

INSPECTION REPORT

Children's Links

15 October 2004



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

CHILDREN'S LINKS

Grading

Inspectors use a seven-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of learning sessions. The descriptors for the seven grades are:

- *grade 1 - excellent*
- *grade 2 - very good*
- *grade 3 - good*
- *grade 4 - satisfactory*
- *grade 5 - unsatisfactory*
- *grade 6 - poor*
- *grade 7 - very poor.*

Inspectors use a five-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of provision in occupational/curriculum areas and Jobcentre Plus programmes. The same scale is used to describe the quality of leadership and management, which includes quality assurance and equality of opportunity. The descriptors for the five grades are:

- *grade 1 - outstanding*
- *grade 2 - good*
- *grade 3 - satisfactory*
- *grade 4 - unsatisfactory*
- *grade 5 - very weak.*

The two grading scales relate to each other as follows:

SEVEN-POINT SCALE	FIVE-POINT SCALE
grade 1	grade 1
grade 2	
grade 3	grade 2
grade 4	grade 3
grade 5	grade 4
grade 6	grade 5
grade 7	

Adult Learning Inspectorate

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) was established under the provisions of the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* to bring the inspection of all aspects of adult learning and work-based learning within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- work-based learning for all people over 16
- provision in further education colleges for people aged 19 and over
- **learndirect** provision
- Adult and Community Learning
- training funded by Jobcentre Plus
- education and training in prisons, at the invitation of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons.

Inspections are carried out in accordance with the *Common Inspection Framework* by teams of full-time inspectors and part-time associate inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work which they inspect. All providers are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

Overall judgement

Where the overall judgement is that the provision is adequate, only those aspects of the provision which are less than satisfactory will be reinspected.

Provision will normally be deemed to be inadequate where:

- more than one third of published grades for occupational/curriculum areas, **or**
- leadership and management are judged to be less than satisfactory.

This provision will be subject to a full reinspection.

The final decision as to whether the provision is inadequate rests with the Chief Inspector of Adult Learning. A statement as to whether the provision is adequate or not is included in the summary section of the inspection report.

INSPECTION REPORT

Children's Links

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INSPECTION REPORT

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVIDER

1. Children's Links is a voluntary organisation, limited by guarantee, with charitable trust status. The company's main office is in Horncastle, Lincolnshire, and it has another office in Lincoln. Children's Links was established in 1993 through a Training and Enterprise Council initiative to support the development of out-of-school childcare. Children's Links became an assessment centre in 2001. The company provides training for national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and a range of qualifications specific to the sector. Training is funded by Lincolnshire and Rutland Learning and Skills Council, the European Social Fund (ESF) and early years development and childcare partnership.

2. A chief executive officer is head of the management team and reports to a board of trustees. The company has 62 staff who form teams responsible for various aspects of the company, including organisational support functions and project work streams. One of these teams, comprising nine members of staff, is responsible for training and assessment.

SCOPE OF PROVISION

Health, social care & public services

3. There are 57 learners on training programmes in playwork. Twelve learners are working towards modern apprenticeship frameworks in playwork. Of these, six are advanced modern apprentices and six are foundation modern apprentices. There are 45 learners enrolled on programmes funded by the ESF. All of these learners are working towards playwork qualifications. ESF programmes include 18 learners working towards a certificate in playwork, 10 on the Everyone can Play programme, 14 working towards an NVQ at level 2 in playwork, and three working towards key skills. Children's Links provides training sessions at a variety of locations including Horncastle, and Beech House in Lincoln. These sessions are available to all providers of playwork sessions for children in the county. Learners are either employed or have a work placement in a range of playwork settings including afterschool, homework clubs and playschemes. Assessment takes place every month in the workplace. Progress reviews take place every 12 weeks.

ABOUT THE INSPECTION

Number of inspectors	3
Number of inspection days	12
Number of learner interviews	26
Number of staff interviews	22
Number of employer interviews	9
Number of locations/sites/learning centres visited	10
Number of visits	10

OVERALL JUDGEMENT

4. The quality of the provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. More specifically, Children's Links' leadership and management are satisfactory. The company's approach to equality of opportunity is good and quality assurance is satisfactory. Training in health, social care and public services is satisfactory.

GRADES

grade 1 = outstanding, grade 2 = good, grade 3 = satisfactory, grade 4 = unsatisfactory, grade 5 = very weak

Leadership and management		3
Contributory grades:		
Equality of opportunity		2
Quality assurance		3

Health, social care & public services		3
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Playwork		
- Work-based learning for young people	57	3

KEY FINDINGS

Achievement and standards

5. Learners on playwork programmes make good progress and achieve qualifications. Some learners on modern apprenticeship programmes are making slower progress than expected for the time they have been in training. **Retention rates are good for all training programmes.** Learners' work is satisfactory. Learners develop useful skills in the workplace.

Quality of education and training

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Health, social care & public services	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	3
Total	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	3

6. Assessment practices are good. There is clear and detailed preparation for the assessment process. Assessment covers the underlying principles and values of playwork. Learners are supported effectively by personal assessors who are available to them at flexible times and help them with social, emotional and academic problems.

7. Teaching is satisfactory. Resources are suitable for the programmes and are available to all learners. A range of programmes is provided to meet the needs of learners and employers.

8. There is insufficient identification and support for learners' literacy, numeracy and language support needs. Not all learners' needs are identified and staff do not have suitable qualifications to provide support.

9. There are insufficient links between on- and off-the-job training. Not all learners have the same opportunities to access training. Employers are not always aware of the progress learners are making but they do provide good support in most cases.

Leadership and management

10. Children's Links has a good business planning process which includes a 10-year strategic plan and a one-year business plan. The plan has a clear focus on training.

11. Staff development is very good with a thorough appraisal system and strong links between the business plan and training requirements. Staff are well qualified and have extra training through relevant short courses.

12. Promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a clear, well-written policy which covers all the relevant legislation. Learners are given an adapted version of the

CHILDREN'S LINKS

policy and their understanding of it is monitored. Learners and employers have a satisfactory awareness of equal opportunities topics.

13. Communications are satisfactory. Regular meetings are minuted but sometimes are not sufficiently detailed or do not assign individuals responsibility for actions. The use and analysis of data are insufficient to enable improvements to the provision. Learners' progress is discussed in meetings but staff do not have access to relevant data relating to all their learners. This weakness was identified by the company in the self-assessment process.

14. Children's Links uses feedback from learners and employers effectively. The company responds to any queries in writing. Quality assurance is satisfactory overall.

15. **The self-assessment report does not contain sufficient detail and is inaccurate in places.** There are too few links between the text of the report and the identified strengths and weaknesses of the provision.

Leadership and management

Strengths

- good business planning process
- good staff development
- good promotion of equality and diversity
- very effective use of feedback from learners and employers

Weaknesses

- insufficient use and analysis of data to enable improvements to the provision
- insufficiently detailed self-assessment report

Health, social care & public services

Playwork

Strengths

- good progression and achievement rates on most programmes
- effective individual support for learners
- effective assessment practice

Weaknesses

- slow progress towards completion of modern apprenticeship frameworks
- insufficient identification and support for learners' literacy and numeracy needs
- insufficient links between on- and off-the-job training

WHAT LEARNERS LIKE ABOUT CHILDREN'S LINKS:

- the support they receive from assessors
- the additional workshops and courses offered
- cluster group meetings
- learning at work
- the support they receive from employers

WHAT LEARNERS THINK CHILDREN'S LINKS COULD IMPROVE:

- the number of training opportunities offered
- the training allowance

KEY CHALLENGES FOR CHILDREN'S LINKS:

- maintain a high level of support for learners
- improve monitoring and analysis of learners' progress
- further integrate training processes with good business planning process.
- establish an effective way of identifying and supporting learners' literacy, numeracy and language needs
- improve progression and achievement rates

DETAILED INSPECTION FINDINGS

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 3

Strengths

- good business planning process
- good staff development
- good promotion of equality and diversity
- very effective use of feedback from learners and employers

Weaknesses

- insufficient use and analysis of data to enable improvements to the provision
- insufficiently detailed self-assessment report

16. Children's Links has a good business planning process. The company has a 10-year strategic plan and a one-year business plan. The one-year business plan is clear and comprehensive. The plan includes finance and resource requirements and provides a clear strategic direction for the company. The board of trustees sets the framework for the business and strategic plans and detailed information for these documents is provided by the teams. There is a clear focus on training. Children's Links effectively consults external organisations that the company works with to develop the content of these plans. Once agreed by the senior management team, the board of trustees then approves the business plan. It is referred back to the organisational teams and provides a useful tool to use as a basis for individual team members' appraisal targets. The business plan also includes a number of organisational targets linked to learners' needs. The senior management team and the board of trustees monitor these targets every three months. Children's Links has recently implemented a development plan, which is linked to the business plan, containing a number of measures intended to make significant improvements to the company's work practices and procedures. The actions in the development plan are designed to benefit learners, such as the system to monitor learners' progress. However, it is too early to judge the impact of these changes.

17. Staff development is very good. The company has carried out a full staff skills audit. There is a thorough staff appraisal system. There are strong links between identified staff training requirements and the business plan targets. The training identified is delivered in a clear timeframe relevant to the individual's and organisation's needs. This has, in a few instances, meant that some staff have been supported through intense periods of individual development, typically following promotion into new roles. Staff are well qualified for their roles. All staff have had recent and updated equal opportunities training. Many staff have received extra training related to child protection or on topics such as autism or behaviour management.

18. A range of suitable resources including books, handouts and websites are available

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to learners inside and outside of the centre. Monitoring of their use is informal and, despite marketing, the central resource centre is not well used by learners.

19. Children's Links has a satisfactory communications structure supported by a framework of team meetings and senior management meetings. The board of trustees meets every three months, and there are meetings of the senior management team, operational teams and cross-organisational groups. Meetings are recorded but the minutes are frequently insufficiently detailed and do not assign individuals responsibility for actions, or set appropriate timescales for the actions to be completed. Actions are not followed up at subsequent meetings. Electronic mail is used regularly particularly in communications outside of the company.

20. The use and analysis of data are insufficient to enable improvements to the provision. The only data the company has is about individual learners. Individual learners' progress is discussed at meetings but is not recorded in a useful way to monitor the progression of groups of learners. Staff do not always have relevant data about learners. For example, there were discrepancies in the numbers of learners in the area of learning. Staff are not able to identify or manipulate data and do not use data to drive change or support learners. There is no formal system to monitor learners' progress. Children's Links has identified this weakness. The organisation is in the process of replacing its current management information system to provide a more efficient system to monitor and retrieve data on learners' progression.

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade 2

21. There is a comprehensive equal opportunities policy with well-written, detailed statements on harassment, bullying and discrimination. The policy covers all the relevant legislation. The policy is included in the learner handbook in a format suitable for learners and includes questions to monitor their understanding of it. An equal opportunities committee monitors all the activities of the company and standardises training and marketing and other promotional materials. Recruitment practices are monitored to ensure that equal opportunities guidelines are followed. All staff have had recent and relevant training and this is monitored and updated regularly. This includes updates on the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Part-time staff also receive this updating. Employment policies include flexibility to allow for the family commitments of members of staff. Children's Links provides training and support for all learners, including those with severe emotional and family problems. Colourful and effective posters on inclusion and anti-discriminatory practice are displayed in the centre. Access to the centre is satisfactory for people with restricted mobility. There is a hearing loop system for learners with a hearing impairment.

22. Assessors monitor learners' understanding of equality of opportunity at every progress review, using questions from a bank available to them. Learners and staff have a satisfactory awareness of equal opportunities topics. The company's marketing materials promote training to men, who are under-represented in the sector.

23. Data on under-represented groups is collected but there is insufficient use of this

data to monitor the performance of these groups on the training programmes. Children's Links does not compare retention and achievement rates for different groups of learners. For example, there is no attempt to monitor the effectiveness of the extra support offered to learners and no targets are set for the performance of different groups of learners.

Quality assurance

Contributory grade 3

24. The use of feedback from learners and employers is very effective. Children's Links has developed a comprehensive evaluation process. Questionnaires are sent to learners and employers ever six months. If the person completing the feedback form asks any questions, Children's Links responds in writing immediately. The responses are collated and analysed. A full and comprehensive report is produced and circulated to the training team for discussion. Actions are taken from the discussion to develop the training programmes, such as the development of the additional training programme on disability. The audit trail of the feedback process is good but currently breaks down at the training management meeting.

25. Overall arrangements for quality assurance are satisfactory. The company is currently working on the development of a policy to manage quality assurance. Random sampling of documents related to learners occurs but this process does not have a clear structure. There is no overarching quality assurance framework. Quality assurance activities take place in isolation but are effective in identifying non-compliance with quality assurance procedures. A process has recently been introduced to review procedures regularly. Signatures are missing from some of the learners' documents.

26. Internal verification is satisfactory. There is a satisfactory process in place with a good sampling plan. Weaknesses identified in assessment practice are fed back through the appraisal process to assist staff development. Sampling covers all assessors, modules and learners. Observations of teaching and learning are carried out. Feedback is clear, documented and effectively supports staff development. Grades are not given to observed learning sessions.

27. The self-assessment report does not contain sufficient detail. The board of trustees and the chief executive officer are not sufficiently involved in the production of the self-assessment report. The self-assessment report is descriptive rather than analytical. Staff do not have specific points relating to strengths and weaknesses on which to focus. Some data in the self-assessment report submitted by Children's Links is inaccurate. There are too few links between the text of the report and the identified strengths and weaknesses of the provision.

28. The self-assessment process is satisfactory and areas for improvement identified in the self-assessment report are linked back to actions in the development plan. Most staff are effectively included in the self-assessment process. Staff understand the importance of self-assessment as a means of improving the provision. Feedback from learners, external organisations and employers is used effectively in the process.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Health, social care & public services

Health, social care & public services		3
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Playwork - Work-based learning for young people	57	3

Playwork

Strengths

- good progression and achievement rates on most programmes
- effective individual support for learners
- effective assessment practice

Weaknesses

- slow progress towards completion of modern apprenticeship frameworks
- insufficient identification and support for learners' literacy and numeracy needs
- insufficient links between on- and off-the-job training

Achievement and standards

29. There are good progression and achievement rates on vocational training programmes. Some learners have achieved the NVQ at level 2 in playwork in six months or less. Many learners are progressing at the rate of one unit per month. Ninety-three per cent of learners achieved the certificate in playwork in 2003-04. Achievement rates on modern apprenticeship programmes are satisfactory. Retention rates are satisfactory and have increased for all programmes from 2001-02 to date.

30. Learners' work is satisfactory. Portfolio evidence meets the requirements of the programmes and is often good. Learners are working at a standard that is appropriate to their programme and display an appropriate level of knowledge. They develop useful skills in the workplace.

31. Learners on modern apprenticeship programmes make slow progress. A significant number of learners have been on programme for a year or longer and have completed less than a quarter of the framework. There are also learners who have reached the end of their planned programme of learning who have still not completed any aspects of their framework. The company has recently introduced more strict target-setting to improve progress but it is too soon to see the impact of this.

LSC funded work-based learning																
Advanced apprenticeships																
	2004-05		2003-04		2002-03		2001-02									
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts			5		3		1									
Retained*			4		2		0									
Successfully completed			0		0		0									
Still in learning			4		2		0									

*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

LSC funded work-based learning																
Apprenticeships																
	2004-05		2003-04		2002-03		2001-02									
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts			12		20		5									
Retained*			0		11		2	40								
Successfully completed			2		9		2	40								
Still in learning			5		1		0	0								

*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

LSC funded work-based learning																
NVQ Training																
	2004-05		2003-04		2002-03		2001-02									
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts	5		18													
Retained*	0		14													
Successfully completed	0		5													
Still in learning	5		9													

*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

Other government funded																
	2004-05		2003-04		2002-03		2001-02									
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts			42													
Retained*			25													
Successfully completed			7													
Still in training			31													

*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

Quality of education and training

32. Assessment practices are good. There is clear and detailed preparation for the assessment process. Learners are fully involved in the planning of assessments and are given detailed feedback at the end of each assessment activity. The underlying principles and playwork values are emphasised in assessment. Assessors use a good range of methods to assess learning. Key skills evidence is collected as part of the NVQ assessment when the opportunity arises. Assessment decisions are accurately recorded and assessors work closely with learners to record the performance criteria covered during observation. Learners have a good understanding of the qualifications and their own progress towards achieving them. Internal verification is thorough and effectively supports assessment decisions. Learners progress is reviewed every 12 weeks. Employers, learners and assessors are involved in the progress review process. However, feedback from employers regarding on-the-job training is not used effectively to develop links between on- and off-the-job training.

33. There is effective individual support for learners. All learners are allocated a personal assessor who visits each month. Assessors have a particularly good understanding of learners' personal, social and programme needs. They provide good pastoral support for learning and are approachable and accessible. Learners are provided with a number of contact details for assessors including fax, e-mail, and mobile and home telephone numbers. Assessors respond quickly to any queries or difficulties that learners may experience, whether the problems are social, emotional or academic. They also offer additional support by visiting learners' homes.

34. Learning sessions are appropriately planned with a suitable range of teaching methods used to meet the needs of learners. Questioning is used to monitor learners' knowledge and understanding. Learners display a satisfactory and often good level of understanding.

35. Resources are adequate to support learning. Staff are all appropriately qualified and have relevant experience in the playwork sector. There are textbooks provided for learners to support their learning, and the resources to support teaching sessions, such as handouts, are good. All learners have access to the same range of resources.

36. An appropriate range of courses and programmes are provided to meet the needs of learners and employers. Playwork training is provided for NVQs at levels 2 and 3 and includes full and short courses. Programmes are delivered flexibly to meet the needs of learners and employers.

37. Children's Links provides a satisfactory induction process. Learners can recall the content of the induction programme and most learners understand the framework requirements of their training programme.

38. There is insufficient identification and support for literacy and numeracy needs. Learners' literacy and numeracy skills are initially assessed during the induction programme. However, the results of this assessment are not used effectively to identify

any additional support needs. Learners who are identified as having additional support needs by the initial assessment, do not receive any further diagnostic testing. Appropriate support to suit individual needs is not consistently provided. Some assessors provide learners with additional support but these assessors are not appropriately qualified to provide training for literacy, numeracy and language skills. Children's Links has recently appointed a subcontractor to support learners' literacy, numeracy and language needs until the company has its own staff specialising in this area. It is too soon to judge the effectiveness of this measure.

Leadership and management

39. There are insufficient links between on- and off-the-job training. An on-the-job learning plan has recently been introduced. However, not all assessors and employers plan together to assist learners to make links between the different aspects of the programme. Employers are not always aware of the progress learners are making. Learners are able to access workshop sessions on topics such as child protection and management of children's behaviour. These training sessions are available to all members of Children's Links across Lincolnshire. However, additional training opportunities designed specifically for NVQ learners are not consistently available to all learners in the county. Some learners are able to access cluster-group training sessions for the background knowledge and technical certificate aspects of the modern apprenticeship framework. Distance learning packages that cover the background knowledge for the NVQ are not accessible to all learners. There are many learners who do not have access to any off-the-job training opportunities. Feedback from learners highlights the lack of planned training to support their learning. Learners receive good support and guidance from employers including good on-the-job training.

40. Learners' awareness and understanding of equality of opportunity is satisfactory. They are aware of their own rights and responsibilities in relation to the workplace. Equality and diversity underpins the playwork principles and values, and learners are able to demonstrate this in practice.

41. The grades in the self-assessment report were the same as those given by inspectors. However, many of the strengths and weaknesses identified by inspectors were not identified in the self-assessment report.