

Inspection report for Weardale Children's Centre

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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Weardale AM/PM Scamps Ltd

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 one early years inspector

The inspectors spoke with the children's centre cluster manager, representatives of the local authority, staff members, members of the parents' forum and the advisory board, a range of partner agencies and users. Inspectors observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documentation, including the centre's action plan, evaluations, key policies and safeguarding procedures.

Information about the centre

Weardale Children's Centre is a smaller than average children's centre set on the site of the local primary school in a small rural town in the Durham Dales. The centre is one of three children's centres in the Teesdale cluster of children's centres. The inspections for each of the three centres were carried out at the same time.

This phase one centre, which was designated in 2006, is governed and managed directly by the local authority. A cluster manager is responsible for delivery across all three centres. Weardale Children's Centre shares a team of staff with either one or both the other centres but has its own administrative support staff. Some services delivered by partner agencies are also cluster-wide. Services delivered through the centre include those delivered by health professionals, outreach support, targeted support for vulnerable families, adult and community learning and activities for children and adults to play and learn together.

The centre covers a wide geographical area with a number of sparsely populated villages, as well as two larger settlements, in its reach area. Within the centre's reach area there are few children under five whose families are dependent on workless benefits. Unemployment is low when compared with national and regional averages. The population is made up of a very wide socio-economic mix with families having a range of complex and diverse needs. For a number of families rural isolation is quite

extreme with limited access to infrastructure services and poor transport links. Travel impacts on the accessibility to services for users and delivery of services by staff.

Almost all families are of White British heritage. There is a large number of young parents, most of whom are not lone parents. Children enter Early Years Foundation Stage provision with skills and knowledge broadly at the level expected for their age. There are fewer disabled children locally compared with regional and national averages and no child has a child protection plan.

The designated childcare provider for the centre is Weardale AM/PM Scamps Ltd, which is co-located with the centre. This provision was separately inspected by Ofsted in November 2006. The report for this inspection can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk. There are no childminders currently working in the reach area.

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

Weardale Children's Centre provides good quality services which are used by a high percentage of families in the reach area. The centre maintains an attractive and welcoming environment for everyone and is effective in improving the lives of the children and families it works with. Parents and carers report that the centre is helping them to develop healthy lifestyles and gain an awareness of how to keep safe. The centre has a very positive effect by providing opportunities for adults to gain confidence in their parenting abilities and increase their skills and knowledge to support them into employment. Parents and carers play an active role in making users' views known through the parents' forum and advisory board.

There is a shared understanding about how to keep children safe both in the centre and at home. Professionals from different agencies are mutually respectful and ensure the effective transfer of information between key partners. As a result of this strong partnership working, families' needs are sensitively and appropriately assessed to ensure services are excellently tailored to meet their individual circumstances. The support given to families who experience social isolation as a result of rural life is exceptional. Vulnerable families are extremely well supported by

a range of agencies working together to ensure that they receive the help they need quickly. One-to-one support is offered, as required, at the centre or in family homes. For example, parents are supported with techniques to manage their children's behaviour, strategies to support language development and encouragement to continue breast-feeding.

The centre-commissioned community transport scheme is a vital service in enabling those living out of the town to access the centre. Drivers have been trained in understanding users' needs and raising any concerns with centre staff. Parents and carers value the service greatly, and typical comments are, 'I am so pleased you've driven us down there, I feel much better now', and, 'It gets me out of the house to meet new people.'

The quality of care, guidance and support is outstanding. Parents and carers report that expert advice and guidance are readily accessible to them to help deal with a range of problems including coping with parenting concerns, benefit claims and financial management. This is supplemented by a wealth of high quality information in the form of posters, leaflets and displays. In times of crisis, families feel comfortable engaging with the centre knowing that they will be able to find someone to help them or signpost them to an agency which can provide assistance. Parents and carers spoke of staff, 'going above and beyond what is required', to support them.

The centre is well led and managed by a principal family worker who has been acting as the cluster manager for 15 months and has responsibility for delivery across three children's centres. This interim arrangement is the result of a recruitment freeze by the local authority which has also led to a number of other posts being left vacant. A significant strength of the centre lies in the commitment of its staff and the cluster manager. They have overcome a number of staffing difficulties with innovative solutions in order to reduce disruption to the services for children and families. However, the number of vacant posts has limited ambition when target-setting and has impacted on the work of the acting centre manager in her substantive post as lead for the monitoring and development of early years provision.

Equality and diversity are promoted satisfactorily. The centre is working hard to break down barriers which might prevent some groups of users from accessing its services. Links between the centre, the school and the designated provider have been established and some qualified teacher time has been spent developing consistency of approach. This support has not extended to the crèche and other childcare providers in the reach area. There is little tracking to assess progress of individual children attending the different settings to determine the impact of their work on outcomes for children.

Systems of monitoring and evaluation are being developed. Workers, including those from partner agencies, have started to review user evaluations and trend data to inform future service delivery. The local authority now has robust systems in place for collection of data and provides useful analysis of these for the centre. Data from

some external agencies are limited and this impacts on assessing outcomes and the performance of the centre. Managers recognise that more could be done to use the evaluations and data effectively in setting future priorities and more ambitious, well-focused targets. At the instigation of the local authority, the remit of the advisory board is currently evolving to provide more challenge and drive improvement.

As a result of improving self-evaluation, the increased availability of reliable, analysed data and the restructuring of the advisory board to take additional responsibility for the centre, capacity for the sustained improvement is judged to be good.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve outcomes and provision by:
 - strengthening the partnerships between the centre, its link school and local early years and childcare providers.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - increasing the use of data and user evaluations to monitor the effectiveness of the centre, demonstrate impact on outcomes and shape service delivery
 - ensuring that rigorous self-evaluation leads to the setting of ambitious and well-focused targets.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Outcomes for children and families in the reach area are good and improving. Integrated teams of health professionals effectively deliver a universally promoted 'healthy child pathway' for all children. A well-developed package of support provided by the centre and its health partners offers a wide range of activities to promote healthy lifestyles including antenatal parent-craft classes, nature walks, cookery sessions and visits from the oral health team. 'Chill out' times with pampering sessions are recognised as supporting the emotional and mental health of users. The Early Days sessions for parents with babies under six months provide opportunity for new parents to understand their babies' needs, access one-to-one support and form friendships with other parents. One parent remembered vividly how she had developed an understanding of how much better home-pureed food was for her baby after sampling a selection of purchased baby foods. These sessions are supplemented by individualised care and home visits on request to address specific concerns and when families are identified as needing additional support.

As a result of this work, users display increasingly positive attitudes to healthy lifestyles and immunisation rates are some of the highest in the county at over 90%

take-up. Good breastfeeding support, both individually and through group sessions have led to an impressive year-on-year increase over four years in the number of babies being breastfed at 6–8 weeks from 2% to 38%. One mother said, 'I felt uncomfortable about breastfeeding until I came here and then I realised it was normal.' Obesity rates for children at the end of Reception are the lowest in the county and less than regional and national averages.

Users feel safe when using the centre and its services due to the robust security procedures in place. They are well informed about health and safety arrangements on the Playbus. Information is easily accessible to ensure they know how to share any safeguarding concerns they may have. Parents and carers report an increased understanding of safety through first-aid courses and how to assess safety in the home, making improvements as required. Children behave in ways that are safe for themselves and others. They are developing an understanding of risk taking in a controlled way with clear explanations provided during the tumble time session.

A wide range of drop-in groups are on offer where children and adults have opportunity to explore and experiment with a wide range of resources. Parents and carers value these in extending what they can offer at home, particularly in relation to messy play and the music sessions led by professional musicians. For children from more isolated home environments, a particular focus is placed on developing language and social skills as they are often unused to mixing with other children. A speech and language therapist works with the centre and initiatives to develop language skills include baby talk sessions and loans of chatter bags which encourage parents to talk with their children. These learning opportunities provide a sound basis for children to develop their skills and, consequently, the data for the Early Years Foundation Stage profile show high levels of achievement with over 80% of children gaining 78 points on assessment scale which is much higher than regional and national averages. There has also been a year-on-year success in narrowing the gap between the attainment levels for the lowest performing 20% of pupils and the rest.

Users report that the centre's role in the community is good. The parents' forum plays an important and active role in the children's centre. Members routinely share ideas and suggestions from users and are involved in the promotion of services to others. Young parents who have learned to make jewellery on a craft course have developed entrepreneurial skills in selling their products and returning the profits back to the centre to help fund holiday activities. As a result of users' suggestions, parents now lead a session for toddlers themselves, supported by staff providing healthy eating snacks and appropriate resources. Many parents and carers highlighted that they had been helped in managing their children's behaviour through a course to promote positive parenting. One parent explained the impact on her daughter, a challenging toddler: 'They gave me new techniques to manage her behaviour. She used to get so frustrated. She's really improved now and is able to enjoy her childhood.' Another parent identifies that her child's confidence has developed through attending the sessions so that she is now able to say clearly what she likes and dislikes.

The centre has a strong focus on adult learning courses to develop skills which will underpin future employability with many users gaining qualifications in English and mathematics. There is a clear emphasis on developing a work ethic with non attendees being chased up to find out why they are not attending. Parents acknowledge that courses help to develop skills and encourage them back to work by building confidence in their own abilities. An identified need for playworkers in the reach area has been followed up with courses for users to provide additional opportunity for them to gain paid employment and support working families with wrap-around childcare. New vacancies sent through from Jobcentre Plus are shared with young parents at their weekly group which stimulates their interest in gaining paid employment. One young parent shared with inspectors how she was successfully supported by centre staff to access funding for childcare to enable her to take up a college course. Two young parents are studying to gain qualifications in childcare and have clear aspirations about becoming childminders.

Several parents highlighted that, as working parents, they do not access the centre's activities but very much appreciate the long opening hours of the day-care facility which enables them to travel to work from their rurally isolated home.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

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

How good is the provision?

2

Staff have an in-depth knowledge of all the families registered with the centre. They know when to push to support families to engage in new experiences and learning opportunities and when to stand back to allow for consolidation of newly found skills and confidence. Case studies demonstrate how staff, using their expertise to manage referrals, have made a difference for families. Through development of trusting relationship and individualised support, parents and carers are encouraged to take small steps in developing their confidence to attend a group session, with one worker explaining what it will be like in advance and another worker accompanying each individually to the group. Centre staff are aware that parents and carers can easily become isolated if they do not attend sessions for a while and follow up when a

family have stopped attending to find out whether there are any problems and what can be done to encourage them to re-engage.

As a result of the recruitment freeze, staff from the nursery have been contracted to support the activity sessions and staff the crèche. This has provided a consistency of care for children. Parents and carers express their satisfaction with levels of care in the crèche and are complimentary about the feedback they receive from staff about their children at the end of the session. However, centre staff express concern at the lack of specialist expertise in developing activity sessions. Excellent transition arrangements are in place for children moving from nursery to school which are individualised to meet the needs of each child at their current stage of development.

The Playbus visits two villages in the reach area, providing additional access points for the centre's services. This valued facility is used by a number of grandparents which enables them to gain additional ideas for extending their grandchildren's play through the excellent range of resources on board and to enjoy socialising opportunities themselves. One parent said, 'If for any reason the Playbus isn't able to turn up we are really disappointed because it's a lot of fun.' Activities in the holidays encourage families to attend together so some do not miss out by having older children to look after. Parents and carers recognise that the drop-in sessions are beneficial to both them and their children. One told inspectors, 'This is my only day off work and I choose to come here because we both gain from it.'

Fathers identify that they feel staff, 'go the extra mile', to ensure they are comfortable and welcomed in the centre and are therefore confident to return knowing that they will be well supported. This is a general view expressed by a number of parents and carers: 'It's so welcoming. Staff are really prompt if you need any information and there's always someone there to talk to. It's wonderful.'

Good participation and retention rates for courses and user satisfaction evaluations demonstrate that attendees enjoy and value the courses offered. Adult learners receive a thorough assessment of their prior learning and ongoing progress is recorded with clear indicators of next steps identified before moving on. Celebration events are held at the end of each 'skills for life' course and learner successes are publicised in a county-wide newsletter.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Leadership and management are good. Clear systems of governance, professional supervision and day-to-day management are in place. A cycle of regular meetings between cluster professionals ensures partnership working is effective and both staff and advisory board members feed into more strategic groups on a county-wide basis. Service level agreements with partner agencies are detailed and provide clarity regarding safeguarding requirements, levels of service and quality of delivery expected.

Effective safeguarding procedures are in place. The centre has ensured all staff are subject to Criminal Records Bureau checks including those from other agencies and volunteers who work with centre users. All staff have participated in safeguarding training at an appropriate level for their responsibility. Safer recruitment policies and procedures of the local authority are followed in appointment of staff. Robust systems are in place to ensure the safety of lone workers. The Children's Trust maintains a strategic overview of safeguarding and monitors the effectiveness of use of the Common Assessment Framework.

A recently formed adult learning partnership has surveyed parents to find out what courses they would like, helping to avoid duplication of courses across providers. Courses are now offered in venues potential users have identified as most accessible to them resulting in better take-up of individual courses and reducing the need to repeat courses in different locations. This has contributed to the centre offering good value for money.

The centre's work in engaging young parents in the centre has been particularly successful, with several highlighting that as a result, they now feel positive about 'doing something with their lives' rather than staying in the house all day. Aspirations for themselves and their children have been raised. However, a tension still exists between this group and other users. Many of the young parents are not ready to fully integrate into other activities within the centre as they feel other users tend to stereotype them. Inspectors found little evidence of this but it was a real feeling for the young parents themselves which has not yet been fully addressed.

Users say that practitioners are knowledgeable, are keen to hear their thoughts and feelings and take a genuine interest in their lives. They feel well listened to and know their views will be acted upon whenever possible. Parents attending the parents' forum and advisory group have a choice of nurseries in which to have childcare places provided depending on which is most appropriate to the welfare of their child. Committee skill training has provided parents who are representatives at advisory board with an awareness of how to present their views in a way which is most likely to have impact. They are keen to present their views and make suggestions for improvement of services as they have a strong commitment to the centre. One stated that being part of an interview panel to appoint staff had made her, 'feel

important and really part of something.’

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	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 evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	2

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

None applicable

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Weardale centre on 9 and 10 March 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

During our visit we talked with a number of you, some of the children and the centre staff. We also held meetings with other professionals who work with you and

members of the parents' forum and advisory board. We visited some of the sessions and the centre's childcare provider and looked at the centre's documentation.

We heard how much you enjoy coming to the centre and how the staff always make you feel welcomed. The community transport scheme has a large part to play in helping you to travel to the centre and the Playbus also enables those of you in more isolated areas to access some of the centre's services.

You told us that you feel safe at the centre and have developed a better understanding of how to keep safe at home. Some of the activities have also helped you to lead healthier lifestyles. When compared with other areas of the country, your children are succeeding very well in gaining the skills they will need to learn quickly when they start school. You enjoy the opportunities to play and learn with your children. Adults who have attended courses say they have also gained new skills and confidence in their abilities which have helped to encourage them to go on to take more courses. Some of you are using these skills to represent other parents' views effectively at the parents' forum and at the advisory group meetings. Many of you who work are particularly pleased that the day care attached to the centre offers hours which enable you to travel to jobs outside the area, although you do not always have time or need to use other services the centre offers.

We were very impressed by the excellent way the staff offer services to meet the needs of each family individually. We know that they make regular visits to ensure that you can help your children to be healthy but you tell us they go beyond this and provide support which is especially designed to meet your family's needs. This is sometimes provided in your own home and at others times will involve a member of staff working with you to encourage you to come into the centre to mix with other parents and carers. For more vulnerable families, in times of crisis, the team of staff working from the centre will work closely together to make sure that you have any help you need quickly. The staff provide you with outstanding advice and support, for example in helping you to develop your confidence as parents or providing help with financial concerns.

The centre staff have started to look at how well they are providing services and what a difference these are making for you and your children. We have asked them to do this more thoroughly using information you provide on your evaluation forms and some information collected by the local authority. This will help the centre to plan more effectively and set themselves more challenging targets. We have also asked the centre to work more closely in partnership with the school and all the childcare providers in the area to ensure that they all have the same amount of support.

Thank you to everyone who took time to meet or speak with us or provided information for us. We are very grateful for your involvement in the inspection and wish you every success for the future.

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