms to ensure that children are not subject to unnecessary invasions of their privacy. In particular, cameras should not see into children's bedrooms. ('Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations, including the quality standards', page 19, paragraph 3.36)
- The registered person should ensure that the content and/or outcomes of one-to-one sessions reflect discussion on safeguarding issues, which allows them to reflect on their practice and the needs and external wider risks of children assigned to their care. ('Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations, including the quality standards', page 61, paragraph 13.4)
- Where there is a secure establishment in a local area, safeguarding partners should include a review of the use of restraint within that establishment in their report. The registered person should work with the safeguarding children partnership (SCP) to assist the SCP's understanding of the definition of restraint so that the SCP includes all relevant practices in its review. ('Working together to safeguard children 2023', pages 41 and 42, paragraph 108)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people, using the social care common inspection framework. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 and the 'Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations, including the quality standards'.

Secure children's home details

Unique reference number: SC046276

Provision sub-type: Secure Unit

Registered provider: Devon County Council

Registered provider address: County Hall, Topsham Road, Exeter, Devon EX2 4QD

Responsible individual: Steve Liddicott

Registered manager: Helen Bowkett

Inspectors

Thirza Smith, Lead Social Care Inspector

Shaun Common, His Majesty's Inspector, Quality Assurance Manager

Leanne Lyon, Social Care Inspector

Gemma McDonnell, Social Care Inspector

Joanna Walters, His Majesty's Inspector

Thomas David, Health and Justice Inspector (CQC)

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