

Inspection report for Gainsborough Children's Centre

Local authority	Lincolnshire
Inspection number	367801
Inspection dates	3–4 August 2011
Reporting inspector	Marian Pearson HMI

Centre governance	Lincolnshire County Council
Centre leader	Raj Johal
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	None
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Riverside Nursery @ Gainsborough Children's Centre EY395028

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 an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the head of centre, members of the parents' group and advisory board (known as the children's services partnership), representatives of the local authority, and representatives of the statutory, community and voluntary organisations working in partnership with the centre. They also talked informally to parents, carers and users of the centre.

Inspectors observed the centre's work and looked at sessions in operation at the children's centre and in a nearby location. They also looked at a range of documentation, including evaluations, key policies and safeguarding procedures.

Information about the centre

Gainsborough Children's Centre is situated in the heart of Gainsborough, once a thriving market town in the West Lindsey district of Lincolnshire. The centre was designated in 2005. It has a shared history with Gainsborough Early Years Children's Centre, sited just over a mile away, as both evolved from the same Sure Start local programme. Joint working arrangements and shared services are still evident between the two centres.

The centre serves a highly disadvantaged community with most families living in areas ranked in the top 20% of the most deprived areas in the country. Of the housing stock, 61% is classed as poorly maintained. Within the reach area, there are pockets of high unemployment and a high percentage of those in work have semi- and unskilled jobs, with low wages. A very large majority of families are of White British heritage. Evidence shows that when children start school at the age of three or four years, their levels of skills and knowledge have generally been below those typically found at that age.

The centre’s main venue, situated next to the bus station, is a purpose-built, two-storey building. Services are also delivered in a number of other outreach centres, including the Gainsborough Adventure Playground Association (GAPA) site and some of the schools and community halls in the reach area. The centre offers the full core offer and provides a ‘one-stop shop’ for most services. It provides a base for the district toy library. Some health professionals, including speech and language therapists, have their base at the centre, and a range of health services are delivered from both the centre and the adjacent health centre. Employment services are provided by Jobcentre Plus situated nearby.

The current head of centre has been in post since July 2010. The centre employs few staff directly, with most service delivery commissioned through partner agencies on a district or county basis. The centre is managed directly by the local authority with a district manager providing the principle local authority leadership.

The designated childcare provider for the centre, Riverside Nursery @ Gainsborough Children’s Centre, is co-located on the same site. This provision was separately inspected in January 2010. The report for this inspection can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

Gainsborough Children’s Centre is an outstandingly effective resource for local children and families.

The centre’s range of influence is exceptionally wide, with 91% of all the children under five in the area registered. Leaders and managers are not complacent about this achievement and, together with dedicated partner agencies, constantly strive to identify the remaining families to ensure they also have opportunity to benefit from the centre’s many excellent services. Attendance is equally impressive, with over two thirds of those registered, including many from the most vulnerable groups, accessing centre services at least monthly. Some users are daily visitors to the

centre. A typical comment from one of the fathers is: 'It's such a fantastic service and at no cost. My kids would be so lost if we didn't come.' The centre is an extremely harmonious place, which provides a warm welcome to all including disabled children and adults. Users identified how well everyone gets on with each other and there are no differences noticed, illustrating the success of the centre's well-publicised commitment to promoting a highly inclusive and respectful community of users.

The advisory board is chaired by a parent and has a parent vice-chair. Innovative solutions have been introduced to provide users with regular opportunities to contribute to decision making as almost all are reluctant to participate in a formal forum. Consequently, users say unanimously that they feel very valued and listened to and cite numerous examples of how they have significantly influenced the shaping of the centre and its services to meet their needs. In particular, they highlight how their views were instrumental in instigating the makeover of the centre, explaining the transformation from a 'sterile, clinical place to a welcoming, attractive centre which feels like a **children's** centre.'

Outcomes for children and families are outstanding. Targeted support has increased the take-up of pre-school provision and reduced greatly the numbers of children with no pre-school experiences. As a result of these initiatives, those entering school are ready to learn and education data shows an impressive year-on-year rise in scores for local schools when children are assessed at five years of age and a narrowing of the gap between the outcomes for the most vulnerable groups and others.

The centre provides an excellent range of courses, which include baby massage, weaning groups, and family learning classes. It acts as a broker for adult learners and very successfully sources, among others, courses to improve literacy, numeracy and employability skills without charge to individuals or the centre. Users are keen to share how the centre helps them greatly increase their skills in parenting, develop healthier lifestyles and raise their own personal ambitions. High-quality, flexible crèche provision for all courses increases accessibility.

Safeguarding arrangements are systematic and rigorous. All legal requirements are met and the risks of a busy, popular centre are managed extremely well without limiting the freedom of users unduly. Early intervention for vulnerable children and families and use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) are highly effective in lessening the need for higher-level interventions and reducing the number of looked after children.

Families have access to an excellent range of services to promote the good health and well-being of themselves and their children. They engage very effectively with universal and specialist services as appropriate. Activities and training successfully encourage parents and carers to improve their families' health with a well-balanced diet and lifestyles which include physical exercise. One parent said, 'I think twice now before I pick up a piece of cake.' Obesity levels for children at the end of Reception year have halved and are now comparable with national levels.

The vast majority of the centre’s work is commissioned through partner agencies, such as Citizen’s Advice Bureau and Home-start, well chosen for their expertise in delivering specific services. The centre’s distinctiveness lies in the excellent coordination of this extensive range of services, accurately focused to meet the needs of families locally. This ensures an extremely well-integrated, holistic approach to service delivery which is making a positive difference to the outcomes for children and families, and providing practical support to help them achieve better futures.

Recent improvements in local authority data have enabled the centre to target service provision increasingly towards supporting the most vulnerable groups, particularly families with complex needs, and narrowing the achievement gap for adults and children. The cycle of evaluation and improvement planning is rigorous and particularly well established with commissioned agencies. However, their specific targets and evaluations are less well reflected in the written evaluation and development plan for the centre overall. Leaders and managers had rightly identified the consolidation of these aspects of work with partner agencies as an area for improvement

The centre is in a strong position to maintain its high effectiveness because leaders’ evaluation of the centre’s achievements is accurate and they have identified the needs of the community. They are reflective and creative about where further improvement may lie.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure that the leadership and management of the centre are enhanced by:
 - strengthening the formal involvement of parents on the advisory board
 - adopting a coherent approach to target setting and evaluation.

How good are outcomes for users?

1

Case studies and other evaluations indicate that the centre is extremely effective in making a positive impact on the mental health of users accessing services. Prior to accessing the centre, users expressed feelings of loneliness, isolation and lack of personal stimulation through being at home with their children all day. They report that the centre has been pivotal to getting them out of the house, meeting with other people again and recognising the benefits of active engagement for themselves and their children socially and emotionally. Other health outcomes are also improving rapidly with an impressive increase in the number of smoke-free households, high immunisation take-up, and teenage parents accessing antenatal and postnatal care. During National Smile Week, the dental health nurse encouraged parents to evaluate different juices for sugar content which has led to the use of water as a preferred drink. The number of mothers breastfeeding fluctuates but is showing a strongly increasing trend with recent data showing 100% sustaining breastfeeding at six to eight weeks. Good arrangements are in place for peer support through the weekly

'Baby Café' and individual support from breastfeeding buddies. One mother said: 'I would have given up after 5 weeks as baby was feeding every 20 minutes; it was nice to have some reassurance that all was normal.'

A home-safety scheme and safety-week activities had significant impact on reducing attendance at the local accident and emergency department, particularly in relation to accidents resulting from falls. Online safeguarding training, requested by parents and carers, has resulted in excellent understanding of how to keep children safe, with users reporting any concerns in a sensitively appropriate way. Users report feeling very safe in the centre and have developed highly trusting relationships with staff giving them confidence to share any worries they have.

Children subject to Common Assessment Framework processes are extremely well supported by the highly effective multi-agency team around the child approach. Preventative and highly individualised programmes are delivered in their own homes, with parents, carers and children empowered to contribute to and 'own' the targets set. This results in heightened confidence and self-respect and rapid progress to use of other services at the centre.

Through timely and well-focused interventions, combined with rigorous quality-assurance processes, the education team evidences improvements in provision offered by pre-schools and private nurseries in the area. Almost all now offer provision judged by the children's centre teachers to be good or outstanding. This gives the centre increased confidence it is using providers delivering the highest-quality early education when providing supported places for children most in need.

Babies and children demonstrate impressive levels of independence, social skills and decision making as a result of the very wide range of excellent resources provided in the toy library sessions and those where parents and children are learning together. Because they are so engrossed in their activities and enjoy a high level of parental engagement, their behaviour is exemplary. Parents have learned highly effective strategies to manage their children's behaviour and report feeling significantly less stressed as a result. Language and communication skills have improved through focused and structured learning, such as 'Tots on Tour'. One parent's comment reflects the views of many users: 'These sessions have helped me become a better parent and my daughter to become the happy, confident child she is.'

The centre's 'one step at a time' approach to adult learning has been highly effective in enabling users to take advantage of over a hundred courses offered during the previous year. Take-up of courses is impressively high. Staff encourage and support learners well, their philosophy being reflected in the comment of one member of staff: 'You've got to believe they can all achieve even when they don't believe it themselves.' Parents and carers are proactive in shaping services as a result of their increased knowledge of healthy lifestyles, for example, by requesting additional physical activities as they say it makes them feel better about themselves. Improved understanding of child development has led users to be more discerning in their choice of toys for their children. 'The sessions have given me good ideas to try at

home. I don't need to buy expensive toys,' said one parent. Users have valued the opportunity to have help in writing CVs and practising interview skills. This has prepared them very well to enter the jobs market.

An excellent range of volunteering opportunities is underpinned with training from partner agencies. A vast number of users have been extremely keen to repay the centre for the help they have received. They run the community café and garden, provide practical support such as building a stage or acting as buddies and supporters to other parents. They provide help, such as childcare while parents attend hospital appointments, demonstrating admirably their new-found confidence in their own abilities. One volunteer shared her experiences with inspectors: 'I've supported so many families, gained my NVQ3 and am now employed in a role providing support to rural areas and community development in Gainsborough. Without these experiences I wouldn't be where I am today – happy.' Similar experiences have led to large numbers of users, and some local young people, developing high levels of self-esteem and relevant skills to access further training, progressing to higher education and employment.

The partnership with Jobcentre Plus is well embedded and users make excellent use of the centre's vacancy board when considering employment opportunities. Jobcentre Plus appointments offer users the opportunity to obtain details of childcare available, to discuss future prospects and to access information, advice and guidance sessions. This service provides users with very useful direction on how best to prepare themselves for future employability.

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	1
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	1
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	1
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	1

How good is the provision?

1

Needs are very carefully assessed from registration onwards and users are encouraged to share information about their lifestyles and identified training needs. This enables accurate signposting to the most appropriate services to assist in improving outcomes for themselves and their children. Pivotal to this is the daily

'Drop-in' which acts as the first point of contact for the majority of parents and carers. Here, users are able to secure practical help and advice on a range of matters, such as income and welfare benefits, debt counselling and support in contacting other agencies such as the local council and housing services. Users value greatly the opportunity to have access to a phone in a private environment and to have scripts available to help them in getting their message across to officials effectively. Leaflets relating to health are quick to disappear from the centre as they are very much valued by parents and carers as a useful source of information.

Workers facilitating the 'Drop-in' are extremely sensitive to the pressures on families and work with them to identify what will be of most help in times of crisis. For some families, workers are able to provide emotional support themselves, and users related how when they first came they needed to sit and cry all day just to get things off their chests. Workers have been highly efficient in referring users to agencies which can help with practical resources such as food parcels, essential household furniture and clothing. This readily available support has a material impact on improving their families' lives.

'Drop-in' staff also work in partnership with other agencies to offer an outreach service. This ensures consistency for families who also use the centre for other services. Parents and carers with health issues, users whose first language is not English, young parents, grandparents, foster carers and families with disabled children report benefiting particularly from highly individualised support either through the 'Drop-in' or in their homes. Services are also provided at additional outreach venues where it has been identified there is a specific need. For example, a toy library session at one local school and 'Stay and Play' at another have been established to support children's development and ease transition to the school environment. The impact of these sessions will be monitored when the children start school after the holidays.

Rigorous interrogation of health data has revealed clusters of families with clearly identified needs related to specific health outcomes. This has strongly influenced the shaping of services; for example, an ambitious plan with innovative strategies is in place for one part of the reach area to reduce long-term cultural resistance to breastfeeding. In another pocket of the area, higher obesity levels are being tackled through additional physical exercise activities including the very popular community walks. The destinations, for example a local Tudor house, have been purposefully selected to link to other outcomes, such as increased cultural awareness of local heritage contributing to children's knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

The centre is very responsive to users' views which influence the shaping of services. Following a user survey, 'Men Behaving Dadly', a fortnightly group for male carers, was established. This is now a very popular session enabling male carers to come together and enjoy spending time with their children, learning about their play and development. Plans are currently in place to develop weekend provision for working mothers following further feedback. Attempts have been made to gain the views of

non-users but without success. A service for families of disabled children is greatly appreciated. Children’s development is tracked, advice is provided for parents who struggle to complete lengthy benefit forms and a respite service offered. One parent said, ‘I have been able to mix with other parents, chat and relax for a while knowing that my child is being looked after and is safe.’

The centre promotes purposeful learning and enjoyment extremely well. Parents, carers and children were observed enjoying songs and happily joining in with action rhymes. They have fun and learn together. At one of the outreach centres, GAPA, quality opportunities for children to explore, experiment and take risks safely are evident at all sessions. Activities are led by skilled and experienced staff and are precisely planned to deliver a range of outcomes. Children’s development is captured by parents in their ‘learning journeys’ which provide a useful tool to show progress made. Communication and language skills are fostered through re-living these shared experiences. ‘Graduation events’, held when children move from one age-related activity session to the next, provide an ideal opportunity to reflect and celebrate achievements.

Parents have been very keen to improve their own skills as they have come to realise the importance of these in helping their children learn. Adults gaining accreditation in reading and writing were recently presented with their certificates at the local school assembly, raising parents’ self-esteem and children’s awareness that learning continues into adulthood. Parents participate well in feeding back on satisfaction levels which are very high and how effective courses have been to influence future provision.

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	1
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

1

There has been a lengthy period of inconsistent leadership with the centre having experienced a number of managers over a comparatively short period. The new manager has made an immediate impact on the centre; users and staff talk of the centre being ‘transformed’ and ‘being the best it has ever been’. The centre’s values of being welcoming, approachable and accessible, and being respectful at all times are ‘lived’ on a day-to-day basis by everyone involved in the centre. As a result, the centre is inclusive to families from all backgrounds, including minority groups and those who have a disabled member in their family, all of whom make excellent use of its services.

Staff morale is exceptionally high, despite a recent further period of change. Everyone is impressively focused on the core purpose of the centre with children and families at the forefront of everything they do. They are clear about their role in achieving the centre's vision. Users are quick to praise the centre's staff for ensuring 'services as usual' during this unsettled time and are highly motivated to contribute their own suggestions to help with the centre's finances, suggesting, for example, that users could be asked to contribute to the cost of refreshments.

All levels of management and staff are clear about the priorities to provide more targeted services for those with the most complex family issues which make them vulnerable. The district children's centre team have used the increasingly detailed data impressively to inform resource decisions and commissioning of services, with a comparative increase in funding being made available to services demonstrating the most impact in supporting those families with the greatest need. Decision-making responsibilities are clear, with accountability resting with the local authority. The children's services partnership, the centre's advisory board, is responsible for monitoring service delivery, ensuring a high level of integrated working and shaping of future services based on identified needs. The centre manager receives additional support and challenge from her peers leading other children's centres in the district.

The centre is highly effective in ensuring children and families are safe. This is achieved through rigorous attention to child protection, ensuring everyone, including users, within the centre has appropriate training to understand their responsibilities, and regular scrutiny of vetting, recruitment and safeguarding procedures of both the centre and partner agencies. In-depth knowledge of each other's services and well-developed protocols for information sharing ensure that those needing services receive them swiftly. Services are fully integrated, resulting in highly cohesive provision which ensures seamless transitions from one service to another and has a positive impact on the lives of children and families. They are particularly effective for those who find themselves in vulnerable situations. This extremely effective partnership working is a real strength of the centre.

The central and district commissioning of services provides a very cost-effective and efficient way for the centre to deliver its services. Contracts are clearly defined in terms of targets and outcomes related to the national indicators. These are amended annually to meet emerging needs. By working in partnership with community and charitable organisations, the centre is able to extend local resources through grant income secured by these agencies to develop services. This enables them to thoroughly evaluate the impact of services delivered on a piloted basis prior to including them in contracts. Rigorous and regular monitoring of the commissioned services with a keen focus on evaluation of impact results in all agencies being able to evidence benefit to users and ensures that the centre, through these services, delivers excellent value for money.

User engagement is outstanding. The centre's success in reaching out to all but a very small minority of families in the reach area indicates its excellent reputation

within the local community. Community cohesion is fostered very effectively with many activities attracting an intergenerational and diverse group of users. Childminders are included as both partners and users of the centre. They are represented on the advisory board and are able to access training opportunities alongside other providers. Parents and carers play a major part in the life of the centre, making their voices heard to ensure leaders and managers are aware of and provide for their needs. Although they have a stated preference not to become involved in formal meetings, their views are well represented as there is always an item on the advisory board agenda to consider any items parents and carers have raised. Users contribute impressively to the centre's work through their volunteering, which has great mutual benefit for their peers, the centre and themselves.

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	1
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	1
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	1
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	1
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	1
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	1

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

The Ofsted reports on the centre's designated daycare provision and local schools were scrutinised to provide contextual information about the area in which the centre is situated.

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. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Gainsborough Children's Centre on 3 and 4 August 2011. We judged the centre as outstanding overall.

We were extremely impressed by the way in which the centre works with many other partners to make sure that it has all the expertise it needs to deliver very effective services to meet your needs. This has resulted in almost all the families with a child under five in the local area registering with the centre. Many of you use the centre regularly because you find the services it offers are very supportive to you and your families. Some of you told us your children would be lost if you did not come. You find the centre a very welcoming and child-friendly place to visit and are extremely keen to tell us that the suggestions you made about the centre's environment have vastly improved the look and feel of it. You are less keen to make your views heard through a formal forum or advisory group. We have asked the centre's leaders to work more on this with you so that they have the benefit of your input directly to these meetings. Everyone feels welcome at the centre and you were very proud of the way in which everyone gets on so well together.

We heard how, by using the centre, more mothers continue to breastfeed for longer and many of you have learned how to eat more healthily and take more exercise. This has meant that fewer children are obese when they are six years old. The centre has been working with nurseries and pre-schools in the area to ensure that the quality of their provision is very high and the centre can have confidence in using them when it helps you by providing places for your children. More of you are using a pre-school or nursery before your child starts school and this is helping them to achieve better once they start school, as they are ready to learn. The skills and knowledge of five-year-olds in the area is increasing impressively every year. Adults have also been keen to make use of learning opportunities offered by the centre. You have access to an exceptionally wide range of courses. We heard how these have significantly increased your confidence to go on to further learning and gain qualifications which has inspired some of you to enrol at university or gain employment. You have also found the courses very useful in increasing your knowledge and understanding of your children and learning how to manage their behaviour. We were really impressed by the number of you who volunteer. This has huge benefits to the centre and also other parents and carers you work with and for you yourselves. A number of you shared with us how these opportunities had greatly improved your skills and confidence.

You told us you feel very safe and are confident about sharing any concerns you have with staff. This is because they are skilled and knowledgeable about assessing and helping to meet your needs very effectively. They work well with their partners to ensure that they all contribute to the services offered to you in a way which can help you most appropriately. The quality of information, advice and guidance you are offered, particularly through the 'Drop-in' which many of you use regularly, is exceptional. The centre caters equally well for all families who need its services, including families with a disabled child who have specialised services which are highly appreciated and are making a difference for their families.

The centre's leadership team manages the work with other agencies very well so that you receive the services which best meet the needs you have. They assess well when you need other services and make sure these are provided for you. They also choose carefully when deciding how to spend the budget, looking at what the most pressing needs are before choosing what services to buy. This ensures that you are receiving the very best possible services which will improve the lives of you and your children. The leaders and managers are very good at making sure that all the other agencies they work with are evaluating the impact of their services but they do not make sure that this is all put together in one overall plan. We have asked them to improve this.

Thank you to everyone who took time to meet or speak with us. It was very helpful to be able to talk with you. Your honest and open discussions with us provided us with lots of useful information to help us with the inspection. We thoroughly enjoyed spending time at your centre. We wish you and your families every success for the future.

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