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# Children's homes that make the grade

Despite Ofsted's feared new inspection regime and a tough economic climate, children's homes are mostly improving. **Judy Cooper** reports on the effect of inspections on outcomes

There are a lot of eyes watching Ofsted's move to inspect outcomes in children's social care instead of the more process-driven inspections of the past. This is the first year when the results of such inspections have been included in Ofsted's annual report, published this week.

Children's homes, one of the first sectors to make the switch, have been inspected under the new regime since April this year.

The move wasn't without controversy. Following initial pilots, many providers claimed the new framework would make it difficult to achieve anything more than a satisfactory rating. In the current climate

when councils are trying to commission only good or outstanding rated homes this could have been disastrous for many.

However, the overall results from the first six months seem to show that the new framework has made little difference to the overall rankings. As of August 2011, 21% of children's homes were rated outstanding (compared with 14% in September 2010), 56% were rated good (compared with 52%), 21% were satisfactory (compared with 23%) and 2% inadequate compared with 5%.

Ofsted's director for social care, John Goldup, agrees: "The overall profile of judgements hasn't shifted in any significant way as the result of the change. What has changed is the nature and quality of reporting. The reports now show a much stronger picture of what it's like to live in these homes. That's important because it's a key source of information that commissioners are relying on when they place children."

However, he says once they have a full year of inspections under their belts they do intend to review the framework. "One of the questions we need to reflect on and judge is what difference a change in methodology has made and if the framework is tough enough?"

"I'm confident we are now starting to ask the right questions but are we being sufficiently challenging? We'll be discussing this

#### ↓ 'IMPORTANT TO RECOGNISE THE TRIGGERS FOR ANXIETY'

**Rachel Redgwell, head of care, Calcot Services for Children; rated outstanding by Ofsted**

"We work closely with schools and social workers and our own staff to make sure everyone is giving consistent messages. This is important because many of our children and young people have been out of the education system for quite some time and are very resistant to it, engaging in very challenging behaviour to try to avoid it.

Every child has a long-term goal which we discuss with them – where do they want to be in 10 years? What do they want to do with their lives? Their goals should be nothing less than what we would want for children not in care.

But we also recognise that going to school for these children can be very stressful. We try to identify those triggers of anxiety and provide support. We also have a reward system so they have a short-term as well as long-term motivation to cope with the stress.

We have to judge the risks and sometimes it takes a few months until they might be ready to go back to school. If they really aren't able to go back then we find them off-site alternatives such as mechanic courses, hair and beauty courses for example."

**Melissa Duncan, 19 (pictured, right)**

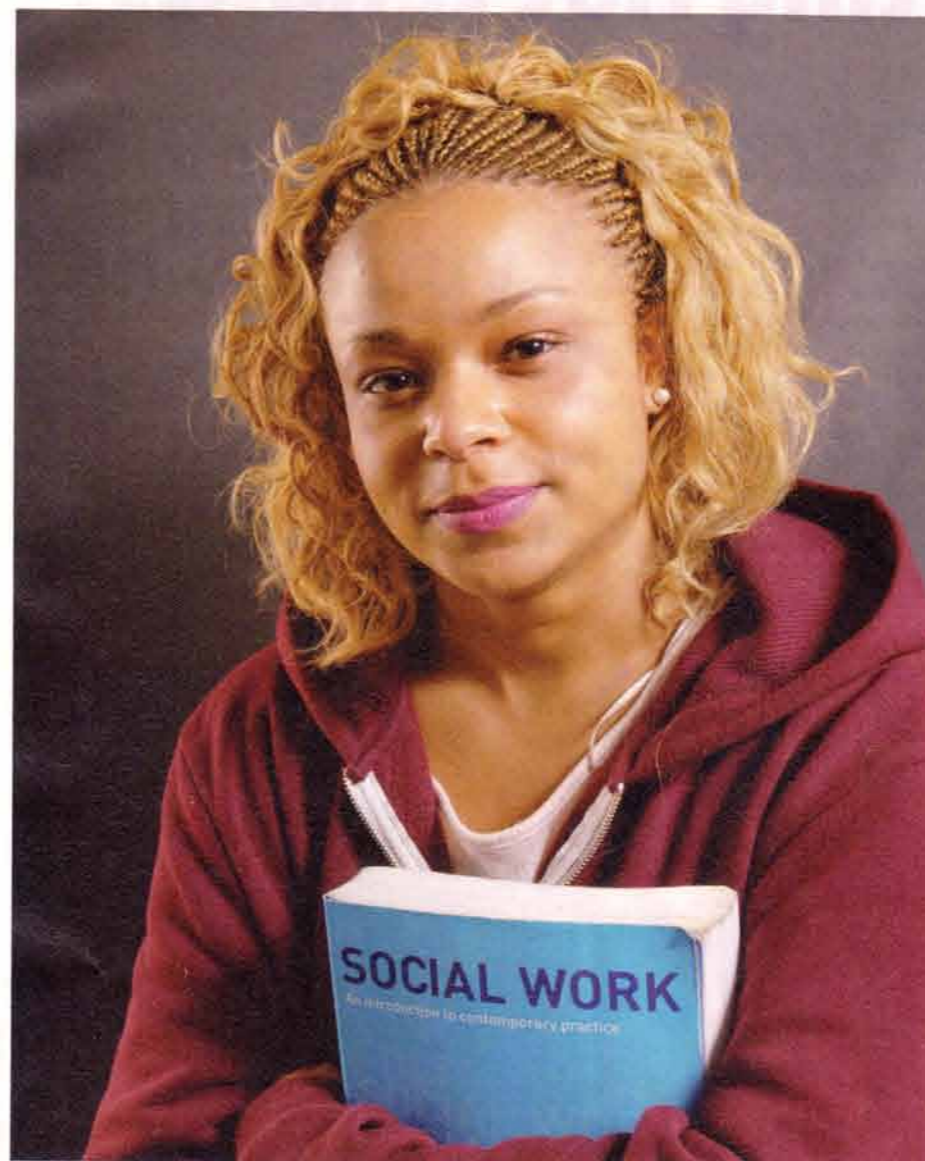
"I was 13 when I first arrived and I couldn't believe I'd actually ended up in a children's home. I'd been in and out of school and my attendance had been pretty poor because of some of the stuff going on at home.

I was pretty resistant to the idea and rebelled a lot, but the routine and the structure of The Dingles (a Calcot children's home) was actually good for me. It was pretty scary going to school again.

I didn't know whether to tell my friends that I was in a children's home or not. But after every meal at the home we would all sit down together and just chat about any issues we were having and I really enjoyed that. You felt everyone was there to support each other.

The staff and one of my teachers at school really encouraged me in my education. After a while I started feeling that I wanted to make it work and prove to my family that I could be successful.

I'm now in my second year at university studying to be a social worker. I wanted to give something back because The Dingles really helped me."



Melissa Duncan: Her children's home rescued her schooling through staff support and encouragement

with providers and with the sector because we need to make sure this framework is robust enough."

The themes coming out of the analysis of the inspections in this year's annual report do appear to have a far more child-focused flavour compared with last year.

For example, the report highlights a common factor linking outstanding children's homes is the systems they put into action as soon as a child goes missing.

"It's not just about good partnerships with the police, although it is phenomenally important," says Goldup. "It's about keeping the focus on the child's wellbeing. So not only do outstanding homes focus on finding the child, but once the child has returned

they find out what is driving the behaviour in the first place and try to reduce those triggers.

"It's about hearing the voice of the child and understanding that children don't speak with words but through behaviour. Workers need to understand that as well as the risks attached to such behaviour, such as sexual exploitation in the case of missing children. This is what is really a hallmark of high quality residential care."

Another finding, this time not so positive, is around the education of looked-after children. Only 11% of the 327 homes providing on-site schooling were deemed to provide inadequate education. This compares with national statistics showing only 2% of

### FURTHER INFORMATION

**Title** Guide to developing and maintaining resilience in residential child care  
**Author** Judith Furnivall, consultancy manager, Centre for Excellence for Looked-after Children (CELCIS), University of Strathclyde

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schools across England are inadequate.

Poor education provision was not necessarily linked to poor care by the home and a significant number of those homes providing inadequate education were owned by just three providers.

"This is an issue of concern and a very challenging finding," Goldup admits. "Not because of what it looks like in terms of schooling league tables but because one critical determinant of life chances for a child in care is education."

He points out that, although the number of looked after children attaining five GCSEs or more has doubled over the past four years, this is from a very low base and the gap between children in care and their peers in educational attainment is widening.

But he shies away from claiming the sector is prioritising care over the education of children, pointing out that, across the board, there is some very good practice in place around education for children in residential care. "Children in residential care are the most damaged children in our society," he says. "So it is vitally important they get outstanding education provision because their early experiences will have already put them at a disadvantage."

Overall, though, Goldup points out that children's homes are improving. More than one-fifth of homes are now considered outstanding compared with just 6% in 2007 when inspections began. Not only that but the number of children's homes is rising, with an extra 110 registered now than at 31 August 2008. Most of these new registrations were providing either outstanding or good provision on their first inspection.

Goldup points out this is a very encouraging finding given the current economic climate and attempts by councils to reduce their use of residential care.