

# Inspection report for First Steps Children's Centre

Local authority	Lancashire
Inspection number	362478
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Reporting inspector	Gillian Bishop HMI

Centre governance	Lancashire County Council
Centre leader	Alan Johnstone
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	St Thomas the Martyr Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Bright Beginnings Neighbourhood Nursery

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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Early Years Inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the senior leadership team; a representative from the local authority; representatives from the advisory board and health services; frontline workers; representatives from local schools and day care providers; and parents and other users of the centre's facilities.

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

## Information about the centre

First Steps Children's Centre is located in the Tanhouse area of Skelmersdale Newtown. Skelmersdale is a town suffering much social and economic deprivation and it serves a community that is ranked within the top 30% of the most deprived areas in the country. The proportion of young people not in employment, education or training in Lancashire increased in 2009 and 2010 but the figures vary widely across the county. Most children enter childcare and early education with a narrower range of skills and abilities than that expected for their age.

First Steps Children's Centre developed from a Sure Start Local Programme and gained full designation in 2006. A multi-agency team, which includes health visitors, outreach workers, speech and language therapists and Job Centre plus, provide services from the children's centre but most are not co-located on the centre's site. The majority of the population within the centre's reach area are of a White British heritage. However, in recent years, there have been a number of Eastern European families moving in and out of the area.

The children's centre provides link services and activities from First Steps Children's Centre at Digmoor and St Thomas the Martyr Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary School with First Steps Children's Centre in Up Holland. These include a baby stay and weigh, breastfeeding group, Birth, Bump and Beyond, Let's get Arty and a

Young Parents Group. The centre provides the full core offer including childcare and early learning, family support, health, and childminder network support. Bright Beginnings Neighbourhood Nursery provides 39 childcare places for children from birth to five years of age. This is a privately run setting which operates within the children's centre site. The childcare was last inspected in June 2007 and the most recent inspection report can be found at [www.Ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.Ofsted.gov.uk). The centre has established links with a number of schools within the area although its main links are with Hillside Community Primary School and St Thomas the Martyr Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary School. Their inspection reports can also be found on the Ofsted website.

Governance is through a federated advisory board with representatives from partner agencies, the voluntary sector and parents. The board also provides governance to St Thomas the Martyr Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary School with First Steps Children's Centre, based in Up Holland.

## 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

First Steps Children's Centre provides good support to children and families accessing its services. Outcomes for them are good and improving. The centre provides an exciting and friendly environment where children, parents and other users are keen to attend. The centre's approach to safeguarding is robust. Centre staff and partners have developed a highly cohesive and effective approach to reduce the risk of harm and prevent difficulties escalating. This action includes successful implementation of the Common Assessment Framework.

The Early Years Foundation Stage provision within the centre and that of the registered childcare is good, although there is a mixed picture across the locality as a whole. Despite their low starting points in learning, children who access centre services make good progress due to the high quality learning environment and the systematic support and guidance from leaders and speech and language therapists. The intensity of this work ensures that outcomes for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities attending the centre are also good. Collaboration with Job

Centre plus and adult education services is well developed and consequently parents and carers have good access to information about training and employment opportunities. However, the impact of such services and activities on supporting them into education or employment is often unclear because of the lack of good quality evaluations.

Ensuring equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination are central to the work of the centre, which is why the needs of the whole family are well catered for. Parents and carers describe the centre as a 'lifeline' and many provide striking testimonies of the difference the centre has made to their lives. They speak highly of the staff because of the trusting relationships they have established and the 'non-judgmental manner' in which they are supported. The centre is currently working well to reduce the rise in obesity and smoking and increase the prevalence of breastfeeding. However, health inequalities lack focus within the centre's improvement plans due to the availability of only limited, localised health data to help track trends.

Provision is good overall, although there are some examples of outstanding practice due to the extensive range of activities and services on offer, which accurately reflect what the community wants and needs. Excellent inter-agency work with children's social care, health, schools and particularly outreach work, provides a secure bridge between support and formal services.

Leadership within the centre is strong, highly focused on the development of well-structured provision and purposefully designed to improve families' life chances and aspirations. The development plan provides a good overview of the centre's long-term plans and intentions. However, the plan does not include measurable targets to demonstrate how they will be monitored and achieved. The senior leadership team works collaboratively across a cluster of other children's centres in a willingness to share individual expertise and good practice models. As a result there is a cohesive and wide range of services and activities across three First Steps Children's Centre sites.

Leaders receive good levels of support and challenge from both the local authority and the advisory board due to a joint vision and commitment to the development of the children's centre and its services. All demonstrate a very secure knowledge of the local community, cultures within the community and those who may be harder to reach. However, the quality of self-assessment and the evaluation and interrogation of pertinent data from across all services sometimes prevents the centre from demonstrating the full impact of its work.

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

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Work with the local authority and the Primary Care Trust to refine health data to a more localised level.
- Enhance the good quality self-evaluation in place already, by:
  - making full use of the data provided through the local authority, the Primary

- Care Trust and other centre partners to evaluate the impact of activities and services and to plan further provision
- developing measures to evaluate the impact of key targets within the children's centre development plan.

## How good are outcomes for users?

2

Evidence through case studies, discussion with partners and with parents and carers all reflect the very positive impact of the centre's partnership working to promote children's and families' emotional well-being and their physical health. Groups such as Time 4 U are described as 'an absolute God send' because parents state they have received exceptional support for postnatal depression. Parents describe how the centre is a safe place to be because they know they will receive the help they need, when they want it and in a non-judgemental way. The support for children in need and those with child protection plans is good due to careful planning by managers and partners. This is reflected in the very few numbers of children who are re-registered onto child protection plans.

Parents provide some striking examples of how they are now able to keep their children healthy and safe because of the activities provided by the centre. For example, one warned her friends of the dangers of passive smoking and another described herself as the 'street first aider' because her friends know she has completed training. Numerous parents told inspectors how they have benefited from health and safety training and home safety risk assessments. As a result, they have reduced 'silly risks' and the number of accidents in the home and on the roads.

The good range of maternal and health services include antenatal appointments, breastfeeding and weaning support groups and baby stay and weigh. The centre is working hard to meet the national indicators for breastfeeding through a positive poster campaign and through training for all the staff. Although there is a reluctance to breastfeed within the community, 100% of mothers attending the support group maintained breastfeeding until at least six to eight weeks.

Activities such as Mini Movers, Active Kids and Splash & Play at the local swimming pool improve families' awareness of how to live a healthier lifestyle. The development of the centre allotment has encouraged children and their parents to grow and eat foods which are good for them. The high priority given to getting children and parents physically active, and the centre's proactive work to improve the quality of food within children's lunch boxes in school, has begun to have a positive impact on obesity levels in the community. The centre staff are mindful of key national health indicators such as obesity, hence the good strategies in place to address it. However, health data received by the centre is district based and not always sufficiently up to date to enable the centre to be aware of, and plan for, current trends.

The extent to which children enjoy and achieve is good. The necessity for high

quality play and learning experiences within the Early Years Foundation Stage is promoted exceedingly well. For example, the consistent use of learning journeys heightens parents' and carers' awareness of key developmental milestones and how children can be helped to achieve them. Parents state that positive parenting courses have made them more aware of the need to read, talk and play with their children in a meaningful way. They are developing a firm understanding about how to support their child's speech and language development due to a number of initiatives supported by the centre staff, outreach workers and the speech and language therapy team. Transition to school is well planned, particularly for children with specific needs; the centre is currently strengthening these arrangements through a highly focussed action plan. Data collated by the centre confirm that children are making good progress in their Early Years Foundation Stage profile points. As a result, the gap between the lowest 20% of children achieving expected levels in key early learning goals is beginning to narrow.

Parents contribute to the evaluation processes through a variety of means, for example, through satisfaction surveys and post activity evaluations to enable the centre to see how well their needs were met. Some parents play an active role within the parents' forum and the advisory board, which enables them to represent local views. There is some good evidence to show how the centre has helped parents into learning, training and employment, increasing their economic stability and independence due to volunteering opportunities, access to childcare and a pathway to training. The Job Centre plus advisor offers monthly appointments, providing advice about finances, employment and training; however, success and progression rates are not routinely tracked.

*These are the grades for the outcomes for users*

<b>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</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>2</b>
<b>The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training</b>	<b>2</b>

## How good is the provision?

2
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The centre provides the full core offer through well-structured services across sites at Tanhouse, Digmoor and Up Holland. The strong provision is a result of clearly defined working practices across a range of partner services. The priority placed on parenting support ensures parents and carers are empowered to raise their aspirations and make positive changes in their lives. For example, parents frequently describe how they have become 'better parents' because they have learnt to manage their children's behaviour and tantrums more effectively through positive parenting classes.

The centre has firmly established procedures for assessing the needs of children, parents and families. The early notification of pregnancy has increased the number of registrations to the centre and helps to identify families in greatest need at a very early point. As a result early intervention through cohesive support and targeted outreach work is highly effective in preventing difficulties escalating. There is excellent communication between staff, health, children's social care and outreach workers through the team around the child approach. This ensures those best placed to undertake initial and ongoing assessments, do so. Centre staff frequently undertake the leading role in implementing the Common Assessment Framework with good engagement by partner agencies and families.

There are some striking examples that show how targeted support through assessment has brought about significant improvements to families' well-being, safety and prospects for the future. For example, children referred to the two-year pilot scheme have benefited from childcare places and intensive language and speech input through the Language in Partnership Project Skelmersdale. The centre's evaluations clearly show the good gains made by these children and their parents, as many improved their circumstances by proceeding to access additional services and further educational opportunities. One parent stated that she has 'never looked back'. Priority is given to the involvement of lone and teenage parents and there is evidence of steady progress with the Young Parents Group, which now has some regular attendees.

Care, guidance and support are of good quality. The range of information and literature available is extensive and the children's centre website provides an excellent information resource enabling users to access a wealth of information and share their views without visiting the centre. Parents told inspectors that they receive much more than signposting because the outreach workers send text messages to alert them to important appointments. They describe how staff go 'the extra mile' by making appointments for them and by taking them to meetings and groups if they need it. Parents and carers appreciate the centre's work and recognise the positive impact it has on their lives. They state that this is why they continue to come back.

Parents and children display high levels of enjoyment in their activities, often returning more than once per day in their eagerness to make the most of what is on

offer. Parents state that there is a group for everybody and inspectors agree. For example, Early Days provides for the needs of small babies while Mini Explorers is more suitable for more active toddlers. The Saturday morning dads group is well attended and parents can book family play sessions in the sensory and soft play rooms. Furthermore, the centre supplements the regular programme of events with additional activities such as the new Healthy Lifestyle drop in and Holiday Allsorts for children with additional needs and their siblings.

Opportunities for learning and development are good within the centre. Children's progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage is monitored and used to inform the learning focus for future events and play activities. Childminders receive good support in assessing children's learning and development through an effective and well-organised network. The newly established 'Intraining' course prepares participants for adult education or to re-enter the workforce. Parents told inspectors that they have accessed a variety of training and accredited courses such as childcare. The use of individual learning plans helps participants to monitor and assess their own performance and set both practical and aspirational targets for their future, and the 'celebrating achievement awards' spur them on.

*These are the grades for the quality of provision*

<b>The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>

## How effective are the leadership and management?

**2**

Governance arrangements are well established and secure. Lines of accountability are understood, reporting arrangements are embedded, and the local authority provides robust challenges to the manager and his team through the annual conversation and performance audits. The senior leadership team is strongly committed to raising the community's aspirations and personal and economic stability, through focused and well-targeted support. Performance management procedures and the priority placed on continuous professional development ensure all staff are well equipped for their roles and responsibilities. Leaders are proactive in developing innovative ways to engage parents and carers and to improve their outcomes. For example, parents and staff worked collaboratively to produce Small Talk books designed to help parents understand early language acquisition. Not surprisingly, the centre won a National Sure Start Excellence Award for this work.



The advisory board is well represented by a range of partners, parents and carers who share the aspirations of the senior leadership team and make accurate assessments about what the centre does well and how it needs to improve. In the main, board members, staff, partners and parents are appropriately involved in self-evaluation processes and in setting local and strategic targets within the centre development plan. However, they have not incorporated measures through which to evaluate the impact of key targets within this plan and assess the impact for centre users. Their knowledge of the local community, together with the firm challenge from parent representatives, ensures the community has a strong voice and an opportunity to influence services for the future. The advisory board has maintained a secure role and focus despite its recent restructuring. Managers receive good levels of support from local authority finance officers, which ensure they receive guidance in their monitoring of management arrangements. These measures ensure the centre offers good value for money.

Safeguarding procedures are robust and meet with statutory requirements. Appropriate risk assessments occur, the building is well maintained and security measures are good due to rigorous visitor arrangements. The cohesive and integrated approach to family support is a key strength of the centre and this is shown in the wide range of partners with which the centre engages. Particularly strong links with health professionals, police and social care ensure vulnerable families consistently receive a package of tailored support. An excellent example of which is the work associated with high-risk cases of domestic violence through the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference.

The centre is successful in creating a fully inclusive provision, which meets the needs of its users and those in the wider community who may not be able to engage directly. Excellent outreach work ensures families in these circumstances benefit from equally good services within the home. There are well-established support systems and activities for children and adults with disabilities and excellent priority is given to the engagement of fathers. Services are designed to engage users from a range of backgrounds and circumstances and the harmony within the centre confirms it is a positive place to be.

The local authority provides excellent levels of support and its officers recognise and celebrate the centre's achievements. They effectively assist the centre in its on-going development and they have high expectations of its performance. The local authority data system provides a comprehensive range of information relating to the reach population, attendance, retentions and the range of families using the centre facilities. This system has successfully alerted the centre to a problem relating to single attendances, which is now being monitored. However, the centre does not analyse the data well enough, to evaluate the impact of activities and services so that it can be sure it plans effectively for future provision.

*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>2</b>
<b>The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</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>2</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>2</b>
<b>The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>

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

Childcare is provided on site by Bright Beginnings Neighbourhood Nursery. As this setting was not inspected at the time of the children's centre inspection, the previous inspection report was taken into account. There are a number of primary schools within the centre's reach area although Hillside Community Primary School and St Thomas the Martyr Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary School are closely associated with the centre. Information from their most recent regulatory and section 5 inspections and information relating to the quality of the Early Years Foundation Stage has been taken into account when writing about early years' provision and outcomes for children in the report.

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## Summary for centre users

We inspected the First Steps Children's Centre on 20 and 21 October 2010. Our investigations included visits to activities, scrutiny of the centre's plans and documents, discussions with some of you and professionals. Following this work, we judged the centre as good overall.

The children's centre provides an outstanding range of services and activities, which meet the needs of families and help to improve their lives. We know this because we can see how popular the activities are and because you tell us that they have helped you in lots of different ways. You particularly enjoy Mini Movers and Active Kids because they are great fun and they help you and your children to be more active. Many of you have completed first aid and home safety training so you feel equipped to help and guide others living on your street. We found that the centre is successfully helping parents to stop smoking and cook healthier food and that mums are getting help with breastfeeding which helps them to continue for longer periods of time. However, staff need to know more about the health issues in your area so they can make sure they are providing the right health support for you.

The centre is a friendly and welcoming place to be and you are happy that there are activities such as Holiday Allsorts, which all the family can join. The centre works hard to make sure all children get off to a good start in their development and staff involve you by giving you suggestions about how to help your children's learning at home. As a result you tell us that you are reading with them more and you are helping them with their speech. Mums and dads frequently told us how they have become 'better parents' because parenting classes have helped them to manage their children's behaviour and tantrums in a better way. As a result you feel calmer and happier when playing with your children.

Inspectors found that everybody offering services to the centre works well together as a team and provides personal help and support to families when they need it most. We found that this is particularly effective where families are experiencing a crisis or feel unable to come to the centre themselves. The staff are very good at making sure that there is an activity for everybody at the centre. As a consequence, lots of dads, young parents, and parents bringing children up on their own are able to benefit from groups or activities which suit their particular needs. Staff provide training to help prepare you for when you are looking for a job and they put you in touch with people who can help you to budget your money or help you to find training or jobs. However, records are not always kept, so it is difficult to know how many of you have succeeded.

People in charge of the children's centre are doing a good job because they have the right sort of training and support to help them in their work. Managers and staff are very committed to improving your health, safety and independence because they want you and your children to do well in the future. Managers keep the building safe

and secure and they ensure children and parents are well protected because they follow expected procedures.

Managers receive lots of good support from the local authority and the children's centre advisory board. Some of these people may not live in your community but they know the local area very well and they want to make sure everybody who would like to use the centre is helped to do so. Managers have been able to show inspectors that their hard work and commitment has made a positive difference to the people who use the centre. They know they need to improve how they monitor and evaluate all the courses, services and activities to make sure they are successful in meeting your needs. However, they cannot do this on their own. They need the Primary Care Trust and the local authority to help them improve systems for gathering information so they can clearly show the difference the centre is making to your lives.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to come and speak to us. We are very grateful and we wish you every success for the future.

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