

Surrey's focus on independent lives is "good".

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Surrey County Council's adult social care services have been rated as 'good' by a health watchdog – despite some inconsistencies. In the local authority's first ever overall rating, the Care Quality Commission found SCC 'good' at keeping people independent for longer in communities.

The new report, published November 20, comes from the CQC's new responsibilities to assess how local authorities meet their duties under the Care Act. The watchdog assessed SCC in nine areas, including how the local authority works with people, safeguarding and leadership.

The CQC's report found one of the county council's strengths was that a "variety of measures were in place to prevent, reduce and delay people's needs". People could access information and advice where needed but improvements could be made to streamline this further.

CQC assessment teams reported 70 per cent of the service's provision should be rated "good". The report did highlight some areas that needed improvement, which the council said it would be working on.

Sinead Mooney, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, said: "The dedication of our staff shines through the report and I'd like to thank them publicly for their hard work making a positive difference to the lives of thousands of people in communities across Surrey.

"Our ultimate goal is to deliver the best possible services for Surrey residents and this 'good' outcome will help instil confidence in the services and support we are providing and that we are on the right path to making further improvements."

Partners with SCC gave positive feedback about how the authority worked with them to support people's independence, according to the report. Data for Surrey showed 86% of people who have received short term support didn't need ongoing longer-term support which is positive compared to the England and regional average of 78%.

Inspectors praised Surrey for their "ambitious" plans to increase supported living by at least 500 spaces to help encourage people's independence, choice and control. The council is also working to keep people in their homes for longer and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions, reducing pressure on A&E departments.

Good, but inconsistent

However, the CQC found there was room for improvement. Although a lot of the feedback seemed positive in the report, inspectors noted experiences of receiving care and support in Surrey varied.

The report said: "One person was assessed and felt listened to, achieving the outcome they wanted, which was to return to live at home. Other people had similar good experiences with staff focusing on what people wanted plus their future wishes, people described staff as being empathic and showing them respect."

Safeguarding was judged to be effective, slightly above the national average, but has some shortcomings. Staff and partners raised concerns about some new safeguarding processes that were not yet fully embedded with knowledge and understanding of some staff.

Staffing challenges were also flagged as an issue, leading to some reviews not carried out in a timely way and leading to a backlog. Partners working with SCC told inspectors the cost of living crisis had affected people on low incomes, and Surrey was an expensive place to live, making it hard to recruit and retain staff and then impact on care services, the report said.

But the report noted SCC has long-term plans to address recruitment challenges which had been created with staff. The local authority stated they were making improvements to manage risks until staffing levels had improved, by making better use of existing resources.

James Bullion, CQC's chief inspector of adult social care and integrated care, said the county council "should be proud of this assessment and the foundation they've created on which to build improvements and further innovation".

He added: "The local authority was very aware that although Surrey is an affluent county, there are pockets of deprivation where residents have high levels of need and disadvantage. The authority knew of these very differing needs of its population and were doing some creative work to meet those needs and help people keep their independence."

Commenting on the report's feedback for improvement, Mrs Mooney said: "As we celebrate this achievement, we also recognise that there are areas where we need to learn and develop and we are actively working to address all feedback

from the CQC through comprehensive improvement plans. Our new director of adult social services recently started with us, so we're well-placed to build on this result to further raise the bar for our residents."

Photo: Sinead Mooney, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care (*second from right*), pictured with people who draw and care and support alongside staff from the provider Dramatize, which supports adults with learning disabilities after they leave education, offering a wide range of activities including day provisions and employment and life skills programmes.