

# Surrey's children services improve

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After a seven-year improvement process, Surrey County Council's children's services spun its 'Inadequate' Ofsted rating to 'Good' on May 9.

Inspectors looking at the council's performance in March found "services have improved substantially since the last inspection". In 2018 Surrey was slammed with an 'inadequate' rating for their children's services, which include supporting children and families' welfare and protecting vulnerable kids. This picked up slightly in 2022 but Ofsted inspectors still said they still "required improvement".

But the new Ofsted report finds "most children and families in Surrey now receive the help, protection and care that they need". The report read: "A model of strengths-based practice has become embedded since the previous inspection. In particular, the quality and consistency of relationship-based practice, direct work with children and families, and written records have significantly improved."

The inspection focussed on the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, those of children in care, and those of care leavers, as well as the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families. Each of these focus areas were also judged to be 'good', alongside the overall effectiveness.

Inspectors said: "Given the size and geography of Surrey, this is impressive and means that most children in Surrey receive effective help and support that improves their lives."

The report detailed social workers use creative life-story work to help children understand why they are in care. It read: "The impact of this was evident in the words of one child, who, after completing life-story work, said, 'Considering everything that has happened to me, and everything I have been through, I am pretty amazing.' "

Clare Curran, cabinet member for children, families and life-long learning, said the services have been on an "amazing improvement journey". She explained a lot of hard work from the council's staff and partners has gone into "tirelessly supporting Surrey's children in often very difficult circumstances".

Speaking to the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), the Conservative councillor said the Ofsted report put the new authorities under local government reorganisation in the "strongest position". Cllr Curran said: "It will really empower the new shadow authorities to take services for children and young people to the next level."

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Recruitment, especially in senior and experienced professionals, has been flagged as an issue in the past for Surrey as part of a wider national problem. Inspectors said the county has improved its staffing since the last inspection which has partly been tackled by the council's training and development programme.

Some inconsistencies and room for improvement were highlighted on children's safety plans- which outline specific safeguarding risks in the present and future. Inspectors found their safety plans did not always clearly show the immediate actions a family should take for child protection, or what to do if risk increased.

Inspectors also highlighted the county council is inconsistent in providing support and services to children placed outside of Surrey. These kids, who are born in Surrey, may have to live outside the county because that is the best home for them currently. But Ofsted found children living outside of Surrey do not always get timely health inspection or get the protective responses needed if they go missing or are at risk of exploitation.

Inspectors noted that some care leavers (18-year-olds who are leaving foster or residential care) are not studying, working a job or in training, the report noted. Although the numbers are reported to be reducing, leaders recognise there is more to do.

"We're redoubling efforts to make sure that every young person, particularly those who have care experience, is really supported to be able to fulfil their potential and achieve their goals," said Cllr Curran. She explained not every one will want to go to university, but it is ensuring people have the right career pathway, training or volunteering opportunities open to them.

Care leavers remain living with their foster carers when this is possible, and most live in suitable homes that meet their needs. However, a small number of care leavers do not obtain suitable permanent accommodation at the right time for

them. The disparity in banding across 11 district councils is a perennial factor in a minority of care leavers not securing the right accommodation at the right time.

Cllr Curran said: “It’s showing the really good relationships our workers are developing with children and young people that they support, and putting children at the heart of their work. I was really pleased to see that the inspectors noted that our social workers work in a kind, sensitive, motivational, and respectful way. We’re striving for all children to reach their full potential.

“I want to extend my personal thanks to the leaders of the service and also all of the staff for the tireless and determined way that they have worked with children and driven this marvellous improvement through.

“We know there is still more to do to ensure that every single child in Surrey gets the positive experiences and outcomes that they deserve. We are now focused on our areas for development and are united in our determination to continue to provide even better care for children and young people in Surrey.”

Surrey County Council headquarters. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp