

Social care commentary: creating the environment for excellence in residential practice

Over 80% of children's homes are judged good or outstanding, which is a good news story and good news for the children who live there. We want all homes to be good or outstanding. I know staff in the sector are keen to think how they can make their service and the experience and progress of children even better.

There's a question we want to better understand the answer to: 'What are the ingredients that lead to successful outcomes in residential care?'

To explore this, we looked at how a small sample of children's homes maintained their good or outstanding rating across inspections. We know the importance of good leadership in ensuring high standards and excellent care.

We are sharing our findings with you in this commentary.

How we investigated

We looked at children's homes that have been judged consistently good or outstanding for 5 years or more. All had kept the same manager in post. We gathered information on the common experiences of these managers to understand why they were so successful and what we could all learn from their experience.

The homes came from across [our 8 regions](#), were of varying size and catered for children with a broad range of needs. We sampled homes run by the local authority, and both private and voluntary providers.

We carried out 8 interviews in total, with registered managers and responsible individuals. I would like to thank our colleagues for their time and their insights into 'what works'.

We asked questions based on 4 main areas:

- what the home is trying to achieve
- what the key responsibilities of the manager are
- external support for the manager
- resources available to the manager

From this, we identified several common themes.

The statement of purpose

Every home is required to have a 'statement of purpose'. The content is set out in regulation and should include the needs of the children that the home

can care for and the ethos of the home.

In homes that are consistently successful, there is a strong sense of ownership of the home's statement of purpose by the registered manager and their staff team. They keep the statement of purpose up to date and it accurately reflects the purpose of, and service provided by, the home.

One manager told us that their staff team regularly reviews the statement of purpose to ensure that the whole team 'understands the vision and purpose of the home and how to make it work in practice'.

Managers told us that, even if the statement of purpose was based on an organisational template, they were able to adapt it to make sure it was relevant and specific for their home. Managers regarded the statement as 'theirs' and not something they had just to meet regulation.

Making good decisions about children coming into the home

We found that the admissions process in these homes is detailed and thorough and involves the registered manager throughout. Many managers told us they make the ultimate decision as to whether a child is admitted to the home. This leads to good or outstanding matching of children, promoting excellent experiences for them.

One manager makes extensive enquiries about the children referred to the home. She will contact the social worker obviously, but also, if the social worker is new, she will speak to the previous one, or a team manager and then anyone who knows the child. This means that the home can support the child and it leads to a smooth transition for the child on arrival.

Another manager who provides short breaks for disabled families set out her admission criteria. As demand for places at her home exceeds what she can provide, she looks for children who can benefit the most from the care provided.

All managers took a detailed and personal interest in the children coming to live or stay at their home. This means that children, often with very complex and multiple needs, are both matched and welcomed into these homes. Managers ensure that the appropriate support and resources are in place for the children and this leads to good outcomes. Managers and staff know what they can achieve for their children and are confident in their practice.

Visible leaders

In consistently good or outstanding homes, the registered manager (and often the responsible individual) are very visible to staff, other colleagues and, most importantly, the children.

They provide a very 'hands on' model of good practice. Managers frequently work in the home, spending time with children and the staff. They seek

regular feedback from children, staff and colleagues.

Managers regularly observe practice and provide constructive feedback to staff and take the opportunity to 'model' the practice they want. This gives staff confidence and reassurance that they were 'doing the right thing'. It also enables managers to identify poorer practice early and prevent it developing.

Continuing professional development

Managers and responsible individuals value their personal development. In the discussions, they were up to date with current practice and knew why they did what they do.

One manager said:

We never give up on a child and we are constantly finding ways to support children better

This includes talking to other professionals, reading latest research and trying different ways to engage children.

These managers were confident in their practice and not afraid to try something new just in case it might work for a child. They attend training, workshops, multi-agency meetings and carry out additional research to inform their practice. Learning is disseminated to all staff effectively. Teams discuss research and learning, developing and trying individual strategies to work with children.

High ambition for children and monitoring children's progress

Managers have a 'can do' attitude towards the potential achievements of all children.

One manager stated: 'disability is no block. We encourage and support children with all the opportunities and experiences they should have at their age.' Others went further and described setting ambitious challenges, such as recording a song at Abbey Road studios.

Managers and staff celebrate children's achievements and have high aspirations for all children. They use monitoring effectively to identify progress towards targets and what else needs to be done to support children to achieve.

All managers have monitoring systems that identify individual progress and achievement of children. Managers and staff use monitoring as a tool for reflection, examining what is working and what needs to change.

The systems they have are not necessarily complicated or high-tech. But what

was clear from our conversations was that managers knew the children well enough to be able to articulate the progress each child made and how this had been achieved.

Budget holders

Managers in these homes are delegated budget holders, although the levels of responsibility vary. Some have responsibility for the smaller costs within the home, including direct spending with children, while others have responsibility for most costs. This appears, perhaps not surprisingly, to be dependent on the size of the organisation.

With a wider budget oversight, managers can plan with confidence their staffing costs and how much can be spent on each child.

Managers can respond quickly when a situation arises, for example an impromptu celebration or the need to buy in additional resources to support a child with their education.

Managers were not reliant on asking each week or month for additional monies or, worse still, not actually knowing how much money they have at their disposal on a weekly basis.

Support for the staff team

A common feature of these managers was that they clearly identify staff as their most valuable asset and therefore there is a desire to support them as well as they possibly can. They recognise that, without an experienced, skilled and confident staff team, they cannot carry out their role effectively.

The importance of recruitment and retention featured strongly throughout the interviews. Managers spoke of the need to employ highly committed and/or experienced (including life-experienced) staff. Some recruitment strategies included the use of graduate trainee programmes, advertising abroad and offering more flexibility in working patterns. Most managers said that they would rather invest in a thorough and often time-consuming recruitment process and attract the right staff, than deal with poor staff through a weaker process.

Managers describe their staff as passionate, dedicated, committed, diverse and risk-takers. They provide regular, effective supervision that both supports and challenges staff. Team meetings are a forum for sharing good practice as well as providing training and learning opportunities for staff.

Both e-learning and face-to-face training are provided. But in these homes, most managers stated that they need to discuss any e-learning training as a team in order to share learning and get the most from the experience.

Staff receive debriefs after any incidents to identify learning and good practice. Staff are supported to understand their emotions and feelings. Managers value the importance of staff resilience and well-being and identify

the key role they have as managers in ensuring that staff are supported.

Managers were aware of the dilemmas of developing good staff and the risk that this then equips them with the opportunity to leave and gain employment elsewhere. What managers aimed for was a team of staff who were skilled and experienced but supported and valued so well that they would choose to stay. One manager referred to Richard Branson's quote as her mantra: 'Train people well enough so they can leave; treat them well enough so they don't want to'.

Leadership journey

Nearly all the managers said that they had worked their way 'through the ranks' in residential care, often with the same provider and sometimes even within the same home. Others, with different managerial experience, said that the quality of the induction process was important when they became a residential home manager. Managers said that this meant that they knew what it was like to be a care worker, working longer hours sometimes in difficult situations. However, they also knew what success looked like when a child who did not appear to be making any progress suddenly did something amazing, like go to school following a period of refusal.

One manager said that she knew they had turned a corner when, in asking a child if they had enjoyed their weekend, the child asked her the same question: the first time he had shown any interest in something else other than himself. It takes a skilled leader and practitioner to recognise that small progress. These are leaders who know what good practice looks like.

Support for the registered manager

Support for registered managers is an important theme. Support does not just come from their managerial supervisor, but from their peers, the independent visitor and other professionals.

Most commented on the role of Ofsted and that inspection helps the manager and the home improve. Inspection offers recognition of effective practice. These providers did not fear Ofsted and were confident enough in the quality of their service to know that they were doing a good job and all we did was confirm that.

Summary

We hope you find the information from these good and outstanding homes useful for your own practice.