

Inspection report for Spalding Children's Centre

Local authority	Lincolnshire
Inspection number	384101
Inspection dates	3–4 May 2012
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	St Paul's Community Primary and Nursery School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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.

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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 one additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the practice supervisor, staff, parents and representatives from the local authority, the partnership board and partner organisations.

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

Information about the centre

Spalding Children's Centre is a phase two children's centre which was designated in March 2008 and became fully operational in December 2009. It is located on the site of St Paul's Community Primary and Nursery School, but there is no formal partnership arrangement with the school. The centre is housed in purpose-built accommodation, which comprises a small community room, a small meeting room, a small kitchen, an outdoor play area, a consulting room for midwives and health visitors and two small offices. A few activities take place at outreach centres, such as the Lighthouse Church and the Youth Centre in Spalding.

The centre is managed by the local authority. It is one of a cluster of four children's centres in South Holland, a government district in the south east of Lincolnshire. A practice supervisor is responsible for the running of all four centres, which are overseen by a partnership board which meets once a term. The local authority employs a children's centre teacher and ten family support workers to work across all four centres. At the time of the inspection, four support workers had just been appointed. The only member of staff who is permanently based at the centre is the full-time receptionist.

The centre fulfils its core purpose by commissioning a range of services for parents and children from a range of partners, such as Citizens Advice and the Pre-School

Learning Alliance. The latter employs six early years workers and an outreach worker for fathers to provide early learning activities and courses and services for parents across all four children’s centres. Through its arrangements with the primary care trust, health visitors and midwives run drop-in clinics at the centre. Crèche facilities are provided when needed to enable parents to attend courses, but the centre does not provide full- or part-time childcare services.

The centre serves a very large, mixed catchment area, centred around the town of Spalding, but reaching out into many rural communities situated some distance away. It caters for just under 2,400 children, far more than all except one of the other 48 children’s centres in Lincolnshire. The level of unemployment and the proportion of families that are dependent on workless benefits vary across the reach area but, overall, are just below the national average. However, much of the employment is in low-paid, low-skilled jobs in agriculture or food-processing industries. There is a high level of unemployment in the St Paul’s locality in which the centre is situated.

A very large majority of families in the area are White British. There is also a sizeable group of families from Eastern Europe, some of whom are migrant workers, although exact numbers are not known. Evidence indicates that the skills and knowledge with which children enter the local Early Years Foundation Stage settings are below those expected for their age.

The practice supervisor took over the running of the four children’s centres in South Holland in September 2011. The local authority is intending to appoint a children’s centre practitioner to provide additional management support for her in the near future.

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 families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The quality of the services which the centre provides is good, as is the impact they have on the relatively small number of families who access them. The centre’s overall effectiveness, however, is only satisfactory as it has yet to engage many families

within its area. The centre places high priority on meeting the needs of families whose circumstances make them vulnerable but, until recently, has offered very few universal services to introduce families to the wider work of the centre. The centre's effectiveness is significantly limited by its resources and the size of its accommodation which also limits its potential to become a hub for families living within the area. The practice supervisor and staff divide their time and attention between four children's centres which makes it difficult for them to get to know families other than those who have been referred for specific reasons.

The centre has, however, seen remarkable change over the last eight months. The practice supervisor has a clear vision of what she would like to achieve and how the centre could have a really positive impact within the community. She has introduced new initiatives, and relationships with the centre's partners have improved immeasurably. Partners are now enthusiastic about working with the centre, and links with the co-located primary school are blossoming. Staff feel that their contributions to the centre are valued and find their work much more fulfilling than before. Capacity for sustaining these improvements, however, is only satisfactory as the practice supervisor is unable to meet the many leadership demands on her own while running three other centres. The local authority provides the expected annual review of services but has been slow to recognise the constraints on the centre's effectiveness. The partnership board only meets once a term, has to divide its attention between the needs of four different centres and has yet to provide a great deal of challenge or strategic support for the practice supervisor. The centre's self-evaluation draws on the experience and knowledge of the practice supervisor to highlight relevant needs within the community and details actions to meet these needs. However, lack of time and the facility to analyse available data have prevented a more detailed analysis of the area's needs and the formulation of a longer-term development plan with clearly expressed, measurable targets.

Outcomes for families are satisfactory. Most of those who access the centre make good progress in developing healthier lifestyles and improving their parenting skills, but there are many families who have yet to discover what the centre might have to offer or for whom no relevant services are provided. Two of the most successful aspects of the centre are the services provided for expectant mothers and those who have recently given birth, and for those who have been referred to the centre with specific needs. Good safeguarding arrangements, the good-quality care, guidance and support provided by family support workers, and the work of some commissioned partners, such as Home-Start, ensure that the outcomes for keeping children safe, identifying their welfare concerns and taking appropriate steps to address them are good.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The local authority should work with the centre and provide greater support to help overcome the constraints which limit the effectiveness of the centre by exploring ways to:
 - provide additional leadership and management support for the practice supervisor
 - overcome the restrictions imposed by the centre's accommodation and help the centre find alternative venues for activities
 - ensure that the centre has adequate staffing and/or funding to commission services to meet the full range of needs within the area.

- The centre should engage with more families within the reach area by:
 - ensuring that all families within the reach area are aware of what the centre has to offer
 - registering a much higher proportion of families with the centre and keeping them informed of its activities
 - ensuring that the range of activities provides equal opportunity for all families to benefit from its services.

- The partnership board should play a greater role in:
 - helping the practice supervisor determine the centre's strategic direction
 - evaluating the centre's effectiveness against clearly defined, measurable targets
 - providing challenge and holding the centre to account.

- The practice supervisor should work with her staff to produce a more detailed self-evaluation and development plan which take full account of available data and set clearly defined, measurable targets.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

The impact which the centre has on improving outcomes for families across the whole of its reach area is limited because many are either unaware of or have no contact with the centre. Only 43% of the families living within the area are registered with the centre, and only 8% attended any form of activity in the first three months of this year. This indicates that there are many families who are not benefiting from the centre's services. For example, only 24% of lone parents are registered with the centre. Just under 5% of those from minority ethnic groups and 1% of fathers engage in any form of activity at the centre. Key performance indicators for the area vary but are broadly average. The proportions of mothers initiating and sustaining breastfeeding are close to the national average. The proportion of Reception-aged children who are obese is below average. Outcomes for children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage vary, but for those living in the immediate vicinity of the centre are below average.

The centre undoubtedly has a positive impact on outcomes for those families who attend clinics, courses and activities. Midwives and health visitors provide helpful advice at clinics held at the centre. Those who attend cookery classes say they have helped them to provide a much healthier diet for their families. Parents say that parenting courses have helped them to improve relationships and manage their children's behaviour at home. Some report dramatic changes in their home environment as a result of the support they have received. Partner organisations such as Relate and Citizens Advice have helped families to improve their economic stability. Data from the neighbouring school show that children who have attended the centre are further ahead at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage than those who have had no contact with the centre.

Because much of the centre's work has focused on meeting the needs of vulnerable families, the centre has had the biggest impact on keeping children safe and ensuring their welfare. Visits from family support workers and the support provided by Home-Start have helped families to deal with difficult situations, and have given them the confidence to address issues and provide a safer home environment. One parent, for example, who said, 'I had never left the house and was really anxious,' received on-going support which enabled her to confront her difficulties so that she could then say, 'I have never looked back.' The centre uses the Common Assessment Framework well. The centre's intervention and support have prevented escalation of difficulties, thus avoiding the need for children to be placed on the child protection register, and have improved circumstances so that children have been removed from the register.

The centre takes parents' views into consideration when making decisions about future activities. However, parents' contribution to the formal decision-making process and governance of the centre has been limited. A few parents have attended partnership board meetings, but these have yet to have a major impact on the governance of the centre. As with many other aspects of the centre's work, new developments are in the pipeline. For example, plans have been agreed for a parents' forum to give parents a greater voice in the running of the centre.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
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 children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and	3

parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	
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How good is the provision?

3

Although the quality of the centre's services is good, provision is no better than satisfactory because the centre is unable to meet the needs of all families in the area. The centre runs activities for specific groups every day, but the limitations of the accommodation restrict the number of participants and make it impossible to run more than one activity at a time. As a result, there is a waiting list for some groups. With its current staffing level, the centre does not have the resources to organise many activities in outreach centres.

The centre has been at its most effective in meeting the needs of specific groups and in dealing with families who have been referred to it by various partners and agencies. The quality of care, guidance and support provided by the family support workers and commissioned services is good. One parent said, 'They have helped me no end.' Another said, 'The centre has been an absolute lifeline for me.' The needs of those who are referred to the centre are assessed effectively and the Team Around the Child process is used to determine the most appropriate support to provide. Supervision sessions are held regularly to assess the effectiveness of the support.

The centre has been dependent on its partners to refer families and encourage them to register. The system for registration is now working smoothly, but this has not been the case in the past. The centre, therefore, lacks information about many families in the area and has not had the capacity to analyse its data to identify how effectively it is meeting the needs of the community. Although health visitors use their initial visits to mothers to inform them about the centre, there is no capacity for staff to carry out follow-up visits. One parent said she felt excluded because the centre seemed to focus its attention on target groups. Some families living in rural locations do not know what the centre has to offer. There is currently no provision to assist those who are out of work back into employment or to provide learning opportunities for those from minority ethnic backgrounds. The practice supervisor is well aware of these gaps. On the second day of the inspection, the centre ran its first 'Stay and Play' session to attract families to the centre, and an external provider has been commissioned to run literacy, numeracy and personal skills courses.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Staff indicate that the day-to-day management of the centre has improved markedly over the last eight months. Staff are clear about the roles they have been assigned and feel well supported. Governance arrangements are clear but, beyond its annual review of the centre's performance, there has been little support from the local authority to help the centre to become more effective in reaching the large number of families who live within the reach area. The current arrangements for the partnership board limit its effectiveness in providing support and challenge for the centre. The practice supervisor has a good understanding of the challenges facing the centre. She has high ambitions to make it more effective, but these have yet to be translated into a detailed evaluation of the centre's effectiveness or clearly expressed, measurable targets.

Although the centre makes effective use of the resources available to it, value for money is no better than satisfactory because these resources are not sufficient to meet the needs of all families within the reach area. This factor also limits the effectiveness with which the centre promotes equality and diversity. Families with the greatest need and those in particular target groups are served well, but systems for registering families and collecting data about the reach area have not been sufficiently well developed to ensure that the centre identifies all who could benefit from its services. The centre provides a weekly session for disabled children and those with additional needs, but few avail themselves of the service.

In many respects, the centre's partnership arrangements are good. Service level agreements are clear and there is productive dialogue to ensure that services meet the needs of families for which they have been commissioned. However, a number of partnerships have only recently been established and have yet to show how effective they are in helping the centre to meet its core purpose. The centre is now working in collaboration with the neighbouring school to facilitate family learning sessions. However, productive relationships with the 13 other schools in the reach area have yet to be established, although the first steps have been taken to rectify this.

Safeguarding arrangements are good. The centre ensures that all staff and partners have had the necessary checks to assure their suitability to work with children. Procedures to ensure the safety of staff are sensible and fully understood. The centre prioritises helping families where children's safety is at risk or domestic violence occurs. There is good cooperation with other agencies to improve the emotional health and well-being of families.

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	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3

The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	3
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	3

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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Spalding Children's Centre on 3–4 May 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We enjoyed our visit to your children's centre and would like to thank those of you who gave your time to speak to us and tell us your experiences of using the centre. Your views have helped inform us of how well the centre is doing. In addition to talking to as many parents as we could, we spent time talking with the staff at the centre, representatives from the local authority and with the centre's partners. We observed the activities which took place at the centre while we were there.

We found that the quality of the centre's services, safeguarding arrangements and the care, guidance and support provided by the staff are good. However, only a small proportion of families access the centre's services and the range of services provided is not sufficient to meet the needs of all families living in the area. As a result, we have judged the overall provision and the impact this has on your families' lives to be satisfactory.

We spoke to a number of you who said that the centre has had a dramatic impact on your lives. For some, the centre has helped you to lead healthier lifestyles by making you aware of how to provide a healthier diet and nutritious meals for your families. For others, the centre has helped you to develop better parenting skills or to improve relationships within the family. Others have really valued the advice and guidance on how to access benefits or deal with difficult problems. Because the centre takes very seriously any requests for help, it is good at providing the support needed to keep you and your children safe. Visits from the family support workers are much appreciated, as is the input from organisations such as Relate, Home-Start and Citizens Advice. Many of you said you learn a lot from the courses which the centre provides, such as 'Baby Peep' and 'Middle Peep'. Some, however, expressed a little frustration that there are waiting lists for some courses. The centre's working relationship with midwives and health visitors is particularly good. We found that you appreciate the convenience of attending clinics at the centre and that you are more likely to attend them because of this.

The practice supervisor has brought many improvements to the centre since she arrived in September 2011. Relationships with various partners who provide services at the centre have improved dramatically. Staff appreciate the clearer sense of direction and feel that their contribution to the centre is valued. A whole range of new courses has just started, including the centre's first 'Stay and Play' session which took place during the inspection. However, the small size of the accommodation limits the range of services which the centre can provide, and there is nothing yet on offer for families who live in the more rural areas covered by the centre. Staff, and especially the practice supervisor, also find it hard to meet all of the needs in and around Spalding as they have to divide their time between the four children's centres in the South Holland area. We have asked the local authority to provide more support to help the centre overcome these problems. We have also asked the partnership board to play a greater role in helping the practice supervisor determine the priorities for the centre and to help her evaluate how successful the centre has been in meeting the needs of the community and achieving its targets. Above all, we would like the centre to engage with more families within its catchment area. Currently, less than half of the families in the area are registered with the centre and only 8% engage with any form of activity provided by the centre. To help the centre become more effective in improving outcomes for all families, we have asked the practice supervisor to produce a more detailed evaluation of what the centre does and to use all the data at her disposal to ensure the centre identifies areas of need and serves as many families as possible.

Some of you who spoke to us said that you were reluctant at first to attend the centre. However, you found the reception you received at the centre to be friendly and welcoming and you really enjoyed attending. We hope that the actions that the centre will take will open up the centre to many more people and that it will become a real hub for families within the Spalding area.

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