

Inspection report for Stafford Children's Centre

Local authority	Staffordshire
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Reporting inspector	Georgina Beasley AI

Centre governance	The local authority
Centre leader	Anette Whitehouse
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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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.

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 two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with centre and day-care staff, parents and carers, health professionals, members of the advisory board, and representatives of the local child-minding group, job centre plus and local authority.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Stafford is a Phase one Sure Start Children's Centre that provides full care provision. It is situated on the outskirts of Stafford. At the time of the inspection, 1345 children aged nought to four years live in the reach area. The majority of families regularly use the centre's services. Almost all families are White British. The remainder are from a number of different minority ethnic backgrounds. The centre serves densely populated urban communities and isolated rural and agricultural communities. The economic position of families is mixed. About 26% of families live in one of the 30% most deprived wards in the country. On average, 15% of children live in workless households. Around 25% of children live in lone-parent families of which 11% are lone fathers. Around 26% of families receive benefits at any one time.

The centre provides a base for a wide range of health, educational and social services that take place on site, in the home and in local community venues. The centre hosts a day nursery which provides 139 full- and part-time day-care places, including for under twos, for 50 weeks of the year. Some day care and pre-school care is provided by childminders and voluntary providers offsite. The children start pre-school with skill levels below those typical for their age. The local authority manages the provision and works closely with a local advisory board made up of representatives of all partner organisations, and parents and carers. The senior management team includes a head of centre, extended services manager, educare manager, learning development manager and business manager.

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 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

The children's centre is good and serves its reach area well. The head of centre and members of the senior management team know the reach area well and provide a varied range of services and activities that largely support users' needs. Staff are clear about what the centre is trying to achieve and work closely with health and social services partners to implement activities and services that meet children's, families' and users' needs well. Systems for care, guidance and support are well established. The centre has good capacity to improve.

Outcomes for children and adult users are good. While children's outcomes for keeping healthy and staying safe are outstanding, adult users' outcomes relating to promoting family health and safety are good. The centre promotes equality of opportunity well through focused support for vulnerable families and children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. As a result, this group of children make good progress. Care, guidance and support are good. They are excellent for families learning to speak English, mothers suffering from post-natal depression and teenage mothers, because the centre provides for their specific needs extremely well. Safeguarding arrangements are highly effective in keeping users and visitors to the centre and its community venues safe. Child protection arrangements are extremely robust due to the close partnership working between social and health agencies and centre staff, and the constant monitoring of children's and their carers' needs.

The centre collects a broad range of information to support effective self-evaluation of its performance and to improve further the range and quality of its services and activities. There has been limited data until recently to support the centre's ability to review and adjust its services to target more effectively the needs of all potential users. This is especially so for some of those families living in the most challenging circumstances and who do not continue to access the centre's services after post-natal support finishes. Priorities for improvement are relevant, but targets are not related closely enough to data to enable the centre to measure the success of its work more accurately against all users' outcomes.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Gain support from the local and health authorities to further strengthen the collection and recording of National Indicator Set and local data to help the centre to set challenging targets and measure the impact of its work against users' outcomes.
- Use the data to further plan and target services to ensure the needs of identified vulnerable groups are being met, especially those children who are living in one of the 30% most deprived wards in the reach area.
- Seek the views of potential users to find out why they are not accessing extended services and day care more regularly.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Children who attend the day care run by the centre enjoy regular daily opportunities to take part in physical activity and eat healthy snacks and meals. As a result, they are building excellent healthy lifestyles. Parents and carers who attend centre activities always bring healthy snacks to enjoy with their children. Parents and carers encourage their children to drink water during and after physically active groups such as 'Twinkle Toes'. Dental care is high priority on the day-care curriculum and in communications with parents and carers. As a result, incidence of tooth decay in children under five is lower than average. Information from local midwives and health visitors indicates that an average proportion of parents and carers give up smoking during pregnancy. Good support continues informally during home visits but specific activities to support parents and carers who want to give up smoking are not formally planned. Immunisation rates are average. Recent data indicates that an average proportion of mothers initiate breastfeeding. Good support through the weekly breastfeeding drop-in, and at other times if requested, results in more mothers than usual continuing to breastfeed after eight weeks. In order to further improve outcomes for a broader range of users, the centre is working towards the nurturing health award which focuses on improving family health and safety.

Children who use the centre are kept exceptionally safe. Accident rates in day care are below average. The number of children on a child protection plan is reducing. As soon as a concern is expressed, centre staff, in close partnership with multi-agency teams, follow the required process for putting support into place quickly. While there is evidence to suggest that all concerns regarding children's safety and welfare are identified through community support, there is too little data currently available to the centre to evaluate the extent to which children who do not directly access its services are safe and protected. Mothers who have suffered post-natal depression value the support given to build their emotional health and safety.

The strong focus on monitoring for children's engagement has resulted in children attending day care making good progress in all areas of learning. Children's

engagement with learning is high and their enjoyment of learning is excellent. The large majority of children reach expected levels by the time they start in the Reception year. The proportion of children reaching the expected 78 points at the end of Reception and six points in personal, social and emotional development and in their communication, language and literacy skills is growing. The gap between the lowest 20% and the rest has decreased steadily over the last four years and by 10% altogether. Well-documented plans created through an effective Common Assessment Framework process detail ongoing and focused support for children with a particular need. As a result, children with special educational needs make good progress.

Adult achievement is good. There are some telling examples, if not formal data, of adults accessing relevant training and so having increased confidence in their parenting skills and in returning to work. The centre is actively chasing agencies responsible for offering accredited courses for adults to achieve Level 1 and 2 literacy and numeracy qualifications. As a result, formal courses are planned for early next year. Jobcentre Plus gives excellent advice about work and benefits to those users who attend the weekly clinics. The 'better off in work' calculations and knowledge that the centre can signpost good day care for their children have acted as good incentives for users to actively look for work. The centre and its partners know that there is still a significant minority of workless families not taking advantage of these services and is focused on improving social and economic outcomes for this particular group of children and users.

Relationships between staff, parents and carers and children who use the centre are extremely positive. Parents and carers feel confident in approaching centre staff for help and advice. Children are quick to approach an adult for help during their play or if they need comfort. Children's behaviour is good and they engage well in activities offered. Parents and carers put forward their ideas in a 'suggestion box' situated in the foyer and give regular feedback after activities. They are more involved in centre review and decision making through increased numbers on the management advisory board this term. The relatively new family forum meetings give good opportunity for users to receive and give feedback about the centre's work and to offer further suggestions for improvement. Fathers play a full part in the life of the centre, dropping off and picking up from day care, attending one of the many group activities and getting involved in the work of the advisory board.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable 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 users 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 users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

Careful analysis of the reach area communities informs the varied range of extended services and where these will take place. For example, 'Stay and Play' takes place not only at the centre but also at Ecclesall to meet the needs of users who live in isolated and agricultural communities and in the Holmcroft ward to serve families living in the most challenging circumstances. 'Tea and Talk' provides good opportunity for adults learning to speak English to meet with others, and 'Bunnikins' gives specific support for families of children under two. Home visits are provided for any family with a particular need, for example, to provide support for mothers with post-natal depression. The centre recognises that there is still a significant minority of families who may not be accessing the services and day care offered. As a result, some groups are now run by users themselves so that centre staff can increase the number and range of activities for targeted groups and wards within the reach area.

Users who come to the centre's activities enjoy them tremendously. Parents and carers value playing with and alongside their children which, they say, gives them more confidence to know when to join in and when to leave their children to play alone at home. Relationships with parents are extremely positive. Parent and carers are confident to talk with staff about any concerns because they know they will receive practical and emotional support. The centre foyer is welcoming and contains an extensive number of leaflets about activities taking place in the reach area, whether run at the centre or at other local venues. Jobcentre Plus holds weekly meetings at the centre, providing a safe and private space where users can talk confidentially about their benefits and training needs. Agency staff work closely together to signpost users to the relevant service. The promotion of safety in the home is supported through regular presentations by the fire service and through car safety week. Impact relies on users coming to the centre's activities and special events. The objective promotion of the centre's services to the wider community is still developing.

The centre provides extremely good care, support and guidance for families and parents and carers who have a particular need or crisis, and who come to the centre. One young mum was so appreciative of the support she had received that she felt compelled to tell inspectors that, 'If it wasn't for the centre, my life would be in turmoil.' Another said that she now had lots of confidence to be a good mum as a result of the centre's support and ongoing encouragement. Parents and carers value the crèche facility, called the 'Shoppers' Crèche', because it was originally set up so

that parents and carers could shop without their babies and toddlers. Parents and carers, and especially lone parents, use the facility for a number of reasons, including being able to go home and have a rest if their children have kept them awake at night. Children and families supported through the Common Assessment Framework receive excellent support from health and education specialists, and through placements at the linked day nursery. Support and guidance for adult education is good. Users value the advice they receive about the skills they will need to support their return to work.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The head of centre articulates her vision and high expectations clearly. Consequently, every member of staff strives to achieve the best for the children's and other users' physical and emotional well-being and their personal achievement. The advisory board is well organised to ensure all aspects of the centre's work are discussed and requirements met. All agencies and parents and carers are represented on the board, and regular reports keep members well informed. As a result, the board members are knowledgeable about the centre's strengths and improvement priorities and are beginning to be involved in improvement planning and to challenge the centre more critically about its decisions. The business manager monitors spending and staffing levels against user attendance but is not yet measuring efficiency of costs against user outcomes as measured by the centre's assessments and national indicators. The centre provides good value for money.

The senior management team works effectively together to ensure all aspects of the centre's work go ahead as planned and to a good standard. The monitoring process is clearly embedded in their work and that of other staff, and evaluation is based on a detailed assessment of children's progress, users' views, case studies and attendance at group activities. For example, there are plans to make the toy library mobile to increase the number using it. The centre does not survey the reach area generally to find out why some families are not using its services or whether they are accessing facilities and services elsewhere. Recent National Indicator Set data is

helping it to target its resources and services more accurately to need. As a result, it has extended its advertising of services across the reach area so that the wider community is clearer about what is on offer. 'Stay and Play' groups in its Holmcroft venue have been increased, and plans to extend Jobcentre Plus and health promotion services to these groups have been formalised.

Partnerships play a positive role in the centre's work. Health professionals are regular visitors to the centre and so meet formally and informally with centre staff to discuss specific cases. Often, immediate support is given to those parents and carers who request it. Childminders meet every week to share ideas and improve their provision. The group decides the programme and so meetings focus on their specific needs and the needs of the children in their care. The network coordinator for childminding services monitors outcomes from inspections closely. Immediate support is put into place for those who are judged satisfactory, and those judged good and outstanding are encouraged to share their successful practice.

Safeguarding procedures are excellent. Regular and ongoing staff training and induction ensure procedures are known and followed consistently by all centre and agency staff and by the small number of volunteers. Comprehensive risk assessments ensure the safety and welfare of children and users when they are onsite and when they access activities at other community venues. All required statutory requirements are met. Child protection is given high priority and the needs and support for identified children and families are monitored closely. Records are detailed and constantly updated. In a recent audit, the centre received top marks for all but one aspect of health and safety. The advisory board subgroup monitors safeguarding regularly. The business manager's involvement ensures costs are allocated when necessary and used efficiently.

The centre promotes equality of opportunity well through its work with different groups targeted for specific support. Members of the teenage group value the individual support they receive tailored specifically to their situations. The 'Tea and Talk' group gives parent and carers learning to speak English good opportunity to meet every week to talk about everyday topics such as shopping outings, getting on a bus and organising children's parties, as well as learning about the work of the centre at first hand. The developing partnership with a setting in Belgium is extending users' awareness of communities beyond their own. The needs of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities who attend day care are met extremely well.

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 extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2

The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	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	1
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
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	2

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

Stafford Children's Centre Day care was judged good in its inspection in March 2010 and contributed to the children's centre report and judgements.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Stafford Children's Centre on 8–9 December 2010. Thank you for talking to us about yours and your children's experiences at the centre.

We judged your children's centre as good overall.

The head of centre, members of the senior management team and all staff know the reach area well and so provide a varied range of activities that you all enjoy and largely meet your needs and those of your families. All staff have high expectations for you and your families, especially your children's physical and emotional well-being and your personal achievement. The centre's environment is welcoming. Your children are developing good levels of confidence as a result of the positive welcome they and you receive the moment you step inside the building. They enjoy playing with the toys in the toy library while waiting for activities to begin. Children who use the day care are very settled because of the extremely positive relationships with each other and staff. They achieve well as a result of the well-planned and good-quality opportunities for their learning and development. Those of you with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities value the excellent support you receive in helping them in their development.

Safeguarding arrangements receive high priority from the centre staff and the advisory board. They work hard to ensure your safety and that of your children, not only when you are at the centre but also when you attend one of the groups held at one of the local community centres. The centre strives to ensure you receive the care, support and guidance that help you all to develop high self-esteem and confident parenting skills. Those of you who spoke to us were keen that we should know how insightful staff are in recognising that you have a particular need without you having to say. This has given you considerable confidence in knowing you can approach any member of staff for advice and assistance with any query or concern. The centre has registered for the nurturing health award to focus further planned improvements for family health and safety, including those who currently do not use the centre's services.

Those who use the groups and parenting programs enjoy the company and value the support they get from staff and each other. Some of you have gone on to complete courses that have helped you back into work or to gain further expertise and skills. Jobcentre Plus is especially helpful in giving advice about benefits and the possibility of finding work. By holding the service at the centre, you have the opportunity to talk confidentially and in private about your particular needs and support.

Feedback from you reflects your and your children's enjoyment of the many activities. Many activities are oversubscribed because so many of you want to attend. While attendance at the groups is growing, a significant number of families still do not use the centre's services and activities as regularly as they could. The centre has fair and equal processes to try to make sure it includes as many of you as possible who want to join in. It was good to see so many fathers using the facilities. The

shoppers' crèche is a particular favourite, especially at this time of the year, as it gives those who wish the opportunity to do the Christmas shopping alone. Others said how this facility gives respite to those of you who are bringing up your children on your own and also for those who just need some time on their own to catch up on sleep after their children's restless night.

The centre promotes your families' health well and that of your children who attend day care extremely well. Health visitors and midwives give good support to those of you who wish to breastfeed. The weekly drop-in sessions encourage an above average proportion of you to continue to breastfeed after your babies are eight weeks old. While many of you stop smoking during pregnancy, more could be done to encourage more of you to stop completely. The promotion of dental hygiene is good. As a result, the incidence of dental decay is lower than average. It was good to see the healthy snacks and regular drinking of water during and after activities, especially the very active ones such as 'Twinkle Toes'. Particularly good support is given to teenage mothers and to those of you who need some extra support after giving birth.

We have asked your centre in partnership with the local authority to improve three things.

The centre collects a lot of information to help plan individual services that meet your specific needs well. We have asked the centre to work in partnership with the local authority and health authority to gather more precise information about the reach area to help it assess where it is more successful and why, and to use the information to set challenging targets for improvements and to measure its success against your and your children's achievements.

We have then asked the centre to use the information collected to target more precisely those users in the centre's reach area that are most in need of its services to ensure everyone is benefiting from its good work.

We know that the centre is always asking for feedback from those of you who use its services regularly and involve you in making decisions about its activities, groups and services. This is evident in the free access to the suggestions box, the 'WOW' noticeboard where children's achievements are celebrated, the involvement on the management advisory board and the newly formed 'Family Forums'. We and the centre know that there are others in the reach area who are not yet benefiting from what the centre offers. Therefore, we have asked that the centre, in partnership with the local authority and its health partners, seek the views of all potential users to find out why and what the centre can do to encourage their involvement.

Thank you again for welcoming us to your centre and telling us how you, your children and your families have benefited from its work.

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