

# Inspection report for Octopus Children's Centre

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Local authority	Somerset County Council
Inspection number	366398
Inspection dates	February 2011
Reporting inspector	Jane Burchall HMI

Centre governance	The local authority
Centre leader	Julie Simmonds
Date of previous inspection	This is the centre's first inspection
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Octopus Children's Daycare EY374124

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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 representatives of the centre's management group, the local authority, the advisory board, partnership agencies, members of staff and users of 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 the local community.

## Inspection judgements

**Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory and 4 is inadequate**

### Information about the centre

Octopus Children’s Centre is a phase two centre which was designated in March 2008. It is governed by Somerset County Council. The centre serves a large geographical area which is predominantly rural but also has pockets of urban and coastal locations. The centre’s reach area covers Burnham, Berrow Brean, Brent Knoll and Biddisham. The local population is mostly White British families with smaller percentages of other minority ethnic groups such as those from Eastern European countries. An element of the local population is transient due to seasonal work opportunities offered within local holiday areas.

The centre provides services from several locations within easy reach of each other. On-site early childcare and education is managed by a private provider and outreach services are commissioned through Barnados. Services provided directly by the centre include drop-in and stay-and-play facilities, family support and a childminding network. While data show that there are high levels of unemployment within the local area, a proportion of this is due to high numbers of affluent people living in the area having taken early retirement. Children’s attainment on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage has typically been low, particularly in regards to their communication and language development and their personal, social and emotional development.

#### Overall effectiveness

**The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community**

**2**

#### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

**2**

## Main findings

Octopus Children's Centre is making a good contribution to improving outcomes for users. Staff and management show high levels of commitment and work extremely well together in order to meet the needs of users. They have worked hard to establish an accessible and well-thought-of children's centre. Staff know users well due to the effective systems to assess the needs of individual families. They work closely with partner agencies in order to tailor services which meet users' needs. More recently, reduced staffing levels within health services have impacted upon the amount of input they have been able to offer the centre. This has resulted in the loss of some services which support the emotional well-being of users and their children such as baby massage classes.

Centre staff show a strong commitment to inclusion. For example, staff support parents and carers to obtain equipment to ensure that children with specific needs are fully included. The local authority works closely with children's centre managers in order to improve the quality of information they provide to support their work. However, the data currently provided are not sufficiently honed to local level to give staff a clear and accurate picture of the make-up of their community. This hampers the effective targeting of services to ensure those most at need are reached.

Centre staff have a very close working relationship with the commissioned early years provider. Childminders and other early years providers in the local area receive good support and training to improve outcomes for children in their care. In addition, centre staff have been instrumental in bringing together early years providers and local schools in the 'Burnham Reach Early Years Partnership'. Together they have developed effective transition arrangements supporting children as they move into school. As a result, an increased percentage of children now reach above average standards by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Good relationships between staff and users are evident. Users report that centre staff are warm, welcoming and approachable. As a result, users are confident to approach staff to talk about any concerns they may have. Users say they 'really appreciate' the effort staff go to in order to support them. They particularly value the welcome they receive from reception staff; they take time to get to know parents and carers and their children, making them feel valued and 'important'.

Staff are well trained in safeguarding issues. Good referral and information sharing procedures mean that vulnerable children are quickly identified and referred to appropriate agencies. Staff provide a secure environment for families undergoing supervised and supported contact.

Processes for staff management and professional development are good. Centre staff and management have accurately identified the areas they need to develop based upon users' comments, assessment of users' needs and staff's good knowledge of the local community. Strong leadership complemented by a strengthening advisory board means that the centre has good capacity to develop further.

## What does the centre need to do to improve further?

### Recommendations for further improvement

- With the local authority and partners:
  - refine data further to enable the centre to more precisely identify any additional groups who would benefit from services
  - use this data, and information already available, to ensure hard-to-reach or isolated members of the community are fully engaged.
- Strengthen partnerships with health agencies to ensure families get the best possible service.

### How good are outcomes for users?

<b>2</b>
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Users' understanding of how to promote their own good health is developing through the implementation of a 10-week healthy lifestyle programme. This covers relevant topics such as healthy eating, exercise and dental health. They take positive steps to improve the diet for their families by taking account of information provided by staff through 'cooking on a budget' where they are provided with ideas on how to increase their intake of fruit and vegetables. Parents and carers and their children become more active in the outdoors as they take walks in the park with other members of the centre and take part in the centre's forest school programme.

Children are kept safer in their homes through the support centre staff offer parents and carers to identify and reduce hazards. Attending activities during the annual 'Safety Awareness Week', including those provided by relevant agencies such as the fire department, St John Ambulance and Burnham Lifeboats, means that parents and carers learn skills to keep their children safe, such as resuscitation techniques. Parents and carers report that they are confident that their children are safe while attending the centre due to the security systems in place and staff's attentiveness. Good support is given to families who are subject to child protection plans in order to safeguard vulnerable children.

Parents and carers and children play and learn together when they visit the 'stay and play' and 'shakers and movers' sessions. Parents and carers report that they repeat many of the activities undertaken in the centre when at home. Their skills as parents and carers are enhanced as they take part in relevant opportunities such as 'Triple P', 'Playing up' and 'Peer Early Education Partnership' (PEEP) parenting programmes. Children are supported to settle well into school through a cohesive programme of transition. Parents and carers are well informed of changes to school admission policies in order that they can support their children through the process.

Parents and carers are supported in making appropriate decisions for their children through the family support provision, including contact with workers and attendance on parenting programmes. Users report enhanced confidence due to the support and opportunities provided by centre staff. This is particularly the case for younger

parents. Their attendance on the 'Straight Talking' programme led to them undertaking the role of peer support within local secondary schools. They say the positive feedback received from the students they worked with was key to developing their self-confidence.

Users influence change in the centre through their contributions in 'Parents voice' and representation on the advisory board. A range of opportunities is available for users to communicate their views. Good use of 'Somerset Total Communication' means that those who have difficulties in communicating are supported to contribute. Children learn about the wider world through themed activities such as 'Chinese New Year'.

The economic position of some families has improved through the support they have been given to assess their benefit position and to return to the workplace by the Shaw Trust. They are well supported to overcome challenges they face; for example, they are assisted to find the right day-care provision to meet the needs of their children.

<b>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, and their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How good is the provision?**

<b>2</b>
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Good attention is given to understanding the needs of users through effective assessment procedures. For example, family support staff spend time getting to know families on a one-to-one basis in their homes before identifying what services may be useful to them. Staff make good use of the Comprehensive Assessment Framework (CAF) process as well as local processes when children are identified as needing higher levels of support.

The range of services offered meets the needs of those who currently access the centre. Groups are well attended and attendance levels are increasing. Services have been developed based upon staff's and management's good local knowledge. Centre staff are beginning to engage with groups in the community who are hard to reach. Outreach provision commissioned through Barnados is supplemented by creative use

of the family support team in order that some families are supported in their homes. While the centre recognises the need to extend this element of its provision further, data provided by the local authority are not yet sufficiently synthesised to the reach area in order for it to enable sound identification of the needs of the whole community, including those who are hard to reach.

The centre provides users with good opportunities for personal development. This includes courses to develop their parenting skills as well opportunities for users to develop their confidence and self-esteem. The centre has effectively tailored training provision to meet the needs of specific groups of users such as providing courses for those who do not speak English as their first language. Staff are effective at signposting users to local training providers where they access a range of appropriate courses such as information technology. Provision to help children learn and develop is good. Effective transition arrangements mean that children move seamlessly from early years provision into school, showing an improved readiness to learn. Centre staff celebrate and share the achievement of users in both their own newsletter and features in the local press.

Parents and carers value the good support provided by the children’s centre. In times of crisis families report that staff are flexible and willing to go the extra mile. For example, they quickly develop knowledge about working with children with specific disabilities in order to ensure they are fully included and supported. Users speak highly of the opportunities and advice and guidance they are given in order to improve outcomes for themselves and their families. For example, they value the guidance on improving healthy lifestyles and ways in which to keep their children safe.

<b>The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How effective are the leadership and management?**

<b>2</b>
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The centre is managed by a cohesive management team that shares a common vision for the centre, and has high expectations and a drive to succeed. Members all fully understand their roles and the part they play in developing and delivering services. Their skills, knowledge and understanding complement each other and make a strong overall team. The management team is supported by an advisory body which is reflective of a good range of partners. Their good understanding of the needs of the local community mean they are well placed to offer the centre



appropriate levels of challenge and to assist effectively with prioritising areas for development in order to secure improvement. Day-to-day management and professional supervision is well organised although strategic monitoring is less robust. The local authority is aware of the need to develop data analysis to measure the impact of the work of the centre.

Staff morale is high and all are committed to providing children and their families with services of a good quality. Centre staff systematically evaluate the effectiveness of each of their programmes. They take good account of users' view in order to adapt services. Self-evaluation is undertaken by centre staff, management and the advisory board. They correctly identify priority areas for development although the accuracy of their evaluation of the quality of the centre is variable.

Centre staff are well qualified and trained and their expertise is well used to improve outcomes while maintaining value for money. Good value is also achieved by a sharing of resources with other children's centres and with local schools. For example, users have access to resources from a mobile toy library which operates from another centre. Close working with the co-located school has resulted in the joint facility of a forest school. Centre staff are effective at targeting their service delivery based upon users' starting points. For example, they work on building users' self-confidence before supporting them to apply for work. Staff make creative use of limited space within the centre. They work hard in order to be a focus for the community, such as in taking part in local events including 'Playday'.

Centre staff actively encourage all members of the family to engage with services. They have been successful in engaging a good number of fathers through 'Forest Fun'. They were quick to respond to the request from mothers to participate in this activity by opening this up to the whole family. A number of grandparents also access services provided by the centre. Young parents receive good support through activities designed specifically with them in mind. Centre staff are sensitive to the needs of working parents and carers and offer activities at weekends in order to engage them. Partnerships with agencies to support some of the most vulnerable children in the reach area are effective. The centre's membership on both the multi-agency integrated support in early years group (MAISEY) and the action review for vulnerable children in early years group (ARCHEY) ensure children with particular needs obtain relevant services.

The centre manager takes a proactive role in ensuring staff and providers are well trained and informed in safeguarding issues. She is instrumental in delivering relevant training sessions provision to ensure staff are trained as quickly as possible. Staff are conscientious in ensuring comprehensive records are maintained regarding vulnerable children and their families to ensure they are effectively monitored.

Centre staff have built a good range of effective partnerships. In particular, their proactive approach to partnership working has resulted in a range of early years providers working closely together to promote better outcomes, particularly as children transfer into school. The development of lead childminders through the early

years support officer has resulted in childminders having a strong and active presence within the centre. Relationships with health partners have, more recently, been less robust. Together with health partners, centre managers are planning the redevelopment of services.

Users say they feel valued by staff who take their views and concerns seriously. They effectively contribute to the shaping of service delivery. For example, they are actively involved in developing the vision and values for the centre and have taken an active role in the staff recruitment. The centre is beginning to take steps to engage with those members who are not yet accessing centre services through attendance at community events.

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	2
<b>The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community</b>	2
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	2
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	2
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	2
<b>The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities</b>	2
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide</b>	2
<b>The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision</b>	2

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

Not applicable.

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## Summary for centre users

We inspected the Octopus Children's Centre on 3 and 4 February 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

We found that Octopus Children's Centre provides you and your children with good support. Staff and management work well together and are committed to improving the lives of the families who live within your community. They know you and your families well and provide services which meet your needs. However, the information given to them by the local authority does not yet provide enough information about the local area to enable staff and management to fully understand how they could help and support those people who do not yet come to the centre.

Centre staff have very good relationships with other professionals and organisations and this means that they are able to offer you a good range of support, information and guidance. We have asked the centre to work more closely with the health services in order that they can provide you with the best service possible.

We agree with you that staff are warm and welcoming. You told us that you value that reception staff take time to get to know you and your children and you truly appreciate the fact that they are always there to listen to you when you need to seek advice or need someone to talk with. We noticed that you make a strong contribution to the running of the centre and the services it offers. You are well represented on the advisory board and are given regular opportunities to present your views and thoughts through the 'Parents' Voice' group. Some of you were invited to work with centre staff to develop a vision for the centre and others helped with the recruitment of new staff. Staff and management listen to and value your ideas.

Centre staff work hard with local schools and those who provide early years care and education. This ensures that each child in the area makes as much progress as they can and that they all have a positive experience when they start school. They offer good support to children who have specific needs to ensure they are fully included in all activities.

Staff do all they can to make sure you and your children remain safe. The centre provides good guidance to parents and carers on how to keep their families safe and healthy. You tell us that the 'Safety Awareness' sessions have raised your understanding of potential accidents and have provided you with vital skills including how to resuscitate a child. Staff are well trained in how to safeguard children and management have taken the correct steps to ensure that anyone who works with you and your children is suitable.

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 every success for the future.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).