

Inspection report for County Children's Centre

Local authority	Liverpool
Inspection number	383416
Inspection dates	29 February - 1 March 2012
Reporting inspector	Tim Vaughan HMI

Centre leader	Sue Culkin
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	135267 Arnot St Mary Church of England Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

An inspection of the co-located primary school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre coordinator, centre staff and a representative from the local authority. Discussions were also held with members of the advisory board, the parent forum, a range of partners, parents, and service users. The inspectors observed the centre's work, accompanied staff on a home visit, spoke to one of the local schools by telephone, visited the local library and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

County Children's Centre is located in the Walton district of Liverpool. The centre developed from a local authority day nursery and was designated as a phase two children's centre in June 2007. Governance arrangements are through an advisory board reporting to the local authority.

The centre provides the full core purpose within premises at Arnot St Mary Church of England Primary School and also uses a range of satellite sites. Since September 2011, childcare has been provided through a range of local providers. Almost all children enter early years provision with a much lower range of skills and knowledge than that expected for their age.

There are eleven super output areas served by the centre and each is economically and socially disadvantaged. Three are ranked in the top 1% of the most deprived areas in the country and the remaining eight areas are ranked in the top 15% most deprived. There are 51.7% of children aged under five who live in households where no-one is working. Also

9.2% of the local population are in receipt of Job Seekers' Allowance. The proportion of local people who claim benefits and receive Incapacity Benefit or Disability Living Allowance is 15.6%. Almost all local families are from a White British background with 3.2% of families from a range of minority ethnic groups.

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

This is a good children's centre providing a wide range of services at the heart of the local community. As a result, almost all local families are registered and the majority use the activities on offer. There is a strong focus upon the welfare and safety of all children and parents, including those with circumstances that make them vulnerable. People are respected as individuals and the partnership with health visitors and social care are particularly strong around family support, as is the link with the on-site primary school. Staff show skill and commitment in supporting families which is enhanced by their in-depth knowledge of the local community.

'They pulled me from the dark, murky water – they helped me to tread.' Comments made by this parent and others show that families feel accepted and valued and indicate why the centre is very effective. Safeguarding is a high priority, all necessary systems are in place to safeguard children and parents' well-being and there is a good level of safeguarding training for all workers and the advisory board members.

Over the past five years, the centre has undergone a period of significant change during which the centre coordinator has built strong teamwork and a shared sense of purpose among staff. Through carefully focussed improvement planning and a clear vision for supporting children and families, she has led ongoing improvements to provision and outcomes. Good support is given to the coordinator by the advisory board and by the local primary school headteacher. The board holds the centre to account very effectively, helped by clear briefings from the coordinator, including about data and outcomes.

The learning environment is a particular strength of the centre. For example, high quality learning for babies and toddlers at centre activities is well illustrated through photographs

on the walls. Furthermore, the centre uses daylight and a range of architectural features very effectively to create a modern, welcoming and comfortable feel to an extended Victorian school building. The heritage of local families and the wider community is valued. For example, Black History Month is celebrated and festivals range from Diwali to St David's Day to Mother's Day. Imagery around the centre reflects a range of ages, ethnicity and gender that helps the centre to be welcoming and inclusive. However, the centre's self-evaluation and plans for improvement include only a satisfactory level of detail about how it will promote greater equality across sexual orientation and transgender identity.

Leaders, staff and the advisory board have a clear and shared understanding of the strengths of the centre and where further improvement is required. For example, they are aware that obesity among children in the Reception Year of primary school has increased over the last three years. In addition, while the centre gives good support to individual parents who wish to improve their basic skills, not enough parents access accredited adult learning or other activities that promote access to employment. Nonetheless, other outcomes for children and families are good and improving, and the centre has clear plans for further improvement. Along with the centre's other strengths, including good reach to almost all target groups, its capacity to improve further is good.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Further reduce obesity in children by the age of five years by continuing to work with partners in health, primary schools and early years settings.
- Increase the proportion of local parents who are undertaking accredited adult learning courses and other activities that will improve their economic stability.
- Improve equality and diversity by reviewing self-evaluation and plans for improvement in order that they show how the centre will promote greater equality for all characteristics of equality.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The centre has built good links with health colleagues and consequently the number of children accessing mainstream health services and the number being immunised have increased. The take-up of health appointments has also increased. There is widespread health promotion through leaflets, group activities, displays and during home visits. This has helped breastfeeding rates to start to increase from a low starting point and teenage conceptions have declined. The percentage of pregnant women smoking at delivery has declined but the centre is aware that smoking during pregnancy has increased.

Through courses such as 'healthy eating on a budget' parents' understanding of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle for their whole family is beginning to develop well. However, this is not sufficiently showing an impact upon the levels of obesity for young children which

increased from 9.2% in 2009-10 to 15% in 2010-11 and was at 11% half way through 2011-12.

Children using the centre behave well and parents feel confident that any unacceptable behaviour by an adult or child will be appropriately challenged. Parents are well supported through such as parenting courses where they develop new skills and confidence in their own parenting. Children's safety at home has improved because of the extensive gifting of home safety equipment and the regular promotion of safety messages by the centre. As a result, the number of hospital admissions by local young children has declined by 72.8% over three years.

Where families need specific support the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used very effectively to identify their needs and indicate which agency is best placed to take a lead. The number of such assessments is increasing year on year because of the increased coordination across agencies. Due to this work, there is good evidence of improved outcomes for children subject to a child protection plan and for children in care. One parent who had needed such support commented to inspectors 'I now have a completely different outlook because of the centre'.

The centre has a strong emphasis upon improving the quality of the Early Years Foundation Stage within centre activities and through links with local schools and early years providers. As a result, the achievement of children by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has improved by 9% over three years and the gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile and the rest has narrowed by 9%. Parents report that they are more confident in supporting their children with toileting and speech development. Local primary schools acknowledge the effective work of the centre and one said 'I can't praise the children's centre staff enough for the support that they have given to us and families'.

Most families, including those from target groups who are using the centre are making improvements in their skills and personal development. There are good links with the 'Volunteers into Placement' programme and the number of successful placements leading to employment is one of the highest in the city. However, the take-up of accredited training and other activities to support access to employment are satisfactory. As a result, the high level of worklessness across the majority of the reach area is not yet reducing.

The centre promotes a range of opportunities through which parents can develop positive behaviour and relationships. This has enabled some families to be actively involved in the advisory board and the parent's forum. Some parents run groups with centre staff and the centre makes extensive use of post-it boards for parents to make suggestions for improving the centre. These contributions are regularly used and parents say that they their views help to shape services.

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	2
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
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	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.	3

How good is the provision?

2

Through the effective use of data, partnership working and outreach work staff have developed a good understanding of the local area and the barriers to engagement and achievement. This has enabled the centre to increase registrations to 98.5%. Although the recent closure of the on-site nursery has slightly reduced the take-up of services from the 63.8% recorded in 2010-11, a majority of local families continue to use the centre. Registration and take-up of services by target groups are good. For example, a majority of teenage parents are registered and accessing activities within the centre. Centre staff are not complacent and have already prioritised the lower take-up by local fathers and the proportion of engaged fathers is increasing each year.

The centre routinely provides high quality information and signposting about a range of topics including parenting, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual health, adult training and breastfeeding. At times of crisis, families feel strongly supported. Parents typically commented: 'If it wasn't for the centre I wouldn't be here'. Furthermore, women reported gaining greater confidence and ability to keep themselves safe through the support of the 'Harmony' project.

The on-site nursery provided directly by the centre was inspected in 2010 and judged to be outstanding. However, it was closed in September 2011 following local authority review and parents are now signposted to other local providers. Support for childminding has reduced due to local authority changes but childminders report that they continue to feel valued by the centre. One new childminder, from a minority ethnic group, has been successfully supported by the centre to achieve her registration status. Other provision made by the centre to support children's learning and development is good and activities use appropriate venues, for example, local schools. The personal development and achievement of parents is recognised through certificates and through the excellent use of wall displays.

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	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups.	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The development of the centre has been characterised by constant change throughout which the centre coordinator has shown resilience and a firm commitment to improving services for local children and families. She has maintained high staff morale, even through the closure of the centre nursery in 2011. Underpinning this approach has been a flexible, open-minded determination and clarity of vision. As a result, staff know the centre priorities and contribute to regular discussions about how to improve further. Self-evaluation is accurate and linked to impact and feedback from families. The advisory board is very effective in supporting and challenging the centre and strong support is given by the headteacher of the on-site primary school.

The safeguarding of children and families is high priority and as a result there are strong links to colleagues across agencies around family support and child protection. All appropriate criminal records checks of staff and vetting arrangements are in place and staff are well trained in safeguarding. Wider matters such as safe sleeping for babies are well promoted. Individual support to families includes safe behaviours, domestic violence and mental health. Children and families with circumstances that make them vulnerable feel supported, as indicated by one parent who said, 'The centre has helped me so much. Without them I would have just struggled.'

Families from minority ethnic groups such as from the Polish community feel welcome in the centre. Disabled children and those with special educational needs are well supported through groups and through home visits. Furthermore, much care has been given to showing positive images of men and different age groups around the walls of the centre. Festivals are regularly celebrated. However, the centre's self-evaluation and plans for improvement do not show how the centre will promote greater equality for all characteristics of equality.

There is good partnership working with other organisations working in the local area. As a result, the centre is having a greater impact than it could do alone. For example, supporting local early years settings through activities at the local library.

Given the good outcomes achieved, the centre's very effective location within a primary school premises, the efficient use of staff expertise and the fact that a majority of local parents use the centre, the centre is giving good value for money.

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	2
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secures improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
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	2
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	2
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.	2

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

Before the inspection, inspectors read the Ofsted inspection reports and RAISE online reports for local primary schools and inspection reports for six local early years settings to learn about partnership-working, attainment of local children and contextual information about the area in which the centre is situated. The local authority provided comparative data about the centre's performance.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected County Children's Centre on 29 February – 1 March 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you for your help. We spoke with many of you about the centre's work and visited some of you at home. You expressed your views very clearly and they were very helpful to us. This is what we found out.

Your centre provides good support to you and your families and staff work well together to make things better for you and to improve your lives. You told us that you and your children are well supported and looked after. We could see this for ourselves. It was also pleasing to hear that when life is difficult that the centre is there to support you.

We found that the centre is a safe, comfortable and attractive place in which to learn, play, have fun and make friends. We were pleased that mums, dads, grandparents, Polish families and others all use the centre.

We were particularly pleased to hear that many of you are coming to the centre and getting involved. You told us that the centre is providing you with activities that are just what you need and how the staff go out of their way to get to know you and your families.

We were delighted to see that the centre is really important to you and to hear how much more confident you are as parents as a result of all the groups you attend. We were very pleased to hear that many of you have made new friends through the centre and do not feel alone.

Staff work effectively to make the centre as good as it can be. To help them we have suggested they continue their work to ensure that by the age of five years old that more local children are not obese.

Some of you told us how the centre has helped you to gain new qualifications and access opportunities that have led to employment. We have asked the centre to find ways to ensure that more people can do this.

We have also recommended that the centre improves the way that it plans to include all people and helps you to learn about similarities and differences with others.

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