

Children's Links

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' quality monitoring or annual assessment visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Child development and well-being
- Teaching and lecturing

Description of the provider

1. Children's Links is a voluntary organisation, limited by guarantee, with charitable trust status. Training is managed through the company's 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. Children's Links became an assessment centre in 2001. The company provides training for NVQs and apprenticeships funded by Lincolnshire and Rutland LSC. A chief executive officer is head of the management team and reports to a board of trustees. A team of 10 staff and eight peripatetic assessors is responsible for training and assessment.
2. At the time of the inspection, Children's Links had 62 learners enrolled on LSC-funded programmes and 35 participants on Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) funded programmes. The scope of provision has increased since the last inspection. Train to Gain programmes are now provided through a subcontract with the Boston College Consortium. NVQs are also offered as part of an Adult Learning Account (ALA) pilot programme through a sub-contract with Skegness College. In November 2007, Children's Links took responsibility for the provision of training and assessment of NVQs for participants on an employability programme funded by the DWP through a sub-contract with A4e.
3. Lincolnshire is a rural county with approximately half the population living outside of the main towns. It is the fourth most sparsely populated county in England. Much of the employment around Louth is seasonal, coastal and agricultural in nature and there are few large employers apart from the local authority and the NHS.
4. The unemployment rate in Lincolnshire is 4.9% compared to the national average of 5.2%. According to the 2001 census, minority ethnic groups make up about 1.4% of the population of Lincolnshire, compared to the national average of 9.1%. There has been a significant migration of workers from the European Union in the last five years.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Capacity to improve	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Achievement and standards	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Quality of provision	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Leadership and management	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Good: Grade 2

Sector subject areas

Child development and well-being	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Teaching and lecturing	Satisfactory: Grade 3

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

5. The overall effectiveness of the provision is satisfactory. Achievement and standards and the quality of the provision, including teaching and learning, how well courses meet the needs and interests of learners and guidance and support are all satisfactory. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Equality of opportunity and social inclusion are good.

Capacity to improve

Satisfactory: Grade 3

6. Children's Links has demonstrated that it is in a satisfactory position to make improvements. The organisation was previously inspected in 2004 and at that time, the quality of the provision was satisfactory. The company's approach to equality of opportunity was judged to be good. Since then, an additional range of quality improvement procedures have been introduced, however, not all planned activities have been carried out. Effective steps for improvement have been taken since the previous inspection.
7. A number of the strengths identified at the time of the previous inspection have been maintained, including the good promotion of equality of opportunity. Success rates for apprentices have improved since 2004 and are now satisfactory. The success rates for advanced apprentices are better, however, there are few learners on these programmes. Success rates on the new Train to Gain programmes are satisfactory, although, aspects of two key areas for improvement remain. The support for literacy, numeracy and language on Train to Gain programmes is inadequate and there is insufficient analysis of management information.
8. The self-assessment report is satisfactory. Children's Links collects the views of learners, staff and employer and uses this feedback to write the report. Inspectors agreed with a number of the judgements it contains and the overall grades for the programmes. However, a number of the identified strengths are no more than usual practice and the report is overly descriptive.

Key strengths

- Good development of learners' childcare skills
- Very effective development of learners' confidence and occupational skills
- Well planned, effective and thorough induction
- Good promotion of learning through employers
- Good staff development
- Good promotion of equality of opportunity

Key areas for improvement

- Weak formal reviews of learners' progress

- Inadequate arrangements for additional learning support on Train to Gain programmes
- Insufficient analysis of management information
- Weak target-setting for improvements
- Incomplete implementation of quality improvement procedures

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Satisfactory: Grade 3

9. Overall achievement and standards are satisfactory. Learners develop good childcare skills on all programmes. Learners enjoy their work and show a keen interest in working. They develop good skills in helping children to learn and develop and these skills are underpinned by satisfactory knowledge and understanding. On Train to Gain programmes, the development of these skills increases learners' confidence and motivation. Participants on DWP programmes also develop good skills which increase their self-esteem and enhance their employability.
10. Overall success rates are satisfactory. Success rates for apprentices have improved from 25% in 2004/05 to 58% in 2006/07. In the year 2006/07, the success rate for advanced apprentices was 100%, however, the numbers of learners was very small. Success rates for Train to Gain learners are satisfactory at 73%. Learners on all programmes are making satisfactory progress. The standard of learners work is satisfactory overall.

Quality of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

11. Overall teaching and learning are satisfactory. Most training is provided by individual coaching in the workplace. Induction for apprentices is thorough and well planned. It helps learners to understand the requirements of the qualification and make a good start. Following induction, detailed action plans are produced to ensure that learners start working immediately and are clear about what they must do. Assessment is satisfactory and takes place on a regular basis in the workplace. A satisfactory range of assessment methods are used.
12. Resources to support learning are satisfactory and include useful workbooks produced by Children's Links. However, although learners are encouraged to use the internet they are not provided with appropriate references. Formal progress reviews for apprentices are weak. Monitoring of progress is good, although there is too little recording of learning and skills development. Few employers take part in the reviews with Train 2 Gain learners. On Train to Gain programmes, there is insufficient use of long term target-setting.
13. Learning support is satisfactory on apprenticeship programmes. However, the arrangements for literacy, numeracy and language support are inadequate on Train to Gain programmes where the uptake of additional support is very poor.
14. The range of programmes is suitable and appropriate to learners' needs and interests. Work placements provide learners with a good range of assessment opportunities. Children's Links also offers a range of additional short courses that are highly relevant to learners needs. Apprenticeship programmes are planned appropriately, although individual learning plans are not always updated. On Train to Gain programmes, there is not always a sufficient match between the opportunities for workplace learning and the requirements of the NVQ. However, employer involvement in training is often good.
15. Overall support and guidance are satisfactory. Pastoral support for DWP participants is good. Participants improve their self-esteem and make appropriate progress.

Leadership and management

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Good: Grade 2

16. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Children's Links works particularly well with employers to promote learning. Managers are members of local, regional and national representative bodies for the sector. Children's Links works closely with local authorities and childcare networks to influence the development of policies.
17. They have been successful in increasing the number of employers who provide support for training and work placements. Children's Links actively participates in pilot learning projects. For example, 16 learners are part of the ALA pilot programme. Staff provide good professional advice and support for owners of nurseries and day care settings. Many of these provide good learning environments. Children's Links has developed a wide range of resources for employers. These are available in childcare settings and are used regularly by learners. Learners benefit from the support and encouragement that they receive in the workplace.
18. Staff development and career opportunities are good. This strength was recognised in the self-assessment report. Children's Links has a strategy of developing their own staff into new roles and responsibilities. Several staff were originally learners with the organisation. Staff are supported in completing a wide range of training courses and gaining qualifications, including teaching qualifications. The training plan is developed following the annual review of all of Children's Links contracts. The range of qualifications held by staff allows the provider to respond quickly to additional requests for training. For example, Children's Links took responsibility for the provision of the current DWP contract at short notice. Individual staff development needs are effectively identified and agreed during appraisals. Planned learning objectives are linked well to strategic objectives. All staff complete professional development in a childcare setting each year.
19. Insufficient use is made of management information. Children's Links has an adequate management information system, however, too little analysis is made of data to identify and monitor trends in staff performance and learner outcomes. Individual learner's progress is discussed at meetings but there is no overall monitoring of the progress of groups of learners on the different programmes.
20. Target-setting to lead to improvements is weak. For example, there are no numerical targets for success rates and staff do not know how much improvement is expected by managers.
21. As yet quality improvement procedures have not been completely implemented. There is a clear programme of activities, including service reviews and observations of teaching and learning. However, not all planned activities have been carried out this year. There are insufficient criteria for measuring the quality of teaching and learning. Some key aspects of the provision are not included in the schedule of observations.
22. Promotion of equality of opportunity is good. This strength was recognised in the self-assessment report. Children's Links actively promotes learning to under-represented groups including males, travellers and people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Children's Links provides introductory courses to learners in areas of rural isolation and socio-economic deprivation. Some of these learners have progressed and are now working towards NVQs. In addition, Children's Links provides parenting skills training in local prisons.

23. Children's Links has a good range of relevant policies and procedures, including child protection arrangements. Recruitment practices for both learners and staff are monitored closely.
24. All staff have had recent good equal opportunities training. Many staff have received extra training related to child protection. Learners' understanding of equality and diversity issues is generally satisfactory for their job roles. However, some opportunities to check and develop their understanding of equality are missed.
25. A range of equal opportunity data on learner groups is collected but there is insufficient monitoring of the performance of different groups of learners on the training programmes.

What learners like:

- Supportive staff in the workplace
- Access to assessors
- Support and encouragement from assessors
- Opportunity for employment
- Meeting the challenges of returning to learning
- 'Being treated as adults'
- 'Being workbased all the time'
- 'Our tutor is easy to talk to and is understanding'
- 'Linking the course work to what we do in work'
- Challenging work

What learners think could improve:

- More time to complete portfolios
- More information on who's who
- 'Children's Links to speak more to my employer about my course'
- 'Integrate the mathematics more with childcare activities'
- More time with the tutor

Sector subject areas

Child development and well-being

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Context

26. Children's Links offer a range of programmes in children's care learning and development (CCLD) at Levels 2 and 3 and programmes in playwork at Levels 2 and 3. Sixty eight learners are working towards CCLD qualifications. There are fifteen learners on apprenticeship programmes and 12 learners on advanced apprenticeships. Twenty seven learners are working towards NVQs at Level 2, 15 are on Train to Gain programmes and a further 12 learners are through an ALA pilot programme. In addition, 14 participants are currently working towards an NVQ at Level 2 in CCLD through a subcontract with A4e funded by the DWP.
27. Eight learners are working towards playwork qualifications. There are three apprentices. One learner is working towards an NVQ in playwork at Level 3 through Train to Gain and four learners are working towards an NVQ in playwork at Level 3 through the ALA pilot programme.
28. Training and assessment are carried out by eight trainer/assessors, four of whom are internal verifiers. In addition, there is an apprenticeship officer responsible for recruitment and selection.

Strengths

- Good development of learners' childcare skills
- Well planned and thorough induction

Areas for improvement

- Weak formal reviews of learners' progress
- Inadequate arrangements for additional learning support on Train to Gain programmes

Achievement and standards

29. Overall achievement and standards are satisfactory. Learners develop good childcare skills. Learners enjoy their work and show a keen interest in children's learning and development. Most demonstrate a high level of caring skills and are developing good levels of skill in helping children to learn and develop. These skills are underpinned by a satisfactory understanding of the core aspects of children's care, learning and development. Learners' understanding and practice of health and safety are good. Many learners appropriately relate theoretical learning to practice and the more able learners can give clear examples of applying learning to practice. On Train to Gain programmes learners improve their confidence, motivation and performance at work. Many learners feel inspired to continue with learning and pursue further qualifications.
30. Overall success rates are satisfactory. Success rates for apprentices have improved significantly from 25% in 2004/05 to 58% in 2006/07. Children's Links own data for the current year shows further improvement with a success rate of 75% so far. In 2006/07, the success rate for advanced apprentices was 100%, however, the number of learners was

very small. Success rates for Train to Gain learners are satisfactory at 73% in 2006/07. Learners make satisfactory progress overall, although a few apprentices make slow progress with key skills.

Quality of provision

31. Teaching and learning are satisfactory on all programmes. Induction for apprentices is thorough and well planned and carried out in the workplace. Learners have a good understanding of what they have to do to get their qualification. Staff provide clear information to help learners choose appropriate optional units of the NVQ. The paper free portfolio and the methods of assessment are explained very well. During induction, assessors make good checks on the progress learners have made with the work they are set by the apprenticeship officer at recruitment. A clear and detailed action plan is produced and targets are set for completion of new work. Workplace supervisors have a good understanding of the work expected from the learner.
32. Individual coaching takes place at regular sessions in the workplace. Accurate, relevant information is given by trainer/assessors but learners do not always have time to reflect on new information before answering questions.
33. Assessment is satisfactory and takes place regularly in the workplace. A range of methods are used and several observations of each learner's performance are carried out early in the programme. Good use is made of naturally occurring activities to provide evidence. The quality and quantity of feedback on written work varies too widely.
34. Children's Links has suitable resources to support learning, for example, it has produced useful workbooks. These are helpful to learners but contain a number of grammatical errors. Learners are encouraged to use the internet but too often they are not given website references.
35. Formal reviews of progress for apprentices are weak, although monitoring of progress is good. Learners are able to make meaningful and constructive comments about their own learning and progress. However, there is too little recording of learning and skills development. A series of questions on equality and diversity are asked at reviews, but the learner's responses are not recorded and no judgement is made about their level of understanding. On Train to Gain programmes there is insufficient long term target-setting to identify the steps learners need to take to achieve the qualification. Few employers take part in reviews with Train 2 Gain learners.
36. Learning support for literacy, numeracy and key skills is overall satisfactory on apprenticeship programmes. The arrangements for literacy, numeracy and language support are inadequate on Train to Gain programmes. This area for improvement is recognised in the self-assessment report. Initial assessment identifies learners' needs satisfactorily, but not all assessment results are recorded in the individual learning plans. Uptake of additional support is very poor. Of 16 learners, nine are identified as having additional learning needs but only one is receiving the planned support.
37. There is a satisfactory range of provision. Children's Links also offer a range of additional short courses that are highly relevant for learners. Introductory parenting skills courses serve as an introduction to the field of childcare and playwork and have been used successfully to recruit some NVQ learners.

38. Overall guidance and support are satisfactory. Pastoral support for participants on DWP programmes is good. All learners receive appropriate initial advice and guidance.

Leadership and management

39. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Planning for training on apprenticeships is satisfactory and employer involvement in training is often good. Supervisors help learners to develop skills in caring for children. They are effective role models for learners. Learners take part in a range of additional training offered by employers. On Train to Gain programmes there is not always a good match between the workplace training and the requirements of the NVQ. Employers do not always have sufficient information about learner's training needs. Individual learning plans are not always updated.
40. Communication is satisfactory and staff attend regular team and standardisation meetings. All members of staff are involved in business planning and self-assessment. The self-assessment report is reasonably evaluative but overly descriptive. Inspectors agreed with a few of the strengths and most areas for improvement.

Teaching and lecturing

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Context

41. Since September 2007, Children's Links has held a subcontract with A4e to provide training and assessment for participants working towards NVQs on a DWP funded programme. Participants are unemployed and claiming job seekers allowance. All participants are referred for training by A4e. Twenty one participants are working towards teaching assistants qualifications. Training and assessment are provided in the work place.

Strengths

- Very effective development of participants' confidence and occupational skills
- Effective assessment practices

Areas for improvement

- Inadequate arrangements for the observations of teaching and learning
- Insufficient communications about changes to programme

Achievement and standards

42. Achievements and standards are satisfactory overall. Participants develop good confidence and occupational skills. They also improve their communication and interpersonal skills and build effective relationships with school staff, pupils and parents. Participants develop and improve many of the skills needed to work effectively as teaching assistants and greatly increase their self-esteem. Participants' regular attendance and good performance at work helps to generate useful employer references and adds recent relevant experience to their curriculum vitae. They enhance their employability. Some participants become ambitious about their potential to achieve and are motivated to progress and continue their learning. Participants are able to reflect confidently on their learning and practice and use the relevant knowledge and understanding to complete work tasks successfully. They contribute effectively to making their classrooms good learning environments for children.

43. The standard of participants' work is satisfactory with some examples of well-researched assignments. Written work is clearly presented, often word processed and it demonstrates a clear understanding of knowledge requirements of the qualification. Participants develop an appropriate level of understanding of relevant aspects of equality and diversity for their job roles.

Quality of provision

44. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Tutors and assessors know their participants well and provide them with individual, well-planned assessment activities. Effective monitoring systems are in place to review participants' progress towards their qualification. Participants have regular individual meetings with their assessor, classroom teacher and mentor. Work placements provide participants with a good range of assessment opportunities.

45. Assessors discuss relevant important policy issues skilfully in a way that enables participants to clearly understand how they apply in their work placement. For example, participants generally have a good understanding of the *Every Child Matters* themes. Participants at one workplace cross-referenced their planned classroom activities successfully against the intended outcomes for children described in the five *Every Child Matters* themes.
46. Assessment observations are used extensively to assess learning and skills. Good professional discussion is used to develop participant's knowledge and understanding. Assessors provide detailed feedback which clearly identifies what went well and accurately identifies specific areas for improvement in future practice. Assessment outcomes are recorded accurately.
47. Overall programmes meet the needs and interests of participants satisfactorily. Work placements provide a wide range of relevant opportunities for learning. The breadth of training programmes on offer help employers to meet the regulatory requirements. Learners have the opportunity to progress from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications. Many learners take on additional responsibilities and gain promotion when they gain their main qualification.
48. Overall support and guidance for participants is satisfactory. Pastoral support for participants is good. Most have few previous qualifications and much emphasis is placed on improving their self-esteem and overcoming anxieties caused by previous poor experiences of learning.
49. Tutors keep in touch with participants regularly and frequently by email, telephone and text messages. Tutors' visits are planned to meet the needs of the participants and accurate information about their progress and development is given. This support helps to maintain their motivation and commitment.

Leadership and management

50. Leadership and management are satisfactory. The programmes are well managed by suitably qualified and experienced staff who work effectively as a team. There are clearly defined staff roles and responsibilities. Assessors have responsibility for a reasonable number of participants and manage their workloads effectively across a large geographical area.
51. Arrangements for the observations of teaching and learning are inadequate. The agreed criteria currently used for observations of teaching and learning are inadequate. The records of observations focus on the activities of the teacher rather than the learning taking place. Insufficient observations are carried out to develop and improve teaching and learning. Not all key aspects of the provision are regularly observed. There are insufficient opportunities for observers to share good practice through internal and external moderation. Some targets have been agreed to improve the quality of formal, planned lessons. However, there are no agreed targets to improve the quality of the training sessions carried out with individual participants, although these form the majority of the training.
52. There is insufficient communication about changes to the programmes. Children's Links took responsibility for the training and assessment of participants in September 2007. Assessors introduced themselves to participants when meeting them for the first time in

November 2007. However, participants did not receive formal notification of the change of arrangements for the allocation of staff and assessment from either Children's Links or A4e. Teaching staff in the school placements are unsure who is responsible for the provision and management of the programme. Participants are unsure about where responsibility for each part of their programme lies and the reasons for changes to the programme. Documents and individual learning plans still refer to the procedures of A4e without any reference to those of Children's Links. Participants are not clear about who carries out formal reviews and the purpose of some visits.

Learners' achievements

Success rates on **work-based learning apprenticeship programmes** managed by Children's Links **2004 to 2007**

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of participants*	Provider/c college NVQ rate**	National NVQ rate**	Provider/college framework rate**	National framework rate**
Advanced Apprenticeships	04-05	overall	4	0	48	0	34
		timely	4	0	31	0	22
	05-06	overall	6	50	53	17	44
		timely	6	33	34	0	27
	06-07	overall	4	100	64	100	58
		timely	4	100	43	100	37
Apprenticeships	04-05	overall	16	50	51	25	39
		timely	17	35	29	18	22
	05-06	overall	15	87	58	53	52
		timely	14	57	38	29	34
	06-07	overall	12	58	65	58	61
		timely	12	58	47	58	44

Note: 'At the time of the inspection - LSC data for 2006-07 had yet to be fully validated'

* Participants who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of participants are then added to the participants who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned

** Provider and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the Individual Learning Record