

Inspection report for Dereham Central Children's Centre

Local authority	Norfolk
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	East Dereham Day Nursery EY403721

The inspection of this Sure Start children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, representatives of centre users, parents and carers, and the Chair of the Advisory Board. They met with representatives of the local authority and visited the linked early years provision, East Dereham Nursery.

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

Information about the centre

Dereham Children's Centre is a phase two centre which was designated in 2007 and met the full core offer in 2009. The centre operates from premises which are shared by the Early Years, Childcare and Extended School team. Previously, the premises were also home to the youth service provision in the area. In addition to the centre, services are provided in the surrounding villages of North Elmham, Swanley Morley and Scarning.

The centre is currently being managed by a new interim centre leader and is directly governed by the local authority. The advisory board includes representatives from a number of community partners and is chaired by a volunteer of the centre. Since 2009 Dereham South Children's Centre, a phase three centre, has operated from the same premises, and is managed by the same interim leader. Both centres share the same staff and resources.

The population of the area is mainly of White British heritage with an increasing number of Eastern European families. The reach area is mainly urban with some outlying villages. Housing consists primarily of privately owned and rented accommodation with some social housing.

There are currently 1067 children aged under five years living in the centre's reach area. Of that number, 226 children live in the 10-20% most deprived areas in Norfolk

and 60 children live in the 20-30% most deprived areas. Local employment opportunities tend to be low paid, unskilled and often seasonal resulting in the need to travel significant distances to access higher paid or skilled work. There is a high number of workless families' dependant on state benefits.

Full day-care provision for children aged from six weeks to five years is delivered by East Dereham Day Nursery which is privately owned and not based in the centre. The skills and knowledge with which children enter the local Early Years Foundation Stage are below those expected for their age.

Norfolk County Council has recently announced a restructuring of its children's centre services. The centre is subject to a proposed merger with two neighbouring children's centres in July 2012.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The centre's overall effectiveness is satisfactory. In recent times, the centre has been through a period of unrest due to significant changes. These included the centre taking over the premises that were previously shared with the youth service, a staffing re-structure, taking on the responsibility for a neighbouring centre and a period without clear leadership and management. However, the centre now has a small but stable staff team. Additional staff have been recruited and new leadership has successfully ensured high morale among the staff who are eager to bring about further improvement for the benefit of families in the reach area.

Both the interim centre leader and the local authority have a clear and largely accurate view of the centre's strengths and areas for improvement. Therefore, the centre has satisfactory capacity to improve.

Staff are effective in supporting children's learning and development and, as a consequence, children achieve satisfactorily and go on to build successfully upon their skills, knowledge and understanding in their early years at school. Parents, carers and children are guided and supported appropriately, and partnership working

with health visitors ensures effective checks are made on health care and early childhood development.

Although parents and carers have access to a suitable range of services to support them back into employment, the centre does not provide sufficient opportunities for adults to attend accredited courses. The centre signposts some adults to other organisations who provide accredited courses. However, it does not collect robust data to track and monitor the progress of these learners and the numbers of referrals made are very small. Therefore, insufficient numbers of adults are receiving services to support them gain the skills and knowledge to support their children's development and to gain qualifications or employment.

The centre's provision is satisfactory, inclusive and equally welcoming to all. The centre's small staff team have created opportunities for local people to volunteer to work within the centre. This has enhanced centre activities and increased engagement with some target groups such as fathers. However, the centre does not currently have a robust system to evaluate the quality of its activities, which are run solely by volunteers, and to provide on-going supervision to these volunteers.

Parents and carers who use the centre value the activities and support provided. Users who spoke to inspectors expressed how the centre had supported them especially in times of crisis. As one user stated, 'If it was not for the centre then we would not still be together - it saved our partnership' when talking about the impact using the services provided by the centre had for her and her family.

Satisfactory systems and procedures are used to safeguard families, including the most vulnerable, and the centre works satisfactorily with other partners to share information and concerns in an appropriate and coordinated manner. Due to the high level of complex cases, the new interim leader has rightly undertaken a review of the professional supervision arrangements for the work of the family support team. Appropriate temporary support has been introduced while securing more permanent arrangements

Those who use the centre feel involved in it. However, there is no parents' forum at present and parent and carers representation on the advisory board is low. As a result, the involvement of parents and carers in governance, evaluation and decision-making is limited.

The centre is in the early stages of implementing a database through which they intend to measure their own effectiveness, identify any changes in the reach area and set priorities. Centre managers are trained in data-management systems, but information is not yet collated or in a format to show the full impact of the centre's work and help leaders to set consistently challenging targets for improvement within planning.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure that there are robust systems for monitoring the quality of activities provided through the centre.
- Review and revise the systems for supervision of volunteers and ensure appropriate permanent professional supervision arrangements are introduced for the work of the family support team.
- Improve the effectiveness of self-evaluation through regular and rigorous analysis of data that shows the full impact of the centre's work, and help leaders to set consistently challenging targets for improvement within planning.
- Provide more opportunities for users to attend adult education classes and monitor the numbers of users who attend.
- Increase the involvement of parents and carers in governance, evaluation and decision making.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Families benefit from the satisfactory range of child and family services offered by the centre. As a result, they are developing an adequate understanding of how to adopt healthy lifestyles. Mothers benefit from the advice and support offered through the centre. As a result, more mothers are initiating and sustaining breastfeeding their babies. This helps children to have a healthy start in life. Parents and carers enjoy activities with their children which promote physical development such as 'Music and Movement' sessions.

Users report feeling safe in the centre and are confident that any problems are tackled and resolved quickly. Consequently, parents and carers trust staff and are confident in sharing their personal concerns and circumstances. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used well, in collaboration with parents and carers, to develop a package of support that matches users' individual needs. The most vulnerable families, including those where children are on a child protection plan, are well supported by the centre through home visits and one-to-one help, as well as through sound partnerships with other agencies.

Children enjoy the activities the centre offers and have fun playing with a good range of toys and equipment. The centre's 'Stay and Play' sessions are provided by staff from the linked nursery and encourage parents and carers to engage in meaningful play with their children. Parents and carers are therefore increasingly able to contribute to their children's school readiness. Behaviour among all those who use the centre is good and everyone works and plays together harmoniously. As a result, all parties enjoy being at the centre.

Initiatives, such as 'Words in the Wood' run by the early years advisory team, successfully engage with early year providers in the area to promote learning in the outdoor environment. The well-resourced toy library is helping parents and carers to use a wider range of toys and resources with their children at home to promote their learning. Advice for parents seeking childcare is adequate and the centre provides

highly valued local day care for working families.

The extent to which all families enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal social development is satisfactory overall because the outcomes for adults are not as strong as for children. While the centre effectively signposts adults to educational provision through other providers, it is not clear how many adults take up courses and training to improve their literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology skills, and thus improve their prospects to secure long-term economic well-being.

The 'How Babies Learn' course gives parents an insight into their children's development and gives them an opportunity to meet with other parents and carers. Those who attended the course report that they now have a greater understanding of what activities they can offer to their children and how this promotes their development. Young parents receive a good range of activities that supports them to improve outcomes for their children. They also develop their own self-esteem and confidence in their parenting skills.

Parents and carers benefit from the centre's satisfactory procedures for helping them make a positive contribution towards the work of the centre. Some have been successful in providing additional voluntary support to the centre, such as providing a group to support children with special educational needs and their families through the 'Special Needs Kids and Parents' group. A parents' forum does not currently operate at the centre. Consequently, parents and carers have limited opportunities to become involved in the evaluation of the centre and decision-making processes.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

3

The centre delivers a satisfactory range of services and activities and ensures there is an adequate balance of universal and targeted services, with many of the centre's

services being provided in other premises throughout the reach area, to meet the needs of the community. Satisfactory partnership working ensures support for children and families is responsive and meet the needs of families, particularly for those in target groups such as families in crisis and young parents.

The care, guidance and support for families are satisfactory overall. Families approach staff with confidence and recognise the centre as a place of safety. Users feel well supported, particularly when in times of crisis. This is encapsulated by one user who stated, 'I feel safe to talk to the staff when there is a crisis; the centre is brilliant.' Staff use the CAF well to engage families and assess their needs. It is testament to their skills that parents value this process. One user stated, 'CAF meetings are held every six weeks and this helps as it puts us in touch with people who can help us.'

The centre provides a suitable range of enjoyable sessions for children and their families that are of good quality. For example, 'Music and Movement' sessions and the toy library provide stimulating opportunities for parents, carers and children to enjoy time together. Staff are skilled and they work hard to meet individual needs. The activities provided are presented and resourced well so as to be enjoyable and satisfying for all users. Parents and carers needing childcare are signposted to local providers.

The centre has some evidence that users are supported to improve their educational and personal development and to progress to further employment, education and training. It celebrates the achievements of its families appropriately but the centre recognises that raising the aspirations of adults within the community that it serves is an area that it has to continue to work on.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre's interim leader has used her leadership and management experience effectively to ensure the centre's smooth operation on a day-to-day basis. In the short time she has been in post, she has forged a strong staff team that works together well, with a common purpose. She provides clear purposeful performance management arrangements and is in discussion with social care to provide permanent arrangements for appropriate professional supervision to those staff involved in more complex family support cases. Her appointment is making a clear

difference to the centre's effectiveness.

Resources are used satisfactorily to provide services for the range of users who access the centre's services. Staff are deployed effectively given the constraints placed upon them for responsibilities in two reach areas. Therefore, the centre's value for money is satisfactory.

Partnerships are satisfactory. They are improving, as evidenced in the recent productive meeting with social care. The partnership with the childminding development worker is working well and has resulted in a number of new childminders being registered in the area. Homestart has successfully exceeded the targets within the service level agreement. However, the centre does not have a consistent or systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating all the service level agreements it has in place.

The toy library includes resources to raise awareness of diversity and promote equality. Specific toys and equipment support users with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The toy library is mobile and is used for visits to outreach centres and makes home visits so that its services are available to all. The centre has successfully engaged with some fathers through the weekly 'Men Behaving Dadly' session which is run by a volunteer. A project to support children whose fathers are absent, due to serving in the armed services, has been very well received by families. The centre realises that children and their families with special educational needs and/or disabilities are not targeted effectively for support. Services' venues and times ensure convenient access for all community members.

The centre's safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory. The environment within the centre is safe. The vetting of staff is secure and staff are well trained. The centre's staff are aware of key safeguarding policies and are vigilant in identifying and responding to any potential dangers that users may encounter. Due to the fact that the premises are currently accessible from three entrances it is difficult to establish a main welcoming reception area for families when they first enter the centre. Consequently, the centre is not as welcoming as it would like. The centre has implemented some improvements which unfortunately did not resolve the issue. Further solutions are being pursued by the centre with vigour to over-come this issue. Information is shared appropriately with the relevant agencies, and the centre supports multi-agency working satisfactorily in order to support vulnerable families and keep children safe.

Governance is satisfactory because the local authority fulfils its statutory requirements and oversees the centre's provision to assure accountability. The advisory board has seen resurgence in recent months and while it carries out its duties satisfactorily, it is not fully involved in development planning and in challenging the centre. In addition, users' representation on the board is limited and so parents and carers are not fully involved in the governance and decision-making of the centre.

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	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
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	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	3
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	3

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

Inspectors took into account the inspection report relating to the East Dereham Day Nursery which was completed in June 2010. This inspection report judged the childcare provision to be outstanding.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Dereham Central Children's Centre on 12–13 October 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Those of you we spoke to told us that you enjoy using the centre and that it has made a positive difference to your lives. You also told us that you find staff at the centre very friendly and welcoming.

The centre offers a sufficient range of services and activities for families in the area, which are led by skilled and dedicated professionals. Young parents are particularly well supported by the range of appropriate activities on offer to them. New mothers have received effective advice and support on breastfeeding their babies and this has

resulted in an increase in breastfeeding rates. This helps children to have a healthy start in life.

You told us that you think that the centre is a safe place for parents and their children. Safeguarding children is seen as a priority. Due to the high level of complex cases, the new interim leader has quite rightly, undertaken a review of the professional supervision arrangements for the work of the family support team, and appropriate temporary support has been introduced while the centre secures more permanent arrangements. We have asked the centre to ensure that permanent arrangements are established.

The staff also help you to support your children's learning and development at home by providing services which encourage you to engage in play with your children at sessions such as 'Stay and Play'. The toy library provides you with a good range of quality play resources that you and your children can enjoy in your own home. In addition, they have a range of resources that encourage healthy eating, safety and diversity.

Inspectors are aware that the centre has been through a period of change with a restructuring of the staff team. A new interim centre leader has only recently started her work with the centre but is already having a positive impact. The small, but dedicated, staff team is expected to increase as the centre has been successful in recruiting an additional family support worker and a play worker. These additional members of staff will enable the centre to engage with more families in the community and encourage more of you to use the centre as well as provide extra support to those who need it most.

In order to develop the centre further, we have asked the centre to improve the effectiveness of its self-evaluation through regular and rigorous analysis of data that show the full impact of the centre's work and helps leaders to set consistently challenging targets for improvement within planning.

You told us that you know the centre has information on weekly job vacancies and that staff can support you or signpost you to organisations which can help you with issues so that you can obtain the benefits to which you are entitled. We have asked the centre to provide more opportunities for you to attend accredited courses such as literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology.

A few of you have taken up the opportunity to volunteer within the centre. This has enabled you to lead groups and activities within the centre. Such groups are helping the centre to reach users that it was not previously engaging with, such as fathers. The centre values the work that you are doing. However, it does not currently provide you with sufficient supervision or evaluate the activities that you lead. We have asked the centre to address this so that you have enough guidance and support to develop your personal skills, and make sure that the activities are reaching as many users as possible.

A few of you are involved in the advisory board and some have made suggestions about activities you want. We would like you to have more opportunities to be involved in decision-making and evaluating the work of the centre. So we also asked the centre to increase the involvement of parents and carers in governance, evaluation and decision making. Staff have appropriate plans in place to address this issue and we have every confidence that it will be successful.

We would like to thank everyone who came to speak with us. It was a privilege to be able to talk with you. Your honesty and openness helped us immensely during the inspection. We are very grateful for your help and we wish each of you every success for the future.

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