

Inspection report for Little Marsh Children's Centre

Local authority	Somerset County Council
Inspection number	386955
Inspection dates	22 and 23 February 2012
Reporting inspector	Penny Fisher HMI

Centre leader	Karen Cooper
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Ilchester Schools Out

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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one early years inspector.

Inspectors held meetings with the cluster manager, the senior team for the cluster and centre staff. They also met with representatives from the local authority, partners, the advisory board, parents and carers and Action for Children. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Little Marsh was designated as a phase two children's centre in March 2007. It offers a range of services including health services, family play sessions, parenting programmes and outreach services. There is no full day-care provision on site, but a range of Early Years Foundation Stage provision is available locally. Services are provided in a purpose-built centre on the site of Ilchester Infants School, as well as other venues across the reach area. The centre is not in an area of deprivation.

The children's centre is run by Action for Children on behalf of the local authority. It is one of five centres that form the South Somerset 2 cluster group. The nearby Royal Naval Air Service Yeovilton Tri-Service base, providing significant employment to both military and civilian personnel, has its housing in Ilchester. Unemployment in the reach area is low at 1.91% and the proportion of children living in workless households is 10.3%, which is below the Somerset and national average. Income levels are above the county average. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills typically expected for their age. Almost all of the population are White British.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Little Marsh Children’s Centre provides satisfactory support to families and as a result outcomes are satisfactory and some are improving. Children and their parents enjoy using the centre, feeling comfortable within the welcoming environment. Services are valued and parents find staff very supportive.

Sound planning and staff deployment across the cluster group has ensured that services have continued despite staff shortages. Systems of working across the cluster are coherent and consistent.

The number of parents registering with the centre is improving well and staff and partners continue to work hard to develop partnerships within the community. There are frequent informal opportunities for parents to express their views on services, which have led to changes within the centre. Opportunities for families to be more formally involved in planning or decisions about what the centre provides are limited.

Governance and accountability arrangements are clear, but are not fully effective as the local authority has not carried out regular contract reviews. Self-evaluation is realistic and the cluster manager has a good awareness of the areas that require further improvement within the centre and a clear vision for future development.

Knowledge and understanding of the needs of the area and its target groups is satisfactory, as is the number and range of parents and carers accessing services. However, data do not yet enable the centre to be fully effective at reaching all families in the reach area who may benefit. Services, including activities that all families may attend, are increasingly held in areas where there is greatest need.

The safeguarding of children is given a high priority and systems for ensuring children are protected are sound. Effective outreach services are having a positive impact on improving the lives of families. The centre has begun to implement family profiling as a way of ensuring the early identification of individual families’ needs and that they have access to appropriate services, but it is too early to see the results of

this.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure the local authority strengthens governance arrangements by regularly reviewing the centre's contractual arrangements.
- Ensure the local authority, partners and the centre improve the use and sharing of data so that the centre can be more precise in identifying vulnerable families and targeting services.
- Provide more formalised opportunities for parents and carers to express their views and shape the design and delivery of services.
- Fully implement systems to ensure that families' needs are identified early, that services are meeting needs and outcomes for families can be tracked.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Obesity rates within the reach area are lower than across Somerset as a whole and the national average. Advice given during activities develops parents' and carers' understanding and ability to improve their children's health. Healthy snacks are provided and parents and carers are advised of how to look beyond the advertising slogans to ensure the food they buy for their children is nutritious. Baby clinics are well attended. Visitors to sessions, such as the healthy lifestyles officer and the oral health worker, enhance the work of the centre in promoting healthy lifestyles.

Mothers receive support in regard to breastfeeding their babies through the weekly 'feeding friends' group. Breastfeeding initiation and prevalence rates across Somerset are slightly above the national average, but data are not yet available at reach level to children's centre staff. Collaborative working with health partners has led to 'Two Year Celebration' events being held across the reach area. These incorporate play activities with children's two-year checks and ensure parents and carers are aware of the services available from the children's centre. Sensitive introductions to the centre by the outreach service have led to improvements in parents' mental health, such as post-natal depression and isolation.

Targeted parenting courses are having a positive impact on improving parents' and carers' management of their children's behaviour. Parents and carers show a good understanding of how to keep children safe while participating in activities and the environment is safe and secure. Resources are age-appropriate and safety in the home is promoted during group sessions. Outreach services are effectively supporting families with increasingly complex levels of need leading to improved outcomes, for example promoting the safety of their families. Hospital admissions following injury to children and young people in south Somerset are in line with figures for Somerset as a whole and below the national average.

Information regarding children within the reach area that are the subject of a child protection plan is now shared with the children's centre. No referrals have been made to children's social care from the centre in the last year, but staff demonstrate that processes and procedures are clearly understood. Action for Children assessment is used consistently to identify the needs of families receiving targeted support. This is limiting the impact of the identified inconsistencies and lack of clarity, across children's centres, in the use of the Common Assessment Framework.

The proportion of children achieving a good level of development by the end of their Reception Year has improved well in the reach area in the last year. In 2011 the figure was above both the Somerset and national average. Although not providing full day care, the centre is improving parents' and carers' understanding of children's development and learning. The centre is successfully engaging fathers; as one said 'I am interacting and playing more with the children at home, such as singing, music and games.' All group activities are planned using the Early Years Foundation Stage framework and the use of 'Wow' books encourages parents and carers to recognise children's achievements. However, the centre does not always ensure that spontaneous opportunities to widen parents' and carers' understanding of learning, for example in messy play activities, are maximised. The centre is working well in developing partnerships with local providers to ensure smooth transitions to primary schooling. Supported childcare placements are effectively supporting parents to access local Early Years Foundation Stage provision, with improvements seen, for example, in children's speech and language.

Families are offered support to improve their economic position when needed. The centre is not in an area of deprivation or high unemployment and, therefore, signposting to other agencies such as learndirect, is proportionate and has led to improved outcomes for some. The outreach service provides effective support for families in crisis, such as debt and homelessness. Families are also supported in their application for two-year-old funding as appropriate.

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	3
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
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	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic	3

stability and independence including access to training and employment	
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How good is the provision?

3

The centre knows the families that are accessing their services well. The data available from the local authority are increasingly comprehensive and some are now available at reach area level. However, live birth data are not yet shared, so the centre does not know all families with young children in the area. The centre provides mainly universal services, but is now clearly focused on targeting services at the most vulnerable families, including those suffering from isolation. Some activities have been adapted to meet need, with more being held in the areas with greater deprivation. The brand new Bookstart service is targeted where the greatest need is identified through referrals from partner agencies. The quality and range of services adequately meet the needs of families in the reach area.

Staff have been trained in using family profiling and are currently implementing this to ensure that the centre knows the starting points of families using services and can demonstrate how their services are making a difference to outcomes. Healthy Child meetings provide an important forum for partners to share concerns regarding vulnerable families in the reach area and plan services to meet their needs. Firm commitments are in place from partners to attend regularly.

The appropriate care, guidance and support offered by the centre are making a difference to families who report that they feel more confident, less isolated and have developed greater self-esteem. For example, those attending a parenting course describe how they have built on their skills to manage routines and children's behaviour: 'things have quietened down at home, the children and us are now happier'.

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

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Staff shortages at the centre over recent months have not impacted on the delivery of services. Satisfactory use of resources is leading to improvements in outcomes. Data show that the number of parents and carers registering with the centre has improved significantly in the second half of last year, meeting the local authority's

target. However, the centre has not been able to make the progress it had planned in all areas, for example, the implementation of the use of family profiling has been slower than planned.

The cluster centre manager and staff are dedicated and have worked hard to establish the centre, overcoming many barriers within the Ilchester community who initially felt a children’s centre was not needed in the area. Partnerships are developing well with local community groups and professionals from other agencies and partners are sharing their learning and expertise, for example, at Early Years Foundation Stage cluster meetings and provider days.

The cluster centre manager has a clear vision for the centre and managers and staff are well supported, supervised and effectively deployed. Self-evaluation is realistic and action planning adequate, but priorities require refinement in conjunction with staff and partners to ensure shared ownership. Aspiration among senior staff is high and a clear shift towards ensuring the most vulnerable are well supported by the centre is evident.

The centre is supported adequately by a well-attended advisory board that meets regularly. However, the level of challenge provided by the board in its role as ‘critical friend’ is underdeveloped. Key partners from health, education and children’s social care, as well as the voluntary sector, are engaged in supporting the provision. Governance and accountability arrangements are clear, although the local authority has not carried out regular reviews of the contract with Action for Children.

The centre is fully inclusive. The centre is user-friendly and all venues are assessed to ensure they are accessible for disabled users. A temporary sensory room, with equipment rotated around the five cluster centres, is well used by local groups and for individual work with children with additional needs. Translation, literature in different languages and systems for those that are unable to communicate through speech are accessible. Safeguarding is given high priority. Systems and procedures such as those for safe recruitment are sound and effective.

Parents and carers are encouraged to give their views on services and have influenced the work on the outdoor play area and the delivery of group sessions. Surveys show parents and carers are satisfied with the services they receive. However, the parents’ forum has floundered and the centre is currently looking at ways to encourage more parents and carers to play an active role in shaping services, for example, through mini-forums during universal group sessions.

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	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3

The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3
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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Little Marsh Children's Centre on 22 and 23 February 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall. The centre has experienced staff shortages recently, but has continued to deliver a satisfactory range of services from both the centre itself and across the area. The number of parents and carers registering at the centre has increased well, which is encouraging. Those of you using the centre told us that you feel welcomed, safe and comfortable. You said the care, guidance and support offered by the centre are making a difference to you and your children and we agree. Those of you that have attended parenting courses told us that family life is now more enjoyable and you have learned how to set safe routines at home. The baby clinics and groups are helping you to ensure your children are healthy and eating well. These are just some examples of how the centre is helping to improve outcomes for families. The centre is currently looking at better ways to show how their work is making a difference to your lives. Staff are well trained in how to safeguard children.

Staff at the centre continue to build partnerships with other services for children in the area, such as pre-schools, schools and community groups, as well as health

services. They are dedicated to helping families in the area benefit from the centre and have a good understanding of how to improve the services offered. They are concentrating on making sure that the centre is meeting the needs of those that would benefit most and improved information from the local authority and health partners will support this work. We have also asked the local authority to regularly review the centre's contracts to make sure they continue to be fulfilled by all involved.

We have seen that as parents and carers using the centre you have opportunities to share your views on how the centre could develop services. Staff listen to your views and have made some changes that you suggested. For example, the work carried out on the garden will enhance families' opportunities to play outside safely. It is important, however, that more of you contribute to the life of the children's centre. You may wish to consider joining or leading a parents' forum.

We enjoyed talking to many of you during the inspection and would like to thank you for your contribution and time. Your comments were very valuable and helped us in our work.

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