

## Report summary

# Outstanding children's homes

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## Executive summary

This report shows how 12 consistently outstanding children's homes help change the lives of the children and young people in their care for the better. It is written for those who manage and work in children's homes, for those who make decisions about where to place looked after children, and for those who develop social care policy. It describes and interprets what inspectors found to be the reasons for success in these outstanding homes and how the providers themselves explained the factors that contribute to outstanding care.

The needs of children and young people in the care system are varied and complex, and the children's homes that cater for these needs differ considerably in terms of their focus, expertise, size and management. The 12 homes selected for this report are similarly diverse. However, they are united by one common achievement and that is the consistency with which they have maintained their outstanding quality over the course of at least three years, and in some cases more. Ofsted has inspected more than 1,400 children's homes six times over three consecutive years, and of these only 35 have succeeded in being judged outstanding at every inspection. The 12 homes selected for this report are therefore exceptional.

Despite the variety of the 12 homes, their individual stories of success – what the managers, staff and young people see as critical factors in maintaining excellence – show remarkable similarities. Effective leadership was at the heart of this success. Leaders in these homes were open with their staff, visible and active in the home, and were able to communicate a clear and compelling vision. The way in which they engaged, supported and held their staff to account was a critical factor in developing a culture of continuous improvement and consistency in systems and practice, which enable these homes to maintain their outstanding status over time.

The experience of the children and young people who live in these homes is, of course, the real hallmark of quality. The systems which had been put in place to manage the placement and induction of children and young people into the home played an important role in ensuring that they were able to benefit from what the home had to offer. However, the evidence of this survey suggests that above all it is the quality of relationships that young people are able to forge with staff, with each

other, and where possible with their families, which is the defining factor. The commentary provided by young people themselves made clear just how important relationships with staff were in building their confidence and self-belief, and inspiring them to achieve.

All the homes visited had high aspirations for the children and young people in their care. They were committed to ensuring that every child received a good education and in some cases attendance at full-time education was an explicit element of the placement agreement. In one home, engagement in education, employment or training was a condition of remaining in the home. Throughout the report there are examples of where staff at the children's home have played the role of a committed parent in supporting learning in the home, and advocating for children and young people in their education. In many cases staff have gone above and beyond this role to broker specialist support to meet the particular needs of the children and young people in their care. However, even in these outstanding children's homes more could be done to track the achievements of young people in education and employment over time, and use this information to critically assess their own performance as a children's home. This area for development, which in many ways is a system-wide issue, is brought out in the recommendations in this report.

A further area for development identified by this report is the need to draw more on the skills and abilities of the leaders and staff working in consistently outstanding homes for the benefit of the whole system. It is clear that even for the very best homes opportunities to share best practice and learn from others can be relatively limited. There is, furthermore, little evidence that the skills of these outstanding leaders are being used more widely to improve the sector. Ofsted clearly has a role in identifying and publicising best practice, and it is hoped that this report will make a significant contribution to this. However, there is a challenge to the care system as a whole to learn more from what the best practitioners have to offer.

## Key findings

The key characteristics which set apart consistently outstanding children's homes are explored in detail throughout this report and include:

- leaders who are hands-on, who unite their staff behind a shared purpose, and who are transparent and open in their expectations and pursuit of excellence
- clarity of vision, which is absolutely focused on the experience of children and young people and uncompromising in its ambition
- a commitment to continual improvement, always being willing to learn and ask 'what could we do better?'
- the passion and energy of staff who are deeply committed to their work, and the recruitment, training and management systems which identify these staff and support them to grow and develop

- understanding which young people will benefit from living in the home and creating the conditions, from their first contact with the young person, which are most likely to make the placement a success
- meticulous planning that engages young people and responds in detail to their individual needs so that their experience of care is highly personalised, combined with a commitment to never 'give up' on a child or young person and to do everything possible to maintain the placement
- time spent with the children and young people individually and in groups so that they are able to develop meaningful secure relationships with the adults in the home, and with each other
- absolute consistency in the management of behaviour so that young people understand and respect the boundaries that are set and respond positively to encouragement, rewards and meaningful sanctions
- an unwavering commitment to support children and young people to succeed, and a belief in their ability to do so, translated into active support for their education both in the homes and in their partnerships with schools and other professionals
- working with each child or young person to build their emotional resilience and self-confidence, to prepare them for independence and enable them to withstand difficulties and set-backs in the future.

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