

Inspection report for The Ark Children's Centre

Local authority	Suffolk
Inspection number	368337
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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	The Ark Nursery (EY392883)

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 the local authority, East Coast Community Healthcare Community Interest Company (ECCH), partners, parents, frontline staff and volunteers. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

The Ark Children's Centre is a purpose-built phase one children's centre which was designated in 2006 and delivers the full core offer. The Ark Nursery which is managed by the YMCA is located on the same site.

The manager was permanently appointed in April 2012; she had previously been manager in a temporary capacity since October 2011. The centre works in a cluster with two other children's centres serving the North Lowestoft community. The centres are located less than two miles apart in a densely populated area. Services and staff are deployed to provide services at all three centres, and families access services at any of the three centres.

The children's centre has 708 children aged from birth to five in its reach area with a total of 2264 children aged from birth to five in the North Lowestoft community.

Lowestoft is a coastal town with high levels of social disadvantage and deprivation. The reach area has high levels of unemployment and families living benefits, teenage pregnancy and poverty. It covers densely populated and rural areas. The local population is mostly White British with smaller percentages from other minority ethnic groups including those from Asian, Portuguese and Eastern European communities. The percentage of families who speak English as an additional

language is increasing. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are generally below those expected for their age.

The centre is run by ECCH on behalf of the local authority. Formally the Primary Care Trust, ECCH has recently launched as a social enterprise. A joint advisory board that serves the cluster area has been recently re-established.

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 overall effectiveness of the centre and outcomes for users are satisfactory. Governance arrangements have been insufficient but are now satisfactory. Over the last year the development of the centre stalled amidst staff and structural changes within the cluster of centres. In addition, the governing body moved from a health trust to a social enterprise and is now the East Coast Community Healthcare (ECCH). New management and governance arrangements are now in place. Managers have rightly focused their attention on ensuring that the centre is well-ordered and running effectively on a day-to-day basis. They are now tackling, with some success, those issues that will help the centre improve further and achieve better outcomes for users.

After this period of change the centre is re-establishing itself in the community. The newly formed management team have worked tirelessly to secure a range of improvements in the last six months. They have laid sound foundations for further development. The advisory board has been re-established, terms of reference agreed and meetings take place regularly. They do not yet provide sufficient scrutiny and challenge to the centre. A new and active parents' group is beginning to impact and parents and carers attend the advisory board. Staff morale is good and they are working well towards achieving the centre's mission of, 'One team, one focus, helping every child to thrive and reach their full potential.' The improvements achieved are relatively recent so the centre's capacity for further improvements is satisfactory.

Families attend the centre in greater numbers including those families whose

circumstances make them vulnerable. The centre plays an important role in the lives of those who attend. As one said, 'I feel safe and happy coming.' Another added, 'It's very accepting and friendly.' The safeguarding of all users is effectively promoted. Staff know well what action to take should they have any concerns about the welfare of users.

The bright, welcoming environment provides a safe environment where families enjoy the activities on offer in a lively learning environment. Where families need additional help, the care, guidance and support that they receive is effective. As one commented, 'They've helped me a lot and got me out of debt.' Another said, 'We have a great bond with the staff; my children love them!'

The centre is effective at engaging families with more acute needs. Data show that the proportion of casework for children on child protection plans and children in need is growing. This rightly reflects the high levels of need in the area. Use of the Common Assessment Framework is established and effective in supporting families. Family Support Workers work well with other professionals such as nursery nurses and health visitors to ensure that a more holistic and coordinated approach is taken to meet the needs of families.

Provision to help users move into education, employment and training is good. Personal learning plans capture well the individual aspirations of users who are effectively signposted to adult learning courses. A weekly drop-in session focuses on helping adults find employment. Data and case study evidence show that many who receive support move into voluntary work, full and part-time employment and further training.

Data are now routinely collected. However, they are not always reliable or analysed sufficiently to inform service planning or set challenging targets. The self-evaluation form provides a comprehensive description of the work of the centre but does not effectively evaluate the impact of its work. The centre's self-evaluation grades were, in the main, more generous than inspection findings. Scrutiny of the self-evaluation form by East Coast Community Healthcare and the county council is insufficient. However, the centre's leaders and managers know well the strengths and areas for development of the provision.

The centre recognises that it currently does not have a specific plan with regard to where activities are offered within the cluster group of centres. While the majority of groups and services for the area are offered at The Ark Centre, the extent to which this meets the needs of the community has not been assessed.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Strengthen governance arrangements to provide robust support and challenge to the centre's leaders underpinned by rigorous analysis of performance information and targets.
- Improve the accuracy and effectiveness of self-evaluation through regular and rigorous evaluation of information and data that show the full impact of the centre's work and helps leaders to plan consistently challenging targets for improvement.
- Review services offered across the cluster of three children's centres in North Lowestoft to ensure that they meet the needs of the community most effectively.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Families access a suitable range of targeted and universal health services. The centre has successfully re-built its relationship with the health visiting team which has resulted in a revitalised approach to joint-working and integration of services. Baby massage is offered to all new births in the area. This supports the mother's bonding with her baby, resulting in improved emotional well-being. Health visitors actively promote the work of the children's centres through post-natal visits. Initiatives such as 'the breastfeeding workshop' offer a relaxed environment for expectant mothers to raise concerns and anxieties around breastfeeding with experienced midwives. However, breastfeeding rates remain low in the area. Users receive useful advice on healthy eating and snacks of fruit and vegetables are provided throughout the centre. Even though these initiatives raise parents' and carers' awareness of healthy eating, this is yet to be reflected in a significant reduction in levels of childhood obesity.

Families feel safe at the centre. There is a very friendly, welcoming atmosphere and this helps parents and carers feel confident to ask for advice. Children who need additional help are well supported through the Common Assessment Framework process. Good strategies help parents and carers understand safety issues within the home. Parents and carers take responsibility for their children's safety well.

There is a high level of trust between users and the centre's staff. Families show respect for one another. Children and their parents and carers actively engage in a range of well-planned activities, which help children to develop the necessary skills to be ready for school. Parents and carers value the ideas they are given to continue their child's learning at home. For example, those attending the 'Songbirds' session proudly told inspectors how they enjoy singing the action rhymes they learn at the group at home with their children.

The percentage of children achieving the national average point scores across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scale is improving steadily, although it is below the local authority and national figures. The gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the rest remains wide. The centre recognises that more needs to be done to build relationships with other pre-school provision and local nurseries to strengthen transitions between providers and improve children's early learning. Consequently, The Ark's nursery manager is to be seconded to undertake this work.

The use of 'WOW' boards encourages feedback and comments from parents and carers. Their comments feed well into the development of provision. The centre staff successfully support many adult users to access courses that develop their employability skills. The personal development worker works across all three centres and offers a package of effective individually tailored support and guidance. The well-established and successful community parent programme develops users' confidence and supports them to move into further training, education or employment. There are many individual cases of parents being helped into accredited training and employment. Funding for childcare for families on low incomes is effectively promoted.

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	2
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	2

How good is the provision?

3

There is a sufficient range of services to meet the needs of users who access the centres across the cluster group. The Ark Centre makes a positive contribution to improving outcomes for families who use the centre through good-quality activities. Learning journeys celebrate children's achievements well and record the developmental milestones reached. In groups, children, parents and carers develop their confidence well and gain a sense of achievement.

Assessment is used satisfactorily to ensure services meet families' needs. Local intelligence and the good knowledge that staff have of the community support

service development effectively. Specialist support for those experiencing domestic violence is available at the centre and the 'Positive Young Parents' group reflects local need well. While the centre collects a range of data relating to target groups, this is not used systematically to plan improvements and assess the effectiveness of specific provisions.

Outreach provision extends opportunities into the community, such as providing activities at a near-by library. Services across the cluster centres are well attended and they are increasingly engaging the families with the greatest need. However, the centre has not yet evaluated the extent to which the services offered meet local needs across the area effectively.

Parents expressed appreciation for the support they receive and the positive changes that have resulted for their children and themselves. Typical of parents' comments are, 'I don't know where I would be if it was not for staff here.' Case study evidence shows that at times of crisis families are supported well. The increasing use of home visits to engage families is effective. Family support workers are successful in working with the most vulnerable families, and parents and carers particularly value home visits and individually tailored support. Staff assess needs appropriately and provide sustained, on-going support and advocacy. They refer users effectively to other services.

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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Governance arrangements are satisfactory but not yet fully embedded. Day-to-day line management arrangements are clear and understood by all staff within the centre and staff are provided with appropriate professional supervision. There are clear lines of accountability for managers and staff. The new management team have prioritised well and have taken action in those areas most in need of improvement. They are ambitious for the centre and its users but the action plan for the centre does not include targets which are sufficiently measurable. Leaders recognise that greater scrutiny of the performance of the centre is needed to ensure continued to improvement.

Regular financial management is in place. Some service level agreements have been reviewed and good efficiency savings secured. Resources are being directed well to better support the increasing focus on the most vulnerable families, for example

through the recruitment of a qualified social worker. Most groups and outreach services offered within the centre serve users from across the cluster area. As a result, families go to groups as it suits their needs. They achieve satisfactory outcomes and the centre provides satisfactory value for money.

Equality and diversity are promoted satisfactorily within the centre. Activities are free and the centre provides a crèche to support access to adult services. Increasingly, the centre is engaging a greater proportion of users from the most disadvantaged communities in the area. Individual support takes good account of the particular needs of users, including their language and literacy needs. Children with disabilities or with special educational needs are included in activity groups at the centre and some additional discrete provision is made for them.

All staff, including volunteers, undergo appropriate pre-employment checks, including Criminal Record Bureau checks. Partner agencies confirm the suitability of their staff to work in the centre. Routine risk assessments are undertaken for activities and suitable control measures put in place. All staff have undergone appropriate safeguarding training and know well what to do should they have concerns about the welfare of children, parents or carers.

Over recent months professional partnerships have been strengthened. As a result, the provision available has been extended. Health visitors promote the centre effectively to new parents and the sharing of information has increased the proportion of parents and carers with children under the age of one engaging with the centre. Links with the on-site nursery have been re-established and joint work supports users well. Partnerships with schools and early years settings are developing. Parents and carers contribute regularly to the evaluation of groups and sessions and changes are made as a result of their input. The parents' group is newly established and has already been able to enhance the work of the centre, for example in securing access to a soft play area in the adjacent leisure 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

The inspection outcomes of the aligned inspection of Roman Hill Children's Centre, which was judged satisfactory, contributed to The Ark Children's Centre inspection and report.

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 Ark Children's Centre on 2-3 May 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We very much enjoyed our visit to your children's centre and would like to thank all of you who gave your time to speak to us and tell us your experiences of using the centre. Your views have helped inform us of how well the centre is doing and we have mentioned some of your comments in the report.

The centre provides a welcoming environment where you enjoy time with your children, playing and learning together. It is a safe place for you and your children, and sound procedures are in place should staff have any concerns. Managers and staff are working hard to improve the centre further. They are re-establishing the centre as an important part of the local community and attracting more families to attend. A greater number of families who need additional help are being supported well by centre staff. Particularly good support is provided on education, employment and training opportunities. Overall, we were very impressed by the good-quality support provided for you by the dedicated staff team.

The centre has undergone much change over the last year. In that time new management arrangements have been put in place to oversee its development and management. These have succeeded in putting the centre on a stable footing. However, to ensure that further improvements are made, we have asked senior managers and the advisory board to better oversee the work of the centre. The centre collects a great deal of information about the difference that activities and services make to the community. However, this information is not always analysed

well so that the progress of the centre can be judged accurately. In these areas, we have made recommendations for further improvements.

In addition, many of you choose to use other centres in North Lowestoft, such as Roman Hill Children's Centre. While you told inspectors that you find it accessible, we have asked the centre manager to review the provision offered across the cluster of three children's centres in the area to ensure that your needs are being best met.

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