

# Inspection report for Exeter Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Northamptonshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	365779
<b>Inspection dates</b>	23–24 February 2012
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Kath Beck

<b>Centre leader</b>	Geraldine Lewendon
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not applicable
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<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	Exeter Primary School
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	Little Rainbows EY332046

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.

An inspection of the co-located/partner primary school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector. Inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, consultant headteacher, Chair of the Governing Body, children's centre teacher, outreach workers, parents and carers using the service. They also met with representatives of the local authority, key partners and steering group. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

Exeter Children's Centre, a phase two centre, is part of Exeter Primary School. It serves the Exeter estate, Oakley Vale, Stanion Village, Little Stanion, Weldon Village, and parts of the town centre. Deprivation levels vary from the highest 10% to 30% in the country. The local authority has delegated responsibility for the leadership and management of the centre to the governing body and headteacher of the school. In the absence of the substantive headteacher, it is led temporarily by a consultant headteacher, and managed on a part-time basis by a separate children's centre manager. The advisory board, known as the steering group, includes representatives from the school's governing body and parents. The centre, designated with the full core offer in March 2010, provides childcare, family support, child and family health, job and benefits advice. The school and centre share some of the accommodation and staff. Services are commissioned or delivered by employees of the centre.

Outreach services are provided in Weldon and Oakley Vale primary schools, Stanion Pre-school Playgroup and Eden Park sheltered accommodation for teenage parents. The number of lone and workless families on benefits is well above the national average. Families come mostly from White British and Eastern European backgrounds. They live in social housing and private homes. Children's skills,

knowledge and abilities are well below those expected for their age when they first start in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Little Rainbows private nursery provides respite care for the centre. It is inspected separately.

**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**

**4**

### **Capacity for sustained improvement**

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

**4**

### **Main findings**

Exeter Children’s Centre is inadequate. Disruption to the leadership and management of the centre over the past two years means responsibilities for governance and accountability have not been fully understood and implemented. There are few links between the collection and analysis of data, strategic planning, development planning and provision. Targets for improvement lack ambition and developments are not measured robustly. Checks to ensure value for money lack rigour. Self-evaluation is not supported by secure evidence of the impact of the centre’s provision on outcomes for families. It does not give those in charge a sharp enough understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision to ensure continuous improvement. Those responsible have not asked sufficiently challenging questions of senior managers to improve provision and outcomes for all target groups. Consequently, outcomes, especially those for achieving and enjoyment, and economic and social well-being are inadequate. The centre’s capacity to improve is inadequate.

Since taking up her post, the current manager has ensured the centre meets its core offer. She has checked that staff are fully aware of their role to safeguard the children; raised the profile of the centre in the community; and identified some priority groups for support. Together with Eden Park, the centre has successfully engaged a significant number of teenage and young parents. Sessions have raised their expectations and improved their educational development, health and welfare. Provision for families with English as an additional language was increased, but it has been reduced recently due to the long-term absence of bi-lingual staff and the subsequent postponed courses to help parents to learn to speak English. The threshold of access, set by the commissioned service, excluded many needy people in the community. The level of family engagement is limited particularly those from workless households, lone parents and groups whose circumstances have made them hard to reach. The centre does not know precisely where these groups reside and has been insufficiently proactive in engaging them. It relies heavily on referrals

from the health visitors or midwife. These factors undermine its efforts to promote equal opportunities.

Although the centre provides families with access to the Citizens Advice Bureau and Jobcentre services, too few parents are improving their economic stability. The centre has insufficient data to show that it is reducing the percentage of children aged from birth to four years living in households dependent on workless benefits or eligible for the childcare elements of the Working Tax Credit.

There are appropriate opportunities for parents and children to play and have fun together in the centre and through provision in the surrounding villages. Young children in the childcare groups observed during the inspection, made satisfactory progress. That said, the centre is unable to demonstrate accurately the rate at which it has reduced over time the gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the Early Years Foundation Stage and other children of this age.

## What does the centre need to do to improve further?

### Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve leadership and management to ensure that:
  - responsibilities for governance, accountability and day-to-day management of the centre are fully understood
  - evaluation is accurate and used to set and monitor ambitious, measurable targets that secure improvement in outcomes
  - the centre narrows the achievement gap, especially for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- Increase the level of engagement by families from workless households, lone parents, fathers and hard to reach groups.
- Provide sharply focused activities and opportunities that enable families across all target groups to improve their economic well-being.
- Together with the local authority:
  - collect and use accurate data to show the impact of the centre's provision on outcomes for families in the local community
  - provide courses for those who are speakers of other languages to learn English.

## How good are outcomes for families?

<b>4</b>
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Children behave well in the centre as there is always an adult on hand to play with them. Parents say they feel secure and safe there. Safety is promoted through risk assessments for activities and excursions. First aid courses, parenting courses, and home safety visits help to minimise the risk of injury. Data show that the centre is beginning to have a small impact on the reduction in the number of visits made to accident and emergency by families in the area.

A substantial part of the centre's current work provides parents with the skills to resolve problems, overcome depression and reduce domestic violence. Together with parenting courses, the centre promotes positive relationships within families and between parent and child. 'Stay and play' activities in the outlying villages, and for those who speak English as an additional language, help to reduce the sense of isolation. Partnerships with other professionals are beginning to provide a cohesive approach to children subject to child protection plans or the Common Assessment Framework. Little Rainbows provides good quality respite care for families in times of difficulty. One parent wrote, 'My child developed confidence, and good quality social and communication skills, while in respite care. I couldn't have done without it.'

'Big cook, little cook' is a popular course promoting healthy lifestyles and enables parents and children to enjoy a meal they have cooked together. There is little to indicate how this provision influences lives away from the centre. Health visitors and midwives encourage breastfeeding and there is some evidence, though not entirely accurate, that an increasing number of mothers initiate and sustain breastfeeding at six to eight weeks. The 'What is life?' course for 12 to 19 year-olds, supported by volunteer young parents, is proving successful in promoting sexual health, safety and the prevention of at least one teenage pregnancy.

Children involved in well-planned activities alongside their parents, in the crèche or respite care, enjoy their learning. The services of a speech therapist, commissioned by the centre, enables families to access the help they need. In addition, a focus on developing communication skills through speech and signing is helping children to communicate more effectively. Other activities that help children to understand the nature of different shapes and to count are shared with families so they can support their children at home. 'Learning journals' have been established and staff now record young children's achievements and their level of development. The effectiveness of this provision on improving the outcomes for children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is not monitored rigorously enough. Recent data show that the gap between the lowest achieving children and others in this age group is widening.

Some parents attending the centre develop relevant aptitudes to achieve their personal learning goals and gain relevant qualifications. Others find it hard to sustain regular attendance and this means they do not improve their skills and personal development well enough. They do not become involved sufficiently in accredited or non-accredited courses. Opportunities to enhance achievements for those who speak English as an additional language are restricted. Representatives of the Citizens Advice Bureau attend sessions and give individual advice to families about ways in which economic well-being can be enhanced. Jobcentre Plus carries out statutory interviews for families in receipt of benefits in the centre. Limited evidence shows that some families are reducing their debt burden, but generally, the provision to enhance financial independence is limited. These commissioned services did not know how many families had been helped to return to work.

Parents are involved in making decisions about activities in the centre. Timings of

sessions have been changed to accommodate family routines. A support group for families with children who are disabled or who have special educational needs has been established at their request. While parents on the steering group contribute their ideas, they have too little information to challenge its overall effectiveness.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

<b>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>4</b>

### **How good is the provision?**

<b>4</b>
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The range of services and activities does not serve the interests of all target groups. The centre lacks the assessment information it requires to ensure that services take full account of the needs of workless households, fathers, lone families and those who are harder to reach. Access to services for those who live at a distance from the centre is limited, and there is little provision currently for those whose first language is not English. The majority of sessions are universal and those that are targeted are not always well-attended.

Parenting, first aid, cookery and 'stay and play' sessions are of good quality. Trips out and local fun days broaden social experiences for adults and children. Except for teenage and young parents, programmes of work are not negotiated sufficiently to reflect users' individual abilities and aspirations. There are not enough sharply focused activities to enable families across all target groups to learn about budgeting and enhance their economic well-being. A current project to reduce child poverty is focusing on enabling mothers to overcome depression. This is intended to restore their confidence and prepare them to return to work and to contribute financially to the household. The effectiveness of this programme has yet to be established. Achievements, when courses are completed, and qualifications gained, are celebrated with awards ceremonies.

Care, guidance and support for those using the centre are satisfactory. Parents spoken to during the inspection spoke highly of the individual and personal support

provided by the centre and the outreach workers in times of crisis. The provision of respite care gave them the chance to resolve their problems and make positive changes to their lives. Some spoke movingly of the help they received to overcome alcoholism, reduce the risk of harm to their child and help them become healthy, and independent. The information, advice and guidance the centre provided encouraged 11 parents to volunteer within the centre's activities, one of whom has followed a clear developmental path and returned to work.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>3</b>

### **How effective are the leadership and management?**

**4**

Since her appointment, the current centre manager has developed a shared sense of purpose among the staff team to improve the lives of families in the community. Initially, the centre focused on 'stay and play' activities, but now provides the full core offer. It has developed effective key partnerships with a range of professionals to support staff in their work and the centre in its overall provision.

The steering group and those who hold the centre to account are unable to demonstrate that services are effective and that public funds are used efficiently. This is because roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability lack clarity. Self-evaluation procedures do not include rigorous monitoring, contributions from all services or the analysis of data. Nor do they include sufficient systematic checks on progress in the objectives set out in the centre's development plan. Consequently, the identification of long-term challenging targets is weak and the centre is not improving at a fast enough rate.

The centre makes appropriate arrangements for safeguarding families. Along with its partner agencies, it ensures that staff and volunteers undergo Criminal Records Bureau checks and participate regularly in child protection training. They know the action to take should they notice symptoms of abuse. Outreach workers are trained to keep safe when working alone and to protect vulnerable children and adults. Child protection plans and assessments carried out under the Common Assessment Framework, including those for children with a disability or special educational needs, enable staff to work closely with specific agencies to reduce the risk of harm. The centre is proactive in promoting safety in the home through a variety of courses and through intensive support to reduce domestic violence.

Staff tackle discrimination robustly. Information printed in different languages



enables those who do not speak English as their first language to access information. The centre listens to the views of those attending to shape its programme, but does not currently encourage enough families from across the community to engage with its services. Systems for identifying the needs of target groups, and monitoring the impact of the provision for them, are too imprecise to show whether or not the achievement gap for the most disadvantaged is being narrowed.

The centre is open for 50 weeks of the year. Shared accommodation and staffing are deployed appropriately, although their quality is variable. The management of resources is not having a consistent impact on outcomes for families. The centre's value for money is inadequate.

These are the grades for leadership and management

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>4</b>

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

The inspection of Exeter Primary School was used to inform the judgements made during this inspection. The school was inspected on 22 and 23 February 2012 and its overall effectiveness was judged inadequate.

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](http://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](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

## Summary for centre users

We inspected the Exeter Children's Centre on 23–24 February 2012. We judged the centre as inadequate overall.

Thank you for meeting with us and for your contribution to the inspection. You told us that the centre is important to you and that the staff always give you a warm welcome. You mentioned that staff have listened to your views by changing the times of some of the sessions so that they fit around your children's routines. You also said the centre provided a support group, at your request, for those families who have children with a disability or special educational needs.

The centre manager and staff are ensuring that you have access to childcare, family support, child and family health, job and benefits advice. They are keeping you safe in the centre and helping you to keep your children safe at home and when you are out on trips. More families in the area are using the centre as they become aware of its existence and the help it can provide. Many of you are young or teenage parents and you know the good work the centre has done in partnership with Eden Park to help you to become independent. Some of you have become keen volunteers in the centre. The amount of help for families who speak English as an additional language has reduced recently. Currently there are no bilingual staff at the centre. The courses to help you to learn English have been cancelled because the service providing them has made it too difficult for some of you to attend.

The centre is helping those who visit regularly. Most of you are referred to the centre by the midwife or the health visitors as they know that help and advice is needed when there is a new baby in the house. However, the centre is not taking enough action to attract others who may need advice about their children, benefits, jobs, or how to gain qualifications, and are not referred by the health services.

You may not be aware that the governing body and headteacher of the school have the main responsibility for ensuring that the centre meets your needs. A lot of changes have taken place recently. Currently the governing body and centre manager are working with a consultant headteacher to run the school and centre. They know they have to make important improvements to ensure that the centre supports as many families as possible in its area.

We have asked those responsible for the centre to make sure that the local authority, representatives of the governing body, steering group, and the centre manager are very clear about their particular roles and responsibilities. In doing so, they must check that the services you are offered are really helping you to change your lives and improve your financial situation. They must also ensure that many more people, including fathers, in the area use the centre. It is important that they make sure that the childcare and the advice they give you, about supporting your child at home, is helping children to do better in their assessments at age five.

To bring about the necessary improvements, we have asked the centre and the local authority to collect and use accurate numerical information about local needs. This is so that they can set ambitious and relevant targets to reach more people and improve their lives, too. In addition, leaders and managers must ensure there is adequate provision to meet the needs of those who speak English as an additional language.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).