

Inspection report for Bishop's Castle Area Children's Centre

Local authority	Shropshire
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Bishop's Castle Primary School (122254)
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Crowgate Child Centre (EY386783)

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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the children's centre manager, its senior children's support worker and other centre staff. They spoke with parents and carers, and representatives of the advisory board. Discussions were held with representatives from the local authority, health professionals, and a wide range of partner organisations and educational bodies who provide services for the centre's families. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Bishop's Castle Area Children's Centre was designated as a phase two centre in October 2008; it started to fulfil its core purpose in December 2008. Full-time early years provision is available, on-site, at the privately run Crowgate Child Centre. The centre itself makes crèche provision available to support families when accessing its services.

The centre serves a rural area of over 200 square miles, with a low population density. It is one of seven 'hub and spoke' children's centre areas in South Shropshire which are organised and managed by a single staff team under the leadership of the centre's manager. These seven centres are subject to reorganisation and will become five areas as from 1 April 2012. The Bishop's Castle Area Children's Centre will then become known as the Shropshire Hills Area Children's Centre. The centre's manager is answerable to the local authority; an advisory board provides advice and guidance and oversees the work of all the children's centres in the South Shropshire area. The local authority has set up a

county-wide parents' panel to provide additional advice and support for all its centres, and the development of their programme of services. Users from the Bishop's Castle area are represented on both the advisory board and parents' panel.

As a tourist area, the centre's locality has an active service industry, but families are affected by low wages and a lack of affordable housing. The percentage of workless families in the area is below average, but the proportion of low-income families, in receipt of benefits or subject to financial hardship, is above average. Overall, the centre serves a community which falls into the 40% most deprived areas nationally. There are 12 primary and/or infant schools in the extended Bishop's Castle area, and 28 independent childcare settings. The centre serves nearly 600 children and over 250 families living in its reach area. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities vary significantly over such a large area, but are generally below or only broadly in line with those expected for their age when they enter the Early Years Foundation Stage provision. Most families are White British; the proportion from other heritage groups, mainly Welsh, is well below average.

The centre itself is situated in demountable buildings on the site of the Bishop's Castle Primary School. It also shares its buildings with an established childcare setting, the Crowgate Child Centre. The children's centre consists of a multi-use room, a meeting room and an office. It also has 12 service delivery points and four information points for users within its reach area. These sites are situated in local schools, community halls, health visitor clinics and libraries. The centre operates in partnership with other agencies and professionals such as health visitors, midwives Jobcentre, playbus and library services. The centre's manager has been successful in working with local community leaders in acquiring, from 16 April 2012, a permanent, satellite base in Minsterley Parish Hall. This is in order to strengthen its presence in the north of its reach area.

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, well-run centre which meets well the needs of its community. Its activities and services result in good outcomes for families and their children. The focus on children's personal development, and their language and communication

skills, has helped raise standards on entry to school across the reach area. The focus on healthy lifestyles has helped lower obesity rates below that of the wider local authority. Parents from minority heritage groups point to ways they have been helped to integrate into local community life. Families praise the impact of parenting courses on the quality of their own and their children's emotional well-being. Feedback from users show they feel safer because of the centre's work; they understand how to act more safely, focusing on prevention rather than cure.

The secret of its success lies in the quality of the cooperative teamwork existing between its professional and administrative staff. The centre leader and her team are highly ambitious on behalf of the families in their reach area. This approach inspires the confidence and cooperation of the centre's partner groups, including those from which the centre commissions activities and support services. This has led to excellence in the partnerships established by, and with, the centre. An impressive number of the centre's partners took the time to meet inspectors. There was universal praise for the quality of their working relationships, and how these supported their own work so effectively. This in turn underpins securely the outstanding quality of care, guidance and support the centre provides for its users. Its impact can be summed up by one parent who wrote, 'My child always leaves the centre happy. As soon as I say we are going there, her face lights up.' The centre's records show that, right from its early days, it has attracted such comments.

The main difficulty for the centre has been the sheer size of its reach area. Public transport is often difficult for those in the more isolated areas; reaching Bishop's Castle itself is challenging for those without private transport. It can often take staff well over half an hour to drive to the furthest reaches in the north of its locality. Consequently, while coverage of the centre's south and central areas has been good, it has been less effective in the north. Staff welcome the forthcoming opening of the Minsterley satellite base. Users speak with enthusiasm about the future possibilities this development offers to themselves and their families.

In order to target more effectively the users in the centre's northern area, the manager has been aided significantly by the local authority's recently introduced, helpful system of mapping its children's centre areas by postcode. The centre now knows, for example, the numbers of children aged under five, or the proportions of families affected by income deprivation, in each of its individual or broader postcode areas. This information has been welcomed by the centre manager who is already using it very effectively to analyse need in the wider northern reach area, and to aid planning for the new Minsterley base. The advisory board for the South Shropshire group of centres has a membership which covers a good range of personal and professional expertise. It is using this well to aid the centre in the forthcoming reorganisation. However, some board members recognise that they do not always have the specialist knowledge to enable them to challenge sufficiently effectively the work of their centres. They are seeking additional training from the local authority. This positive, active approach by the centre's leadership is indicative of the impact of the centre's good self-evaluation, determination and strategies which support its good capacity for further development and improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Augment the facilities and services the centre is able to provide in its locality by completing its plans to develop its services in the north of its reach area.
- Enhance the centre's leadership and management by working with, and within, the local authority to provide additional, specialist training for those members of the advisory board seeking this.

2

How good are outcomes for families?

Data show a steady increase in registrations and use since the centre opened in 2008. The centre's impact has been partially limited by the difficulties in reaching families in the north of its area. However, figures for 2011 show that it is now reaching nearly two-thirds of the families with children under the age of five. As a result, the gap between children's knowledge and skills in the Early Years Foundation Stage and those expected nationally has been closing across the locality. Data show that children's personal, social and emotional development is now slightly better than national expectations. Children's skills in communication, language and literacy development are only broadly average, but improving. The centre's work in the promotion of adult literacy and numeracy has not only helped raise awareness of the importance of these aspects of child development, but also the promotion of users' economic well-being. As one mother commented, 'The literacy course has been a great opportunity to help towards my future employment.'

The centre takes a holistic view of the families it serves, whether through the work of the health teams, the welfare and benefits teams, or those involved in adult learning and the centre's successful parenting courses. As a result of such work, for example, the percentage of mothers sustaining breastfeeding is well above the national average. The centre has also played its part in helping Shropshire local authority to win a national award for its work with teenage parents, and in reducing the under-18 conception rate.

The safeguarding of children and their families is good. A routine fire drill for the 'Bumps and Babes' group was organised well; no baby cried during the evacuation. Road safety activities and messages are included in the play activities for children. Such work has contributed to a downward trend in children involved in traffic accidents across the authority. Discussions between mothers as a result of the championing of anti-smoking day showed the centre is successful in promoting this message. Family first aid and 'healthy cooking on a budget' courses are particularly popular. Families from low-income households say how much this has helped them.

Overall, staff invest a great deal of quality time and effort into ensuring the social, emotional and physical health of the children and families they serve. One parent summed up the views of most when writing, 'The centre and its staff have helped me focus again, socialize and share views and experiences with friends.' The impact of

all this is to be seen in the success of activities such as the 'Bumps and Babes' group, particularly in helping babies' sensory development, and the work of the crèche and 'drop-in' activities at the outreach centres in aiding children's social development. Resources are designed well to stimulate children's interests, whether to encourage their sensory awareness as young babies or to develop their physical coordination during play. Observations by staff of individual children are acute, recorded well, help in the planning of activities to promote the next steps in the children's development, and contribute successfully to their preparation for school.

Social interaction between adults is good; children behave and play well together. Parents and children of all ages enjoy their time at the centre and its outreach facilities. They appreciate the ways the staff aid their learning and help improve their personal skills. The centre is focused well on raising users' self-confidence and self-esteem. The impact of this was summed up by one comment, 'I didn't expect anything of the centre, but it has helped me become more positive, happy and left me feeling empowered.' The centre is successful in registering both male and female users; over 40% of registered users are male parents or carers. This is because users know their views are taken into account in the running of the centre, in addition to meeting their needs. Families and their children, whose circumstances make them more vulnerable, benefit significantly from the highly coordinated support they receive when they require multi-agency assistance. Their needs are assessed thoroughly through the Common Assessment Framework, and 'Team Around the Child' support.

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	2
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	2

How good is the provision?

2

Centre staff are looking forward to the opening of their northern area base in order to improve further the effectiveness of their outreach. However, the good quality of the existing provision is typified by the ways the centre promotes mothers' and children's well-being and health through breastfeeding. Staff and some users are

active in going out into the community to seek 'breastfeeding-friendly' premises and facilities. Parenting skills are promoted very effectively through the parenting course; crèche facilities have also assisted access to this group. Literacy development is supported well by the centre's partnership with the local library service. This ensures that those for whom a visit to the nearest library might mean a two- or three-hour trip, have more local access to books for their children. The centre also commissions regularly the 'playbus' to support those in more isolated areas.

The excellent quality of care, guidance and support results from the very efficient ways the centre's services are integrated, and the excellent quality of links with the centre's professional partners. The centre is responsive to the needs of the children, parents and carers in its area who are disabled or have special educational needs. It is particularly supportive of a parent-led group for such users which operates in the south of the county. There is also good cooperation between centre staff and the special educational needs coordinators in its partner schools. Childcare settings appreciate the support and encouragement they are given to help them in their work. The families of service personnel value their contact with the centre, particularly when their partners are away on duty, at home or abroad.

The centre engages its users well, and is active in helping families to access good-quality information and advice. The information leaflets and posters it produces are well designed, and written in readable language that is easily understood. This enables them to make informed choices to improve their economic well-being and access pathways to work or additional education and training. Typical of users' feedback is, 'The centre staff have definitely helped me with what I want to achieve in my life plan.' The display of information and signposting is thoughtful, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues such as domestic violence against either gender.

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	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre's manager has built an effective team of skilled and well-qualified staff. This has led to the establishment of the excellent partnerships which characterise the centre's work, and prove so vital in pursuing the centre's philosophy of ensuring the children and their families always come first. There are good levels of accountability and careful, regular analysis of the impact of the centre's activities. Staff use their local knowledge, and that of their partners, well to promote equality and diversity. This has led to the drive to improve the centre's services in the north of its reach

area. The good outcomes already achieved, and sustained since the centre first opened, result from the high expectations the centre's leaders have of themselves and each other. This has ensured the centre provides increasingly good value for money in the ways it builds and targets successfully its services to its communities.

The effective safeguarding arrangements reflect a rigorous approach which is understood well and practised by all staff. All necessary checks on staff are undertaken, regarding their suitability to work with families. Child protection and health and safety at the centre itself, and its outreach facilities, have a high profile; risk assessments are thorough. The importance of early intervention is embedded and centre staff play an important role in any multi-agency work. The teamwork links between the centre, health services, family workers, social services and schools work very efficiently.

The involvement of the advisory board in challenging the centre's effectiveness is good. Members are supportive and, alongside users, are active participants in the centre's good processes of self-evaluation and development planning. However, the more the board has become involved, the more some members have realised they would appreciate additional, specialist training to ensure they carry out their responsibilities effectively. This is being sought through, and agreed by, the local authority. The authority-wide parents' panel also plays an active role in guiding the centre's thinking and planning. The difficulties of travel and communication in this rural area have meant the local authority and its centres have taken an innovative approach to the consultation with a wide range of users. This is achieved, successfully and efficiently, through telephone, email and social media networking.

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 secure 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	2
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	1
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the	2

reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	
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Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

The findings of the November 2011 inspection of the Craven Arms Area Children's Centre were taken into account. It was found to be good, and the care, guidance and support offered to users to be similarly outstanding. This is the only other centre in the South Shropshire group which has been inspected; these seven (soon to be five) centres have a common team of staff, workers, leaders and managers.

The findings of the inspection of the Crowgate Child Centre in May 2009, when it was judged good, were also used to guide the inspection team's findings with regard to educational provision and outcomes for pre-school children. This setting was not re-inspected at the same time as the inspection of the children's centre.

In addition, the findings of the last inspection report on Bishop's Castle Primary School were taken into account. In November 2008 this school was found to be satisfactory. It was re-inspected at the same time as the inspection of the children's centre and continues to be satisfactory. Inspectors shared the evidence for some of the common aspects of leadership, management, provision and children's outcomes.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Bishop's Castle Area Children's Centre on 15–16 March 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank all of you who took the time to talk with us during our recent visit. We were impressed by the warmth of the praise you gave to the centre and its work on your behalf. It is clear that you have confidence in the staff, and that you value the improvements the centre has made to the lives of your families. We saw this for ourselves. Your centre's manager and her staff have a good understanding of your needs, listen to what you ask of them, and put on the activities you want. We also agree with you when you say the centre manager and staff work well together as a team, and help you to keep your children and families safe and healthy. As one of you said, 'The staff have helped me look closely at my life and what I want to do.' The discussions we had about your experiences and those of your children and families were important and we found them to be very helpful.

There are two excellent aspects of your centre's work. The first comes from the high quality of the teamwork you told us about. This has ensured outstanding

partnerships have been established between the centre and those with whom it works on your behalf. This includes health services and health visitors, family workers, local schools and childcare settings, social workers, welfare and benefits teams, Jobcentre, the library service and a host of others, including the playbus scheme. This ensures the centre staff are effective in the ways they support you and your families not only during the good times but also when you and your families find yourselves in a time of difficulty. This is particularly the case for those of you whose circumstances may make you more vulnerable. Consequently, the overall care, guidance and support you receive from your centre is excellent.

As many of you will know, from 1 April 2012, the seven South Shropshire centres, which are under the leadership of your centre's manager, are going to be streamlined into five new areas. It is intended that there will be no major changes to your own area, but it will be known in the future as the Shropshire Hills Area. Until now, those of you using the outreach facilities in Westbury and Minsterley have often had difficulty in travelling to the Bishop's Castle centre. From 16 April 2012 there will be a permanent 'Shropshire Hills' base in Minsterley Parish Hall. This aims to make it much easier for those of you in the north of the centre's area to access its services. We have asked your centre's staff to make sure this new facility is fully operational for you as soon as possible. As part of the reorganisation, your advisory board for the South Shropshire group of children's centres has been taking on additional responsibilities. They take their work very seriously, and everyone on the advisory board has something valuable to offer, either personally or professionally. However, the scope of the centre's work is increasingly very wide, and some of them have said they would like additional training to help them become even more effective in their monitoring and advisory work. We have asked your centre manager, and the local authority, to help by providing this additional training.

Since your centre first opened in 2008, an ever-increasing number of families from your communities have benefited from your centre's services and activities. We hope that many more will continue to join you as it transforms into the Shropshire Hills Area Centre. We thank you again for all your contributions to the inspection.

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