

I give five stars to saint Sue

THE needy and vulnerable are always top of my list when it comes to helping those who write to me each week.

Among all the touching letters there are many tales of sheer injustice that make my blood boil.

But none more so than heart-rending proof from poor pensioners trapped in squalid, rip-off private nursing homes.

So today I'm highlighting a campaign that aims to flush out the cruel bosses who make a mint out of the old, frail and helpless, and make stars out of the homes that really care.

Sue Brand, herself the boss of two nursing homes, has masterminded a scheme to give homes hotel style star ratings, from two star for the most basic to five star for the best.

Filthy

It's a brilliant plan and is already being tested in Blackpool and Brighton. It also has the backing of Health Minister John Hutton and could go nationwide.

'It will take a lot of the anguish and risk out of choosing a home for an elderly relative,' said Sue. 'And it will drive the bad places out of business.' Like those where residents are beaten and starved by heartless staff and left to rot in filthy conditions.

'The star ratings will help protect these people and give them the quality of life they deserve,' added Sue.

John Dyson agrees wholeheartedly. He is one of 32 residents at the five-star rated Cleveleys Nursing and Convalescent home, on the outskirts of Blackpool.

John, 62, said: The stars swung it for my daughter, Margaret, who shopped around after I came out of hospital with chronic asthma.

'Everything is superb here and I can't wish for a better place to live in.'

Private homes in test areas Blackpool and Brighton wanting to join the scheme are assessed on 350 care standards, each marked out of 10.

They are then graded on facilities, food and management after stringent checks by experienced independent inspectors.

Only then are they given a Residential and Domiciliary Benchmarking (RDB) Star Rating. Now thirty other local authorities are monitoring how Sue's system works. They showed an interest in her scheme after Health Minister John Hutton promised more funding for care homes that get a star rating.

'I've been involved in nursing for 30 years and know there are a lot of vulnerable people out there,' said Sue, 53.

Thelma Madeley, 89, is a very satisfied resident at Sue's own three-star Pembroke Hotel for the Retired in Hove, East Sussex.

She told me: 'I once worked as a carer at a so-called nursing home, which was ghastly. The sheets were always wet and the food was dreadful. It was terrible.'

There are still places like that, but the star ratings should wipe out these awful homes once and for all.

I'll second that. And if you want to find out more about Sue's campaign, call RDB Star Rating on 01273 411 811.