

Inspection report for Portside Children's Centre

Local authority	Cheshire West and Chester
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Portside Children's Centre Nursery EY390958

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.

The inspectors held meetings with the manager of the centre, members of staff and partner professionals from other agencies. Discussions were held with members of the advisory board, parents and with representatives of the local authority. The inspectors observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including the centre's development plans, evaluations, key policies and safeguarding procedures.

Information about the centre

Portside Children's Centre is a phase one centre which was established in 2006 and is situated in Ellesmere Port, Cheshire. In September 2011, as a result of local authority restructuring, it became a 'hub' centre with two 'spokes': Parklands and Woodlands. It provides a range of services which include health services, social care, family play sessions, parenting programmes, adult education and outreach services. Crèche facilities and a nursery are provided on site and the centre liaises closely with Westminster Primary School which is adjacent to it.

In the four wards that make up the reach area, there are 790 children under the age of five. Of these, 96.3% are White British, 1.3% White Other and the remaining 2.4% represent a range of ethnic backgrounds. Levels of deprivation are high and employment is low. National Statistics show that in 2004, the area had a deprivation ranking that was above average in relation to employment, health, education, crime and the environment.

A large proportion of families are on workless benefits and there is high percentage of lone parents. Most children enter early years provision with a range of skills that are below, and sometimes well below, those normally expected for their age.

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

Overall, Portside Children's Centre provides a satisfactory service for its users. It is valued by those who use it and, through the concerted efforts of the staff, particularly family support workers, it is becoming increasingly well established in the community. Although rates of participation in its activities are rising, there is still further work to be done to increase the involvement of fathers and families on income support.

The activities organised by the centre are clearly focused on improving the life chances of children, and their families and users provide positive feedback on what is offered. The impact of this work is beginning to be felt. There has been an increase in the proportions of mothers who start and continue to breastfeed their babies and rates of obesity have fallen. However, in both cases, the figures continue to be considerably less than the averages nationally. The percentage of children reaching a good level of development at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has fluctuated and is now just below the national average for the 30% most deprived areas of the country. The gap between children from the most economically deprived homes and others of the same age has narrowed slightly. Therefore, although there have been improvements in outcomes, these have not been consistent or always sustained. In part, this is because planning is not sufficiently focused on clearly defined priorities and measurable targets and evaluation has not been sufficiently rigorous. As a result, the centre's capacity for improvement is satisfactory.

Good partnership with other agencies is providing increasingly effective early intervention and support for families facing difficulties. The revised approach to the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and the focus on the 'Team around the Family' is helping to ensure that each agency takes a more active part in leading and contributing to the process. It is also providing more coherent support where there are several siblings in a family.

The centre collects its own data as well as being provided with data by the local authority. However, analysis of this information is not always sufficiently detailed to enable the centre to gain a clear indication of its strengths and areas for development. This impacts on its ability to improve the rigour of planning and evaluation systems and to set precise and quantifiable targets for improvement. The centre receives good support from the local authority, particularly from its consultants.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve outcomes for children further by:
 - reducing the rates of obesity
 - increasing the number of mothers who breastfeed their children
 - raising the levels of achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- Make better use of data and other information in order to:
 - identify clear priorities for development
 - produce precise and quantifiable targets for short- and long-term improvement
 - improve the rigour of planning and evaluation.
- Increase the participation rates of fathers and workless families.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

In partnership with other agencies, the centre is providing activities across all of the five outcome areas and, through the new 'hub and spoke' arrangement, is making these more easily accessible to families. However, the impact of provision is variable and fathers and families claiming income support have yet to be engaged sufficiently in activities.

Initiatives such as the 'Community Café', 'Come Dine with Me', 'Toddle Waddle' events, 'Be-A-Star' and 'Bosom Pals' are well received by parents and are raising their awareness of how to improve their children's health. The award-winning allotment programme also plays an important role in this respect. Through involving young carers and fathers, it has a wider reach than many other activities. However, the impact of these types of activities, in reducing obesity and increasing rates of breastfeeding, for example, is yet to be seen. For example, over the last year, there has been a 5.1% increase in the proportion of women who start to breastfeed their children and a 6.3% increase in the proportion who continue to do so. However, the overall figures of 48.1% and 15.3% remain well below the averages nationally of 73.7% and 45.7%. Similarly, although rates of obesity among four-to five-year-olds have fallen, they continue to be considerably higher than the national average.

The rigorous systems and procedures operating within the centre ensure that families who use it are safe and feel safe. Young children adapt quickly to the clear and consistent routines established by staff and relate well to each other and to adults. Children subject to

a child protection plan are supported well through the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and the 'Team around the Child' process. Discussions with parents gave eloquent testimony to the high regard in which they hold the staff. One parent, referring to her family support worker, said: 'She's like a mum to me'. For many families, the centre has been a crucial source of help and advice when they have experienced difficulties in their lives. Parents are given good support to contribute to the life of the centre through their feedback, membership of the parents' forum and through the increasing number of formal and informal volunteering opportunities. There is also an increasing number of opportunities for them to contribute to the local community through fund-raising events. A notable example of this was the recent project where the centre manager and the National Boat Museum matched the money raised by parents, thus providing a large number of families with season tickets for museum events.

The courses offered by the centre are valued and used well but predominantly by mothers. Written evaluations and the comments made to inspectors showed that parents were being helped to build up their confidence and to develop their skills in supporting their children's development. The 'Stay and Play' activities are highly valued. These include sessions at the women's refuge and the local sports centre. However, the number held at the latter venue is limited. A concerted effort is being made to support young children's development across the Early Years Foundation Stage and good use is made of the 'learning journeys' to track their progress. The local authority's consultants are an important source of advice, support and expertise in this area of work. However, data show that although the percentage of children gaining at least 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scales rose in 2009/2010 this fell last year to just below the national average for children in the 30% most deprived areas of the country. In addition, over that period, there was a small narrowing of the percentage gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the rest which closed by two percentage points.

Through its crèche and nursery, the centre plays an important part in enabling parents, including teenage parents, to attend courses in order to extend their own qualifications and become more employable. The partnership with the Housing, Health and Employment and Enterprise (HEET) centre and the local college is helping an increasing number of parents to pursue credited and unaccredited courses. This organisation is also a crucial source of advice on housing, benefits, debt management and financial planning. The numbers taking advantage of advice are increasing but less than a fifth of families claiming income support are currently engaged with 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	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	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?

3

The centre conducts detailed evaluations of individual courses and activities to determine the extent to which immediate aims have been met and to establish the satisfaction rates among participants. However, this feedback is not collated systematically to give a coherent overview of the quality of provision. Limited use is made of the available data and information to determine what long-term impact the provision is having on specific outcomes. As a result, self-evaluation is too generous and does not identify clearly articulated priorities for further development.

The centre is making a concerted effort to extend the range of people who use it. For example, through door-to-door calling, 170 families were recently informed of the 'Toddle Waddle' event and parents attending drop-in 'Stay and Play' sessions are provided with information on further activities available to them. At the request of parents, provision was adapted to include a crèche. The opening hours of the nursery were also extended till 6pm and, apart from Bank Holidays, provision is now available every day of the year.

Those who attend the centre told inspectors how much they value the support it provides and how welcomed they are made to feel by all the staff. Social care workers also spoke of the valuable contribution the centre makes to their work by enabling them to meet families who might otherwise be reluctant to seek relevant help and advice. The information leaflets available within the centre and distributed in the community provide a good range of valuable information.

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.	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre manager and staff have a strong commitment to extending provision and providing the best possible life chances for children and their families. There is a clear system of governance with appropriate opportunities for parents to influence decisions about the range and focus of services. Partnership with other agencies is good. The advisory board has only recently been established in its present form and is not yet fully effective in reviewing the work of the centre and providing suitable challenge to its manager. Appropriate use is made of resources and the centre provides satisfactory value for money. The centre manager and the advisory board recognise the need to improve planning by establishing more precise goals, more clearly defined priorities for further development and a more detailed analysis of costs.

The centre has appropriate arrangements for challenging discrimination and has conducted targeted work to support diversity, including a project with the local Traveller community. Disabled children and those with special educational needs are supported appropriately. However, the centre does not always receive sufficient information from health services to ensure that it is reaching all families in need of such support.

All staff receive regular and up-to-date training on safeguarding and this forms an important aspect of monthly supervisions and annual reviews. As a result, policies and procedures are firmly established and reflected in the centre's work. The procedures for the safe recruitment of staff and volunteers and of obtaining Criminal Record Bureau checks are followed rigorously. Through close collaboration with other agencies, good support is provided for those who experience domestic violence. The 'Jigsaw', 'Time out for Dads' and other programmes designed to raise awareness and understanding of domestic violence issues have been very effective in helping families in these circumstances. The centre is considering further ways of extending provision to support men who experience domestic violence.

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 secures 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	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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Portside Children's Centre on 7 and 8 March 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We are very grateful to those of you who kindly took the time to speak to us during the inspection. You helped us to understand the work of the centre and gave us a very clear view of what an important part it plays in your lives. It was good to hear how welcoming you find all the staff and how they have helped you when you or your children have faced particular difficulties in your lives.

We found the staff to be very committed. They are keen to support children's development and to help increase adults' confidence and skills so that being a parent becomes an enjoyable and rewarding experience. You clearly appreciate the wide range of activities run by the centre and the feedback forms that you fill in at the end of each course are very positive. We have asked the centre to build on this feedback and to try to get a clearer picture of what difference attending the centre makes to the way you deal with your children and the progress that your children make.

The work of the centre is leading to improvements for you and your families. For example, the number of mothers who breastfeed their babies is rising and the number of obese children is falling. However, there is still quite a way to go to bring these figures into line with the averages across the country. The number of children who reach a good level of development by the age of five has fluctuated and is now just below the national average.

We have asked the centre to focus further on these areas in order to bring about further improvements.

The centre receives some good information from the local authority but it does not always make best use of this to analyse how well it is doing and to identify where further improvement is needed. Therefore, we have asked for this to be done.

The staff at the centre work very hard to try to get as many people involved in its activities as possible. The numbers are rising but there are still some groups of people who are not taking part. Therefore, we have asked the centre to look at ways of getting more fathers involved, as well as more families who are unemployed.

There are several strong partners working with the centre. These include Housing, Health and Employment and Enterprise (HEET) and the local college which help families to improve their qualifications and to find work.

Thank you to all of you for your contribution to the inspection. We are very grateful and wish you and your children every success in the future.

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