

Inspection report for Litcham Children's Centre

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| Local authority | Norfolk |
| Inspection number | 383772 |
| Inspection dates | 26–27 June 2012 |
| Reporting inspector | Kath Beck |

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| Centre leader | Pam Arrowsmith |
| Date of previous inspection | Not previously inspected |
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| Linked school if applicable | Litcham Primary School |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | Litcham Childcare EY365492 |

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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, the headteacher of the primary school and the outreach workers. They also met with representatives from the local authority, voluntary and partner agencies, health services, advisory board, parents and staff from the on-site nursery

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

Information about the centre

Litcham Children's Centre is a phase two centre situated in the grounds of Litcham Primary School. It serves a large rural district, approximately 70 square miles, north west of East Dereham, Norfolk, including some of the 30% most deprived areas of the country. Public transport is limited. Some services are provided in the villages. The number of children aged under five years in this area is 404, which is small compared to other centres. Most come from White British backgrounds. The number of lone and workless families on benefits is lower than the national average. Children's knowledge, skills and abilities on entry to early years provision are below the national expectation.

The centre opened in 2008 and was designated with the full core offer in 2009. It provides childcare, child and family health services, and employment and benefits advice. Its manager has full responsibility for day-to-day management. At the time of the inspection, the local authority had almost completed its reorganisation of children's centres. It had commissioned a new provider to assume responsibility for this centre on 1 July 2012, who withdrew at short notice. Previously, responsibility for the centre had been delegated to the governing body of Litcham Primary School. The chair of the advisory board is also a school governor. The school is closing in August 2012 as it is federating with Litcham High School. Senior staff at both schools

have offered to continue to oversee the centre in the interim until issues of governance can be resolved fully.

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Litcham is a good centre. It is empowering families within isolated rural communities to make fundamental changes to their lives. To overcome the difficulties experienced by those living at some distance in attending the centre because of poor transport, the centre has developed a good range of learning and development activities in the villages, in addition to those which take place in the centre. This promotes equal opportunities well. One parent said the centre has been a life saver as she has made many friends, and is no longer confined to her home.

Parents are enterprising. ‘Stay and Play’ activities, initially run by the centre in village halls to give families opportunities to play and have fun with their children near to home, are now run by parents. Others grow food on an allotment to sell to buy seeds for the following year. Over one third of parents are in training and gaining qualifications with a view to returning to work. The strong focus on developing children’s language skills means high numbers of the children in the poorest areas are reaching the nationally expected levels at age five. Outreach workers, together with other professionals are helping to keep children safe. Healthy lifestyles are promoted through physical activity. However, health services do not provide sufficient local data for the centre to plan, provide and target support to increase the numbers of mothers sustaining breastfeeding, to reduce levels of obesity or to support programmes for immunisation.

Staff at the centre know their target groups well and where they can be found. Currently, the centre engages with 58% of families in its area and is determined to increase this. Through its data analysis, it has found that the proportion of lone and workless families using the centre is lower than other groups. It has drawn up plans to engage more families in these groups, but these plans have yet to be fully implemented and monitored for their impact. Parents enjoy being part of the centre. Their views are often taken into account when planning provision, and their

expertise, such as that of a dental nurse, is utilised to help others.

The centre's capacity to improve is satisfactory. It has a good track record of improvement since it opened and is a much-valued resource within the community. Strong teamwork, high levels of morale among the staff and close working partnerships with a range of public, voluntary and independent providers have brought about mostly good outcomes. Its drive to develop further is hindered by the uncertainty caused by the withdrawal of the new provider. The centre has set its own challenging targets and has a very clear view about the improvements it needs to make. The direction of the centre is in abeyance while the local authority resolves the situation. This means there is no long-term planning for the centre's development.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- In the local authority, ensure that the arrangements for governance and accountability in the long-term are resolved as soon as possible and made clear to all.
- In partnership with the local authority and health services, share and analyse local data related to breastfeeding, immunisation and obesity rates, so that the centre can improve further the health of families in the locality.
- Implement the plans to engage with a higher proportion of workless and lone families than is currently the situation, and monitor the impact of this work over time.

How good are outcomes for families?

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The centre's determination to enhance safety in the home through outreach visits, one-to-one advice, safety packs, first-aid training and advice about keeping children safe in the sun has contributed to the reduction in the number of children admitted to the hospital's accident and emergency department in recent years. Parents trust staff as they know they will help them to overcome the difficulties they face. Staff introduce families to specialist provision, such as counsellors, to try to resolve more complex difficulties. Families whose children are subject to the Common Assessment Framework process or child protection plans meet with all the services involved in the centre. This enables a coherent approach to supporting families and reduces the risk of harm to children. Families treat one another and staff with respect so they feel safe. One parent said, 'This is a very safe and secure environment for children and parents.' Children behave well and this too helps to keep others safe.

Activities in the centre, in the locality, or in the home are improving the emotional well-being of targeted, isolated or inexperienced families. Attendance at the nearby dance studio, and groups who meet to take their children swimming, particularly enhance physical health. The 'Allott-mums' encourage families to grow nourishing

food at home by donating seeds. One mother said, 'This is great. He has started to eat different foods at home.' Families also cook healthy foods regularly with their children in the centre's training kitchen. Data over a wide area, not the immediate locality of the centre, indicate that the percentage of mothers sustaining breastfeeding for longer than six weeks is lower than the national average and that obesity levels are rising. The centre does not have any data about immunisations or how many families have reduced their reliance on smoking or unhealthy substances. Without this information, it is difficult to target improvements in the health of more families in the reach area.

Feedback from families shows high levels of satisfaction as well as constructive criticism of the centre's provision. The wide range of activities offered in 'Stay and Play' are very popular. The centre has been part of a pilot programme to enhance children's communication, language and literacy skills. Captivating activities, such as hunting for words in the woodland, muddy activities at the museum, drama activities, story sacks and a focus on a national initiative to support children's language acquisition, have been very successful. Over 90% of children in the deprived areas reached or exceeded 78 points in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores in 2011 and it is expected to be even higher this year. The gap between the lowest-achieving children aged five and others has reduced significantly over the past three years.

Structured courses and individual advice enable families, including some grandparents who have become full-time carers, to build their confidence and skills. 'Little Wrigglers', a suggestion from a parent, builds self-assurance from before the baby is born. Attendance is high across all the activities as parents influence the time when they take place and their content. If necessary, staff arrange transport. Views sought from parents about the centre and its future developments are shared with the advisory board, but their attendance at its meetings is sporadic. The centre has been particularly successful in engaging one third of parents on courses, especially in childcare at levels 1 and 2. Some parents are moving on to a qualification at level 3 and one is undertaking a university degree. Additionally, a volunteer programme has been established and some have returned to work.

Data indicate that the proportions of children whose parents are in receipt of Working Tax Credits or who live in workless households are below average. Figures in the data do not show whether the number is rising or falling over time to help the centre check the impact of its work. Staff, outreach workers and Citizens Advice offer advice to families about benefits and employment as it has been hard to engage the Jobcentre in efforts to enable more parents to improve their economic well-being.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

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| 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 | 2 |

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| concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them | |
| The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre | 2 |
| 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?

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One parent said, 'The centre has supported my family through some really bad times and helped us to solve our worries.' Outreach workers, Home-Start volunteers and a parent adviser provide much-valued additional assistance while families are in crisis. Case studies reflect the centre's success in empowering families to make positive changes to their lives. Outreach workers offer good advice to students in the local high school to improve their knowledge of sexual health and prevent teenage pregnancies.

The centre uses its in-depth knowledge of the area, data, and information from its key partners and families to meet the needs of its target groups. It knows where lone and workless families live and is proactive in trying to engage them in its activities. At present, not enough are responding to the centre's efforts.

The individual needs of families in the area are assessed and reviewed, while provision is amended to meet differing needs. Outreach workers negotiate personalised areas for development with individual families. Parenting courses enable others to grow in confidence in dealing with their children's behaviour and knowing how to enhance their personal development. While there is no specific provision for a father's group, many fathers attend the centre and some are involved in supporting sessions in the villages. 'TOMS Club' assists families with twins, and the centre does all it can to enable parents to gain the skills they require to return to work. It has been particularly successful in enabling a significant number of parents to access training. The centre celebrates achievements with the families, and ceremonies follow the successful award of accredited qualifications.

The centre works closely with the childminders and other childcare providers in the area, providing activities and training. All the childminders have been judged 'good' in their inspections. This ensures that the quality of childcare in the centre and in the villages is consistent and contributes fully to the rising levels of achievement at age five.

Overall provision is resulting in good outcomes, except in health. The centre provides opportunities for mothers to feed their babies, receive advice from a health visitor and attend confidential baby weighing sessions. However, there is not enough

provision to help mothers extend the time they breastfeed their babies or reduce the levels of obesity.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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| The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups | 2 |
| The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups | 2 |
| The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups | 2 |

How effective are the leadership and management?

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Good leadership, management, team and partnership working by all staff have contributed significantly to the centre's success in narrowing the achievement gap for children at age five. The actions of staff, together with the provision for adults who are involved in training, reflect its commitment to equality and diversity. The provision of services across the community enables more families to access them than might otherwise be the case. The centre ensures that groups do not form 'cliques' that are difficult to join, and activities take place at times agreed with the families. It works in cooperation with providers with expertise in special educational needs to enhance its provision.

The centre places safeguarding at the core of its work. Procedures and policies are reviewed regularly to evaluate their effectiveness and ensure that they are up to date. Staff training is matched to the needs of staff and the centre's priorities for development. Leaflets and notices around the centre inform families of their responsibilities to keep others safe, as well as the centre's responsibilities towards them. It works closely with its key partners to protect children who are subject to child protection plans and the Common Assessment Framework process. All who work in the centre, volunteer or visit have been checked for their suitability through the Criminal Records Bureau.

The centre provides good value for money. Parents say that they like to attend because it is welcoming, attractive to children, clean and well cared for. Its provision for all groups across the reach is promoted strongly through an attractive, informative website, direct invitations, open days, and coffee mornings. These underpin the centre's commitment to sustainability and continued good outcomes. However, it faces a period of uncertainty. Contracts for some agencies that support the centre, for instance Home-Start, end shortly. Without new agreements their continued contribution to family support is uncertain.

The centre manager and advisory board use data and rigorous self-evaluation processes to check its effectiveness, although this does not include all aspects over time. After consulting with parents and its partners, they set their own challenging

targets and priorities for development in the short and medium term. The local authority has very recently set general improvement points in its annual conversation with the centre, the first for two years. The lack of clarity in the overall arrangements for governance and accountability even in the short term makes it difficult for the centre to link its plans for the future to overall long-term strategic goals.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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| 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 | 2 |
| The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups | 2 |
| The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties | 2 |
| 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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose | 2 |
| 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 | 2 |

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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Litcham Children's Centre on 26–27 June 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We really enjoyed meeting you during our recent visit to the centre. Thank you for the contributions you made to the inspection. We understand that many of you

wanted to come and tell us about how much the centre has helped you. I am sorry we could not meet you all. Those of you we met told us how much you appreciate the centre. One of you said, 'This is the best thing ever to have happened to this village.' Another said, 'The provision is a godsend. Staff have helped our family through some really bad times and work things out for ourselves,' and another said, 'The centre has been a life saver. I have made many friends and am no longer confined to my home.'

We found that the centre is giving you the skills to make important changes to your lives. As many of you live some distance from the centre, it provides activities in the villages nearer to your homes. Some of you have taken over running some of the groups as you are really confident. The 'Allott-mums' are helping you to grow nourishing food at home and you enjoy cooking in the centre's superb kitchen. However, the health services do not provide sufficient data for the centre to support more of you in breastfeeding your children for longer, to reduce the number of five-year-olds who are overweight, and to support programmes for immunisation.

At the moment, almost two thirds of the people living in the area use the services of the centre. Staff are keen that more people use it. From the information they have, they know that not as many families who are single parents or who are out of work are using the centre. It has drawn up plans to help more of you to attend and to check how well it has helped you over time. Staff make sure that they listen to your views and make changes to the programme to suit your needs. For those in crisis, the staff help you to plan the steps you need to take to help you to resolve the problems, and support you along the way. If you cannot get to meetings or activities, staff can transport you. If you have a particular skill, staff help you to share it with others. For example, one of you advised others about dental health. Parenting courses are giving you the confidence to deal with your children's development and manage their behaviour. Many of you are also attending courses to gain qualifications to return to work or volunteer in the centre.

Some of the popular activities involve you taking part in visits out to 'hunt words in the woods', engaging in muddy activities at the museum, acting out stories with your children or making puppets with them. You also borrow story sacks to share books at home. These activities and the ways the centre is helping you to communicate clearly with your children are very successful. Children, when they are assessed at age five are doing well in their communication, language and literacy skills.

As you know, it was a bit of a shock to find that the new provider that was due to take over the centre and run it on behalf of the local authority at the end of June decided not to go ahead. Staff are continuing to help you all they can, and arrangements will carry on until the situation is resolved. However, it makes everyone feel uncertain.

We have asked the local authority to resolve the difficulties it faces following the withdrawal of the new provider as soon as possible. We have also asked that everyone is informed once decisions have been made.

We have also asked that the local authority, the health services and the centre work together to help more of you enjoy healthy lifestyles. If health services provided more information, the centre could help to increase the number of mothers breastfeeding to do so for longer. They could also help you to maintain healthy weights for your children and make the centre aware of the programmes for immunisations.

Staff at the centre are very keen to increase the number of people attending the centre and activities in the villages. They especially want to help more of you who are single parents or out of work make the changes you wish to make to your lives. We have asked them to introduce all the plans they have to do this.

We know that you really enjoy the activities the centre provides and appreciate the help that it gives you. We wish you all the very best for the future.

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