

Inspection report for Chard Children's Centre

Local authority	Somerset
Inspection number	362453
Inspection dates	3–4 November 2010
Reporting inspector	Robert Pyner HMI

Centre governance	Action for Children
Centre leader	Karen Cooper
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Chard NNI/School's Out EY 262443

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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Early Years Inspector.

The inspectors visited a range of provision at the centre and other venues used by it. They held meetings with senior managers from the centre, the chair of the advisory board and a number of partners, including the main Early Years Foundation Stage and childcare provider, health, education and children's social care professionals. They also spoke with representatives from Jobcentre Plus and with users of the services. An inspector interviewed the group manager for Action for Children. Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a wide range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Chard Children's Centre is managed by Action for Children and is situated close to the centre of the town. Its reach area includes the whole of Chard and two nearby villages. It was originally designated as serving one of the 30% most disadvantaged areas in the country. However, it has since been redesignated as serving an averagely disadvantaged area. Three wards within the reach area have educational achievement measured within the lowest fifth nationally. The number of workless families is around 20% of the reach area. Nearly all local families are of White British heritage, although there are a significant number of Portuguese families in Chard.

The centre originated as part of the Sure Start programme and opened in 2005 with the full core offer available since this date. It is based within a neighbourhood nursery managed by a private provider. Accommodation is quite restricted and the centre runs a wide range of outreach services at other locations linked with health, education, social care and work-related professionals, together with voluntary groups

such as Citizens Advice Bureau. These sites include provision based at two primary schools.

The centre has been part of a government-funded Jobcentre Plus pilot supporting parents with a range of support and work-related services. This has included a Jobcentre Plus representative available at the centre or one of its satellites for two and a half days each week. This pilot ends in March 2011.

The centre has recently set up a single advisory board with representatives from a range of partners and led by an independent chair. This group held its first meeting in September 2010. Previously governance was structured as an independent forum.

Childcare and nursery education is provided on the site by a private provider, Chard NNI/School's Out. The latest report for this provision can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

The manager of the centre took up her post in April 2007. She is also the manager of three other children's centres in the area and leads local authority outreach services for the south Somerset 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 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

Chard Children's Centre provides good support to children and families in its reach area. Most outcomes are good and the common feature across these is the effective partnership working developed by centre staff with a range of professionals from health services, the local authority, Jobcentre Plus and voluntary organisations. These partnerships are effectively supported and brokered by the council's locality structure for services. The commitment to partnership working by the local authority is shown by the inclusion of the centre manager on the locality leadership team and this supports the cohesive provision of services offered by the centre.

The effective partnership with the health service has resulted in regular monthly meetings between centre staff and health visitors to discuss individual families and

identify those who could benefit from the centre's provision. The 'Work Focus' pilot, undertaken by Jobcentre Plus and based at the centre, has been operating for almost two years and ends in March 2011. At the time of the inspection the government's Child Poverty Unit was collating outcome data and this was not available to inspectors. However, case studies and discussions with staff and users indicate that this pilot has been effective in supporting lone parents in their claims for benefits and tax credits, the enrolment on work-related courses and the signposting to other health, parenting, childcare and learning provision available through the centre.

The manager leads three other children's centres, together with outreach support in south Somerset. She has used her leadership and management experience to good effect and much of the provision is developed across the four centres. The leadership team represents the four children's centres and this ensures a cohesive approach and the sharing of good practice which can be adapted to meet the needs of an individual centre. She includes staff fully in the development of provision and morale and expectations are high. Staff have used data available to them on the needs of the reach area through partnership, working with, for example, health and the local authority. The centre is proactive in encouraging registrations from parents and users by providing information about services at supermarkets and community centres. However, the data this and other sources have produced has not provided comprehensive information about the context and needs of the community. Moreover, although users have been involved in evaluations of activities, these have not been consistently applied and the information gathered has not been systematically analysed. Centre staff have been working with the local authority on the development of more comprehensive contextual and outcome data, eStart, and this is beginning to be used to target provision.

Integral to the improvement strategy is the establishment of an advisory board with representatives from a range of partners offering services through the centre. This is at an early stage of development but professional partners and an independent chair have been appointed. However, so far the centre has been less successful in appointing parents and users to the board.

Safeguarding is good and a priority for the centre. The centre manager has taken into account safety aspects relating to the accommodation. Safeguarding and employment vetting arrangements are robust and meet requirements, using Action for Children and local authority procedures. The systems for engaging with families mean that referrals to social services at various levels are handled well through the council's locality structure. The centre's commitment to promoting equality and diversity is clear. However, the lack of comprehensive data on the context of the reach area means that the centre does not focus sufficiently sharply on some groups, for example those for whom English is an additional language.

Taking into account the predominantly good outcomes, the centre's overall effectiveness is good. This, together with the manager's accurate self-evaluation and determined focus on improvement, indicates that the centre has a good capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The senior leadership team should develop the use of evaluation data to ensure that:
 - eStart data are used more effectively to evaluate need, set challenging targets for groups and measure overall performance
 - performance data are used by the advisory board to hold the centre management to account for performance
 - evaluations by users are systematically built into the process and these are used to improve provision.

- Increase the involvement of parents and users on the advisory board so that they have a clear role in the development of the centre.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The effective partnerships with health professionals mean that families can be referred easily for support from the centre. The centre plays an important part in the provision of health-related courses and activities based within it or at other venues in the community. These include 'make and munch' sessions on the preparation of healthy food and a programme with health visitors on the 'health exercise nutrition for the really young (HENRY)' course. The centre offers facilities for speech and language therapy sessions at one of its venues and health service data shows that this has increased attendance and improved outcomes for users. As well as these planned activities, the centre is flexible in meeting individual needs. For example, effective support on basic hygiene in food preparation was arranged for a mother who speaks English as an additional language as a result of a referral from a health visitor. However, collaborative work has been less successful in developing groups to encourage breast-feeding and this is now offered on an individual basis.

Children using services at the centre are effectively safeguarded. Staff use the common assessment framework to ensure issues are recorded and good links with the locality working structure of the local authority mean that vulnerable families can be monitored and supported. There is effective training for staff on safeguarding.. Imaginative links with organisations such as the Fire and Rescue Service reinforce safety issues through presentations. Evidence shows that, as a result of such activities, home safety of users has increased through, for example, the installation of smoke alarms.

Data held by the children's centre indicate that at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage children in the reach area are making satisfactory progress by the time they enter Year 1. The centre teacher post has recently been filled after being vacant for an extended period and the incumbent is beginning to work with other

settings in the reach area. The learning sessions directly offered through the centre are effective and very popular with users. These include the baby clinic music and movement, dads' stay and play, parent and toddler sessions, the peers early education partnership (PEEP) sessions and the positive parenting programme (Triple P). There has been a childminders' group in the past but the numbers attending have dwindled recently. Overall, the quality of the learning provision directly controlled and managed by the centre is good and is effectively improving users' skills and achievement.

The centre is aware of the need to develop a consistent understanding of the views of users and to use this in order to measure outcomes and target groups. There are individual procedures which staff use to gain the views of users and some of these are highly appropriate for users. What is not in evidence is the systematic analysis of information gained to develop provision. Some users reported that they did not know about the advisory board or that they could join it. However, relationships between staff and users are good with a number of parents noting the welcoming atmosphere of the centre.

A strength of the centre is the partnership with Jobcentre Plus. Information from staff and users reported that this has led to a greater understanding of benefits and the opportunities for learning work skills. A partnership with the Citizen's Advice Bureau has led to effective work with users on debt management.

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	3
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

A strength of the good provision is the centre's effective partnership with a range of health, education and social care professionals which leads to effective assessment, support and monitoring. Examples of this include the multi-agency identification sharing in early years (MAISEY) and the action review for vulnerable children in early years (ARCHEY). However, because the centre is only just beginning to use the

recently introduced local authority eStart database, it does not currently have a fully comprehensive view of the profile of need within the reach area. The centre is aware of this and a priority action is to develop the use of data to shape services and measure outcomes.

Evidence from users shows that they thoroughly enjoy the learning provision directly managed by the centre. They say that it is well planned, with parents encouraged to join in with their children’s learning and taught how to develop and reinforce this learning at home. Inspectors observed several sessions where participants of all ages were thoroughly enjoying their learning and improving their skills and understanding, for example the music and movement sessions.

The centre offers good quality of care, guidance and support. A parent who spoke to inspectors described the centre as a ‘lifeline’ during a particularly difficult time. The centre’s extensive local knowledge and partnerships enable flexible approaches that are tailored for individuals. An example of this was the allocation of a volunteer worker to support a family for whom English is a second language following identification of need by a health visitor. This coherent and flexible multi-agency approach is a strength of the centre and is driven by the manager.

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	3
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 centre is accountable to the Action for Children organisation with clear performance management systems in place. Governance at the centre has recently changed and is developing satisfactorily. The manager has focused on the development of a single advisory board for the centre. A headteacher of a local school in which the centre has a base has been appointed as chair of the board and is a strong advocate for the centre’s work. Currently a group of 14 professionals from a range of specialisms has been recruited to join the advisory board. However, the centre has been less successful in recruiting parents and users. Some parents who spoke to inspectors did not know the purpose of the advisory board. The centre manager is aware of this and is working with the chair of the centre to inform and recruit parents and users to support the strategic development of the centre.

The centre manager is highly experienced and has developed a motivated team. She has been instrumental in developing the wide ranging multi-agency partnership approach. In this she has shown the highest expectations and considerable drive. Staff are aware that the use of data on the reach area to plan provision and measure outcomes is at an early stage of development. The limited accommodation at the centre is used well and there is imaginative use of community venues to promote effective outreach work. Overall, resources of all kinds are used and managed well. Safeguarding, vetting and recruiting procedures are robust and well managed.

The inclusion of all children and families is at the heart of the work of the centre. Positive images, resources and tailored programmes highlight the centre's determination to support groups who may be subject to discrimination. However, lack of comprehensive data on the reach area means that provision cannot be fully targeted to meet need.

The centre works hard to publicise its services and those who use it generally say the provision meets their needs. Some users who spoke to inspectors noted that they would like further opportunities to undertake more of the same type of activities in the centre as currently offered. However, lack of a consistent method of gaining users' views means that views such as this are not collected in a systematic manner.

Overall, the generally good outcomes, the strength of the leadership of the centre, the effectiveness of the multi-agency partnerships established and the drive for improvement means that the centre provides good value for money.

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
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	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the	2

integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	
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	3

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

The private Early Years Foundation Stage and childcare provision based on the same site as the children’s centre was subject to a separate inspection on 1 November 2010. There is a separate report resulting from this inspection which can be found on the Ofsted website – www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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 Chard Children’s Centre on 3–4 November 2010. We judged the centre as good overall.

Your children’s centre provides a good range of services that are helping families and children in Chard. Throughout the inspection some of you told us how you had benefited from the support provided by the centre. An example of this effective work is the popular music and movement programme for parents and children, which enables the development of parenting, social and learning skills. A major strength of the centre is the strong partnerships with other organisations including health and Jobcentre Plus. For example, the centre has regular meetings with health visitors and this enables support for individual families to be coordinated to ensure that an appropriate range of services are offered. The Jobcentre Plus staff, who have been based at the centre over the last year, have supported some of you to develop your skills and understand your entitlements for benefits and tax credits.

The centre offers a range of activities in other places, such as schools, and this is popular with users as these are often closer to home. The close links with the council locality team means that the centre can help people gain access to local services.

The centre works effectively to ensure the safety of children and there are good links with social services. The centre itself is a safe environment for users and their children. When families find themselves in difficulty or even in crisis, the centre is able to support them effectively by providing information and resources to help.

The manager is very experienced and has been effective in using her role as leader of three other children's centres to ensure that good practice is shared. Staff are developing the use of more comprehensive information and data on the needs of families in the area to improve the centre's ability to support individuals and groups, particularly those who may be vulnerable for one reason or another.

The centre is developing an advisory board to support its work and to help it improve further. An independent chair has been appointed and workers from health, education and social care have been recruited to join the board. Those missing are representatives of parents and users of the centre. It is very important that users are involved in the development of the centre and so you should consider getting involved so that you can play a part in improving the centre further. If you want more details please contact the centre manager.

In discussion with users, many of you expressed appreciation for the courses and programmes available, saying that you would like more of the same. Some courses involve participants in giving their view of the activities and this helps the centre to improve provision. However, this is not the case for all activities.

As part of the report inspectors have made the following recommendations to help improve provision at the centre.

- Use data more effectively to evaluate need, set challenging targets, monitor activities and measure performance in order to improve provision. This should include using users' evaluations of activities to improve services.
- Increase the involvement of parents and other users on the advisory board so that they have a clear role in the development of the centre.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to come and speak to us, 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.