

Inspection report for Foley House Children's Centre

Local authority	Suffolk
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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, members of staff and professionals from key partner agencies. Discussions were held with parents, members of the advisory board and representatives from the local authority. Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Foley House Children's Centre is a phase two centre situated in the market town of Newmarket, Suffolk. It covers a large mainly rural area with pockets of deprivation. This includes an area which is located in one of the 30% most deprived parts of the country. The centre shares the premises with an adult training agency and the Citizens Advice Bureau. It also delivers services from three outreach venues, Gazeley Village Hall, Studlands Park Sports and Social Club and Exning Church Hall. The centre is part of the integrated services provision for the children under 11 years in the West locality. The centre manager has responsibility for two other children's centres; Brandon Children's Centre and the Lark Children's Centre at Mildenhall, which together with Foley House form the Forest Heath cluster. She is supported by an advisory board for the cluster and a cluster parents' forum.

The children's centre has 2,121 children aged from birth to five years living in its reach area. The local population is mostly White British (85.7%) with a growing percentage of minority ethnic groups including Asian and Eastern Europeans. Services delivered by the staff team and partners include health services, family support, a range of play activities and outreach provision. A small number of children in the area come from homes where no-one is in work. When they start early years provision, the majority of children have skills, knowledge and abilities that are below those expected for their age.

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

4

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

4

Main findings

Foley House Children's Centre cannot demonstrate that it is meeting the needs of the families in its area; its overall effectiveness is inadequate. Leadership, management and governance have significant weaknesses. Self-evaluation is descriptive rather than analytical and data are not used effectively to ensure that those who are using services have the greatest need. Senior managers do not provide a clear sense of direction and decision-making lacks accountability. Key areas for development are not prioritised and targets lack challenge. These weaknesses clearly identify the centre's inadequate capacity for sustained improvement and inadequate value for money.

Despite the inadequacies, some families are helped to keep themselves and their children safe; improve their health; and develop positive relationships. However, outcomes for families are inadequate overall because not enough families improve their educational achievements or enhance their economic well-being.

Children and families that use the centre enjoy the activities. As one parent told inspectors, 'If I didn't have a group to go to, I would never get out of my pyjamas.' The safety of children and families is important to staff and clear safeguarding arrangements ensure the safety and well-being of those using the centre. Some families who have experienced domestic abuse are well supported through their engagement with the 'Freedom Programme' and 'Nurture Group'.

The centre provides a welcoming environment for children and families. Provision overall is satisfactory, although there is insufficient use made of data about the different target groups in the area. The majority of activities are offered as universal provision and are well attended. However, it is often the same families that attend multiple sessions. A few activities are specifically aimed at those families in most need of support, such as infant massage.

There are satisfactory opportunities for children and families to play together in activities such as 'Creepy Crawlers', and 'Ready Steady Play'. However, any progress made is not recorded and user and staff evaluations of the activities are too general. A small proportion of parents find employment or go on to further training as a result

of their experience with the centre. However, the centre does not routinely record parents' educational achievements, or keep a check on their success in gaining employment.

Health outcomes for families in the area are satisfactory and beginning to improve. Staff at the centre direct users to a range of health services and help parents to adopt healthier lifestyles through activities such as 'Cook and Eat' and 'Walkers and Talkers'. Families treat each other and staff with respect. Some parents are involved in decision making in the centre through their roles on the parents' forum and the advisory board.

The centre has weak arrangements for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. This means the centre cannot demonstrate it is supporting the families who are most in need. Integrated working through the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and Team Around the Child (TAC) processes help some children and families to improve their circumstances, particularly in times of crisis. The support and guidance for families using the centre is satisfactory; some parents receive effective help in times of crisis. One parent told inspectors, 'The children's centre is there when you have moments of doubt.'

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Devise systems for keeping track of information about children and families who use the centre's service to measure the difference that services make to improving educational achievements and economic well-being.
- Ensure that the local authority is clear about its role in driving improvements and ensuring the centre has improved capacity to improve; provides improved value for money; and secures improved outcomes for the most vulnerable families.
- Improve the quality and effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels by:
 - improving the rigour and effectiveness of self-evaluation to inform and set ambitious targets for improvement
 - prioritising actions to ensure key areas of weakness are addressed
 - making better use of data to identify and target those who are not using the centre but who could benefit from its services
 - increasing the number of different families the centre works with
 - ensuring the advisory board members undertake appropriate training to enable them to challenge the centre robustly against measurable targets and ensure the centre makes rapid improvements.

How good are outcomes for families?

4

Outcomes for children and families are inadequate overall because the centre is not able to demonstrate that children and families are making progress from their starting points. There is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that vulnerable families

in the area are kept safe, or that parents are improving their skills, economic stability and independence. In the sessions observed some parents and children made progress in their learning. However, there were no systems in place to record their achievements or build on their learning. As a result, activities lacked purpose and did not contribute towards improving the educational development of both children and adults.

Families that are engaged in activities have fun and play together and some sessions such as 'Ready Steady Play' and 'Free Funky Fun for Under Fives', are planned broadly in line with the Early Years Foundation Stage guidance. Children attending the 'Tea Timers' activities are introduced to routines that will support their transition into school. There has been a small reduction in the achievement gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and the rest. However, at 60%, the proportion of children in the area achieving 78 scale points or more on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is below the national average.

The centre currently has one community parent volunteer and plans to encourage more parents to take up volunteering opportunities. Centre staff direct parents to training opportunities but is not following this up to record longer-term achievements and whether parents meet their goals. Case study evidence provides information on one or two parents who have gained employment as a result of support from the children's centre. However, there are insufficient parents improving their skills and economic well-being as a result of their engagement with the centre.

Parents using the centre feel safe and well supported. However, some families are turned away from the centre when activities are full and staff are unaware of whether these are families who are most in need. Staff provide positive role models so that parents know how to keep themselves and their children safe. Safety events held at the centre led by the fire service and the police give parents an improved understanding of safety issues in the community and at home. A few parents have made their homes safer for their families by using equipment such as safety gates which have been loaned by the children's centre. Despite these strategies, leaders and managers do not have any information of its impact on reducing the number of children requiring emergency hospital admission. Therefore, it is unable to demonstrate whether it has made a positive impact on keeping children and families most at risk safe.

Some parents have successfully completed parenting courses at the centre. Women who have been subject to domestic abuse gain confidence and develop healthy relationships through their engagement with relevant support programmes. Centre staff are involved in the Common Assessment Framework and Team Around the Child processes which support the improved welfare and well-being of families. Case studies of children subject to child protection plans, including looked after children, show evidence of improved outcomes because of the effective support they receive from the centre.

Health outcomes for families in the area are satisfactory. Health professionals

provide services from the centre and staff signpost parents to a range of additional services. Activities such as 'Cook and Eat', and 'Walkers and Talkers' help parents adopt a healthier lifestyle. Breastfeeding mothers told inspectors that the centre is the one place in Newmarket they feel able to go and not be made to feel uncomfortable when they are feeding their baby. While the number of mothers initiating breastfeeding in the area at 73.9% is a fraction below the national average, the proportion of mothers breastfeeding at six-to-eight weeks is above the national average. Pregnant mothers and their families needing additional support are identified early on through the Ante-Natal Healthy Child Collaborative process. Centre staff attend these meetings and have started working with parents who have been identified as needing additional support. The level of obesity amongst Reception-age children in the area at 7.2% is below the national average.

Only a handful of parents are involved with the parents' forum and the advisory board. Parents are insufficiently involved in the governance and decision-making processes of the centre, although some parents contribute to decision-making at a practical level by deciding what activities they want in sessions. The centre actively encourages parents to engage socially in the coffee bar. Some parents have continued to meet away from the centre and have set up a network of mums from different cultures that meet together in one another's homes. The relationships between parents, children and staff are very positive. Parents are beginning to recognise the centre's role within the community. For example, some parents receive appropriate outreach work. The coffee bar is starting to become a place for families to meet and some families are involved in community events through the centre.

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	4
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	4
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	4
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	4

How good is the provision?

4

The provision is inadequate. This is because data are not used appropriately to inform the centre about the different target groups in the area. Centre staff do not know if the services they provide are benefiting families with the greatest needs. The majority of activities at the children's centre are universal open to all on a 'first come,

first served' basis and are well attended. However, when sessions are full, parents are turned away, and no record is kept of who these families are and no follow up is done. At 28%, the number of families in regular contact with the centre is low.

Staff plan activities which encourage children and their parents to play and have fun together. One mum said, 'It gives me a routine and a structure in the day.' However, the lack of personal assessment of each family's needs means the centre staff do not track or monitor the impact of learning or training opportunities on supporting and improving parents' and children's development. Resources and activities are appropriately age-related and fully engage children with the support of adults. One parent said how she particularly liked the songs and had been doing them at home with her son, who really liked 'Row, row the boat ashore'. Staff recognise children's and parents' achievements in the session and provide encouragement for them to try new things. However, this does not lead to setting challenging individual targets to help all children and families achieve well.

Trusting relationships exist between staff and parents. Parents see the centre as a place to go to for information and support. Centre staff direct a few families to the on-site Citizens Advice Bureau for a range of information, including benefits advice. A housing and debt advice service is also provided at a monthly 'Drop in' and families are supported to access many health-related services. One parent said, 'The centre and staff have been a real life-line for me.' Case study evidence shows how some families who find themselves in a crisis situation are able to get the support they need to get themselves back on their feet. Staff and managers have created a welcoming environment at the centre where families know they can drop in, find someone to talk to who won't judge them and feel cared for.

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	4
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	4
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

4

Governance and accountability arrangements are inadequate overall. Senior managers recognised the need to support the centre manager to undertake a self-evaluation of the work of the centre. However, the evaluation processes remain weak and written self-evaluation is not incisive and is descriptive rather than analytical. In 2011, and again in 2012, the local authority's reviews identified the need for the centre to 'measure activity, impact and progress, specifically for the most vulnerable groups', yet work on these aspects only started this year. Targets included in the 2012-2013 Development Plan are not prioritised or sufficiently challenging, and are not closely monitored to demonstrate progress.

There is an advisory board which has responsibility for the three children’s centres in the Forest Heath cluster. A few partners are represented on the board along with one or two parents. The manager is working hard to attract more members to the board and the newly-elected chair of the group is keen to make it more effective. Currently the advisory board does not provide enough critical challenge, or hold the centres to account for the impact of the work they do. Given the inadequate outcomes, the value for money provided by the centre is inadequate.

The arrangements for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults are inadequate. Centre staff do not sufficiently assess the needs of local families and target appropriate services at those identified as being most at risk. As a result, managers are unable to demonstrate the work of the centre reaches the families most in need. Effective risk assessment procedures are followed and there are clear recruitment and vetting procedures for staff. Centre staff collaborate effectively with other key agencies to reduce the risk of harm to children known to the centre. Multi-agency working ensures that some families experiencing crisis or in complex need, including domestic violence, are supported through a package of individualised support.

The promotion of equality and diversity is inadequate overall. The work of the centre is not having sufficient impact on narrowing the achievement gap and is not regularly engaging with 72% of families in its reach area. Consequently, insufficient families from all key target groups are accessing services and their individual needs are not appropriately assessed and planned for. Parents who attend the centre say that they are always made to feel welcome and the coffee bar area is a popular meeting place for parents who need time away from home. The centre is well used by a relatively small but representative group of children and families. However, the large majority of families in the area do not access provision. Agreement has been reached with Portage to jointly deliver guided play sessions for children with disabilities or special needs which is due to commence shortly. Consequently, there are currently few services for children with individual needs.

Partnerships with some agencies are effective and are underpinned with service level agreements. Parents benefit from the additional opportunities provided by partnership working. However, more work remains to fully engage with some partners, for example, adult training providers, in order to meet the personal and educational needs of families. Centre staff regularly seek the views of the centre’s current users. A concerted effort by staff to increase membership of the parents’ forum is beginning to have a positive impact and this is reflected in the slightly increased numbers. However, numbers are still too low to reflect the views of all centre users.

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	4
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets	4

which secure improvement in outcomes	
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	4
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	4
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	4
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

Not applicable.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Foley House Children's Centre on 14 and 15 March 2013. We judged the centre as inadequate overall.

We would like to thank those of you who met with us during the inspection, agreed to let us sit in on your groups, or spoke to us about the centre. We were very grateful for your help with the inspection and were interested to hear your views.

We know how much you enjoy coming to the centre and how much you appreciate what the staff do for you. Some of you attend lots of activities. However, we are aware that a significant number of families in the local area do not regularly access the centre or benefit from its services. We have asked the centre to make sure that people who do not come to the centre very often are encouraged to do so.

We noticed how much you and your children enjoy yourselves at the centre during activities. However, at the moment, staff do not record the learning and progress you and your children make during sessions. This means that staff do not help you to build on this and help to further improve your learning and personal development.

We have asked the staff to do this. We have also asked them to record when you have completed training and learnt new skills. This is so that the centre can help to assess your on-going learning and development needs and provide relevant services to support this.

We do know that you feel safe in the centre and that some of you are happy about the additional support you receive when you were going through a difficult time. We also noted the care you show for one another and for each other's children. Some of you have adopted healthier lifestyles as a result of the activities you have been part of and the advice you have been given.

A few of you are on the parents' forum and we know that staff are trying to encourage more of you to join. The advisory board oversees the work of the children's centres in Forest Heath. It is not yet doing an effective job in monitoring the work of the centre and ensuring it continually improves. We would like advisory board members to understand their role in asking the centre manager challenging questions about the centre's work and ensuring it provides services which are closely matched to local families' needs. We have asked the local authority to provide relevant support to the advisory board members to enable them to do this and to help the centre to quickly improve and make a positive difference to a greater number of local families.

We note from our conversations with parents and the centre staff that not many parents and partner agencies are involved in making decisions about the centre's work. We have asked the centre's leaders to address this. This will mean that services are adapted in accordance with what local families really need.

At present, centre staff do not make effective use of the information they have to plan services that meet the needs of all families in the area, particularly those who most need the centre's services. The centre is not prioritising the actions required to improve services and staff are not checking closely enough to make sure things are improving. We have asked the local authority managers to ensure that centre staff are supported to do this much better in the future. Procedures for reviewing the centre's work are not sufficiently rigorous. This means that the centre staff and the local authority do not know what they do well and what they need to improve. We have asked the local authority to support managers and staff to do this much better. Staff work hard to help you improve your lives, and they try to make themselves available to help you with advice and information that you may need. They work with other agencies too, so that you are provided with as many services as possible. When they are unable to help you themselves, they know where to direct you. It is clear that for many of you, being able to come to the centre is important for your emotional well-being and being able to meet with friends and socialise in the coffee bar area is an important part of that.

Once again, thank you for your willingness to talk to us. We wish you all the best for the future.

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