

Inspection report for The Star Children's Centre

Local authority	Stockton-on-Tees
Inspection number	365863
Inspection dates	31 January – 1 February 2011
Reporting inspector	Michael Glickman

Centre governance	Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Centre leader	Glenis Charlton
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	None
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	The Star Children's Centre Crèche EY277966 Newtown Crèche EY300118

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with centre managers and staff, representatives of the local authority, health services, other partner organisations, members of the advisory board and parents and carers.

They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

The Star Children's Centre is located at the northern end of Stockton-on-Tees town centre and covers the wards of Town Centre and Newtown. The area served by the centre has a high percentage of poor quality housing and most of it is within the 30% most deprived category on the index of multiple deprivation. In the area, 47.5% of children live in households where no-one is working. Although most families are of White British heritage, there is a significant population from different minority ethnic groups and the centre also serves the local refugee and asylum seeker community. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with knowledge and skills generally below that expected for their age.

The centre consists of a purpose-built single storey building with an outside play area. There is a satellite centre at Newtown, two miles away, from which activities are also delivered. This has dedicated rooms within a community resource centre based in a former school. Both centres have crèches attached.

The Star is one of two children's centres in the central area of Stockton. Staff work across both centres, with management and administration being located at The Star, while home visitors are based at the other centre. The centre opened in 2004 and is a phase one centre, delivering the full core offer, including health and education services. Governance of the centre is provided by the local authority and there is an advisory board in place which includes parent representation.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

The centre's capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management

2

Main findings

The Star Children's Centre provides a good service to the children and families who live in its area. The centre is warm and welcoming and staff are committed and enthusiastic about their work. Leaders and managers have a clear sense of purpose. They are aware of the centre's strengths and of where further development is possible and are able to inspire the staff with their vision. This means that the centre has a good capacity for sustained improvement.

The centre works effectively with its partners. The local health authority has been involved in the centre since its opening and, in fact, was consulted over its design. Midwives hold antenatal clinics within the centre and health visitors conduct baby clinics there. Jobcentre Plus also uses the premises for mandatory interviews. This results in the centre being a true 'one stop shop' where parents and carers can access a range of services in their local area. Good relationships have been built up with local schools and some activities are now being delivered from school premises in order to introduce parents to the services that the children's centre can provide. This has resulted in more parents accessing the centre.

The centre staff know their local area well and provide a range of activities tailored to its requirements. The centre also promotes equality and diversity well. Because of the sizeable refugee and asylum seeker community within the area that the centre serves, they provide a group specifically for this community at which they receive relevant advice and guidance as well as health care. This has resulted in parents going on to English language classes, as well as becoming better integrated into the community.

Parents are fulsome in their praise for the centre, particularly for the quality of information, advice and guidance and adult learning provided. They say that they are 'always made to feel very welcome' and describe the support they receive from the centre as 'absolutely fantastic'. The centre has an impressive record of supporting parents into education, training and employment and is rightly proud of parents who,

through accessing childcare and training, are now studying at university. Members of minority ethnic communities have been assisted to access training and employment, including posts within the centre itself.

The centre has an active and ambitious fathers' group, 'Dad's Army', which is run by the fathers themselves. This brings fathers and children together fortnightly for a range of events which develop the children's social skills as well as being explicitly linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. Members come from a wide range of ages, ethnic groups and social backgrounds. Fathers emotionally describe how they feel that they have improved as parents through the mutual support the group provides.

Parents say that they feel safe in the centre. All staff have received child protection training and there are clear procedures in place to ensure that children using the centre are safe. The local authority has recently implemented the Common Assessment Framework process for identifying the needs of families who require support and the home visiting staff are enthusiastic about the benefits of the procedure.

The local authority has introduced a sophisticated database which allows detailed analysis of children's centre attendances. However, this is still in the early stages of implementation and it is currently not possible for the centre to obtain all the data which it requires in order to show accurately how its services are making a difference to the lives of parents and children. Although it is beginning to work with local schools to monitor the progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage of children who have attended the centre, it will be a number of years before sufficient data is available. Currently, local headteachers feel that the centre does make a difference, but there is no statistical evidence for this.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Further develop data collection and analysis to enable accurate interpretation at centre level
- Continue to work with school partners to track the progress and achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage of children who have accessed services provided by the centre

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Children are encouraged to have healthy lifestyles by the displays about healthy food around the centre. Programmes such as Mini Movers encourage exercise while Tiny Teeth promotes oral health. Taste and Make introduces families to a range of healthy food choices and Dad's Army sessions end with a formal meal at which the children have an opportunity to sample a range of healthy foods. The health and well-being of new babies is assisted by a targeted antenatal programme entitled Ready 4 Baby,

which includes smoking cessation and healthy living, as well as home and fire safety.

The safety of children is a priority at the centre. Physical security begins with every visitor being greeted by customer care staff and asked to sign in and the crèche and staff areas are protected by electronic locks. The café area has been designed to allow parents to enjoy hot drinks while their children play safely nearby. A home safety coordinator who works across all children's centres makes home visits to assess risks and help families keep their children safe at home. The coordinator can arrange for free or cost price safety equipment to be fitted. The centre supplies free lockable medicine cabinets to families who need them.

Children who are judged to be at risk of harm are identified by home visitors or referred by other agencies and the centre has begun to employ the Common Assessment Framework process to build a support package individually tailored to the family's needs. The centre identifies those children who are looked after by the local authority or who have a child protection plan and they are tracked to ensure that their needs are being met.

The centre encourages families who have low self-esteem to attend adult learning sessions where they learn new skills and rebuild their confidence. The inspirational information, advice and guidance worker challenges users to develop themselves. She supports them all along the way, from the initial introduction to the basic skills tutor through to helping them with job applications and even accompanying them to interviews. Progress in adult learning and parenting skills is recognised by the award of certificates and many parents have gone on to employment or voluntary work, some within the centre itself.

The focus on encouraging parents to develop new skills extends to the parents' forum, 'Stars Together'. Facilitated by the information, advice and guidance worker, this not only gives parents a voice in the running of the centre but enables them to develop the confidence and skills to chair meetings, take minutes and voice their opinions. Parents also work towards qualifications which will allow them to work within the centre. In addition, it offers them the opportunity, as one put it, 'to sit with other adults – to be yourself.'

The centre works well to promote children's development. Children are well supported by staff and play happily with the wide range of equipment inside the crèche and in the outdoor area. Parents report that their children are 'really coming out' since they started attending the crèche. The Tiny Treasures group encourages babies to socialise and at Dads' Army older children not only learn new skills such as gardening but also have an opportunity to practise their social skills at the meal which ends each session.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre managers are aware of the needs of families in the area through considerable experience backed up by the knowledge gained by the home visiting team and relationships with schools and partner agencies. All activities are evaluated and parents are involved in planning through Stars Together and Dad's Army as well as via a suggestion board. Suggestions are answered on the same board so that parents feel that the centre is responsive to their needs.

The home visiting team are key to the centre's outreach work. The home visitors are clear that their biggest challenge is engaging parents who have had negative experiences with other agencies and they work hard to gain their trust. They join the midwives at antenatal clinics so that they become, as they put it, 'a friendly face' and they continue to follow up new mothers after the baby is born, offering support with breast-feeding and weaning and activities such as baby massage or parenting courses. Each home visitor links to one of the local primary schools where they run programmes, meet with mothers and promote children's centre services. In one local school, they worked with children to produce a giant star lantern for the annual lantern parade. They are also active in engaging with the local minority ethnic communities and have applied to join the Stockton Residents Association to develop contacts with the various community and faith groups represented there.

Information, advice and guidance is key to much of the success of the centre and the adviser holds regular sessions, with crèche places available to enable parents to relax while they work through a computer program that analyses their skills and suggests appropriate careers. She also runs outreach sessions in the local library. Because the Jobcentre Plus adviser conducts interviews at the centre, he can refer clients directly for advice and guidance. Experience has shown him that referrals made in this way are far more likely to be effective than those made from Jobcentre premises.

The centre offers a range of basic skills courses as well as parenting programmes and signposts parents to further and higher education. Users were quick to comment on how the adult learning courses developed their confidence and helped them back into employment or training, as well as enabling them to help their children at school. They complimented the skills of the tutors who teach classes with a wide range of abilities while maintaining a friendly and informal atmosphere. They were appreciative, too, of the social side of the courses and of the emotional benefits of 'using their brains'. Adult learning programmes are timetabled to suit the requirements of parents while childcare is provided in the crèche. Parents were clear that they would not have been able to attend courses without these arrangements.

The children's centre teacher oversees and monitors the planning of activities in the crèche and in play sessions to ensure that they help children towards the Early Years Foundation Stage learning objectives. At parenting programmes, parents are shown how they can play with their children and encourage their physical and emotional development. Stay and Play sessions and the Olive Branch drop-in allow staff to set an example for parents in helping children learn and develop.

Where necessary, the centre provides its services in innovative ways to meet the needs of the community. For example, the Mini Movers session in the Newtown satellite site takes place later in the afternoon because parents express a preference for an activity after school. At The Star, health clinics take place in a local church because parents are reluctant to cross a main road to the centre itself.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Staff have high regard for the children's centre manager and rightly so, as she is clearly focussed on ensuring the success of the centre. She knows the local area well and can accurately identify both the strengths and weakness of the provision. She has produced detailed action plans to cover all areas of the centre's work and progress in meeting them is closely monitored. In particular, she is well aware that, while there is considerable qualitative data to indicate the impact that the centre is making in the

form of case studies, evaluations and records, there is little quantitative data that can be broken down to local level. This has correctly been identified as a priority area for development.

Staff understand the management structure and know where they fit into it. They are aware of their responsibilities and have regular supervision sessions with their line managers. The centre has identified the training courses relevant to each job role and monitors staff training to ensure that all staff are appropriately trained.

Within the local authority structure, children's centres fall under children, education and social care. This ensures that the children's centre works closely with social services when it is necessary to act to support a family. Until recently, the health service manager also worked within the local authority and close links to health are still maintained.

The centre has an active advisory board comprised of volunteers from the local authority and community together with parent representatives. They bring a range of talents to the running of the centre, for example, they have arranged for leaflets and flyers to be professionally designed. The parents' forum aims to provide parents with the skills which will empower them to take an active part in the running of the centre. They are currently preparing a plan for making the front entrance to the centre more welcoming. Both the advisory board and the parents' forum are confident that their ideas and suggestions are welcomed by the centre management. The centre provides good value for money.

The centre has robust child protection procedures. Staff have received appropriate training and are aware of their responsibilities. The centre maintains a single central register of staff checks which complies with regulations. Through joint working with health and social services as well as with other agencies, home visitors are able to identify families in need of support and to prepare and implement suitable support plans. With the introduction of the Common Assessment Framework, this process will be simplified and staff expressed eagerness to begin using it.

The centre works effectively to promote equality and diversity. Wall displays celebrate festivals of different religions and the use of multilingual signs ensures that speakers of other languages feel welcome. Where necessary, the centre has access to interpreting services. Families who attend the Olive Branch group for refugee and asylum seekers are encouraged to use other centre facilities and members of minority ethnic communities participate in adult education and Dad's Army, among other activities.

Although there are no specific activities for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities in the centre, these are provided at the other central area children's centre, and parents from The Star access them there. The Star does, however, offer parenting programmes for parents of children with special educational needs and the attached crèche caters well for their children during the course.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	2

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

Inspection of private nursery which shares premises with The Star (not yet published).

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected The Star Children's Centre on 31 January – 1 February 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

During our inspection, we spoke with many of you as well as to the centre manager and staff and to some of the professionals from health and Jobcentre Plus who work in the centre. Please accept our thanks for your help and cooperation.

You spoke highly of The Star and its staff and told us how you feel the centre has made a real difference to your lives and the lives of your children. We know that the centre has helped many of you through training and careers advice and has supported you to go into further education or employment or into volunteering. You also told us that the centre has helped you improve your parenting skills and that your children have benefited from the crèche and from mixing with other children.

You told us that you feel safe in The Star and we know that the home visitors are working out in the community together with other professionals to support you and your families. The centre is able to provide safety equipment for your home free of charge or at low cost and they can offer lockable medicine cabinets free.

We know that The Star is trying to help you and your families to lead healthier lives. There are a range of programmes to encourage your children to exercise and you have opportunities to try out healthy recipes and sample healthy food. You can even come into the centre for your midwife and health visitor appointments.

We were particularly impressed by the way that people from different cultures and backgrounds come together in The Star and how everyone is made to feel welcome, regardless of their language, religion or nationality. We were also impressed by Dads' Army and how the fathers have created such an active and ambitious group which helps both dads and children to grow and develop.

The headteachers of the local primary schools say that they can see the difference that attending the children's centre makes to the children who come into their schools. However, at the moment, neither The Star nor the schools can prove how big a difference the centre makes, so one of our recommendations is that they gather figures which will show how well the children are doing when they enter school.

We know that the centre takes your views and opinions into account, from Stars Together and the advisory group, from the suggestion board and from the evaluation sheets that you complete at the end of an activity. We learned from you and from the centre records that The Star is being successful, but at the moment they do not have the figures to prove it, so our other recommendation is that The Star looks closely at the data that it gathers and uses it to prove how well it is doing.

Once again, many thanks for your help during the inspection. It was a pleasure meeting you all and we wish you every success in the future.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.