

(Acle) Marshes Children's Centre

The Library, Bridewell Lane, Acle, Norfolk, NR13 3RA

Inspection dates

Previous inspection date

17–18 June 2014

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	Previous inspection:		
		Not applicable	
Access to services by young children and families		Good	2
The quality of practice and services		Requires improvement	3
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is a centre that requires improvement. It is not good because:

- A minority of workless families and those from ethnic minority backgrounds are not yet engaging with the centre.
- There are too few opportunities or services in place to enhance the learning, skills and employability of parents, especially those who are out of work.
- The tracking of children's achievement over the short and longer term is under-developed.
- The quality of case files is not good enough due to the lack of consistency in the information being kept and other record keeping is occasionally affected because some staff have difficulties in completing paperwork due to time pressures.
- Leadership held an overly positive view of the quality and impact of services until recently and some management systems were under-developed.
- Parents are not well enough involved in decision-making; none are represented on the advisory board and the parents' forum is currently inactive.

It has the following strengths:

- Access to services is good overall because the very large majority of most target groups, including children and families living in disadvantaged communities, have regular contact with the centre. The centre is increasingly successful in ensuring that all new births are registered.
- Strong partnerships, particularly with health professionals, underpin the good support work with children and families, who benefit from well-coordinated, timely help.
- Self-evaluation processes are now rigorous and accurate. Staff value the supervision arrangements which link closely to their appraisal and professional development.
- Leaders' robust action planning, challenging targets and close monitoring of performance by the local authority support the centre's capacity in building for better effectiveness, and as a result the centre is improving.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase the engagement of workless families with young children and those from ethnic minority backgrounds in appropriate and relevant services.
- Develop volunteering opportunities and the services available to enhance the learning, skills and employability of parents, especially those who are out of work.
- Sharpen the planning of sessions so that intended outcomes are clear, and establish robust systems to assess and track how well target children progress in their learning and development both during centre activities and when they go to nursery.
- Improve the quality of case files by setting out clear guidance on the standard expected, and monitor practice regularly to ensure that early help is always recorded accurately and clearly.
- Extend parents' involvement in governance and develop the role of the 'Parents' Champion'.

Information about this inspection

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

This inspection was carried out by three Additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with staff, parents, partners, officers of the local authority, lead partner, members of the advisory board, chair of governors, childminders and officers from the local authority.

The inspectors visited three outreach activities held at Acle Recreational Hall; Great Plumstead Village Hall and Brundall Memorial Hall. Two observations were undertaken jointly with the centre manager.

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

Inspection team

Christine Field, Lead inspector

Additional inspector

Anthony Mundy

Additional inspector

Ann Taylor

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Acle is a market village set beside the Norfolk Broads, surrounded by rural villages to the north and south and by more urban development to the west bordering the city of Norwich. The centre's reach area covers approximately 100 square miles. It offers a range of services for families and children under five years, which are run from the centre and a number of community venues, including Acle Recreational Hall, Great Plumstead Village Hall, Brundall Memorial Hall, Lingwood Village Hall, Acle library, South Walsham Village Hall and Reedham Village Hall.

The centre opened in 2009 and in March 2011 moved into the library buildings in Acle which provides an office hub, a reception area, toilet facilities, a multi-purpose room, garden and consultation room. The office area is shared with the library staff. The management of the centre was contracted to Caister Infant, Nursery School and Children's Centre in October 2012. The school also provides governance of the centre, supported by an advisory board. The centre manager of Caister Children's Centre is temporarily overseeing the day-to-day management of this centre since the Acle coordinator very recently left her post.

At the time of the inspection there were 1,011 children under five years of age living within the reach area. The reach area is mixed economically and socially, with Freethorpe, Reedham and Little/Great Plumstead being the most disadvantaged overall. Most families are White British but increasing numbers from Eastern European backgrounds are moving into the area. Data shows that 16% of children live in homes where no one is working. Children's skills and knowledge on entry to early years provision varies but is generally at the level expected for their age.

Target groups identified by the centre include: children and families living in the three most disadvantaged areas; young parents; children living in workless households and children from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Good

- The very large majority of most target groups, including children and families living in disadvantaged communities, have regular contact with the centre. However, the level of engagement of workless families and those from ethnic minority backgrounds in activities is not at the same high level as for other target groups.
- Actions being taken by leaders to meet the challenging targets set by the local authority and included in the development plan are improving the centre's reach into its diverse and widespread community. Useful work is on-going to find out why some families, including those reluctant to do so, are not yet engaging in services.
- The strong partnership with midwives and health visitors is building good links with expectant parents, and has resulted in 75% of children being registered with the centre within two months of their birth. In the last four months this has risen to 100%.
- A monthly team meeting, attended by family support workers, health visitors, midwives, the linked social worker and the parent support advisor, enables good communication and information sharing and facilitates early identification of children and families who most need support.
- Most eligible two, three and four year-olds are taking up their free education at good or better quality settings. The centre knows that 95% of children due to start school in September are accessing pre-school provision, and has prioritised those that are not for an outreach visit to support them to be ready for school.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- A range of relevant services is provided; community venues are used to widen access, particularly in areas of highest need. Good use of data and effective analysis of local needs helps shape the programme of activities. However, the systems in place to check on quality and impact are patchy at best and as such require improvement.
- The support provided by staff for CV writing, Jobcentre Plus advice café and courses such as 'Making the most of your money' helps families prepare for work or get to grips with managing a tight budget. One volunteer is currently giving active support to centre activities whilst studying for a degree. However, the take up of adult education and skills training, particularly by workless families, is generally low.
- Some good support is given to young parents at a fortnightly group specifically for under 25s. Help in meeting travel costs and the healthy lunch provided demonstrate the centre's commitment to reducing inequalities.
- Children enjoy 'Stay and Play' groups run at various locations, and parents value the welcome and high quality resources provided by the staff. However, the planning of sessions is too broad-brush, and because intended outcomes are not clear, assessments and recorded observations, also lack sharp focus. This makes it hard to see the effect of these services in improving the outcomes for target families.
- Family support work is effective in building enduring, trusting relationships with families facing particular challenges in their lives. Case files include a range of information with some using a 'distance travelled' tool to show what benefit the support given to families is having. Others have

'case study summaries' which include a section on 'lessons learnt'. Few have a contents page and most are not well organised. Leaders have very recently monitored the files and have rightly identified these shortcomings.

- Health outcomes are good and improving, and the 2013 results of children's assessments at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are well above the level seen nationally. Some 61% of children reached a good level of development. However, the centre is not working closely enough with partners to see how well the children who accessed centre services achieve when compared to others.
- A high number of families attend first aid training and dental health awareness sessions and as a result increase their understanding of how to care for their children. Evaluations show that 100% felt more confident to deliver first aid following the course and 94% were more aware of safety issues when looking after their children. Such activities contribute positively to the well-being, health and safety of children.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Leadership has recently changed, and the senior team is using the opportunity to have a detailed look at what is going well and which aspects of the centre's work requires development. The team's self-evaluation of the centre's effectiveness is searching and accurate. The new plan in place to drive improvement has demanding deadlines and measurable targets to assist the pace at which actions are leading to positive change.
- Staff morale is good; the team are supportive of one another and keen to do their best for children and families. They appreciate the new direction to their work and say that supervision arrangements are working well: they are now being used to re-visit performance targets and staff training needs.
- There is close monitoring of the budget and effective management of other resources, including premises. The staffing structure is under scrutiny by leaders with a view to improving efficiency, particularly in record-keeping, and ensuring that all aspects of the centre's work become 'good' as soon as possible.
- The local authority keeps a close eye on the centre's performance through quarterly visits, data checks and the annual conversation. Monitoring reports provide a clear picture of how well the centre is doing. The effective use of this information is assisting leadership in increasing registrations and the proportion of target groups in contact with the centre.
- Governance is well established, with lines of responsibility between the governing body and advisory board clearly understood. The chair of governors forms part of the senior leadership team and has close involvement in monitoring and development. The advisory board meets regularly, and comprises a range of partners who have good attendance. However, parents are not represented on the advisory board and the parents' forum is currently inactive.
- Two 'Parents Champions' have volunteered to help market the centre's services and be available should any parents want to share their views. Their role is not altogether clear and there are missed opportunities to link what they do more strongly with the advisory board. The parents involved are keen to further develop their role in going forward.
- Safeguarding policy, procedures and practice are effective. The recently introduced protocol between social care and children's centres has been implemented effectively to ensure looked after children, children who are subject to child protection plans and children in need are all known to the centre.

The Family Support Process (FSP) is used well which, together with strong multi-agency partnerships, reduces the risk of harm to children.

- Parents who use the centre's services have good levels of satisfaction.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and, as a result, inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.
Grade 2	Good	Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children's wellbeing and achieve the stated outcomes for families.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.
Grade 4	Inadequate	The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services.

Centre details

Unique reference number	21942
Local authority	Norfolk
Inspection number	442867
Managed by	The governing body of Caister Infant, Nursery School and Children's Centre on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1,011
Centre leader	Jenny Cuthbert
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01493 752950
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