



**Redcar and Cleveland
Council
Children's Services
Resources and Efficiency
Peer Challenge**

7th to 9th November 2023

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Redcar and Cleveland has a population of 135,000 of which 19.9% are children and young people. It incorporates a mixture of urban and rural communities with a rich heritage which has witnessed significant changes to the main industrial base of employment over the last and few decades with the closure of the steel works which was a major employer in the area. There is evidence of a growth in families experiencing poverty with 22% of the neighbourhoods in the authority being in the top 10% most deprived in the country and with 28.7% of children receiving free school meals compared with 22.5% nationally.

The number of children in care has risen by 28% over the last three years from 317 to 406 with an increase in the complexity of need for some children requiring high-cost placements and pressure being placed in providing sufficient placements for children entering and remaining in the care system. Redcar and Cleveland have a higher rate per 10,000 of children in care at 149.3 compared with its statistical neighbours at 108.1 and the North East region at 114.3 per 10,000.

The peer team reviewed the evidence base of the children in care cohort including a review of 40 cases on site and other evidence such as recent Ofsted reports. They concluded that children entering the care system were doing so for appropriate reasons and needed the protection and support provided within the care system to meet their needs and safeguard them from harm. There is potential for greater pace and urgency during the child's journey from entering care to achieving permanence. Whilst there are systems in place, they could be strengthened so that opportunities to exit the care system are taken in a more timely manner to ensure children and young people do not remain longer than necessary. Targeted work reviewing cohorts of children and young people at various stages of their care journey is likely to stimulate improvements and focus to care planning.

This increase in the number of children in care has had a significant impact and contributed to the budget overspend. Placement capacity for children in care generally fills up from the bottom, with babies and young children being relatively easy to place and older, more complex children, typically teenagers, being more difficult to find suitable accommodation for and for which increasingly higher prices are being set in the independent sector. The data shows that Redcar and Cleveland's cohort of children in care conforms to this pattern although with a relatively higher number of young children (correctly) coming into care, squeezing the overall capacity in the system, leading to rising costs for the older, more difficult to place children. A number of hypotheses were put forward for this, including historic reductions in early years support (now reversed through the Family Hubs programme) and the particular impact of poverty and deprivation on young families.

The commissioning team responsible for children's care placements is effective and is generally able to ensure placements are provided for children entering and moving within the care system. However, this team is under considerable

pressure and lacks sufficient capacity to effectively develop strategic market management opportunities and provide effective contract management and quality assurance of provision. There is a need to build the capacity of the team and continue to explore the potential for greater joined up working on a sub-regional basis.

The current long-term sufficiency strategy is being updated and requires sufficient strategic commissioning resource to effectively manage the market and better contain rising costs.

The provision of home to school transport is a statutory duty for the authority and a significant number of children with special educational needs and a EHCP are likely to require transport to be provided which is tailored to enable them to attend and participate in education. The number of children subject to an EHCPs has increased as have the number of children in care placements who have been placed at a distance which requires transport to enable them to attend school. Increasing the range and sufficiency of local special education provision, and care placements within the borough linked to greater inclusion opportunities in mainstream schools will help to reduce home to school transport costs but does not provide a solution to the deficit. Budget realignment with the actual cost of providing home to school transport is necessary based on the current cohort of children requiring the service.

Children's services in Redcar and Cleveland employ a highly committed, enthusiastic, and skilled workforce who spoke very positively about the council and the support they get from managers and colleagues. The council have taken positive steps to deal with recruitment challenges for social workers and has benchmarked itself within the North East region. The introduction of the social work academy is likely to have a positive impact going forward. There may well be further benefits to be gained from having further targeted incentives to help recruit and retain social workers.

The council would also benefit from exploring greater use of a wider range of practitioners to support front line practice and undertake work and interventions with children and young people and their families which do not require a social work qualification. This is consistent with the recommendations in the Care Review.

The council is currently forecasting that the children's directorate will spend £9.6m more than the existing revised budget. Children in care numbers are rising, and SEND numbers are increasing at a high rate. Some of this overspend has been historically 'locked in', especially home to school transport. Other elements have shown recent increases that the council has struggled to constrain within existing resources. There does not appear to be a single 'silver bullet' that will fix these issues –enhanced work in early help and prevention, development of social work practice, tighter market management of providers and continued implementation of step-down strategies will make a positive financial difference.

2. Key Recommendations

- 1. Accelerate work on the development of performance dashboards on children's data to aid management oversight.** This would greatly assist senior leaders and managers to have a much better real time understanding of workflow and pressures impacting on the whole of children's services.
- 2. Develop an overarching ambitious strategy and plan for the Children's Directorate.** Having an overarching strategic plan linked to the placement sufficiency and early help strategy should assist the Directorate and the council as a whole in identifying priorities and work being undertaken, as well as enabling tighter alignment with financial strategies.
- 3. Celebrate success and continue to enhance corporate support to children's services.** Children's services in Redcar and Cleveland have a lot to be proud of and promoting areas of success is likely to garner additional support and aid further development – for example in foster carer recruitment.
- 4. Put children at the centre of the inclusive growth agenda** Ensure that young people can benefit from the future employment and economic growth opportunities arising from the significant wave of regeneration, development, and investment in the Teesside area. Continue to deliver and enable access to education and skills development and by creating a clear route to good quality jobs.
- 5. Create capacity to ensure a more challenging approach to strategic partnership working.** Whilst partners that we spoke to were confident with partnership arrangements at an operational and individual casework level it was not always clear that difficult conversations around sharing costs were front and centre. The capacity for strategic commissioning work with partners is over stretched.
- 6. Continue to work with schools to support greater inclusion.** Further engagement with local schools to gain commitment to increase the current levels of inclusion would assist in reducing the dependence on more expensive alternative provisions.
- 7. Explore opportunities to embrace the strong community cohesion in Redcar and Cleveland to help recruit foster carers.** The recruitment activity for foster carers in Redcar and Cleveland is likely to benefit from a more targeted approach linked to greater engagement with local communities and use of social media platforms.
- 8. Implement a collaborative approach across the Tees Valley, led by Chief Executives and senior politicians regarding in-house fostering fees and allowances.** In order to avoid counterproductive competition between councils within the Tees Valley sub region in

recruiting mainstream foster carers, it would be mutually beneficial and avoid inflating costs to adopt an agreed rate for paying fees and allowances. It is essential that this issue is gripped and agreed by political and executive leadership across the region and sub region, an 'arms race' in rates for fostering allowances will be counterproductive.

9. Review the Special Guardianship Order allowance policy and support service to increase cost effectiveness and take up.

Extending the support to extended family members and connected carers to enable them to look after children and prevent the need for them to enter or remain in the care system is cost effective and normally in the best interests of the child if they cannot remain with their parents.

10. Instill pace, parity and promotion of options to move children through the care system to early permanence. It is essential the children move through and exit the care system in a timely manner when it is in their best interests to do so. Enhanced management capacity, oversight and tracking would be beneficial in achieving this and maximising efficiencies.

11. Develop an integrated multi-agency child exploitation strategy.

The council has put a great deal of work into this area of practice and is looking to establish a new SAFE team to improve its response. The development of an exploitation strategy which incorporates the commitment from its partners including the voluntary sector will further help embed practice and joint responsibility.

12. Refine the resources panel to be more agile when children's needs change. The existing resource panel appears to work effectively but would benefit from having a tracking and review process in place particularly for higher cost placements or where needs change and a different response is needed.

13. Embrace the opportunities in the care review to develop a different cost-effective skill mix of staff and maximise non-social worker resources. There are areas of practice where a better skill mix of staff would be beneficial and achieve better outcomes. It is not necessary in some areas of practice for posts holders to be qualified social workers and it would be beneficial to review where this is possible for new and existing services. Similarly, there are opportunities for increased administrative support to deliver more efficient social work practice.

14. Explore a differential approach to social worker retention. The recruitment and retention of qualified social workers is a challenge for all councils in what is a very competitive market. A more focused approach to the retention of this group of staff which recognises market forces may be beneficial.

15. Explore joining with other local authorities to commission some services on a sub-regional basis where this is mutually beneficial. Given the size, geography, and commonality of councils in the Tees

Valley with shared boundaries with organisations such as the ICB and other bodies it may be beneficial to have a joined-up approach to commissioning some services such as children with a complex disability and where shared providers are used. See recommendation 8

- 16. Explore options for a sub-regional approach to managing agency provider issues.** Redcar and Cleveland Council already take the lead for the IFA Framework on behalf of the sub-region and there are likely to be other areas where efficiencies could be gained for a similar approach such as post 16 provisions. See also recommendation 8.
- 17. Strengthen market development and contract management practice with the right resources to drive better resource management and efficiency.** The team responsible for commissioning, procurement and contract management has limited capacity and is working under a lot of pressure. The council is likely to achieve further efficiencies and savings by strengthening its contract management, market development activity and strategic commissioning capacity.
- 18. Align children's services strategies with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).** It is essential that strategic plans for the development of children's services are linked to the council's MTFS to set realistic and achievable targets for both investment and savings.
- 19. Recognise and develop income generation opportunities.** There are areas where children's services could generate additional income by reviewing its charging policies e.g., levying a fee where it takes the lead on a sub-regional or regional basis and council checks for independent providers.
- 20. Continue to reinvest in early help and early years to manage demand effectively.** The investment in Family Hubs is a good example of this and further opportunities potentially exist combined with the anti-poverty initiative. Ensure links across early help activity and interventions are in place to avoid duplication.
- 21. Ensure the home to school transport budget is aligned with what is being spent.** The provision of home to school transport is a statutory duty placed on the council and is being tightly managed within a well-established criterion. There are no real opportunities for further savings to be achieved.
- 22. Ensure savings targets are robust and evidence based.** Setting evidence-based savings targets which have a realistic likelihood of being achieved stand a better chance of being delivered in a timely manner with tight management oversight.
- 23. Corporate support to be offered to children's services with the development and implementation of achievable savings options.** There are already good working relationships between colleagues in financial services and children's services but there would be benefits from further ongoing work on achievable savings options informed by data analysis and projections of need.

24. Explore the potential for further substitution of public health grant into early intervention and prevention services. The peer team were aware that this would not achieve any savings in the short term. However, given the high numbers of young children coming into care and the ‘filling up from the bottom’ scenario outlined above, investment in prevention in the early years should deliver significant long term savings as well as being in the best interests of children.

3. Peer challenge approach

It is important to remember that the peer challenge is not an inspection; its aim is to provide a critical friend approach to challenge the council and its partners in assessing its strengths and helping to identify areas for improvement. The approach involved reviewing Redcar and Cleveland Council’s self-assessment and other relevant documentation and data provided, and meetings with a broad range of senior leaders, managers, and practitioners from across the council and its partners. It is important to recognise that the findings are based on a range of evidence-based activity and the peer challenge reflects what the peer team read, observed, and heard in advance and during the period when the peer team were on-site.

4. The peer team.

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced senior leaders. The make-up of the peer team reflects the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected based on their relevant experience and expertise and their participation was agreed with the local authority.

The peers who delivered the peer challenge in Redcar and Cleveland were:

- **Lead peer** – Steve Crocker LGA Associate
- **LGA Finance improvement and sustainability peer** – Barry Scarr.
- **Children’s services commissioning peer** – Vikki Hearn, Devon County Council.
- **Children’s social care and safeguarding peer** – Kate Rose, Manchester City Council.
- **Senior corporate resources peer** – Mike Poulter Independent Consultant.
- **Peer challenge manager** – Cliff James LGA Associate.

5. Peer challenge process

The peer team prepared in advance by reviewing a range of documents provided by the council to ensure they understood the challenges facing services in Redcar and Cleveland. The team spent three days on-site in the borough, during which time they met with councillors in relevant leadership roles, over 70 practitioners and managers working within the council including education, social care, early help and youth offending services. The peer team also met with partners from the Integrated Care Board and Cleveland Police

and with independent providers of services and foster carers. The peer team took part in 22 meetings and 6 focus groups and considered with a senior manager 40 children who had entered the care system through a range of routes.

This report provides a summary of the peer teams findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team on the final day of their on-site visit. By its nature the peer challenge is a snapshot in time.

6. Scope and Focus of the Peer Challenge

In advance of the team arriving on-site, Redcar and Cleveland Council identified four key lines of enquiry they wanted the peer team to consider as part of the peer challenge.

- Key drivers leading to children and young people entering the care system.
- Commissioning of care placements
- Home to school transport
- Workforce recruitment and retention

These were in addition to the two standard core areas which form part of an LGA children's services resources and efficiency peer challenge.

- Culture and Practice
- Financial Strategy

The report includes the good practice the peer team heard about and areas which we feel the Council may wish to consider further as part of their improvement journey.

7. Main Findings

7.1 Culture and Practice

Redcar and Cleveland Council are passionate about the children and young people living in their community and want them to do well. Political and corporate leaders in Redcar and Cleveland generally recognise the centrality and importance of children's services to the work of the authority with a strong lead provided to do what is right for them. This is reflected in the recent development of a child poverty initiative and its services to children and young people. There is an active Corporate Parenting Board in place which focuses on the continuous improvement of services provided to children in care and care leavers.

There is a visible culture of high support to practitioners and managers within the authority and front-line practitioners were able to evidence the support and oversight offered to them by all tiers of management within the service.

Children's services function strongly as a whole, with evidence of collaborative working across the Directorate to achieve good outcomes. The commitment to delivering improvement in the lived experience of children and young people was clearly demonstrated by staff and foster carers who participated in the peer challenge. Foster carers are committed to working for Redcar and Cleveland Council and tend to remain with them once recruited.

Children's services are building comprehensive service strategies which will be beneficial to the improvement journey of the council. Whilst children's services were able to provide lots of relevant data this was not always current and live with ease of access by senior and front-line managers in a timely manner. The service would benefit from improving its monitoring of data and performance with the provision of performance dashboards for all areas of service which are updated daily and easily accessible and 'live' to all managers and practitioners.

There is not currently an overarching children's services strategy which is ambitious and informed by data and projects forward to allow services to be proactive and sufficiently evidenced based to meet changing needs. The peer team was able to identify lots of positive initiatives and the council would benefit from being able to show how they contribute to a whole system approach.

Redcar and Cleveland Council can afford to be proud of its children's services and what has been achieved but needs to celebrate and publicise its successes. Children's services could be at the heart of an inclusive growth strategy for the council, which has the potential to draw in external and collaborative funding with its partners.

Whilst partner relationships are good, particularly at an operational level, there is a need for time to be devoted to having a more challenging approach to strategic partnership working and greater shared responsibility for providing services to children and their families. There is a real need for greater access to mental health and wellbeing services for children in care and care leavers and those on the edge of care. Whilst relationships with CAMHS services are positive there is insufficient capacity within NHS services and alternative service providers may need to be considered.

Schools report good collaborative working relationships and access to training provided by the authority and no children in care are excluded and PEPs are in place for all looked after children. The council does, however, need to continue its work with local schools to support greater inclusion as this will offer benefits across the whole system and reduce pressures elsewhere.

The payment of fees and allowances to foster carers needs to be reviewed with a collaborative approach adopted across all authorities in the Tees

Valley, led by Chief Executives and senior politicians. The current approach of having differential and competitive rates across the sub-region will lead to a situation akin to an arms race and potential recruitment and retention difficulties in what is already a very competitive market. The payment of a single fee to foster carers regardless of how many children they take is a significant issue for foster carers and was reported to peers as impacting on the willingness of some carers to take additional children. This needs to be included in any future review of foster allowances and fees. In addition, whilst there are high levels of need in Redcar and Cleveland there is also evidence of having strong community identity to help recruit foster carers and special guardians to care for children.

Reinvestment in early help and early years services needs to be maintained to enhance preventative and edge of care services to help manage the demand for care placements effectively. Being able to evidence the co-dependence of these services is essential.

7.2 Key drivers leading to children and young people entering the care system

There is good evidence that work has been undertaken to ensure decision making regarding children coming into care is sound with appropriate management oversight and authorisation processes in place. The peer team felt those children and young people entering care needed this to happen for their protection and wellbeing and to offer better outcomes for them. There is good recognition of the need for pre-birth planning and interventions to protect children.

The development of community-based Family Hubs is very positive and offers the potential of providing enhanced support to families and preventing some children from entering the care system.

The anti-poverty strategy which has been adopted by the council is progressive and is likely to have a positive impact on children “in need” and their families. It will provide a greater focus on the development of community-based services aimed at supporting children and their families in their own home and preventing children needing to enter care.

The ‘No Wrong Door’ service is a very positive development and demonstrates effectiveness in resource management and outcomes for young people offering greater opportunity of reintegration back into their birth family in a timely manner.

By working with its partners, the council has strengthened its systems for identifying children and young who are at risk of being exploited although this additional focus has not disproportionately resulted in a significant increase of children entering care for this reason. However, the opportunity should be taken to develop an integrated multi-agency child exploitation strategy

identifying what resources the authority and its partners will be devoting to this work going forward.

The children's resource panel operating within children's social care services works effectively to agree packages of support and placements particularly at the front end. It would benefit from being refined to be more agile when needs change.

The fragility and uncertainty around some of the new developments that utilise one-off grant funding, such as No Wrong Door, will need to be addressed as part of any future funding strategy.

There is a need for greater pace, parity, and promotion of options to help move children through the care system which would reduce the number of children looked after by the local authority. e.g., the discharge of Care Orders with the use of Special Guardianship Orders and reunification to birth family with appropriate support in place to enable this to be successful.

7.3 Commissioning of Care Placements

Children's services were able to provide a clear analysis of the tactical needs of children in care to inform them what is required to meet their immediate sufficiency needs for children's care placements.

The Virtual School in Redcar and Cleveland is effective in ensuring that children in care can access suitable education and skills provision to meet their needs and supports key stake holders such as social workers, schools, alternative education providers, colleges and foster carers to improve education outcomes and skills acquisition. This contributes to sustaining care placements.

There is good access to short break provision for children with a disability and this helps to sustain them within their family.

A high number of children in care can access health funding to support placements where appropriate with good links with the Integrated Care Board.

There is strong evidence that the council has good relationships with its care providers and housing partners which has enabled the development of provision. The management of young people with challenging behaviour can be an issue at times and improvements in multi-agency risk management strategies with providers would be beneficial.

There is a need to develop small-scale dual and solo residential provision which is registered with Ofsted to reduce the number of unregistered placements for hard to place high-cost placements. The range of supported

accommodation provision for 16- and 17-year-olds is underdeveloped and could benefit from a collaborative approach across the Tees Valley.

The council would benefit from reviewing its Special Guardianship Order allowance policy and support service to encourage and enable a higher proportion of children to achieve permanence via this route and increase cost effectiveness.

The Commissioning and Placement Team is small and under pressure, which means there is little time or resource for strategic commissioning activity and it may benefit the authority to consider joining up with other local authorities to commission some services on a sub-regional Tees Valley basis.

Market development and contract management should be strengthened to drive better resource management and efficiency, e.g., for post 16 supported accommodation provision.

7.4 Home to School Transport

Home to School Transport policies are fit for purpose and adherence to statutory requirements is tightly controlled. Faced with significant pressure on the budget, senior leaders have made difficult decisions to deliver savings e.g., faith school transport. Further areas for potential savings have been identified and are being worked on. However, savings targets are not robust and are not evidence based. It is essential that any savings identified are SMART and achievable.

The increasing number of children with SEND are not reflected in budget growth analysis and calculations in the MTFS. As a result, the budget no longer represents a realistic position on SEND spending commitments to meet statutory requirements.

A long list of savings have been identified by Members and Officers, but it is likely that this will generate a relatively small amount (circa £100k). For a number of years, SEND growth has not been matched by budget growth in this area, and savings have not been delivered, therefore budget realignment is needed.

7.5 Workforce recruitment and retention

The peer team found clear evidence of passion and enthusiasm from all the staff they met during the two days we were on site. There are good career progression opportunities and staff retention is high. Front line practitioners spoke well of the support they were getting from their managers and supervision and enjoy working for the authority. Pay and conditions of service have been benchmarked and are in line with the regional market.

The introduction of the social work academy is a positive step forward for the authority and should assist with providing a pathway to a professional social work qualification and aid recruitment and retention. To address the specific challenges of recruiting and retaining social workers the authority should consider adopting a differential approach to social worker retention.

Bi-annual practice development weeks include the whole practitioner workforce across children's services where best practice is shared and helps achieve a common purpose and methodology.

The council would benefit from embracing the opportunities in the national care review to better develop a different cost-effective skill mix of staff to undertake work with children and families. The council would benefit from maximising non-social worker resources e.g., family help services, pre-birth, contact supervision, the new SAFE Team and use business support to enable social workers to focus on the primary aspects of their work and make best use of their technical skills.

There may well be benefits and savings achieved by exploring options for a Tees Valley sub-regional "London pledge" to manage agency social work staff and rates of pay.

The capacity and resilience of staff to manage their workloads in key areas is limited and the council should consider adopting an evidence-based transformation of some areas of service provision. The data provided indicated that social workers across Assessment, Locality and Children in Care Teams held average social work caseloads of 18.6 which is consistent with best practice but highlighted that some social workers were holding greater than 20, with 5 having caseloads over 25.

7.6 Financial Strategy

Senior leaders in the council recognise the pressures on children's services budgets and is actively managing them. There is an acknowledgement that growth is needed in the MTFS to address them. Financial services are highly valued by children's services and senior managers in both services work closely together to forecast and address budget pressures with regular joint meetings and budget reviews. Improvements to data quality would greatly assist with accurate financial planning and forecasting.

The MTFS needs to be aligned with children's services strategies and plans. Some savings are not targeted, or evidence based, e.g., vacancy factors and Home to School Transport savings.

There is some scope for greater income generation opportunities to support and fund service delivery e.g., services to schools and where the authority takes the commissioning and procurement lead on behalf of regional contracts.

Cross directorate support within the council would benefit from being strengthened e.g., Highways support for safer travelling routes to school. The potential for further substitution of public health grant funding for 0 to 19 early help and prevention services should be further explored.

The council's capital programme needs to incorporate the provision of accommodation for residential care and supported accommodation for children and young people in care and care leavers and consideration also given to the use of Section 106 of the Town Planning Act to access accommodation from private developers as part of planning gain to the community.

8. Next Steps

The Local Government Association would be happy to discuss how we could help you further through the LGA's Principal Advisor, Mark Edgell (mark.edgell@local.gov.uk) or the Children's Improvement Adviser, Caroline O'Neill (ceson62@gmail.com).

We would like to thank everyone involved for their participation in this peer challenge. In particular, please pass on thanks from the peer team to Michaela Bellas for her help in supporting the peer challenge with advance planning and during the on-site phase. Michaela's input to the process was exceptional.