

Inspection report for Stepping Stones Children's Centre

Local authority	Rotherham
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Crags Community School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY332198 Stepping Stones Children's Centre

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 of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with parents, the centre manager and staff, representatives of the local authority, partner agencies, the school governing body and the advisory board.

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

Information about the centre

Stepping Stones Children's Centre, which evolved from a Sure Start local programme, was designated as a phase one centre in 2006. The centre's purpose-built premises are situated on the high street of the mining town of Maltby, in east Rotherham. The reach area has recently been expanded to cover the whole of the Maltby Learning Community catchment area and now includes Hellaby, Ravenfield and Ravenfield Common. There are 1320 children aged under five in the extended reach area, an increase of almost 20% compared with the original reach area.

Although the coal mine is still operating, it provides little local employment. The majority of families in the reach area live in the 30% most disadvantaged areas in the country, with 12% living in the 5% most deprived area. The percentage of children under five living in families that are dependent on workless benefits is around 28%. The area has a high rate of teenage conceptions with 43 teenage parents in the reach area. There is also a high incidence of domestic violence and substance misuse. Families in the community are predominantly of White British heritage.

The centre offers on-site health provision, information services, play and learning sessions and targeted support for families whose circumstances make them vulnerable. The Early Years Foundation Stage is delivered across a range of settings in the reach area including

childminders, six private and voluntary settings and six schools. When children enter early years provision many have skills, knowledge and abilities at or below those expected for their age. On-site childcare and early education for children aged two years and over is provided by the centre's own nursery, Stepping Stones Children's Centre, for up to 44 children at any one time. The childcare of Stepping Stones Children's Centre was separately inspected in February 2011 and a report for this inspection can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk

In September 2010 the governing body of the new Craggs Community School assumed responsibility for the governance of the children's centre on behalf of the local authority. The school's headteacher is also manager of the children's centre.

The centre has experienced a number of changes over the last two years with health professionals moving to new premises, a redesign of the centre's premises and changes to the childcare provision. Over the last twelve months a number of staff have required long-term absence related to medical conditions. Three of the twelve staff employed directly by the centre (excluding the daycare provision) were absent at the time of the inspection.

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

'This centre has changed my life and that of my child' and 'I don't know what I'd do without the centre now' were thoughts expressed by parents demonstrating the positive difference the centre makes to families, particularly those whose circumstances may make them vulnerable.

Users feel safe and confident when visiting the centre as it provides a welcoming, friendly environment for everyone. Good partnership working and effective systems for assessing families' needs have a positive impact on outcomes for children, including looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan. Partners and staff intervene early to support families and, as a result, the centre helps to reduce the number of children deemed in need.

The centre offers a wide range of activities providing good learning opportunities for parents and children. Two-year-olds with a funded nursery place make impressive gains in their speech and language skills and parents report how their behaviour has improved. These achievements are exemplified in the good level of development achieved by two thirds of children at the end of the Early Years Foundations Stage, an increase of 12% in one year. The 'achievement gap' is now well below the national average as a result of well-targeted, early interventions.

Staff know families who use the centre well and are very responsive to their needs, adapting services and signposting users to services to meet these needs. Families say staff spend time listening to them and supporting them, particularly when they are experiencing a crisis or need specific help, like dealing with tenancy arrangements or attending appointments. Particular success has been achieved in enabling adults with learning difficulties to develop consistent parenting skills.

The centre regularly seeks the views of those using the centre and, through consultation events at local supermarkets, explores the needs of the community. Feedback is meaningfully used to shape services and evaluate the effectiveness of provision. Services and activities are well matched to the needs of the community and participation rates by most target groups of families are good and improving.

Staff have remained resilient during the many changes affecting the centre and, despite reduced resources, continue to offer high-quality services. Their energies have been rightly focused on activities to support those who need their help most. Strategies are in place to recruit staff and extend sessions into other parts of the reach area to improve overall participation rates.

Under the ambitious leadership of the senior team the centre has improved markedly over the last two years. Leaders and managers have instilled a clear vision for the centre and are accurate in their self-evaluation of the centre's strengths and weaknesses. Challenging targets for user engagement set by the local authority have helped increase the involvement of specific, targeted groups and the number of activities delivered in support of each outcome is monitored in detail. However, until recently, data related to the centre's impact on outcomes have not been available to enable the staff to set specific and measurable targets for the future.

The experience and expertise of the centre's senior leadership team has ensured that most outcomes are good and improving strongly. The centre has not benefited from the same level of strategic expertise from health partners. In addition, the centre is unable to demonstrate the impact of its work with partner agencies to help parents access training and develop employability skills, as it does not track the outcomes of this work. Nevertheless, the centre has the ability and determination to continue improving based on what it has accomplished so far and demonstrates good capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve outcomes by using the expertise of health partners to develop a more strategic approach to promoting health.
- Evaluate and monitor the impact of the centre's work with partner agencies to improve economic well-being.
- Implement strategies to increase the overall percentage of families in the reach area using children's centre services.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The centre promotes healthy lifestyles through a wide range of activities and supports users' emotional health well through baby massage sessions and well-being courses. 'Boogy Babies' and buggy walks, led by local footballers, increase parents' understanding of the importance of physical exercise. Teenage parents attending a 'Cook and Eat' course reported that, three months later, they continued to reduce their use of salt and sugar in meals. Despite these initiatives, obesity levels of five-year-olds are above the national average, and observations at the centre indicate that not all families have adopted a healthy approach to their diet. Breastfeeding is strongly encouraged through the use of 'peer supporters'. Although an additional 7% of babies are breastfed at six to eight weeks compared with last year, the number overall remains low at 20% and a 'bottle-feeding culture' still pervades. Those who smoke in pregnancy are automatically referred to cessation clinics, but the number of mothers smoking at birth is still high at 39%.

Staff have a good understanding of child protection procedures. The well-trained family support team are knowledgeable about the wider safeguarding agenda and are particularly effective in identifying potential risks, referring to other agencies quickly when necessary. Through 'Safety Days', home-safety assessments and first aid courses parents are developing a good understanding of how to keep themselves and their families safe. Their raised awareness ensures they feel confident to deal with emergencies, like choking, and take precautions to prevent injuries occurring around the home. Emergency hospital admissions because of accidents and non-accidental injuries are low.

Children and parents enjoy playing and learning together. Following children's uninhibited exploration of paint and cornflour with all parts of their body, one parent commented: 'Messy play was just that. We needed a change of clothes but the fun we had was well worth it.' Children, including those identified as needing additional support, make good progress in their personal, social and emotional development. They behave well and are confident in forming relationships with adults and other children. Parenting courses effectively help parents to manage their children's behaviour, and books and toys, specifically tailored to each child's level of development, creatively extend learning into the home.

Parents make a valuable contribution to the centre. They participate well in decision making through representation on the advisory board. An active parent group contributes well-informed suggestions to improve services and the introduction of chairs in the foyer demonstrates the successful outcome of their fundraising activities. Parent volunteers effectively support the centre's work by assisting at sessions, such as those offering peer support to disabled children and their families. Their efforts have been mutually beneficial, as a number of former volunteers have successfully used their additional experience and skills to gain employment.

The centre supports families to improve their lives by helping them access funding to purchase household appliances and develop their home environment. An innovative partnership with a voluntary organisation provides surplus food to families in need, enabling them to try new fruit and vegetables without cost to the family budget. Citizen's Advice Bureau appointments, which are well attended, help families to secure additional benefits and manage finances better. Family learning opportunities develop adults' confidence in their ability to learn. Case studies and personal testimonies show some learners have gained accredited qualifications in numeracy and literacy and a few have progressed to further education or employment. However, the centre is unable to demonstrate clearly the impact of these initiatives, as information about the number of parents benefiting from the services of partner agencies is not routinely gathered.

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	2
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	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.	3

How good is the provision?

2

A supportive partnership with local midwives enables centre staff to conduct pre- and post-birth visits, resulting in almost all children being registered from birth. Parents are then introduced to the centre's services, needs are sensitively assessed and good relationships are built at an early stage. Families' needs are reviewed effectively at frequent multi-agency

meetings through skilful use of initial assessment and Common Assessment Framework processes. The knowledge of staff from many agencies working locally with the centre ensures families are referred to services that can support them most effectively.

Attendance rates at most sessions are high and the numbers of families from target groups, including families from minority ethnic groups, teenage parents and workless households accessing centre services, are good. Saturday sessions are popular with working parents, while imaginative sessions such as 'Rowdy Robots' encourage involvement of fathers. Staff recognise the need to extend activities to other venues to increase the number of families overall using the centre's services.

Sessions, such as '0 – Walkers', promote purposeful play well as they are planned under the skilful guidance of the lead teacher. Her expertise is used to equally good effect to support quality improvements in private and voluntary provision. Adults attending courses receive certificates to celebrate their achievements. A child development course, offered following parents' requests, helps them understand their children better. Parents are keen to engage in further learning and encourage others to accompany them. Parents enjoy opportunities to extend their children's learning in 'Riddles and Rhymes' sessions, making songbooks to use at home. Children's progress is rigorously tracked. This enables early identification of children requiring additional support, for example from speech and language specialists. Individual education plans are in place while children are still at nursery. Well-developed arrangements ensure smooth transition when children start school.

Good-quality care, guidance and support help to improve outcomes for families. Parents state that the centre has enabled them to make friends and develop their confidence and self-esteem. Good-quality information is on display at the centre, like useful information about domestic violence and the dangers of substance misuse. Many parents say they had used the centre's leaflets when looking for help with parenting concerns, such as sleep routines or to stop their children from biting.

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	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups.	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Governance arrangements are well established, with clear understanding of responsibility and accountability at all levels. The day-to-day management of the centre is efficient and good mutual support exists between staff and managers. A shared passion to improve the

life chances of all children and families in the area is evident. The centre's development plan contains challenging targets and carefully considered actions to engage all groups, as this is a high priority for the centre. Accurate self-evaluation is underpinned by a good understanding of the reach area, systematic reflection of practice and regular reviews by senior leaders. Scrutiny of the available data and parental feedback result in reshaping of services to address emerging priorities and ensure the centre continues to meet the needs of local families. Managers are aware that the next step is to ensure that there is additional focus on more rigorous monitoring of the centre's impact on health and economic well-being outcomes. Currently, there is not yet a strategic focus on health outcomes and the impact of partner agencies' work on improving the economic well-being of families is not fully monitored.

Inclusion and equality of opportunity for all families lies at the heart of the centre's mission. Staff work diligently to remove barriers and enable families to access the activities and services on offer and to meet any identified needs. They offer childcare for those attending courses and provide interpreters for the few families whose first language is not English. The nursery meets the needs of disabled children well, liaising with other agencies to ensure consistency of approach.

Safeguarding is given a high priority with policies and procedures regularly reviewed to ensure the safety and protection of everyone using the centre. Recruitment procedures are robust and the supervision of staff includes reviews of safeguarding caseloads. Premises, activities and outings are thoroughly assessed to identify and minimise risk.

The centre provides good value for money as it makes efficient use of its available resources. The centre's premises have been redesigned to ensure best use of space and users' evaluations indicate high levels of satisfaction. Collaborative working is well established and centre staff are proactive in sharing information with key partners. Good relationships have been fostered with community agencies such as those offering play therapy sessions, which effectively extend the centre's work.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secures improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
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.	2

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

The Ofsted reports on local schools and childcare providers were scrutinised to provide contextual information.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Stepping Stones Children's Centre on 29 February and 01 March 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We were pleased to spend time at the centre looking at its work and talking to some of you who were in the centre during the inspection. We also spoke with the staff and other professionals who work with you.

We heard how much the centre has helped you, particularly when you face difficult circumstances. Parents we spoke to told us that the centre had changed theirs and their children's lives because of the good-quality care, guidance and support they had received. The centre is a safe and welcoming place where you enjoy coming to meet friends and join in activities. We found that staff work very effectively together with a wide range of other agencies to find out about those of you who might be in difficulties. This helps them act quickly to take actions to make things better for you and your family. This helps to keep you and your children safe.

Those of you who have attended the parenting and child development courses now understand your children's behaviour better. Through courses such as 'Riddles and Rhymes' you learn more about how to support your children's learning at home, and we saw how keen you are to use the 'home-learning' packs with your children. The two-year-old children who are provided with places in the nursery are making very good progress and you told us

how you had seen improvements in their talking and that their behaviour at home was much better as a result. This helps children when they start school and many more children in this area now achieve a good level of development when they are assessed at the age of six.

The centre staff team is only small but it works very effectively under the ambitious centre leader who is very clear about what the priorities for the centre are. The staff know the families they work with very well and this helps them to offer services and activities which are most helpful to you. You are also good at telling the centre what you need from them and how satisfied you are with the sessions you attend. The staff use this information well to help offer additional services, such as first aid courses and 'Cook and Eat' sessions which you say are helping you keep your children safe and well fed. Many of you told us how useful you find the food scheme on offer in the centre. We were impressed with the way this helps many of your children to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. However, we did see that some of you do not help your children to eat healthily all the time.

It was good to learn that some of you volunteer and that parents' views are well represented on the advisory board. The Community Involvement Group has done a great job in providing suggestions about how to improve services and in raising money to buy additional resources for the centre.

There are a few areas where we think the centre can improve. We have asked staff to work with their health partners to look at what can be done to improve the health of families in the area overall. Many of you still smoke when your babies are born and only a small number of you breastfeed your babies until they are at least six to eight weeks old. There are also more obese children in this area than in other areas.

For those in crisis, the centre can provide very practical help in accessing grants to buy furniture and household goods. A few of you told us how you had enjoyed the courses you attended so much that you had progressed to gaining accredited qualifications in numeracy and literacy. However, the centre could not explain clearly how many of you are being helped as it does not gather this information from the other agencies. This means it cannot plan effectively what other activities and services would help you to improve your financial stability.

The staff are aware of how well they are supporting you and what still needs to be done but do not have clear targets against which to measure their success. We have asked that they set these targets when they are planning their work so they can see how successful they have been.

The area the centre covers has recently been extended and the centre manager is very aware that, because of a reduced number of staff, it has not been possible to provide services in other venues apart from the centre and for families individually. There are plans to offer these additional services and we have asked the centre to make sure these increase the number of families who benefit from children's centre services from across the whole of the area.

Thank you very much for your welcome and for taking the time to talk with us. We thoroughly enjoyed talking to you and sharing your experiences. We wish you every success in the future.

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