

Outstanding children's homes

This report analyses how a small sample of 12 children's homes achieved and sustained outstanding status over a period of three years. It draws on the views of managers, staff and young people about what makes these homes outstanding and the key features which have contributed to their success.

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361

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Contents

Executive summary	4
Key findings	5
Recommendations	6
Introduction	7
How the 12 homes were selected	8
Young people's views of what makes an outstanding children's home	9
Outcomes achieved by looked after children	9
Leading with vision and purpose	10
Leadership	10
Vision and ethos	13
Recruitment, induction and training of staff	15
Managing and supporting staff	17
Creating a culture of continuing improvement	19
The experience of young people in the home	21
Managing the placement of young people into the home	21
Inducting young people into the home	23
Policies, plans and procedures	25
Relationships with staff	26
Maintaining relationships with family and friends	28
Behaviour management and conflict resolution	29
Supporting looked after children to succeed	31
Building young people's aspirations	32
Ensuring engagement in education	34
Supporting progress in learning	35
Supporting good health and emotional well-being	38
Preparing young people for independence	40
Notes	43
Further information	44
Annex A: Portraits of the homes visited	45

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.

Recommendations

The Department for Education should:

- consider systematic ways in which the experience and skills of leaders in consistently outstanding children's homes could be used to improve standards across the residential care sector
- provide more opportunities to share best practice across children's homes
- review the quality of provision for young people with severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities after their 18th birthday and establish a clearer understanding of the barriers to effective transition.

Local authorities should:

- provide better and more regular information on the achievements in education and employment of individual young people leaving care to the children's homes where they have previously resided
- systematically analyse, on the basis of tracking data, how well individual children's homes support better outcomes for children in care, and consider this information when they are making placement and commissioning decisions.

Children's homes should:

- seek out opportunities to learn from the best practice in the system, both locally and nationally
- make better use of benchmark data to track individual children's progress during the period that they live in the home, and record the destination of young people and their achievements in education and employment at the point at which they leave the home
- demand better information from local authorities on the outcomes achieved by children and young people for whom they have cared after they have left the home
- establish stronger relationships with local employers to enable young people to gain more developmental experience of the world of work.

Introduction

1. Around 6,000 children and young people in England today live in children's homes. These are some of the most vulnerable children in the country. They represent around 10% of the total population of looked after children, the large majority of whom live with foster families.¹ Children who live in children's homes are normally those whose needs cannot be met effectively within foster care or who would benefit from the specialist or structured care a residential placement offers. Many young people arrive in residential care having experienced a number of disruptions to, or changes of, placement.²
2. There is no such thing as a typical children's home. They differ markedly in their size, purpose and organisation. Some homes provide general support for a range of different needs of young people, more specialist homes support young people with particularly complex needs, short-breaks homes provide overnight and day care for young people with severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and secure homes provide for young people who have committed offences or who need to be held in secure conditions for their own welfare. There are privately run homes, some of which are run as part of a larger group of homes, homes run by the voluntary and community sector and local authority maintained homes.
3. Ofsted inspects all children's homes twice a year. In addition, the Children's Rights Director, based in Ofsted, carries out an annual survey of the views of looked after children and young people about their care.³ Inspections of children's homes show that between 31 March 2009 and 31 August 2010 the percentage of homes judged good or outstanding at their most recent inspection increased every quarter, showing a steadily improving trend. Of those inspected between 1 September 2009 and 31 August 2010, 14% were outstanding compared with 10% in the same period the previous year, and the percentage of inadequate homes dropped from 7% to 4%.⁴ This is encouraging, but it is still not good enough. The needs of looked after children and young people are of such complexity that, unless they receive support of the very highest quality, they are unlikely to fulfil their potential.

¹ As at 31 March 2010, 10% of looked after children lived in children's homes, secure units and hostels. *Children looked after by local authorities in England (including adoption and care leavers) – year ending 31 March 2010*, Statistical First Release, Department for Education, 2010; www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000960/index.shtml.

² As at 31 March 2010, 10.9% of all looked after children had experienced three or more changes of placement in the last year. *Children looked after by local authorities in England (including adoption and care leavers) – year ending 31 March 2010*, Statistical First Release, Department for Education, 2010.

³ *Children's care monitor* (080280), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080280.

⁴ *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2009/10*, HC 599, Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/annualreport0910.

4. Inspection shows that inconsistency remains a pervasive issue in children's homes. Too many children's homes fluctuate in quality from one year to the next. Strikingly, 61% of children's homes judged outstanding three years ago are no longer outstanding.⁵ The reasons underlying this apparent fragility are numerous and sometimes complex. Many children's homes are small organisations and, in these cases, the departure of one or two members of staff, or the children's home manager, can have a very significant impact on continuity and quality. The changing needs of the young people at the home, as some move on to independence or new placements and other young people join, may be a further contributory factor. Market forces also have an impact on the children's homes sector. For example, in 2009–10, 150 children's homes closed while 245 new homes opened.
5. However, some children's homes are able to maintain consistently outstanding quality over a number of years. These homes offer the children and young people in their care an exceptional level of support and create a stable environment which, in many cases, has been previously lacking from the lives of the children and young people. These homes are the focus of this report. It is hoped that this report will prompt the start of a dialogue about what excellence looks like in the children's home sector, how it can be achieved and how it can be built upon. It is clear that if, nationally, more children's homes are not only to achieve excellence but also maintain it, there are some important lessons, practices and knowledge that need to be shared.

How the 12 homes were selected

6. Of the 1,439 children's homes inspected by Ofsted for three consecutive years, just 35 were consistently outstanding at all of their last six inspections over this period. From these, Ofsted selected a sample of 12 across England. Four provided care to children with a wide range of needs, three were specialist homes providing care for young people with specifically defined needs, and five were homes providing either full-time or short-break care for children with severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Homes offering short-breaks comprise around 10% of the children's homes that have been inspected for three years running, but account for six out of the 35 homes found to be consistently outstanding. Seven of the 12 homes were managed by local authorities; the rest were independently managed or part of an independent company. Of the 35 children's homes which have been judged consistently outstanding 22 are privately run, 12 are run by local authorities and one is a voluntary sector provision. These are similar proportions to those found across all children's homes, of which 29% are run by local authorities and 54% are privately run.

⁵ *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2009/10*, HC 599, Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/annualreport0910.

7. The 12 children's homes selected to be part of this survey differed considerably in size, from one home which accommodated just one young person to short-breaks homes offering eight beds and working with more than 20 children and young people on a relatively regular basis. In total, these 12 children's homes could provide accommodation at any one time for 69 children and young people, although not all the homes were full to their capacity at the time of the inspector's visit. Despite the variety of children's homes represented in the sample of 12 visited, in terms of size, purpose and management, a number of clear and common characteristics emerged from the survey visits. The report groups these into three main areas. The first section of the report focuses on the strengths of leadership and management in outstanding children's homes, their success in setting an ambitious vision and establishing effective core systems, and how they both attract and retain the best staff. The second section looks at the day-to-day experience of the young people in the home and the quality of their relationship with staff. The third section examines how these outstanding children's homes have supported young people to achieve better outcomes in education and health, and to prepare for independence.

Young people's views of what makes an outstanding children's home

8. The young people's perceptions of how the homes had made a difference to their lives provide a powerful testament to what makes these homes outstanding. Direct quotes from individual young people interviewed by inspectors punctuate this report and provide a vivid illustration of the analysis. The following points summarise some of the most striking or frequent views offered.
 - Feeling positive – young people said that the staff in these homes helped them feel positive about themselves and their lives again and supported them to want to do better in life and achieve their goals.
 - Strong relationships – young people felt close to the staff and particularly to their key workers. They did not want to let them down or disappoint them.
 - Participation – young people welcomed the opportunity to contribute to how the home was run through regular residents' meetings and more informal day-to-day input.
 - Stability – young people felt safe and secure in these homes. They said they had been given another chance and knew they were not going to be moved. They felt confident that staff would not give up on them.

Outcomes achieved by looked after children

9. It has long been recognised that the outcomes achieved by looked after children are very poor compared with all other children nationally. This reflects the complexity of their needs and the very significant emotional and other challenges that looked after children often need to surmount in order to succeed. However, it is also the case that, for many looked after children, the

social care, education and health systems combined do not provide them with the right support and opportunities to enable them to maximise their potential.

10. In 2009–10, just 12% of looked after children achieved five or more good GCSEs, including English and mathematics, compared with 53% of children nationally. Compared with all young people, looked after children are more than twice as likely to have been convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand, over three times more likely to have been permanently excluded from secondary school, and almost four times as likely to be unemployed. In general, the disparity in outcomes between looked after children and their peers is closing too slowly, and on some vital measures such as attainment at GCSE, it is not closing at all.⁶
11. In conducting this survey, Ofsted was interested in the extent to which children's homes judged to be outstanding had been able to support the children and young people in their care to achieve their potential both during their time in the home and in the future. This proved a very difficult question to answer. Inspectors observed a great deal of exceptional practice in supporting young people to raise their aspirations, to attend and succeed at school, and to go on to further education, university or employment. This practice is reflected in the report and in the case studies of individual young people, which show how they were able to turn their lives around.
12. However, establishing a more systematic answer to the question has not been possible. Responsibility for tracking the outcomes for individual children through their time in care and beyond lies with local authorities. While many of the homes visited as part of this survey maintained informal contact with young people for whom they had cared, they had no systematic way of knowing how those young people fared in their future education or employment. This also meant that children's homes tended not to be held to account for long-term outcomes or for the progress that young people ultimately made.

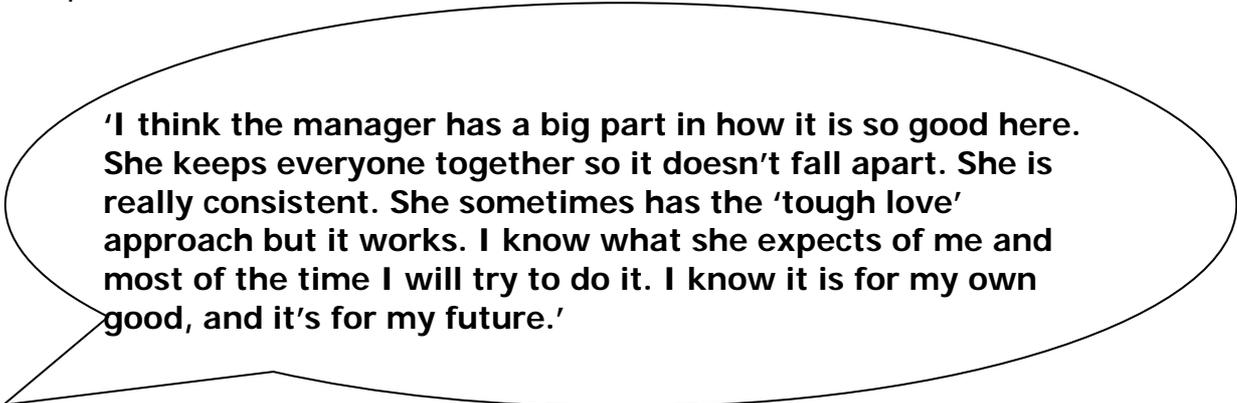
Leading with vision and purpose

Leadership

13. It is not surprising that the leadership of a children's home is critical to its quality. In many ways, the characteristics of a good leader in a children's home are similar to those of a good leader anywhere. Yet there are also particular pressures and challenges associated with working in a children's home which demand specific leadership qualities.

⁶ *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England, as at 31 March 2010*, Statistical First Release, Department for Education, 2010;
http://data.gov.uk/dataset/outcomes_for_children_looked_after_by_local_authorities_england_2010.

14. The first, and perhaps most striking, characteristic is the visibility of the managers of these children's homes. They are not shut away in an office, inaccessible to staff and young people and detached from the day-to-day running of the home. Instead, they interact frequently with young people and staff alike. They show a deep personal interest in all that is going on in the home and lead by example. Staff interviewed by inspectors attested to how well managers kept abreast of small developments in the daily life of the home, and the managers' ability to focus on both the big picture and the important details.
15. It is also, clearly, the leadership of the home that sets the vision and the priorities for improvement. Leaders spoke clearly about the need to create a vision and set of expectations to which staff could aspire. Often these leaders had set an explicit goal of delivering an 'outstanding' quality of care and they had galvanised staff around this journey of improvement, building on the lessons they had learnt from their previous inspection and discussions with their inspector.



'I think the manager has a big part in how it is so good here. She keeps everyone together so it doesn't fall apart. She is really consistent. She sometimes has the 'tough love' approach but it works. I know what she expects of me and most of the time I will try to do it. I know it is for my own good, and it's for my future.'

16. The high degree of consistency between how managers described the vision and purpose of the children's home and how it was described by members of staff was particularly evident during the survey. This strong sense of common purpose was achieved not just through the clear articulation of a set of goals and aspirations, but also through the conscious efforts managers made to include staff in the improvement process, by inviting ideas, discussing developments and respecting their professional contribution.
17. The managers of the children's homes visited often showed strong creative and entrepreneurial qualities. For example, in one of the homes visited, the manager was an active fundraiser, developing strong relationships with community groups in order to be able to afford new equipment or recreational opportunities for the young people. In general, the excellent accommodation and physical resources in these homes created a homely and welcoming environment for young people. By having good and well-maintained surroundings, the young people felt they were treated with respect and wanted to treat their environment with respect in turn. Again, these initiatives to improve the home and its living environment constantly provided another

mechanism to bring the whole staff team together around shared and common goals.

'The home looks like a normal house, unlike other places I have lived in that look like a children's home.'

18. The relationship established between the manager and her or his staff is central to the effective running of a children's home. In these highly successful homes, managers were typically characterised by the openness and honesty of their leadership style. This openness manifested itself in a number of ways. Managers were extremely clear about what they expected from staff, and established a culture in which staff could expect frequent and honest feedback about their performance. In doing so, managers recognised the need to support staff in what could often be an emotionally and physically demanding job, while never compromising on the standards of care for children.

In one home, the journey to reach and maintain 'outstanding' status depended on achieving a shared vision. First, it had to nurture a culture of excellence and bring along the staff. The manager improved the systems for monitoring staff performance and constantly reviewed all the tasks they carried out. The manager acknowledged it had been a tough road with staff who were challenged about their work. The home as a whole also challenged other professionals to come up to its standards. Staff now accept they are learning a new challenge every day and the key to their success has been that everyone is aligned to the vision.

19. The transparency of the leadership also extended to how problems were identified and issues tackled. The children's homes in this survey were highly committed to learning from their mistakes and had developed a strong 'no-blame' culture in which staff could reflect on their practice and that of others, solve problems and develop joint strategies to overcome the challenges that arose. This reflective culture was combined with a very clear expectation that issues would be dealt with quickly, professionally and effectively, rather than left to fester or swept under the carpet.

One home's advice to others on the route to delivering outstanding care was to make sure the team is on the same journey and staff were 100% committed to excellence. They advised dealing quickly with actions and recommendations arising from inspection and, importantly, learning from them. They also suggested talking to other outstanding homes to gain ideas and to improve on them. Keeping staff morale high was key. This required lots of praise for staff and recognition of their good work combined with consistent management oversight through regular

supervision and appraisal. There should be no surprises for staff in their feedback and they should constantly know how they are performing.

20. The personal drive, presence and commitment of the manager of the home were key ingredients of success, but in these outstanding homes, leadership was, in fact, distributed across the staff. Staff who had leadership potential were identified and took on positions of responsibility, either as deputy managers or shift managers, or took on the oversight of one aspect of the home, such as building relationships with local schools. The strong commitment to sharing leadership and responsibility was perhaps one of the factors that had helped to ensure the consistency of performance in these homes. Routines, policies, quality assurance and excellent practice did not depend on the oversight and leadership of just one person. They were part of the fabric of the home, and were reinforced by all those in a position of leadership or wider responsibility. This approach to delegation went hand in hand with respecting the professional expertise of the staff on the team and only taking concerns to a higher level when a solution could not be found.

Vision and ethos

21. All of the children's homes visited were characterised by their clarity of vision and purpose, and the extent to which this permeated everything that they did. Importantly, their vision of what the children's home was for and what it could achieve was articulated strongly by the manager, but also shared and reinforced by staff at all levels. In many cases, it was clear that the children and young people also shared the ethos of the home.

'I think this children's home is outstanding because everyone is proud of it. Young people might not show it but it feels like home.'

22. Although the children's homes were very varied in character, a number of common themes emerged when inspectors discussed the core vision with managers and staff. Typically, they were absolutely focused on the experience of the children in their care. They articulated high ambitions for what the children and young people could achieve in their lives, but also recognised that for many children, because of the difficulties they had experienced, they needed to celebrate and build upon the small steps that then lead to greater progress. So, for some young people, maintaining routine attendance at school or learning to manage their anger were important milestones in their ongoing development.
23. Another common characteristic in the children's homes visited was the staff's commitment never to give up on an individual child. Many of the children's homes recognised that they could offer an essential period of stability in

children's otherwise turbulent lives. Some of the young people felt that life at the children's home was the first point in their life in which they had felt really secure.

'This is the first place I have been that I have felt wanted.'

The staff at these children's homes recognised this and were therefore strongly committed to doing whatever was needed to make the experience in the children's home work for every young person who came there. This required both tenacity and creativity. It also required the management of the home to be clear about which young people they felt they could best support, to establish a strong statement of purpose and effective processes to support new placements and, occasionally, to refuse placements to young people whose needs they were not able to meet.

24. For the five children's homes that offered short breaks or full-time care to severely disabled children, the challenges were different, but no less significant. In these homes too, dedication to pursuing the best outcomes for the individual children in their care was often remarkable. As one manager of a home said:

'We always go above and beyond for the children and we are creative in what we do with the children. There is a passion among our staff for what we do with the children. This is more than a job. The care we give cannot be done by halves. We strive to be better than good. Staff have many skills and all have developed a deep understanding of caring for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The team is being constantly challenged by the changing demands of the children who have disabilities.'

25. In two of the children's homes visited, their vision and ethos were strongly influenced by a particular philosophy of how to care for and support children. In one case, the home focused strongly on attachment theory as an underpinning methodology to guide the development of policies and practices, and to steer staff in their relationships with the children and young people.⁷ In another home, cognitive behavioural therapy provided the theoretical basis for the home's approach to behaviour management and assertive support work with

⁷ The most important tenet of attachment theory is that a young child needs to develop a relationship with at least one primary care giver for social and emotional development to occur normally, and that further relationships build on the patterns developed in the first relationships. Attachment theory suggests that if a young child is not given the opportunity to develop a trusting and caring relationship, this will have an impact on the ability of the child to develop robust relationships later in life.

the young people.⁸ In both cases the theoretical approach helped managers and staff to articulate a clear vision and purpose for the home.

In one home which specialises in working with young people who have exhibited particularly complex and challenging behaviour, a strong emphasis is placed on the use of cognitive behavioural therapy as a means of effecting positive changes in the young people's behaviour. This clear therapeutic model underpins practice in this specialist home. All care staff are trained in cognitive behavioural therapy and the organisation employs the services of a dedicated therapist who conducts one-to-one work with young people and works with staff. The home holds frequent workshops directed by the therapeutic lead that underpin the home's work and there is frequent communication with the therapist, on a weekly basis, to support the ongoing progress of young people in the home.

What is evident from these examples is the importance of a coherent vision, purpose and system of beliefs. These bind together those working in the home and inform the detailed and complex decisions that need to be made every day. They also provide a set of goals and standards.

Recruitment, induction and training of staff

26. Staff are the life-blood of a successful children's home. The young people interviewed as part of this survey stressed again and again the important part that the staff played in their lives. This echoes the findings of the reports by the Office of the Children's Rights Director. Young people in care have indicated that it is the quality of staff that makes the biggest difference. When asked what made their home outstanding, all the managers interviewed as part of this survey said that it was the staff.⁹
27. The journey to establishing a highly effective and stable staff team starts with recruitment. The investment of time and attention in the recruitment of staff by these children's homes was remarkable. In the homes visited recruitment was generally a multi-stage process. It involved not only multiple interviews, but also observations of how applicants interacted with the children in the home, and meetings with current staff. In some cases young people formed part of the interview panel and assessed prospective candidates.

⁸ Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a psychological treatment. It is a 'talking therapy' which aims to help people understand how their problems began and what keeps them going. CBT encourages people to alter their behaviour by altering the way they think about themselves. CBT is aimed at changing people's current behaviour and enabling them to understand the triggers for certain behaviour. It can therefore be a very useful approach to dealing with challenging behaviour in traumatised young people. www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Cognitive-behavioural-therapy/Pages/Introduction.aspx

⁹ *Life in children's homes: a report of children's experience by the Children's Rights Director for England*, Ofsted (080244), 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080244. *Children's care monitor*, Ofsted (080280), 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080280.

'Another really good thing is we are included in some decisions from stupid things like what colour the paint is to bigger things like having a say in which staff join the home when they do interviews.'

28. Managers said that they did not necessarily look for the most highly qualified staff or those who had the longest experience. Primarily, they were looking to identify those who, they felt, would share the vision for the home, showed a passion for the work and could quickly establish a strong positive rapport with its children and young people. One manager, for example, observed that they would rather recruit someone with a strong aptitude for the role and invest in their training than a candidate with more experience but whose values or personal qualities did not align so well with what the home was trying to achieve. The following example outlines a typical recruitment process, in this case for a home offering short breaks.

The process of recruiting staff had changed about seven years before. At that time, the home would simply advertise in the local paper and then interview. A lot of applications were received from people who liked the idea of working with disabled children but needed a lot of training in order to be really good at it. Now, before candidates are interviewed, they are invited for a pre-visit during which they interact with children and staff and are observed by a member of the senior team. Feedback from the staff and the senior care officer, as well as the views of children and young people, then feed into the recruitment process.

29. However, recruitment is just the start of the process. Both induction and continuing training are vital to building an effective staff team. In these children's homes, the induction processes normally involved a system of mentoring for new staff, pairing them with more experienced staff. In many cases, this ran alongside a probationary period to continue to assess the member of staff's suitability. The mentoring period often continued beyond the initial induction period for up to a year, and the high-quality initial training that staff received was reinforced by on-the-job coaching and feedback from their mentors and managers in the home.
30. All the homes visited were committed to all staff being qualified to at least an NVQ at level 3, although not all staff had this level of qualification when they joined the home. New members of staff who did not hold an NVQ at level 3 were actively supported to achieve this as part of the home's commitment to professional development, and it was clear that an NVQ at level 3 was typically seen as the minimum requirement. Many staff, particularly those with management responsibility, also held an NVQ at level 4 or had continued their studies at degree level. In at least two of the children's homes, managers were

also qualified as NVQ assessors in order to support staff better through the process of achieving their qualification.

31. Training was not simply limited to the achievement of specific qualifications, important though these are. All the children's homes visited had clearly articulated training plans, extending over a one- or two-year period, which maintained and built on staff's knowledge. The plans helped to ensure that the staff were able to meet the evolving needs of the young people in their care, as well as keeping the staff up-to-date with the latest developments. One of the independently managed children's homes visited invested 10% of its annual profits into staff development. The homes often placed an emphasis on ensuring that all the staff had received the same training so that absolute consistency was maintained in terms of how they worked with and applied the knowledge to the young people. This was achieved in some cases through staff receiving training, for example from healthcare professionals or specialists from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), in whole-staff groups. In other cases, a small number of staff would receive training and would then train all the other staff at the home.
32. There was clear evidence that training was tailored not just to the needs and interests of the staff but also to the needs of the children and young people. In one children's home, for example, the staff received training in supporting learning at Key Stages 1 and 2 so that they were better able to help the children with their homework and continue the focus on education outside school. In one home providing short breaks, there had been a particular focus in the training on dealing with autism and associated issues of managing behaviour, which the home was planning to develop further in the following year.

Managing and supporting staff

33. Continuity of staffing in a children's home is essential if the children who live there are to have the opportunity to develop meaningful and lasting attachments to adults in their lives. The constancy and stability of the staffing in the 12 homes visited were striking. In one home, for example, the manager told the inspector that the average length of service for a member of staff was 16 years. In general, the homes reported that they had lost only one or two members of staff over the previous two or three years. In other homes, this lack of turnover in staff might have carried the risk that the staff became isolated and that their practice became stale. In these homes, however, the constant striving for improvement meant that staff were continually looking for new ideas and keen to incorporate these into their existing excellent practice.
34. Similarly, in these homes agency staff were not used or were used very rarely. These homes typically either used existing staff to cover for each other during periods of staff sickness or other absence, or had developed their own bank of short-term staff (sometimes those who had previously worked at the home and then retired) who could be trusted to provide cover without disrupting the

home's routines or daily operation. Managers aimed for a balance in the mix of age and gender of staff because they felt that this gave young people a wide range of different role models and facilitated different types of relationships between the staff and the young people.

35. There are many reasons why staff choose to continue to work in these homes. What came across most strongly in discussions with inspectors was the passion of the staff for their work and their overriding commitment to the children and young people in their care. For many of these staff, working in the children's home was more than just a job. They spoke about how privileged they felt working with the children and young people; they also made clear their conviction that they could make a real difference to these children's lives. One manager explained to the inspector how the genuine attachment and affection that staff held for the children in their care led them to continue to work at the home so that they could see individual children and young people progress and develop, and eventually move on to independence.

'The staff are outstanding, fair and approachable. I bet they would not expect me to say that.'

36. No doubt this passion and commitment stemmed from the personal qualities, values and beliefs of the staff themselves – and these had their roots in effective recruitment. However, the way in which the children's home was managed and run was very important in giving the staff the support and direction they needed to be able to fulfil their ambition to make a difference to the lives of children. These children's homes were highly successful in creating a culture of teamwork among staff, without creating unhelpful or divisive cliques. Staff were, typically, highly supportive of each other. For example, they would help colleagues to manage difficult situations or would come in to cover for another colleague if needed.
37. Staff were also given the opportunity to develop professionally and explore particular areas of interest or expertise which would benefit the children in the home. Similarly, managers looked for opportunities for staff to progress either to positions of greater responsibility within the home or, if the home belonged to a wider group, to take on a management position within one of the other homes run by the same company. This active approach to career management and upward progression ensured that the staff continued to be challenged, engaged and fulfilled. This contributed significantly to stability.
38. All these elements were tied together through robust performance management. All the staff in these homes received regular supervision from their managers. This was a frequent opportunity to discuss in detail the needs of the children and young people and how they could best be met, how well

staff were meeting the expectations of their performance, and what support they might need to support children even more effectively. Regular supervision was reinforced through more formal appraisals that took place at least annually, but often more frequently. However, the close monitoring of performance throughout the year, through supervision and daily interaction, meant that performance appraisal was likely to contain no surprises.

39. Managers in these outstanding homes recognised that the job done by staff was not only rewarding but, at times, extremely demanding. Close monitoring of levels and patterns of sickness absence, combined with getting to know staff personally and finding time to talk to them regularly, all helped to identify cases where staff were not coping. There was the opportunity, then, to put timely support in place. Where issues of poor performance arose, coaching and one-to-one development, through supervision, were used to help staff deal with any shortfalls. However, managers were also clear that they would not compromise on the standards of care and of commitment and affection that young people in these homes deserved. They were therefore not afraid to use competency proceedings to dismiss staff if they could not or would not meet the expectations required.

Creating a culture of continuing improvement

40. All the homes visited as part of this survey recognised that remaining outstanding required continual improvement. They were always striving to do better for the children and young people. To a great extent, this focus on improvement was driven by their openness to feedback, which they regularly sought and positively embraced, from the very wide range of people who came into contact with the home.
41. The first, and arguably the most critical of these, was the feedback they received from the young people themselves on a wide range of issues including: the interactions between young people and staff in the home; any incidences of conflict; their experience at school; the facilities available in the home; access to activities in and outside the home; the home's decor and furnishings and the quality of the meals. As one manager put it, 'Young people are our most important inspectors.' Regular meetings with the young people, in many cases chaired by them, ensured a constant stream of live feedback to the home on what could be improved, what was working well and how the service might develop in the future. In the best examples homes would ensure that young people understood how they had acted upon their suggestions for improvement, explaining how changes were going to be implemented or why other changes may not be possible. The young people interviewed for this survey felt that their views were listened to and that they were able to influence the quality and nature of the care they received.

'Staff keep me well informed about what is happening to my plans. Staff always ask young people about their views on life in the home. We are always being consulted about all sorts of things, trips, visits, holidays.'

For young people who might need support in making their views known, wide use was made of independent advocates to work with them and represent them.¹⁰

42. As well as listening to the young people, these children's homes also took the time to listen to their own staff. As discussed previously, the leaders were accessible and visible, they paid attention to the professional views of staff, and they encouraged them to engage in the process of continual improvement. A particular feature seen in many of the homes visited was the use of structured staff meetings, involving all staff. The focus of these meetings was to identify areas of their services which could be improved and to develop solutions jointly, through reflective practice. These sessions were practical, immediate, and maintained the continuing drive towards improvement. A consistent approach to interviews with staff who were leaving also ensured that lessons were learnt and mistakes were not replicated. One home attributed its improvement and continuing high quality to its pursuit of 'charter mark' status. This prompted the home to review the way that it worked in terms of the quality of the service being offered to the 'customers' – in this case, the young people.
43. In the case of children's homes offering short breaks, parents were critical partners with whom they interacted regularly. Feedback from parents was sought both formally and informally. Parents were encouraged to contact the home at any point to raise concerns, however trivial. In addition, formal quality assurance processes were established so that all parents were asked regularly for their opinion of the home and for their suggestions for developments or improvements.
44. These outstanding homes also invited and acted on feedback from a wide variety of partners in the system; for example schools, partner agencies such as the police or health services, social workers and local authorities that placed children with them ('placing authorities'). In general, good relationships with a wide range of partners contributed strongly to the outstanding practice in these homes. As well as being a source of feedback and reflection, partners provided specialist input and advice for the care of young people, opportunities for joint training, and a strong network for shared planning. Examples were given of strong partnerships with young people's social workers, the Connexions service and youth services, with the police, with wider health services, with other

¹⁰ An independent advocate is an adult whose role is to speak up for children and young people who may not otherwise feel confident or be able to communicate their wishes, needs and feelings.

homes within the same company, with parents and with the wider local community including voluntary and faith-based groups. Underpinning many of these partnerships was the effort which the homes had put in to engaging the partners and bringing them into the life of the home. All the homes visited stressed the importance of taking the initiative. Forming these partnerships required careful planning and often started with the simple sharing of information.

45. The process of gathering feedback, reflecting on practice and experimenting with new approaches and ways of working formed part of the day-to-day life in these outstanding homes. However, they also had more structured systems of monitoring and review which overlaid this continuing drive for improvement. In one home, for example, the manager and her deputy audited every child's file every six months to ensure completeness, quality and consistency. Another of the homes had introduced a robust tracking system to monitor how well particular outcomes were being met for individual young people, such as reducing the incidence of self-harming. Similarly robust systems were in place to handle complaints and to make sure that the young people knew how to make a complaint if they had one.
46. These outstanding children's homes were also curious about excellent practice elsewhere. All of them emphasised the important role of inspection in opening their eyes to what more they could be doing, and many of them wanted to see Ofsted doing more to identify and disseminate outstanding practice in the sector. Many of the homes were also active in seeking out good practice from other homes, either regionally, from within the same company or at wider training events.
47. However, despite the appetite and thirst for information, it was clear that opportunities for the systematic sharing of good practice outside the homes' immediate circle of neighbours or colleagues within the same company remained relatively underdeveloped; opportunities for the talented leaders in these and other outstanding homes to take on wider system leadership roles, as is increasingly the case in other sectors, were rare.

The experience of young people in the home

Managing the placement of young people into the home

48. The experience of a young person in a children's home is determined in part by the suitability of the placement both for the young person and the home involved. All the outstanding homes visited during this survey were clear about the importance of actively managing the placement of young people into their homes. Leaders in these homes believed they had a duty to ensure that the placement had the best chance of benefiting the young person concerned, as well as avoiding any detrimental impact on the young people already in the home. On the basis of the visits it is possible to identify a number of factors that are critical to getting the decision about the placement right.

'Moving here is the best thing that has happened in my life.'

49. First, the homes themselves were clear about what type of young person might benefit most from spending time there. This was not about selecting the easiest young people to deal with – far from it, because in many cases these homes were accepting some of the most challenging children and young people – but about being clear that the home had the skills and experience to deal successfully with the particular young person and her or his problems or concerns. The importance of a clear vision in becoming outstanding is outlined in the first section of this report. The managers of these homes were also clear that clarity about their vision and particular areas of strength or specialism also helped them in making decisions about new placements.
50. The second important factor identified by the managers of the homes visited was that they had to make decisions on a case by case basis using all of the information available. They therefore placed a high priority on getting as much information as possible about the young person to inform their admission decisions. For example, one manager stressed the importance of carrying out in-depth assessments of potential placements so that children could be accepted into the home with no probationary period. This accorded with the home's policy of no exclusion, based on its promotion of attachment theory.
51. Many of these homes recognised, however, that it was not entirely within their control to determine the placement recommendations and information made available about young people. Some of the homes, therefore, worked very closely with the placement body or authority and social workers involved to improve the process of placing young people in their homes.

In one of the short-break homes visited, decisions about the care package and the placement of disabled children were made collectively by the local authority's Family Support Panel, of which the home was a member. This considered all the services available for children across the county and assessed individual needs. It used to be the case that placements were decided by the panel alone and the home had no say in the decision. It took the home about two or three years to build the relationship with fieldwork managers to arrive at this way of joint working with the family support panel.

During the first three months of their placement all children who were new to the home received one-to-one support from a member of staff. After this period, the staff met to confirm whether the home was the right placement for the child and what the child's level of need would be. This informed the care plan and the ratio of staff to children.

52. The homes visited were also clear that they benefited from having a reputation for being an outstanding children's home. This meant that placing bodies or authorities were not only keen to see their children and young people sent to the homes, but were more willing to provide the homes with information about the young person and to listen to their views about which young people might most benefit from a placement at the homes. It had often taken time and patience to build up this level of trust between the home and the placing authority.
53. There was a readiness to say no to placements when the homes felt they could not best meet the needs of the young person involved or when it might have had a detrimental impact on the young people already in the home. Examples were given to inspectors of when managers of these homes had declined a placement, although it was clear that this was rare and happened only in exceptional cases. In part because of the reputation of the homes, and often because of the relationships they had built, the placing authorities accepted and understood these decisions.
54. In most cases, the homes felt that a placement decision was, ultimately, a decision for the senior managers, but some gave examples of the ways in which other staff were engaged in the decision-making process and many would often seek the views of staff – and, on some occasions, the young people – when a particularly difficult decision had to be made. It increased the chances of a placement being successful if staff had had a say in whether or not the young person should come to the home in the first place. In this way, the culture of teamwork between managers and staff was enhanced.

Inducting young people into the home

55. All of the outstanding children's homes visited as part of this survey stressed the importance of thinking carefully about how to integrate children and young people into their homes. In many cases, children came to visit the home before they were placed, with their families or social workers. In one example, young people were met in their current placement, had an informal interview and were given full information about the home. In another home, which provided short breaks for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, children came to the home for the day and saw the range of resources on offer, which included a school and farm; then they came for an overnight or weekend stay before a decision about their placement was made.

'I was consulted by my social worker if I wanted to come and live at this home. Staff were very welcoming and let me visit over a period until I was ready to move in.'

56. These outstanding homes stressed the importance of this early contact. By meeting staff and other young people before their formal placement, the young people were enabled to feel comfortable when they first arrived. It also gave the homes a chance to make an informed assessment of the young person's needs and how well she or he was likely to adapt to life in the home, including how any particular needs should be catered for. The homes could then use this information to feed into the young person's placement plan and to help establish priorities with their key worker. In this way, the homes were doing as much as they could in advance to understand needs, as well as obtaining as much information as possible from the placing authority and other bodies which were working with the young people.
57. Many of these homes were also 'going the extra mile' to make young people feel as welcome and comfortable as possible when they first arrived. Inspectors saw examples of high quality 'welcome packs' for young people, which included all the basic materials they might need during their stay, as well as highly informative materials about their lives in the homes and about the resources and facilities available. The children were often given the chance to choose their bedroom in the home, and sometimes even the décor and furnishings, in advance of the placement.

'The introduction here was so nice. All the young people made me feel so welcome and another young person has taught me so much about myself. I am not as sensitive as I used to be. I know I can talk to other young people here when staff are busy.'

58. Often these homes placed particular emphasis on introducing young people to the staff they would encounter during their stay. Inspectors noted a number of methods. In one home, for example, they organised one-to-one meetings between staff and new young people during their first week. In another, they put up posters with staff names and pictures around the home and encouraged young people and staff to introduce themselves to one another.

'When initially visiting the home before moving in, I felt staff were very caring. I was not used to this.'

59. Perhaps the most important element of the young person's induction into these homes, however, was the message they were given by staff about a fresh start. All the children's homes visited stressed the importance of using a new placement as an opportunity for young people to move on and to make progress in their lives, despite what might have happened to them before.

Managers and staff emphasised this message to young people on arrival. In some cases, the message was also reinforced by other young people in the home who had turned their lives around as a result of their own placements.

Policies, plans and procedures

60. It is not unusual in inspection to find that children's homes have a comprehensive suite of policy documents. What was unusual in these outstanding homes was the care they had taken in developing them so that they became a fundamental and evolving element of the home, tied closely to its overall ethos. For example, one of the homes visited had invested considerable effort in taking corporately available policy documents, for example those provided by the local authority, and 'translating' them into language that would be accessible and meaningful to staff in the home.
61. Staff were often involved in the process of developing and reviewing policies to ensure that the final policies were owned by them. Once in place, it was expected that the home's policies were known and understood by all staff, and informed all aspects of the home's daily work. These were not, therefore, just documents on a shelf until they were next reviewed; they were referred to frequently and used to guide decisions and actions. This, again, was one of the elements that contributed to the consistent excellent performance in these homes.
62. These homes took a similarly active and engaged approach to planning for the individual children and young people. Typically, these plans were detailed and highly personalised. They set out everything that staff might need to know about an individual: their likes and dislikes; triggers that might provoke a negative reaction or poor behaviour; their personal goals, aspirations and progress; medical or health needs; interests and friendship groups; and, for disabled children or those who had severe learning difficulties, detailed information about non-verbal communication.
63. This attention to detail allowed a structured and personalised approach to planning the activities for young people that the home offered or supported. In one home, for example, during the young person's initial assessment and continuing planning, detailed information was gathered on hobbies and interests to ensure that she or he was able to access them. In another home, the staff made a conscious effort to ensure that all the young people experienced two individual activities and one group activity each week. These activities were regularly reviewed.
64. The children and young people, if they were able to, took an active part in reviewing their plans with staff. Typically, the plans also included robust risk assessments which, because they were treated as a critical part of the placement plan, often allowed young people to take part in activities which might not otherwise have been possible for them. These plans, like the policies, were living documents, designed to help set goals and monitor progress, to

ensure that all staff working with an individual understood her or him as well as possible and could maintain consistency, and to support work across agencies.

65. In the case of children in short-break services, another important function of the placement plan was to support dialogue and joint working with the child's parents. In one such children's home, a parent with whom an inspector held a discussion pointed to the residential care plan prepared for her daughter by the home, which she had just agreed; she said that it was the finest description of her child she had read – both accurate and warm – and showed just how well those working at the home knew each child individually.

Relationships with staff

66. As already noted, the homes frequently focused on young people meeting staff during their induction into the home. The continuing relationship that developed with staff was critical to the lives of the children and young people in care. Getting this right was one of the main factors that both inspectors and the homes themselves saw as contributing to being outstanding.

'They are consistent and they motivate you.'

67. There were a number of examples of the ways in which these children's homes built and strengthened the relationships between staff and young people. Typically, this was often simply about the staff and young people interacting regularly with each other throughout the young person's time in the home. For example, staff might accompany young people to school, especially when the education provision was directly linked to the home. They would take the time to sit and have meals together, using this as an opportunity to give the young people the chance to discuss issues, either related to their own experiences that day or things they had heard about in the news.

'Staff are constantly checking if young people have any problems. They are always there to care, but not in our faces. They treat young people as young adults. They help young people to move to independence.'

68. The system of having a key worker was generally seen as an effective way to make sure that the young people always had one member of staff they knew

and trusted and could go to with any problem they were having.¹¹ Often this happened both informally and formally – for example, if a member of staff noticed that a young person's behaviour was unusual or they appeared discontented, she or he would be taken to one side during the day and the issue would be discussed then, rather than left to the next formal meeting. The most effective practice was seen in the homes that provided their staff with training and guidance on the role of the key worker and each home's expectations of the role.

69. Trips and outings from the home, and joining in activities together, also gave staff and young people a chance to form stronger relationships. In all the homes visited, the range and variety of activities offered enriched young people's experience of living in the home and broadened their horizons. Examples given by the homes and the young people included visiting local places of interest, going to the gym, or taking part in sports, dance or theatre classes. Young people and staff alike commented how the experience of going on outings locally or going on holiday together provided enjoyment for the young people and a chance to cement their relationships with staff and with each other.
70. Staff in these homes also saw it as their responsibility to act as role models for the behaviours they were expecting to see in the young people they were working with. They recognised that they could be a positive influence on the way the young people saw and related to adults, by whom they had often been let down before.

'Everyone cares about us in different ways. Some people are harsher; some people are a bit more lenient, but everything the staff team do is for us and our own good.'

71. Despite the strength of the relationships that these homes had already established among staff and young people, the homes often felt they could go further. This ambition took a number of different forms. In one home, for example, managers and staff were striving to increase the level of one-to-one contact time. This might involve activity within the home – for example, simply finding the time to have an individual conversation with a young person – or taking the individual out to do something specifically chosen for them rather than for the group. Often the focus on greater personalisation was seen as the next step in continuing to improve provision, and achieve more, for the young people.

¹¹ The term key worker is used to describe the member of staff in a children's home who has special responsibility for an individual child.

Maintaining relationships with family and friends

72. The nature of engagement with families varied considerably, depending on the type of home and the nature of the care plans that were in place. In the case of the outstanding homes visited offering short breaks to children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, there was a very strong emphasis on securing a continuity of approach in work with young people so that this reinforced the young people's experience at school or with their families. This might include, for example, ensuring that the same techniques were used to manage behaviour or that consistent approaches were used for building and developing young people's communication skills.
73. Consistency and continuity between the home and the family were reinforced through excellent communication between the staff and the parents of the young person. The parents felt that they could trust the managers and staff and were convinced that they had the interests of the young person at heart.

A home offering short breaks sent a letter home to parents after every stay, setting out in detail what had happened, including what activities the child had taken part in and how they had responded to them, what had been enjoyed, what their child had eaten, and any health issues that had arisen. In this way, the home ensured that the parents had up-to-date information about the young person's experience and any concerns about which they needed to be aware.

74. In other outstanding children's homes, the nature of young people's continuing engagement with parents depended on the specific detail of the individual care plan drawn up for them by their social worker. In cases where contact was part of the plan, there were a number of examples of homes supporting the young person in a highly sensitive and supportive way, to engage or re-engage with their families. One young person told inspectors how staff from the home had discussed with her whether she was ready to re-establish contact with her family; they had then accompanied her when she travelled to meet her family, and stayed in the local area for the duration of the visit in case the young person required support at any point.
75. As well as helping young people to maintain contact with their families when this was possible and right for the young person, these children's homes placed a significant emphasis on enabling young people to lead normal lives in terms of developing their own interests and, through these, establishing new relationships and friendships. The support provided by the homes to enable young people to engage in out-of-school activities such as sports, dance and theatre clubs was an important way for young people to develop normal healthy relationships outside the home. This was, perhaps, a particularly important consideration in homes offering short breaks to severely disabled children where the activity programme offered, combined with opportunities to go out into the community, could provide a really important means to tackle the social isolation that such young people might otherwise experience.

A short-break home for disabled children and those who had learning difficulties ran both a term-time and a holiday activities programme.

For the holiday programme, the home wrote to all the families in April to ask what activities the children would like. They then tried to organise these for the year ahead. Links with the community were excellent. The children and young people were seen in the community frequently and were well received. Children from the neighbouring estate were invited in to play and develop positive views about disabled children. The home supported children and young people to join other external groups and clubs where possible. For example, they transported children to a club or activity, just as a parent would do, if it happened to coincide with an evening when the child was at the home. At the time of the inspector's visit, the home was trying to establish a regular session with the local riding school.

Behaviour management and conflict resolution

76. All the outstanding children's homes visited in this survey had a clear, consistent approach to managing behaviour. The approach relied primarily on reinforcing positive behaviour, actively managing and dealing with conflict and using sanctions only as a last resort. When sanctions were used, they were proportionate and relevant to the misbehaviour, and often discussed openly with the young people involved.

'I have good relationships with staff. However, in the beginning I had a tense time with staff because I didn't want to be told what to do. Gradually I understood why staff were strict initially.'

The young people themselves recognised the value of having a clear and consistent approach to behaviour management.

One home developed its behaviour management policy through formal training and also through consulting the young people.

The young people thought sanctions were generally fair, even if they did not always like them. The home had developed a database to measure behaviour and physical interventions. It identified and recorded the triggers for each young person's behaviour and planned with staff and young people, before any incidents arose, how they would manage them. There were regular discussions in team meetings and supervisions about appropriate sanctions. The database supported the home in identifying and managing any crises for the young people. The information also helped the managers to look at any patterns in the behaviour of staff and to tackle anything they noticed.

The home was keen to develop more rewards for good behaviour.

77. In all the homes visited, the staff had been trained in behaviour management and restraint. The use of restraint was rare, but when it occurred there were clear procedures and policies to be followed, and the staff and the young people involved would take the time to reflect afterwards why it had happened, whether it had been managed appropriately or whether there could have been an alternative.

'I have been in care since I was a baby and in foster care. Other children's homes have been poor because staff let young people do what they want. Here there is stability and control. You know where you are with staff who are fair and honest.'

78. The staff in these children's homes felt that the key to actively managing young people's behaviour was the fact that they knew the young people well and could often read their moods. This allowed them to spot potential causes of conflict early, to take time to discuss this with the young person and to intervene early if the behaviour was likely to escalate. Some staff commented that the most effective sanction available to them was to show that they were disappointed with the young person's behaviour; the most positive incentive was to recognise and praise good or improved behaviour in some way. This was corroborated by many of the young people who spoke to inspectors who said that they did not want to let themselves or staff down.

In one home visited, each young person had a behaviour development plan and she or he was fully involved in developing it. The young people signed their plans to promote the taking of responsibility for their behaviour and to have a say in sanctions used.

The home's excellent documentation included the recording of young people's feelings at the time of any misbehaviour. The staff and the young people used this approach, following a behavioural intervention, to discuss what had happened. The young people also knew that they could look into ways of balancing negative behaviour with more constructive behaviour that would be rewarded by staff.

79. These children's homes rewarded good behaviour in a range of different ways, including time with staff doing extra activities, verbal praise or rewards such as the chance to earn additional pocket money. However, one of the homes visited recognised that this was an area where they could improve further. In the words of the manager:

'We find that staff acknowledging the effort of young people is very well received. But we also recognise some young people cannot manage praise well. We need to do more to develop the rewards for good behaviour.'

80. Examples of sanctions used were the loss of an activity, delay of pocket money, restricted use of the internet or paying for damage caused. These homes tried to link the sanction to the misdemeanour and involved the young people in determining what an appropriate sanction would be so that it would have more meaning. For example, in one home, a young person who had broken a window suggested that a meaningful sanction would be contacting a range of window repair companies to secure the most cost-effective quote for repairing the damage.

'It works so well here because there are strict boundaries and everyone knows where they stand.'

81. In the short-break homes visited, behaviour management relied to a very great extent on getting to know, in minute detail, the triggers for poor behaviour and anger and doing everything possible to intercept them. This was reinforced by absolute consistency in approaches across the home, the school and the family.

Supporting looked after children to succeed

82. As discussed in the introduction, the relationship between outstanding care and the outcomes achieved by young people is a complex one. It has not been possible, throughout the course of this survey, to come to a comprehensive view of the level of progress made by all young people who attend these homes, or the measurable contribution that the outstanding care they offer has made to young people's future life chances.
83. In some respects, the barriers to arriving at a conclusion are practical. Data on looked after children's achievements during the entire course of their time in care are held by the local authority and tend not be aggregated at the level of an individual home. However, in other respects, the difficulties are more complex. Given the very varied starting points of the young people who enter these homes, and the immense social, emotional and sometimes physical challenges they must overcome, it is wrong to assume that progress is simple

and linear. For some young people the progress that they make during their time at an individual home may be difficult to measure, but it is absolutely vital in terms of laying the foundations for future success. This difficulty in measuring progress in absolute terms may be particularly the case for those young people whose stay at a children's home is relatively short.

84. Certainly, the clear message from the children's homes visited is that support for better outcomes must be based on holistic individual planning that takes full account of each young person's strengths, weaknesses, abilities and aspirations. It must also be based on high expectations – setting individual goals must not be an excuse for settling for second best. In supporting young people to succeed, children's homes take on the role of a committed parent, rather than an expert in education or health. What follows is therefore a qualitative rather than quantitative account of how these outstanding homes support young people to succeed. The individual case studies of young people illustrate how some have been able to turn their lives around.

One young person had not received any education for 18 months while living with her family. On coming to the home she re-engaged with education and, at the time of the inspector's visit, had achieved a distinction in her college course in equine studies. Another of the home's success stories was a young person who achieved good results at GCSEs, moved to independent living and passed her A levels. She obtained a place to study for a social work degree.

Of the 11 young people who had lived in the home during the previous three years, three had gone on to further and higher education, three entered full-time employment, and the others had gained a variety of work experience, including working as a mechanic.

Building young people's aspirations

85. The managers and staff of the outstanding children's homes visited for this survey were clear that having high expectations for the children in their care and actively building young people's own aspirations was an intrinsic part of their role. They recognised that young people often came to them having experienced a wide range of disappointments and setbacks in their lives and, therefore, that their self-esteem, confidence and hope for the future would frequently be very low. In many homes it was emphasised during the induction process for young people that they should view their time at the home as a fresh start and a chance to put behind them the negative perceptions of others and, in some cases, their own negative behaviour.

One young person came to the children's home at the age of 11 from a very difficult home life. He refused school, had no self-confidence and no trust in adults. The staff worked intensively with him to improve his self-worth and confidence. His school attendance gradually improved because of the support of staff and the school. He succeeded in his examinations

and won a young person's achiever award. He left school with GCSEs and entered full-time employment with the council. He is now married with a family and remains in full-time work. He told staff he would not have been successful without the support of staff at the home. He maintains regular contact with them and is an inspiration for other young people.

The opportunity to help young people turn their lives around was eloquently described by one member of staff:

'Our aspirations for the young people are to help build their lives after being damaged by their previous experiences. We want them to achieve their potential in self-confidence, education and being good members of the community when they leave care. Success is when the young people tell us they are ready to move into independence and they will miss us. All staff are involved in shaping the way this home operates with the best interests of young people in the forefront of our work. We believe in our work.'

86. Staff and managers alike stressed that the process of building young people's self-confidence and self-worth was an iterative journey with the young person, not an instant transformation. The homes visited used a number of techniques to help young people along this journey. Perhaps the most important of these was simply spending time talking to the young person about their goals and their hopes for the future, and convincing them that they had potential and could succeed. One manager explained that in spending time with the young people they could make a difference, both by listening to what the young people wanted to do with their lives and by exposing them to opportunities and options they might never have even considered. Of course, not all staff will have been exposed to a wide range of opportunities themselves, and in these cases knowing where to turn for additional information and guidance is important. Some of the children's homes, for example, had developed strong relationships with local Connexions services to provide expert information and advice.
87. Typically the homes stressed to inspectors the importance of setting very individually determined targets and goals, and building up from small achievements to greater ones. These targets encompassed not only achievements in education or training, but also more personal goals associated with the young person's behaviour and how they lived their life. These targets were an important motivating factor for young people and staff alike. However, it was not clear how well or consistently these targets were benchmarked against comparators based on age or prior attainment. This is an area for development, and is a key step in beginning to close the gaps in achievement between looked after children and their peers.

'I learnt more here than anywhere else. I have had a massive wake-up call and more than anything the home has made me want to be a nicer person.'

88. It was also clear that finding opportunities to celebrate success, both privately and publicly, was another way in which expectations were raised. The homes visited used certificates of achievement and rewards such as special outings and pocket money as ways to recognise success. However, perhaps the most powerful form of recognition was seen to be praise from the members of staff.

'The home has high expectations and because we care about the staff we obviously want to please them.'

89. Finding role models to whom the young people could relate was another important factor in building expectations. These would sometimes be individual members of staff or young people who had lived at the home and gone on to succeed in their lives. One home had established positive images throughout the home of former residents showing what they had achieved. Another home commented on the positive impact it has on young people when those who used to live at the home return for visits and it is clear that they are happy and thriving.

Ensuring engagement in education

90. All the homes visited gave education a very high priority. It was central to the home's vision and its aspirations for the children and young people. This was often very clearly expressed as a minimum requirement that all young people must be in some form of education, employment or training during their time in the home and, in one case, was made an absolute condition of young people remaining in the home.

A young woman was very opposed to education at the beginning, but the home knew that it was the most important thing for her. The home made sure she had the right uniform and equipment and the key worker supported her by working with her on her strengths and good qualities, and recognising and praising every small step forward. The home focused on making sure that she felt comfortable about going to school and, initially, it organised taxis to take her to and from school. Her key worker spent time talking to her about the things she did not like and teaching her how to communicate effectively with the school and her teachers, being clear and open in her interactions. Over time her engagement with the school built momentum. She went on educational trips and made friends who were welcomed into the home and with whom she stayed

overnight on occasions. She passed eight GCSEs, two at grade A, was made a prefect in the sixth form and, at the time of the inspector's visit, wanted to go to university.

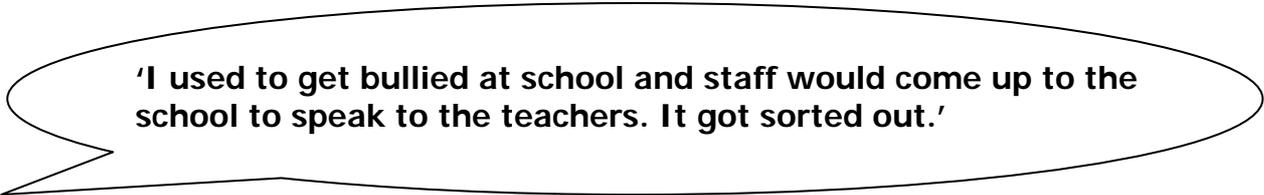
91. Staff and managers recognised that many young people often started with a very negative experience of school or college. In these cases, it was necessary to re-engage young people in education or training gradually. There were many examples of homes acting as a committed parent would to ensure that the young people in their care were able to maintain the right education placement. Staff from the home, for example, maintained very regular, even daily, contact with the young person's school to make sure that she or he was settling in and attending. If concerns arose, the staff would support the young person to resolve them with the school, vigorously challenge exclusions and if a young person was excluded they would undertake immediate planning with the local authority. This was done to ensure that another full-time education place was available quickly and that the young person's education was not disrupted. Young people who were not confident enough to attend school on their own were accompanied by members of staff until they were able to manage the school day themselves.
92. There were also examples of homes advocating for young people to make sure that they had, or were able to keep, the education placement that was in their best interests. A parent described to an inspector during the survey how the short-break home her son attended had helped her to negotiate with the local authority for a place for her son at the special school. She said he could not have attended without the support of staff. In another example, a member of staff described how the home was able to work with the local authority and schools to develop vocational or specialised education plans for young people who were unable to cope with a standard curriculum or timetable. The importance placed on maintaining continuity in education is illustrated by an independently managed home that decided, because the local authority was no longer willing to pay for the young person's placement and had been planning to move him, to allow a young person to continue to live in the home free of charge until he had completed his GCSEs.

Supporting progress in learning

93. As well as ensuring that young people attended school and advocating on their behalf in terms of getting a good education, there was also evidence that these homes placed a strong emphasis on supporting young people's progress in learning. The personal education plan for the young person was the main vehicle through which targets were set and progress towards these was monitored. Staff at one of the homes explained how important the role of the key worker was in supporting progress in learning. She or he attended meetings about the personal education plan with the social worker, developed close relationships with the young person's tutor and head of year and had monthly discussions of progress and achievement with the young person to agree what support she or he might need. The home said the young people in

its care enjoyed their education, had positive attitudes to learning, were ambitious and had successfully built friendships in the schools they attended.

94. The homes visited described how the key workers maintained regular communication with the schools the young people attended to get information updates, normally at least weekly. In this way they were playing much the same role as a supportive parent might do to help their children make progress: asking questions about their progress at school; making sure they had the right environment in which to do their homework; being on hand to help with and check their work; and talking to the school and teachers if problems were encountered or if there were concerns about the young person's behaviour.

A large, horizontal speech bubble with a tail pointing to the left. Inside the bubble, the text is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

'I used to get bullied at school and staff would come up to the school to speak to the teachers. It got sorted out.'

95. There was also evidence of homes building strong relationships with key teaching staff in order to support joint planning. One home, for example, had worked closely with a school's coordinator for special educational needs to develop young people's communication and behaviour plans and to support work on transition.

Young people from one of the homes visited knew that they were expected to continue with their education and the home offered a variety of support to help them to realise their aspirations. A member of staff, for example, had undertaken dyslexia training to help some young people with their difficulties. The virtual school, a well-resourced library and computer room enabled the young people to concentrate on their studies. Staff also used trips as opportunities to enhance the young people's knowledge and education. The educational experiences in a wider context were outstanding. The staff were committed to the young people's education and worked very closely with schools, colleges and alternative education provision.

Former residents who stayed in touch with the home were excellent role models and their achievements were examples to the young people of the benefits of persevering with education and work placements.

96. Since 2006 many local authorities have appointed 'virtual headteachers' to oversee outcomes for all looked after children in their local area.¹² Views among the children's homes visited in this survey about the effectiveness of the virtual headteacher system were mixed. Staff in two of the homes commented that they had had frequent contact with their virtual headteacher and that she or he had been very helpful in drawing up the young person's education plan, resolving problems and checking on the young person's progress. Conversely, staff in two other homes had had little or no contact with their virtual headteachers to date. One manager commented that the home sometimes received a telephone call from the virtual headteacher to see if the young person was in school that day 'but that's all'.
97. These outstanding homes also saw how trips and activities outside the school day could support young people's learning. In one home, for example, the staff organised a visit to a concentration camp in Poland for young people who were studying the Holocaust at school. Staff in another home built on their links with a church and a university in Malawi to offer young people a 17-day study trip during which they visited orphanages and saw how children lived in poorer countries. The young people made a DVD of their experience, maintained their links with Malawi and, with staff, were raising funds for a return visit.¹³
98. Staff at the homes that offered short breaks explained clearly the role the homes played in complementing the young people's formal learning at school. Informal activities gave them enjoyment, challenged what they thought they could achieve, and expanded their horizons. The importance of continuity for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has been highlighted earlier in this report. This is equally true of the need for continuity in the approach to learning. As a result, the short-break homes, typically, had built up very strong relationships with their local special schools and had sophisticated arrangements for sharing information and joint working. A deputy headteacher in one of these special schools attested to the critical importance of its partnership with the home:

'Communication between the home and the school is excellent. We have a trusting professional relationship. This is vital if a partnership is going to work. The key factor is we work together as a team. It is a seamless approach to the care of the children. Staff will provide support to the school if a child is proving difficult to manage. This is very welcome. Staff work very well with teachers who value the input of the care staff.'

¹² *Care matters* proposed that there should be a 'virtual headteacher' in every local area to oversee the education of looked after children and those placed outside the authority, to take responsibility as if she or he were the headteacher of a single school; *Care matters: transforming the lives of children and young people in care* (Cm 6932), DCSF, 2006; www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/vulnerablechildren/eresource/vulnerable-children/frontline-staff/increasing/importance/index.html.

¹³ Permission for trips abroad for looked after children is given by a senior manager within the relevant local authority

Reciprocal training takes place between the school and the home. Staff at the home attend all school meetings and reviews. The home is now part of the special schools partnership in the council area. This has brought together all the professionals who work with children with learning difficulties. The approach to the work with the children is now an integrated one.'

99. Of the 12 homes visited for this survey, four had their own dedicated education provision. Normally this was run as a separate independent school, on a different site, but overseen by the same company. In most cases, the education was provided either as a way of supporting young people back into mainstream education or as a full-time alternative for young people who could not be educated in mainstream or maintained special schools as a result of their particular needs. There was evidence of a high degree of communication between the care staff in the home and the staff leading the education of young people. In one of the homes visited, the care staff had trained as teaching assistants and were working alongside young people when they attended school. In this way, the frequency of their contact with individual young people increased, they were always aware of how a young person's day had gone and of any behavioural issues which might have an impact on what happened when she or he returned to the home.
100. The close liaison between the children's home and the associated independent school is one of the main advantages conferred by this arrangement. However, there can be disadvantages too. In one of the outstanding children's homes the associated education provision was judged to be satisfactory overall. Some of the weaknesses which prevented this provision being judged as good were the limited range of the curriculum and the model of one-to-one tuition which did not always enable young people to engage as well as possible in their learning, for example by learning with and from their peers. These were issues which the school, which was fairly recently established at the time of the inspection, was taking action to put right. However, they are also issues which can be difficult to address in the context of a very small school, which many of these are. One children's home, whose education provision was judged to be good overall, recognised how dependent they were on the quality of the single teacher at the school, whom they had helped to appoint.

Supporting good health and emotional well-being

101. The outstanding homes visited recognised the important role they had not just in supporting young people to succeed in learning but also in supporting them to lead healthy lives and to develop emotional resilience. They would need this to deal with what they had experienced already, as well as setbacks in the future, as in this example.

A young person had a history of absconding, taking personal risks, not maintaining her health and hygiene, and regularly self-harming. Before coming to the home she was not attending school, but the home

supported her to engage with education and take her GCSEs. She passed 10 GCSEs, one at Grade A, two grade Bs, five grade Cs, and three grade Ds. Later, she attended college, lived in the home's independent flat and was looking forward to the future. The young person gave the inspector a tour of the building. She was perceptive and recognised she had changed, even though she had a challenging past and continued to face family difficulties regularly.

The staff in the home talked about the progress young people had made with a great deal of emotion and pride.

102. All the homes visited emphasised support for young people to undertake activities that would promote their long-term health, such as taking part in team sports or attending a gym. They also actively promoted healthy eating. This meant providing good-quality, home cooked meals, taking time to eat meals together as a 'family', and teaching young people to cook. Some had gone even further and developed young people's skills in growing their own fruit and vegetables.
103. The homes visited had generally developed strong partnerships with local health services and drew on these to ensure that staff were trained in key health issues and could draw on professional support and advice when needed. This was a particularly strong feature in the short-break homes visited which were often responsible for caring for young people with very complex and, at times, life-limiting, health needs. The staff in these homes had consciously developed their knowledge and understanding of the specific health issues of the young people in their care through reading, attending seminars and undertaking research. In one home, for example, a member of staff was supported to develop her expertise in communicating with children with no oral communication skills and very limited mobility. Her research had led to the home's investment in new equipment which was enhancing the lives of the children. Staff in another home actively pursued treatment options for a child in their care which were not widely known about or available:

A child in one of the homes visited suffered from a severe life-threatening condition associated with epilepsy. The child, who had complex learning difficulties and behavioural problems, was subject to a full care order. The staff consistently went above and beyond the normal requirements of their role to care for the child. They stayed overnight with her when she was admitted to hospital and they developed a monitoring tool to indicate times when seizures occurred to help the medical team to determine the best treatment. When faced with very scant information from medical staff about the child's illness, staff at the home undertook their own research and successfully identified a centre for managing the condition. When the child was admitted for assessment, staff went with her and 'lived in' to comfort and support her.

104. The important role that members of staff played in developing young people's emotional resilience and self-confidence through their support, their time, and their willingness to listen has been described in a number of places in this report. However, it must also be recognised that, for many of the young people in these homes, their emotional and psychological needs were such that they needed therapeutic treatment from a child psychologist or another mental health professional. Much has been written, by Ofsted and others, about the variability in the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for looked after children.¹⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that this was an area in which partnership working was at times seen as difficult. However, the experience was varied.
105. Three of the homes visited said that they had good or even excellent relationships with CAMHS. One home, for example, pointed to the professional supervision offered by CAMHS to the staff team, in addition to the advice and support provided for individual young people. Conversely, two homes explained how difficult it was to establish strong partnerships with CAMHS, in one case citing the financial constraints under which local CAMHS services were working which precluded better access for young people. Some of the homes had acted to tackle this shortfall directly. For example, one home had decided to enter into its own service-level agreement with a CAMHS worker for the children in the home and supervision for staff so that access to support was guaranteed when it was needed. Another home had entered into a contractual relationship with a psychiatrist and clinical psychologist to carry out their internal assessments.

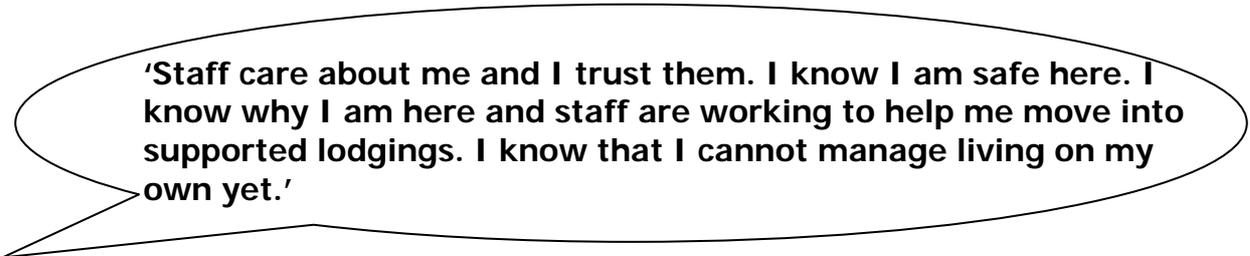
Preparing young people for independence

106. All the homes visited saw the preparation of young people to play a full and successful role in the adult world as an intrinsic part of their vision. These homes acted quickly to put clear pathway plans in place – many had already done so before the pathway plan was instigated by the placing local authority. Clearly, a lot of thought had gone into what young people might be ready for and what the options might be. In many of the homes, staff accompanied young people on visits to local colleges to help them decide on their next steps.
107. Three of the homes explained how the strong relationships formed with the Connexions services were helping to ensure that young people had the right support, advice and guidance they needed to make decisions about their future. In some homes, young people were given the chance to have work experience placements, for example in a local café, or encouraged to find full-time employment during the summer holidays. However, even in these outstanding homes, inspectors did not see strong evidence of strategic relationships being

¹⁴ *An evaluation of the provision of mental health services for looked after young people over the age of 16 accommodated in residential settings* (080260), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080260.

developed with local employers which might enable more challenging work experience to be offered or even lead to employment opportunities in the future.

108. A key focus for all the homes visited as part of this survey was developing young people's resilience and independent living skills. This was achieved both informally, through interaction with members of staff, or by engaging in activities which enabled young people to grow and develop. Staff and managers in some of the short-breaks homes visited emphasised the importance of undertaking activities with disabled young people which would have been difficult for parents to manage on their own and which really challenged parents' and young people's assumptions about what they could achieve. A short-break home spoke proudly about the fact that, to date, over 100 of their young people had been through the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme.
109. Tasks around the home were often used to help young people to develop the life skills they would need when they left care. For example, in addition to the emphasis on cooking and healthy eating, young people also often helped with laundry, cleaning or simple maintenance tasks which gave them the opportunity both to develop their skills and earn additional pocket money, something many of the young people welcomed. In some homes, the journey to independence was supported more formally. For example one home offering short breaks to young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities had established an activity-based transition programme for 16–18-year-olds which focused in a structured way on the skills needed for independent living.



'Staff care about me and I trust them. I know I am safe here. I know why I am here and staff are working to help me move into supported lodgings. I know that I cannot manage living on my own yet.'

110. In one of the homes visited young people were able to access an independent flat on the same site as the children's home, which could accommodate up to two young people. The young people were interviewed before moving into the flat and then lived in the flat with support but on the rate of benefits they would receive if they were unemployed in the community. This gave them a sense of the pressure they could face surviving on very little money and the importance of eating well and getting up on time. It also confirmed for them the need to do better through education or training. One young person gave a vivid testament to an inspector about how living in the flat had helped her to turn her life around.

'This home is about moving forward and looking to the future. The flat is a big part of this. It enables us to have a taste of independence with staff downstairs for support when you may need it.'

111. Other children's homes focused on preparing young people for the inevitable practicalities of embarking on adult life. Young people were taught about the need for a good night's sleep and how to cope with unexpected events such as large bills, shortage of money, or loss of a job. They were also taught practical skills, such as how to negotiate with suppliers of gas and electricity. The homes visited also play a major role in teaching young people budgeting skills. Inspectors saw good examples of budget sheets as a way of helping young people prepare for financial reality once they left the home.
112. Often the homes had a policy of maintaining contact with young people after they left. For many, this was simply informal and the young people were welcome to come back and visit the homes whenever they liked. Other homes had made more deliberate arrangements to keep supporting young people once they left. The staff in one home commented that they viewed any young person who had been at their home as part of 'their family' and continuing contact with the home was actively promoted. In another home, all the young people were given a mobile phone when they left in order to keep in touch with the home. There were also examples of young people returning to the home for Sunday lunch or to bring their laundry. Here the home was acting in the same way that parents might in continuing to support their children once they had left home.

A young person continued to receive support from the home after she had left to attend university. The young person lost the tenancy on her flat and then had a crisis during her first holiday at university because she could not stay at the halls of residence and had nowhere to go for Christmas. The home managed to get the young person affordable bed and breakfast accommodation nearby. She was supported by the home, able to stay for the Christmas period and the staff made sure she had presents to open. The young person kept in regular contact with the home.

113. There was much less evidence of homes being able to keep in touch formally with the progress that young people made after they moved on. The homes, for example, rarely knew what had happened to young people who chose not to make contact with them again and therefore they had no easy way of tracking the educational achievements or the employment of young people once they had left their care. One home, however, did ask the local authority for six-monthly updates. Many of the homes observed that they were aware that the provision available to young people once they left the home could be

poor and not appropriate for their needs. They felt there was significantly less opportunity for them to pursue their education or training post-19 and to continue on the pathways which had been established for them during their time in the home. This was a big disappointment to them. It was also particularly true of short-break homes. The staff in these homes felt that the options for disabled young people post-19 were very poor and that young people often had to wait for a number of months before a transfer could be organised for them after their 18th birthday.

114. Some of the children's homes had also reflected on the impact that young people leaving would have on the other young people in the home. They would encourage the young people to explore how they would feel, both before the young person left and after she or he had gone. A number of the homes mentioned the positive effect, on both the young person leaving and those left behind, of a leaving ceremony to mark their departure formally. One had even placed plaques in the garden as a way of recognising the young person's time in the home. Another home constructed a 'lifetime' booklet which detailed the young person's stay at the home, including photographs of the home and of staff members, and of the young person's participation in various activities. The booklet was given to the young person on departure.
115. All the homes found ways to make the young people feel part of a family, to recognise their time in the home and their achievements, and to provide them with the emotional security to move forward. The fact that many of the young people chose to maintain contact, often at significant occasions such as Christmas and birthdays, underlines the extent to which these homes had succeeded in developing meaningful relationships with the young people they had cared for.

Notes

Inspectors carried out visits to 12 children's homes during September and October 2010. Four of the homes provided care to children with a wide range of needs, three were specialist homes providing care for young people with specifically defined needs, and five provided either full-time care or short-breaks for severely disabled children or those with learning difficulties.

Wherever possible, inspectors spoke to managers, staff, young people and, in the case of homes offering short breaks, parents, to understand the key characteristics which underpinned both their success as children's homes and the consistency with which they had been able, over the past three years and in some cases longer, to maintain that success. In the homes where inspectors were not able to speak to young people, this was either because the severity of the young people's needs was such that verbal communication was not possible or because the children were not present at the home at the time of the inspector's visit.

Further information

Admission and discharge from secure accommodation (090228), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090228.

An evaluation of the provision of mental health services for looked after young people over the age of 16 accommodated in residential settings (080260), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080260.

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The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2009/10, HC 599, Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/annualreport0910.

The special educational needs and disability review: a statement is not enough (090221), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090221.

Annex A: Portraits of the homes visited

Home A is managed by a private company. It operates a service for up to five young men. The home provides a specialist service to young people who have a range of complex needs and who can present significant risks to themselves and others. Young people have exclusive access to a registered school that is also managed by the organisation. The home is located close to several town centres with public transport facilities and local amenities close by.

Home B is a resource centre for children with disabilities and their families, which is owned and managed by the local authority. The centre is registered for five young people, aged eight to 17 years, who have a learning and/or physical disability; many of the children also present challenging behaviour. The home is a two-storey detached house. It has its own minibus to enable good transport links with neighbouring towns and local facilities. There are five bedrooms on the first floor and several communal areas including a lounge, dining area, sensory room and large garden to the rear of the property. All local amenities are within easy reach of the home.

Home C is a local authority facility that offers short breaks for young people with a severe learning and physical disability and/or complex health needs, aged five to 18 years. The home has eight beds and comprises two separate living units. One unit is equipped to care for those young people who have physical disabilities, while the more able and active young people are cared for in the other unit.

Home D is a local authority children's home for eight young people, aged nine to 17 years. The home provides residential care to young people who have learning and/or physical disabilities. The home is a purpose-built detached bungalow in a residential area. It is less than a mile from the town centre and is three miles from a main town. There are two separate living areas within the home. Both areas contain four young people's bedrooms and a lounge. There is a dining area/kitchen in one part of the home, while the other has a dining area with access to the main house kitchen. There is an enclosed rear garden with a large play area. A sensory garden and sitting area are to the side of the house.

Home E provides care and accommodation for up to three young people, aged 11 to 17 years, in a provision managed by the local authority. The home strives to bring stability to the lives of children who have previously lived chaotic lifestyles. The home is semi-detached with an enclosed rear garden. On the ground floor there is a lounge, dining room, kitchen, quiet room and staff office/sleep-in room. On the first floor there are three bedrooms, and bathroom facilities. The home is situated within a residential area and is near to local shops. The home is close to local bus routes which provide easy access to the town centre with its larger shops and leisure facilities.

Home F is owned and operated by a private company. It is located in a rural area within close proximity to community services. The organisation also has similar services located in the area. The home accommodates a maximum of four young

people, aged 14 to 17 years, who have complex emotional, behavioural and educational difficulties. The home aims to provide medium- to long-term placements within a stable, caring environment for young people whose former care provision has become inappropriate.

Home G is operated by a local authority and provides a residential service for eight young people, aged seven to 18 years, and a short-break service for four young people, aged four to 18 years. The home additionally has an emergency bed in the short-breaks unit. All the young people have severe learning disabilities and challenging behaviours. This home is a large house that is divided into two designated areas to accommodate the two aspects of service provision. Both areas provide communal rooms, play areas, bedrooms and bathroom facilities. The home is in a rural area close to a large town. Local shopping and recreational amenities are also close by.

Home H is owned and managed by a local authority. The house is situated in a residential area. The town centre and its amenities, which include a cinema, sports centre, park and library, are a short bus ride away. One of the key objectives of the home is to provide individually tailored care plans to support and help prepare young people for moving on to semi-independent living. This is enhanced through the provision of a semi-independence flat which supports transitional plans for young people moving on. All young people are accommodated in single bedrooms and benefit from adequate living space and a large rear garden, which young people help to maintain.

Home I is a privately run home which can accommodate up to three children, aged five to 17 years. There is therapeutic input available and the aim of the home is to achieve permanency within a family. The children usually remain at the home for up to two years before they move on. The home was built in the 1950s and is a conventional four-bedroom house with a large rear garden. It is situated on a quiet residential road near to public transport and a few miles from the town centre. All local amenities are within easy reach.

Home J is managed by a private organisation. It is situated in an urban area of a city close to local transport and amenities. The organisation also has similar services located in the area. The setting supports and cares for one young person, aged 12 to 17 years, with complex emotional and behavioural difficulties. The unit specialises in the care of more vulnerable individuals who may be at risk or pose a specific risk to others and/or themselves. The organisation has a team of specialist practitioners who provide professional support and guidance for care staff and young people.

Home K is a purpose-built children's home which offers accommodation and care to six young people with differing needs and backgrounds. A borough council owns the house and provides the service. The home is situated close to a town centre. The home has a vehicle and is on a public transport route. Downstairs there are several rooms including a lounge, dining room, kitchen and games room. Bedrooms are located on the first floor.

Home L is operated by a private provider that has a number of other children's homes. The home is registered to care for up to seven young people, aged nine to 16 years. The home cares for children and young people with learning disabilities as well as residents with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The home is a large property set in its own gated grounds. Each young person has an individual bedroom with en-suite facilities. Many community resources are a short journey away from the home. Shops and supermarkets are accessible within the surrounding community.