

Aycliffe Secure Services

Durham County Council

Aycliffe Secure Centre, Copelaw, Aycliffe, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham DL5 6JB

Full inspection

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this secure children's home

The home is operated by a local authority and is approved by the Department for Education to restrict children's liberty. The home provides care for up to 34 children aged between 10 and 17 years across 5 houses.

At the time of this inspection, 11 children were living at the home. The home provides care for up to 8 children placed by the Youth Custody Service and up to 26 children under section 25 of the Children Act 1989 who are placed by local authorities.

The admission of any child under section 25 of the Children Act 1989 who is 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.

The manager post is currently vacant.

Inspection dates: 9 to 11 June 2026

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
Children's education and learning	good
Children's health	good
How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good

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

Date of last inspection: 17 March 2026

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Recent inspection history

Inspection date	Inspection type	Inspection judgement
17/03/2026	Full	Requires improvement to be good
09/12/2025	Full	Inadequate
28/01/2025	Full	Good
11/07/2023	Full	Good

Summary of findings

Senior leaders have worked collaboratively with an independent improvement board that has provided effective scrutiny and robust challenge. This has contributed to improvements across the service and strengthened safeguarding practice, resulting in better experiences and outcomes for children. Leaders across care, education and health provisions demonstrate clear accountability for their respective areas. The home continues its improvement journey. The absence of a registered manager since July 2025 has resulted in some inconsistencies in leadership and management oversight. Interim management arrangements have ensured that the home continues to operate safely and meet children's needs, although these arrangements have not yet ensured consistently strong leadership across all aspects of the home.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are helped to develop strong and nurturing relationships with staff. Children feel valued and respected. Children engage positively with staff and appear comfortable, relaxed and secure in their surroundings. The atmosphere in the home is warm and welcoming and promotes children's emotional security and wellbeing. The positive relationships between the staff and children underpin children's day-to-day experiences. One child said, 'I have strong, and still growing, relationships with staff. I am thankful for everything they do.'

The home environment is well presented and welcoming. Children have access to a wide range of resources and facilities, including books, games, gaming lounges, a swimming pool and sporting equipment. This supports their enrichment and recreational activities. Children are developing positive peer relationships and enjoy spending time together. They engage in group activities that promote social interaction, enjoyment and a sense of belonging.

Children take part in work that is focused on why they are living in a secure children's home. Plans are tailored to their individual risks, needs and vulnerabilities. From the outset, children are supported to complete communication passports and 'All About Me' profiles, helping staff to understand their preferences, strengths and support needs. Children contribute to their plans by identifying triggers and preferred staff responses. This approach promotes ownership from the children and ensures their voices are heard.

There is ongoing work to further develop and deliver practice that effectively meets children's cultural, identity and diversity needs. The introduction of cultural calendars and the development of equality and diversity champion roles are helping to raise awareness and demonstrate positive progress in this area.

Children are increasingly involved in shaping the service and influencing practice. They actively contribute to staff recruitment through participation in interview panels and

engaging in initiatives, such as the Youth Inspector Programme. This ensures that their views and experiences are helping to inform further service development.

Children report that they feel able to raise concerns or discuss issues with staff. Most concerns relate to grumbles or perceptions of unfairness. Staff respond appropriately and proactively, taking steps to address the issues raised. However, children are not consistently informed of the outcomes of their concerns, limiting their understanding of actions taken.

Children's moves in and out of the home are well planned. Staff work closely with children and partner agencies to ensure that moving on plans are tailored to children's individual needs. Children moving to community-based homes are supported through planned interventions, including opportunities to spend time safely in the community. For children moving to the adult secure estate, staff develop individualised plans that help them to best understand the changes associated with such a significant move. This approach helps children to feel best prepared for the next stage in their life.

Children's education and learning: good

Leaders assess children's starting points promptly and use an appropriate range of information, including education and healthcare plans, to develop individual induction programmes and personal targets. Most children make a smooth transition into education at the home. Leaders provide children with a rich range of subjects, including academic, vocational and practical subjects.

Teachers design and teach the curriculum in a coherent way. For example, in English, teachers help children to progress from writing simple sentences to complex sentences and well-connected paragraphs. Teachers explain key ideas clearly and demonstrate practical activities expertly. They adapt their teaching strategies appropriately to meet the needs of children with special educational needs. Most children make substantial progress from their starting points in their education. Children are proud of their work. Children in the post-16 project group enjoy presenting their plans for the proposed new café. Children in cookery delight in sharing their well-presented recipe books.

Senior leaders provide strong leadership in education. They know the children well and have positive relationships with staff. Leaders have developed a distinct and appropriate curriculum for post-16 learners. They provide projects, opportunities and experiences that match the children's interests and help them to develop new knowledge and greater independence.

Leaders encourage high attendance in education. Where children miss a lesson, staff work closely with care staff to identify the reasons for the absence, provide education in the home and achieve a swift return.

Staff teach children about the importance of respect, self-awareness, motivation and resilience. Leaders use these values to underpin how they reward children. Most children's behaviour improves over time.

Teachers in mathematics do not always provide children with sufficient opportunities to practise their new knowledge in a range of relevant contexts before moving on to the next topic. As a result, a minority of children do not make sustained progress in this area.

Children's health: good

Initial health assessments for children are comprehensive and effective in identifying their individual needs. A range of assessments are undertaken, including those relating to physical health, emotional and mental wellbeing and substance misuse. Following the completion of these assessments, appropriate strategies and interventions are implemented to support children, and this delivers positive outcomes and improved health.

There is a strong approach to identifying children's underlying health and development needs. Where speech and language or sensory needs are identified, appropriate strategies are implemented to provide additional support. For example, children are helped to express their feelings and communicate more effectively with the use of mood bracelets and communication cards.

Health interventions contribute to positive outcomes for most children. Children speak positively about their relationships with health staff and describe them as trusted adults. Targeted health interventions help to reduce incidents for children and support them to sustain their engagement in education, making better progress in their learning.

Health staff recognise the challenges associated with children moving on. They work proactively to share up-to-date information with relevant agencies, and health professionals make onward referrals where appropriate. This promotes continuity of care and helps to ensure that children's health needs continue to be supported effectively as they move on from the home.

While records and observations indicate that medication is administered safely and correctly, medication is not always disposed of in line with the home's procedures. Health staff do not consistently countersign records to confirm the correct disposal process has been followed. Furthermore, not all staff are aware of recent changes to the procedures relating to the disposal of liquid medications. As a result, there is insufficient assurance that all medication management processes are effectively monitored.

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

Staff know the children well. They have a good understanding of children's individual needs, triggers and behaviours. They use this knowledge effectively to support children when they are struggling. Staff respond in ways that help children to feel understood and reassured. Children say that they feel safe living in the home because of the staff. One child said, 'The best thing about living here is the staff; they really care for us.'

When children become unsettled or distressed, staff provide appropriate support to keep them and others safe. Where necessary, children are supported to spend time away from the group. Staff maintain close supervision and monitoring throughout. Staff use this time to provide reassurance, guidance and emotional support. As soon as it safe to do so, children are encouraged and supported to rejoin the group and return to their daily activities. Staff help children to reflect on and discuss their feelings. This helps to maintain safety while preserving children's dignity and wellbeing.

Children who are at risk of self-harm are supported effectively to reduce risk. Staff take proactive and preventative action, informed by an understanding of each child's individual needs. Regular multi-disciplinary meetings are held to review risks and monitor progress. This ensures that support remains responsive to children's changing needs.

Children are supported to understand and learn from their mistakes through the home's restorative approach. Work continues to strengthen the evaluation and oversight of the effectiveness of consequences. Training for staff has commenced to embed this approach consistently across the service.

The local authority designated officer (LADO) is assured that any allegations made by children that are referred to the LADO service are taken seriously, thoroughly investigated and appropriate action taken. Safeguarding agencies are appropriately notified and kept up to date as required. This ensures that children are listened to when they raise concerns about staff and kept as safe as possible.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The home has been without a registered manager since July 2025. As a result, changes have been made to the interim management arrangements. There are some inconsistencies across the overall leadership and management of the home. Some positive improvements have been made since the full inspection in December 2025, with clear progress in both the quality of care provided to the children and the effectiveness of safeguarding practice.

While the leaders of health, education and care provide effective support and oversight for their respective areas of responsibility, there remains some disconnect. This has resulted in the occasional miscommunication about the arrangements for children's care. Existing systems and oversight arrangements have not always been effective in identifying and addressing these issues. For example, for one child, there were missed opportunities from health staff to make sure that all appropriate actions had been taken to ensure that incidents had been reported through their own organisational procedures, meaning that there was an increased risk of insufficient oversight.

The local authority that runs the home has commissioned an improvement board. The responsible individual has worked closely with the board. This has provided independent scrutiny and professional challenge to effectively support service development and has contributed to improvements across the home. These improvements include better outcomes for children, stronger safeguarding arrangements and higher staff morale.

Effective partnership working with the home's local authority has enabled access to additional resources and specialist support, including input from the local authority's anti-racist practice lead. This has led to a notable positive culture shift. Children spoke positively about their experiences of living in the home. They said that staff take the time to get to know them as individuals. Children said they felt listened to, valued and understood. This is helping children to build trusting relationships with staff and contributes to their sense of safety and belonging.

Staff teams are supported to attend regular development days. This time is invaluable to staff, as they spend time together to focus on what is working and what could be done differently. Formulation sessions held with the staff and children are a clear focus. This time also allows for staff to decompress and reflect, and builds staff resilience and helps them to feel better equipped to care for children.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 and The 'Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations, including the quality standards'. The registered person must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
The registered provider must appoint a person to manage the children's home if— there is no registered manager in respect of the home; and the registered provider— is an organisation or a partnership; does not satisfy regulation 28; or is not, or does not intend to be, in day-to-day charge of the home. If the registered provider appoints a person to manage the home, the registered provider must, without delay, give HMCI notice of— the name of the person so appointed; and the date on which the appointment takes effect. (Requirement 27 (1)(a)(b)(i)(ii)(iii) (2)(a)(b))	24 July 2026

Recommendations

- The registered person must ensure that children are supported to raise concerns or make complaints, and that their views are actively sought and considered when a response is provided. In particular, children should be made aware of actions taken in response to their complaints. ('Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations, including the quality standards', page 22, paragraph 4.13)
- The registered person should ensure that the ethos of the home supports each child to learn. Leaders should ensure that teachers in mathematics provide children with sufficient opportunities to practise their new knowledge and apply it in contexts that interest them. ('Guide to the Children's Homes Regulations, including the quality standards', page 29, paragraph 5.18.)

- The registered person should ensure that the correct systems and procedures for disposing medicines safely are followed by staff, and that sufficient oversight of this is maintained. ('Guide to the Children's Homes Regulation, including the quality standards', page 35, paragraph 7.15)
- The registered person should ensure that any consequences used to address behaviour should be restorative in nature, to help children recognise the impact of their behaviour on themselves, other children, the staff caring for them and the wider community. In particular, the effectiveness of consequences should be reviewed. ('Guide to the Children's Homes Regulation, including the quality standards', page 46, paragraph 9.38)

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: SC035648

Provision sub-type: Secure Children's Home

Registered provider address: Fostering & Adoption Team, Spectrum 8, Spectrum Business Park, Seaham SR7 7TT

Responsible individual: Clare Nicholls

Registered manager: Post vacant

Inspectors

Jo Birtwhistle, Social Care Inspector

Debbie Foster, Social Care Inspector

Cath Sikakana, Social Care Inspector

Martin Ward, His Majesty's Inspector, Further Education and Skills

David Roberts, Care Quality Commission

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

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