

Inspection report for Chestnut Children's Centre

Local authority	Devon County Council
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Linked school if applicable	Chestnut Nursery School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Little Ones Childcare

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 an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre's management team, the advisory board, the local authority, partnership agencies, members of staff and families using the centre. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of documentation including key policies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its development plans, evaluations of services and data about people who use the centre and about the wider community.

Information about the centre

Chestnut Children's Centre is a phase one children's centre. It serves an area which is in one of the 30% most deprived areas of the country. The centre is currently run by the local authority, although a local charity, Exeter Community Initiatives, has recently been awarded the tender to provide the centre's governance. Chestnut was designated as a children's centre in 2005. The centre offers a range of services which include health services, family play sessions, parenting programmes and outreach services.

The centre works in a cluster alongside Countess Wear Children's Centre. It is located in a densely populated urban area and serves the Wonford area of the city of Exeter. The population is mostly White British, with a small percentage of other ethnic groups, some of whom speak English as an additional language. A higher than average proportion of families is dependant on workless benefits. There are 365 children under five years living in the reach area. Children's levels on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage are low, particularly in their communication, language and literacy development.

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

Chestnut Children's Centre provides satisfactory support to children and families accessing its services and, as a result, outcomes for families are beginning to improve. A strength of the centre is the warm, welcoming and caring approach taken by staff. Parents and carers express how they value the care, guidance and support provided. Statements made to inspectors such as: 'The centre has completely changed my life – I had no confidence' and the centre was, 'my link to society and people' demonstrate the impact the centre has had. Parents and carers advise that coming to the centre is like being part of 'a family'. They report that staff's approach makes them feel 'cared about'.

Parents' and carers' understanding of how to keep their children safe is developing appropriately. Staff support families to provide a more organised and safe home environment. Through the implementation of a home-safety scheme, in conjunction with local fire officers, families' awareness of the risks within the home environment has been heightened. Alongside police officers, staff have improved families' understanding of how to safely transport their children in cars. However, despite these efforts, levels of admissions to accident and emergency departments remain significantly above national averages. Leaders have identified that improved detail in the information provided to them about why children are admitted to hospital will help them to target their services more specifically.

Centre staff have rightly prioritised the promotion of breastfeeding as rates of uptake in the reach area are low. There has been some success in improving the numbers of mothers who choose to breastfeed at birth having increased by 13% since 2009. However, numbers who sustain breastfeeding have only risen by 2% in the same period. A group of mothers have recently engaged in a project to increase awareness of both the benefits and convenience of breastfeeding. This project has been successful in raising some mothers' understanding of the health benefits of breastfeeding and appears to be positively changing some parents' perceptions.

Families are provided with some opportunities to feedback on the quality of services

they access. Parents and carers report that they feel that their views are listened to and acted upon. For example, they were successful in their request to reinstate a weekly play session. Some parents and carers are actively involved in decision-making through their role on the advisory board. However, systems to ensure the views of the range of groups who use the centre drive service delivery are not secure. For example, the centre's attempts to instigate a parents' forum have not been successful.

Staff and managers are increasing their use of available data and other sources of intelligence about the reach area. This coupled with a high registration rate of 92% means they have a developed knowledge of the needs of the community. They provide a suitable range of services although have only engaged just over half of families in the locality. Leaders have not analysed fully data available to them in order to effectively target their efforts to engage those who are not currently accessing services. As the vast majority of services are delivered on site, the centre has not raised its profile by delivering services within the community. Staff have suitable systems in place to assess the needs of families who are referred to the centre. At present, systems to assist with the early identification of low-level need, such as the effective sharing of information with health partners, are less developed.

The centre demonstrates a satisfactory capacity for improvement. Overall self-evaluation is accurate although lacks evidence of impact to securely demonstrate how well the centre is improving outcomes and meeting the needs of the families within its community. The interim manager, appointed at the beginning of January 2012, has quickly got to grips with the key issues for this centre and the steps needed to move the centre forward. Some improvements have been implemented although plans to address remaining issues have not been developed due to the forthcoming change in governance.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Together with health partners implement strategies aimed at:
 - improving the rates of breastfeeding in the reach area
 - the sharing of information to assist with the early identification of need
 - improving the information regarding trends in accident and emergency admissions in order to implement strategies aimed at reducing incidents.

- Improve reach rates by:
 - analysing data more rigorously in order to understand where services need to be targeted
 - extending services out into the community in order that the children's centre has a more visible presence.

- Improve systems to ensure the views of families from a range of groups are

heard and used to drive services.

- Improve the collection of evidence in order to demonstrate impact and measure outcomes for families.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Parents and their children learn about how to keep themselves healthy. Through their participation in the 'Harvest Project' they have learnt how to grow and cook their own fruit and vegetables. Children recognise the effects exercise has on the body and freely access drinking water to support their physical well-being. Parents and carers say how much they enjoy physical activities such as 'Fit Kidz' where they learn how to exercise to music alongside their children. Those who are at risk of domestic violence are supported by well-trained staff. They are provided with a range of information about how to get support. When at risk, staff provide parents and carers with good advice enabling them to keep themselves safe.

Children enjoy the groups they attend at the centre where they make at least satisfactory progress. Boys are particularly well supported in the nurture group as they have free-flow access to the outside play area. There has been an improving trend in the number of children who reach a good level of overall achievement by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage with the percentage rising from 41% in 2009 to 53% in 2011. The achievement gap is also improving, albeit at a slower rate. Centre staff have placed appropriate emphasis on developing children's language and communication skills as these are traditionally weak areas. For example, early indications of the implementation of the 'Let's Talk' programme indicate that it has successfully enhanced parents' and carers' approach to communicating with their children and improving levels of development. Parents' and carers' skills are further developed through a range of parenting programmes, such as 'Incredible Years'. In addition, the 'Early Start' programme successfully combines parents', carers' and children's learning, together with time made available to parents and carers to develop their literacy skills. Satisfactory provision is in place to support children's successful transition into nursery school. Early Years workers work with the on-site nursery to introduce children and parents and carers to the environment through the toddler and nurture groups. Supported by the qualified teacher, staff are implementing systems to monitor the progress children make to share with the settings they move on to.

Parents and carers report increased levels of confidence and self-esteem due to their contact with the centre. For example, a group of parents set up 'Chit Chats' a support group aimed at parents with children under one year. Parents and carers are given suitable opportunities to evaluate the quality of services. A range of means, such as a suggestion box and whiteboard, enables parents and carers to provide their views as and when they choose to. Children are well behaved in groups and parents and carers are supported to implement positive behaviour management strategies.

The centre's Training and Advice Coordinator (TACO) works with individual families in order to improve their financial position including some who are in an extremely vulnerable position. He provides a range of practical advice and guidance regarding benefits and credits and signposts to outside agencies. The centre has had some impact upon supporting workless households in the reach area. For example, some parents and carers have successfully taken the journey from being service user to being employed by the centre or partners.

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 stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

3

Staff and leaders have a satisfactory understanding of the needs of their community mainly through their personal knowledge. Staff make increased use of data in relation to the profile of the area to complement this knowledge and have developed a satisfactory range of services. Family Support Workers have made good use of outreach work, such as the 'Safety at Home' scheme in order to provide support to some families who may have been traditionally harder to reach. Once they have made contact with families, staff are successful in engaging many of them in a range of services. Staff are becoming increasingly proficient at using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process to help them identify the needs of particular families who require targeted support. Systems to enable staff to identify low-level need and provide early intervention are less secure. Staff have had some success in engaging fathers and young parents in services. For example, their attendance on programmes such as 'Incredible Years' and 'Let's Talk' has enhanced their understanding of how their children learn and improved their skills as parents.

Supported by the TACO, some parents and carers develop 'Family Life Plans' which identify their starting points, what they would like to achieve and the steps they need

to take. They are then able to access a range of suitable learning and development opportunities. Some parents and carers report that their contact with the centre has raised their educational aspirations; for example, having initially undertaken literacy and numeracy classes they were inspired to undertake further studies including accessing higher education.

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

Following a period of turbulence in the management of the centre, lines of management responsibility are now clarified and satisfactory systems are in place to provide staff with professional supervision and on-going support. Partners are supervised by their own agency, although these are not integrated with the centre's management processes. Centre leaders are aware that the centre has not been successful in fully embedding integrated working with all partners in order to promote good outcomes for families. The advisory board provides the centre with support and is developing its role of challenging the centre to improve. Governance is currently provided by the local authority who knows the centre well and has a realistic view of what it does well and where it needs to improve. There is good liaison with the in-coming organisation who will adopt governance responsibility from the beginning of April 2012 to support a smooth transition.

The centre currently has an interim manager who is clear on what steps need to be taken in order to improve provision and outcomes for children. She has appropriately prioritised relevant areas for improvement, such as in safeguarding, and is providing the in-coming organisation with information regarding other areas for development. Suitable systems are in place for leaders and managers to evaluate the effectiveness of the centre through a process of self-evaluation. Overall, leaders and managers have an accurate view of the centre's strengths and areas for development. They are developing systems to collect evidence to demonstrate the impact that services have on families, although these are in their infancy. The centre's service-delivery plan is initially shaped by targets set by the local authority. Staff and leaders develop this further by identifying how they will achieve the targets set. While overall appropriate steps are identified, they do not always go far enough to securely effect change. For example, leaders do not analyse data sufficiently in order to have a clear picture of exactly where families not engaging in services live in order to target service delivery most effectively.

The centre offers satisfactory value for money. The premises and environment are suitable and safe for families and staff. Outreach services are in place and work is undertaken with some of the most vulnerable families in the reach area. The centre is building relationships with health partners in order to improve information sharing so that families who would benefit from early intervention can be identified and supported.

Centre staff promote an inclusive environment for parents, carers and their children. Those who speak English as an additional language are supported with information that is translated into their own language and through books for children in play sessions. The provision of crèche facilities for those attending family learning courses has played a key part in enabling more parents and carers to develop their knowledge, skills, experience and confidence. Those who have children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are sufficiently supported to improve outcomes. For example, through their attendance on the 'Let's Talk' programme, they are given confidence to support language development. Staff have built a suitable range of partnerships to deliver services which overall are beginning to improve outcomes for families although they recognise that strengthening these relationships will better support families in the reach area.

Staff are well trained in child protection and have a good understanding of safeguarding children issues. Staff monitor families subject to child protection plans well and liaise with social care appropriately when they have concerns. Through targeted work with families, they have successfully supported families to remain together. Satisfactory systems are in place to ensure those who work with children are suitable to do so.

Some parents and carers directly influence the direction of services as they are involved in the advisory board. Despite staff's concerted efforts, although satisfactory, parents' and carers' influence on decision making is limited as the centre has not been successful in maintaining a forum for parents and carers to share their views in order to make a more effective contribution to the running of the centre.

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

Inspectors used information in the Children’s Centre Profile prepared by Devon County Council to make judgements about the outcomes for children and their families in the Chestnut Children’s Centre reach area.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Chestnut Children’s Centre on 29 February and 1 March 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We agree with you that staff at the centre are caring and welcoming and provide you with care, guidance and support, particularly when you need it the most. It is clear that staff have helped many of you to develop in confidence and to make friends and socialise. Staff are well trained in how to safeguard children and management has taken the correct steps to ensure that anyone who works with you and your children is suitable. Many of you have benefited from advice given by staff on how to make your homes safer for your children as well as steps that you can take to keep yourselves safe. Staff now need to get improved information to help them to understand how they can help you even further.

Those of you we spoke to told us that you enjoy the range of activities on offer, from the play sessions, music and exercise classes, such as ‘Fit Kidz’, to the learning and development opportunities the centre provides. We could see that the services being offered to you are beginning to have a positive impact upon you and your families’ lives. It was good to see that families have been involved in projects to improve their health. We were impressed with the allotment area that some parents and carers are maintaining in order to teach children about how food grows. We were also impressed by the campaign that some mothers have been involved in to raise

awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding. Centre staff are aware that more needs to be done in this area.

Staff clearly know the families who attend the centre well and ensure that the services they provide are suitable for you. Those of you who need extra help are given support either in your homes or at the centre. Staff now need to make sure that they are doing all they can to identify as early as possible when a family may benefit from this kind of help. They need to make better use of all information that is available to them to ensure they are helping as many families as possible.

We noticed that you have some opportunities to share your views with staff about the services they offer you. Staff listen to you and make any changes that they can. It is important, however, that more of you are involved in making direct contributions to the management of the centre, helping to identify how services should be developed.

We know that there have been recent changes in the management of the centre and there are more changes to come. Staff are working well with the organisation who is due to take over the running of the centre to ensure it is well informed. Leaders have a good understanding of what the centre does well and are aware of what steps it needs to take to improve still further. They are beginning to collect information to demonstrate how well they are doing and now need to develop these systems further so that they can be sure that they are providing you with services which really make a difference.

We would like to thank those of you who spared the time to speak with us and were willing to share your thoughts about the centre. We are very grateful and we wish you all every success for the future.

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