

# Children's Links

## Inspection report

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**Unique reference number:** 51147

**Name of lead inspector:** Tim Hanson HMI

**Last day of inspection:** 06 July 2012

**Type of provider:** Voluntary organisation

**Address:** Holland House  
Horncastle College  
Mareham Road  
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**Telephone number:** 01507 528300

## Information about the provider

1. Children's Links is a voluntary organisation limited by guarantee and a registered charity. Training is managed through the company's head office in Horncastle, Lincolnshire. Children's Links was established in 1993 through a Training and Enterprise Council initiative to support the development of out-of-school childcare. The organisation provides training through a workplace learning consortium and receives local authority funding and funding for its apprenticeships programmes from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). The organisation provides training nationally with the main focus in the East Midlands and South East. SFA funded training accounts for around 10% of Children's Links' business. Children's Links offers a range of childcare services through its Workforce and Sector Services and Childrens Services directorates.
2. A chief executive officer is head of the senior management team and reports to a board of trustees. The training team reports to a director of workforce and sector services. A business development manager, together with a team of 13 staff, are responsible for training and assessment. The inspection focused on the provider's subject area of child development and well-being.
3. Children's Links provides training on behalf of the following colleges:
  - Boston College (Child development and well-being)
  - City College Norwich

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2010/11
<b>Employer provision:</b> Apprenticeships	95 apprentices

## Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision		Grade 2
Capacity to improve		Grade 2
		Grade
Outcomes for learners		2
Quality of provision		2
Leadership and management		2
Safeguarding		2
Equality and diversity		2
Subject Area		Grade
Child development and well-being		2

## Overall effectiveness

4. Learners achieve well at Children's Links and enjoy their learning. Most learners continue with sustained employment and progress on to higher level qualifications. Learners achieve a broad range of work skills which employers value highly. Work with external partners provides a wide variety of good practice which helps improve training and benefits learners. Learners with additional learning needs are particularly well supported.
5. Learners feel very safe and safeguarding arrangements are particularly good. Staff receive regular training and updating in safeguarding requirements. Good strategic management by the organisation has led to improved financial performance and improved training resources, particularly in the investment and use of technology to enable learners and staff to monitor progress and performance better. Staff are highly committed and well-trained and are set measurable targets and objectives which are regularly reviewed. Equality and diversity are particularly well-understood by both staff and learners and are a key focus for the organisation. However, targets to widen participation of under-represented groups have not yet been achieved. Quality improvement is a main priority for Children's Links and issues from previous inspections and monitoring visits have been a focus of the quality improvement plan. Not enough learners and employers provide feedback on the quality of the provision

and this is an area to be improved. The self-assessment report is an accurate reflection of the quality of the provision.

## Main findings

- Learners make good progress towards achieving the goals in their individual learning plans. A high proportion of learners achieve their apprenticeship. The provision is managed flexibly and meets the needs of learners well, allowing the majority to make good progress and complete early. Portfolios are well organised.
- Many learners increase their confidence and develop good occupational and time management skills. They improve their employability skills well and take on extra responsibilities at work. Both the provider and employers successfully encourage learners to acquire additional qualifications whilst in training. Most learners on level 2 programmes progress to level 3. Many learners continue training after their apprenticeships.
- Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practices. They develop a good understanding of the welfare requirements in settings and their safeguarding responsibilities. Learners are able to accurately risk assess potential workplace hazards. They have a good understanding and awareness of safety considerations and are confident and competent to undertake risk assessments before play and learning activities.
- Learners make good contributions to the settings they work in and the wider community. They actively develop positive working relationships at their places of work. Learners encourage children to work productively together, to show consideration and patience during play. Learners are particularly effective in promoting spiritual and cultural understanding. For example, celebrating the different customs and religions such as Chinese New Year and Eid.
- Teaching and learning are good. Learners enjoy attending the workshops and increase their skills through well planned one-to-one teaching. Good use is made of a range of appropriate teaching methods to promote learning and progress. Training officers are well qualified and knowledgeable. Lesson plans have clear objectives but do not always record clearly how the learning will be tailored to the specific needs of individual learners.
- Assessment is well planned. Initial assessment is used effectively. Learners have a good understanding of programme requirements. Progress reviews are of good quality and held frequently. Feedback from training officers and employers is clear and ensures learners know how they might improve. Good support is given to the development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills. Children's Links recognises it needs to identify at risk learners earlier in order to help them complete their qualification.
- Children's Links is sensitive to the needs of learners and employers and assessments are arranged flexibly at times which suit them. Provision is coordinated well to ensure the programme complements the experiences of

learners in their early years' settings. Partnerships with employers, schools, childminders and community groups are developed and sustained well.

- Care, guidance and support are good. Learners appreciate the support and the way barriers to learning are removed. Good advice is given on further training and employment. Staff are always quickly available and very responsive. Learners know who to come to for support and trust staff with their concerns. Learners are well signposted to further personal support.
- Performance management of staff is highly effective and helps ensure learners achieve consistently well. Monitoring of staff is regular and targets are particularly relevant and measurable. These targets prioritise improvement in learners' achievements. The results of the observation of training, assessment and progress reviews form an integral part of individual performance management. Under-performance is quickly recognised and improvement plans agreed and implemented.
- Children's Links is involved in a wide range of partnership activity which enhances the organisations ability to develop its training programmes and grow its business. Leading roles are played in promoting and influencing national strategies by a number of staff and good practice is shared well both internally and externally.
- Equality and diversity are very effectively introduced to learners at induction and reinforced using innovative methods during learning sessions. All learners and staff have very high levels of understanding of equality and diversity issues. Initiatives are in place to widen participation, but these have not yet had a significant impact. Learners with additional learning needs are particularly well supported.
- Quality improvement and particularly development planning and self-assessment are highly effective. Children's Links regularly gathers feedback from learners and employers and uses the information well to inform important programme improvements. However despite incentivising the feedback process, percentages of returns on both learner and employer feedback are low.

### **What does Children's Links need to do to improve further?**

- Raise learner achievement rates where appropriate, by identifying early those students who are at risk of not completing their qualifications and then intervening to provide the necessary support.
- Record any specific needs of learners with additional needs on all lesson plans and ensure the teaching and activities are planned to meet these individual learner needs.
- Review the marketing of the apprenticeship programme to improve the participation of under-represented groups. Identify providers who have been particularly successful in this area to share good practice.

- Improve feedback return rates by exploring different ways of gathering the views of learners and employers and including feedback questionnaire return rates in staff performance targets.

### **Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors**

#### **What learners like:**

- the flexibility of staff
- the friendly, helpful and reliable staff
- the ability to put learning into practice
- the workshops
- being able to work at their own pace
- doing the training in their own time from home
- training at work
- being more aware of their role as a playgroup leader.

#### **What learners would like to see improved:**

- better availability of workshops
- more help with e-tracking.

### **Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors**

#### **What employers like:**

- training has improved staff confidence
- learners' understanding of workplace welfare requirements
- the good contact with the training officer
- the reliable and helpful staff
- regular updates on learners' progress.

#### **What employers would like to see improved:**

- availability of workshops at weekends
- questions in workbooks which can be confusing
- some of the referencing materials and other sources of information are not always contained within the workbooks.

## Main inspection report

### Capacity to make and sustain improvement

### Grade 2

6. Children's Links provision has improved considerably since the last inspection. Learner's rate of achievement of their learning goals has improved consistently. The proportion of learners achieving their apprenticeship frameworks has improved over the last three years and is now high. Learners sustain employment at the end of their apprenticeships and progress on to higher level qualifications. Data is analysed well to inform quality improvement with particular priority being given to the comparison of different learner groups. Feedback is regularly sought from learners and employers and used to improve provision. However response rates in both cases are low. Communication with staff is highly effective and the sharing of good practice regularly undertaken, leading to sustained improvement. Observation of training, progress reviews and assessments contribute greatly to overall quality improvement.
7. The performance management of staff is rigorous and effective. Target setting is highly effective and staff, as a result, pay particular attention to ensuring learners' achieve well. Targets and strategies to widen participation for under-represented groups are in place. However these have not yet been successfully met. Self-assessment is a key feature in Children's Links quality improvement cycle and is an inclusive process for staff, learners and employers. The resulting quality improvement plan is a key driver of improvement and is implemented systematically by staff.

### Outcomes for learners

### Grade 2

8. Apprentice achievement rates are consistently good. Learners, including those with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, make good progress towards achieving the goals in their individual learning plans. The provision is managed flexibly, allowing the majority of learners to complete early. Learners are well-motivated and enjoy their learning. Many increase their confidence and develop good occupational and time-management skills. Portfolios are appropriately structured and well organised and show that learners have well developed information technology skills.
9. Employers praise the high quality of work produced by learners and, in particular, their ability to work without supervision and their readiness to take on extra responsibilities at work. Both the provider and employers successfully encourage learners to acquire additional qualifications in for example paediatric first aid and undertake training in sign language and behaviour management. Many have secured sustainable employment with 90% still in employment after completing their qualifications. Most learners on level 2 programmes progress onto level 3 apprenticeships. Many learners continue training after their apprenticeships.

10. Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practices. They develop a good understanding of the welfare requirements in settings and know their safeguarding responsibilities. They have a good understanding and awareness of safety considerations and are confident and competent to undertake risk assessments before play and learning activities. Learners know the importance of multi-agency working to ensure children and vulnerable adults are fully protected and safeguarded.
11. Learners make good contributions to the settings they work in and the wider community. They actively develop positive working relationships at their places of work. Learners encourage children to work productively together and to show consideration and patience during play. They are particularly effective in promoting spiritual and cultural understanding, and designing and engaging in the celebrations of different customs and religions in the workplace, such as Chinese New Year and Eid. Learners have a good understanding of how to lead healthy lifestyles. Training officers work closely with learners and employers to provide effective support. Learners have a good understanding of issues such as benefits, housing and contraception.

## The quality of provision

## Grade 2

12. Teaching, learning and assessment are good. A range of highly appropriate teaching methods are used to promote learning and progress. Learners enjoy their workshop activity and one-to-one coaching. Visual aids are particularly helpful to learners and are used particularly well to improve numeracy. Activities are planned to ensure learners' skills and knowledge are built upon. Training officers have good teaching skills. Learners have access to good resources. Staff are well-qualified and have good occupational knowledge of children and babies and use it well to enliven their teaching. Lesson plans have clear objectives but do not always record clearly how the learning will be tailored to the specific needs of individual learners with additional requirements.
13. Initial assessment identifies learners' literacy and numeracy needs and the outcomes are used effectively to help ensure learners are on suitable programmes. Learners have a good awareness of the requirements of the apprenticeship framework. Assessment is timely and well-planned. Action points are recorded clearly and learners know what they need to do to progress. Their progress is tracked well, facilitated by the use of an electronic tracking system. The introduction of new tracking technology has greatly enhanced the monitoring of learners progress. Most learners use this well, for example to upload work and to check their progress. Progress reviews are managed well; they involve employers, give constructive feedback, and set challenging targets. The reviews are of good quality and held frequently. Good support is given to develop learners' literacy and numeracy skills which help them make progress in their programmes. Learners with dyslexia are well catered for and, where appropriate these learners are referred for a full assessment. The requirement



to recognise earlier than is done at present those learners who are at risk of not completing their apprenticeship has been recognised by Children's Links.

14. Learners and employers needs and interests are well met by training programmes which are provided at different levels. Learners appreciate being able to train and progress in their careers. Employers are a valued part of the training team and their views are incorporated well into the review process. Children's Links is sensitive to the needs of both learners and employers and assessment is arranged flexibly to meet these needs. Provision is coordinated well to complement learners' experiences in the workplace and learners and employers benefit from attending useful enrichment workshops.
15. Partnerships with employers, schools, childminders and community groups, are developed well and sustained over-time. Communication with employers is good. The good relationships Children's Links has help ensure the learners have access to good quality early-years settings. The provision is supporting the work of local communities well through the development of good quality childcare and playwork.
16. Care guidance and support are particularly good. Learner's understanding of safety and equal opportunities are promoted well during progress reviews. Provider staff are very supportive of the learners and able to refer learners to specialists who can provide help with a wide range of personal problems. Learners contact staff frequently and staff are quick to respond to queries. Progress reviews are of good quality and held frequently. Learners are often inspired by the individual support they receive.

## Leadership and management

## Grade 2

17. Staff are highly committed and well-trained. The performance management of staff is linked clearly to learners' achievements. The resulting processes have contributed greatly to learners' continued good performance and have focused the efforts of staff fully through the setting of particularly relevant and measurable individual targets. Staff performance is linked clearly to quality improvement. Staff development is a key organisational priority and a wide range of training activities is provided by Children's Links.
18. Staff have good networking skills and are involved with numerous external bodies and organisations. These skills and links have led to the establishment of extremely good partnerships and the sharing of good practice leading to programme improvements. Staff exert a strong influence on committees at a national level and assist in establishing sector policies. Senior managers work closely with the board of trustees who bring a good range of expertise to the organisation. Regular communication ensures trustees are kept well informed of organisational performance and developments. Staff at all levels work productively with the trustees to establish long-term business strategies and monitor annual business performance.

19. Safeguarding is a particularly high priority for Children's Links. Staff and board members are well informed. They receive regular training to above expected levels and regular updating through networking activity. Learners' understanding of both safeguarding and health and safety are good and regularly reinforced, with employers fully involved in all aspects, particularly so through the learners' progress review process. Risk assessments of employers' premises are carried out rigorously by highly competent staff and recorded carefully. Links with local childrens' safeguarding boards are in place and comprehensive safeguarding recording processes are in place, including central registration of staff Criminal Record Bureau checks. These checks are updated regularly.
20. Children's Links promote equality and diversity well. Learners and staff at Children's Links share a high level of understanding regarding equality and diversity issues. Staff have regular updating sessions on all aspects of equality and diversity and use innovative methods to teach and reinforce learners' understanding. Good analysis of data has led to a clear focus being given to ensure that all learner groups progress well. A range of innovative marketing initiatives is being used to widen participation and in particular to encourage males into the child care sector. Ambitious targets have been set to widen participation; however these have not yet been achieved.
21. Various methods of collecting the views of learners and employers are being tried. Where feedback is forthcoming it is responded to well. However, too few learners respond to the on-programme and exit questionnaires. Children's Links are aware of this and are using a different questionnaire format to encourage greater response, however with limited success. Financial incentives have been introduced to encourage a greater response.
22. Self-assessment is a well established process within Children's Links and is a pivotal part of the quality improvement cycle. Learners' outcomes are a key focus of self-assessment and underpin most aspects of the subsequent quality improvement plan. Inspectors agreed with the judgements in the self-assessment report. Areas requiring improvement identified by inspectors had been identified by Children's Links and work is in progress to make improvements in these areas.
23. The value for money provided by Children's Links is good. Learners achieve well and good use is made of staff and learning resources. Trustees and senior management have a clear vision and focus for the success of the organisation and use their expertise well to produce good results and a good working environment for all.

## Information about the inspection

24. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's business development manager, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the funding body, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's quality monitoring inspection, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
25. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gain the views of learners and employers. They also looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed for the provider. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in the subject area the provider offers.

## Record of Main Findings (RMF)

## Children's Links

**Learning types: 14 – 16:** Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades <b>using the 4 point scale</b> 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	Employer responsive
<b>Approximate number of enrolled learners</b>		
Full-time learners	44	44
Part-time learners	0	0
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	2	
<b>Outcomes for learners</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2	
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	2	
How well do learners progress?	2	
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	1	
How safe do learners feel?	2	
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	2	
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	2	
<b>Quality of provision</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2	
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2	
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2	
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2	
<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2	
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	2	
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2	
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2	
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	3	
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	2	
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2	

\*where applicable to the type of provision

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