

Inspection report for Old Town Children's Centre

Local authority	Borough of Poole
Inspection number	365710
Inspection dates	17–18 February 2011
Reporting inspector	Susan Mann HMI

Centre governance	Borough of Poole
Centre leader	Amanda Boclet
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	Blue Dragon Club

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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 centre users, managers and frontline staff, partners and representatives from the local authority. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation. They also observed play sessions and groups at the centre.

Information about the centre

Old Town Children's Centre was designated in 2008 as a phase two children's centre. It has offered the full core of services since 2010, including health, outreach, family support, early learning provision with a linked setting, childminder network and links to Jobcentre Plus. The centre has an advisory board, and is managed by the local authority.

The centre serves a very disadvantaged area, with 36% of children aged nought–19 years living in poverty. There is a higher-than-average proportion (25.5%) of children aged nought–four living in households dependent on workless benefits in the reach area. The proportion of children registered at the centre with minority ethnic background is 15%, which is the highest proportion in the borough of Poole. There are a number of families with a Polish background. The level of skills, knowledge and development for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage is broadly in line with the national expectations.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The children's centre provides a satisfactory range of services. It has developed an accurate focus on improving provision and outcomes since it started to operate just over two years ago. Some elements of forward planning are good and are beginning to become embedded in the centre's strategic development. Systems to use data analysis of the reach area to focus outreach and services at those groups who are hard to reach are improving, although this is not yet embedded.

The leadership of the centre has a clear vision of how to develop services and improve existing groups in order to match the needs of families in the reach area. The local authority provides a strong framework for development, which includes challenging targets and appropriate support. The centre manager and senior leadership team have high aspirations to ensure continuous improvement of services for all users, and staff are enthusiastic in their support of ongoing development. Future improvement is supported well by realistic and accurate self-evaluation of services and outcomes for users. Systems for evaluating the effectiveness of provision and prioritising areas of development are planned well and implemented rigorously. Consequently, the centre continues to move forward with their priorities for development and the capacity to improve is satisfactory. The advisory board was recently reformed and is representative of families and key partners. It provides sound governance, but processes are yet to be fully embedded to be wholly effective.

Overall, outcomes for adults and their families who use the centre are satisfactory. The centre offers a friendly environment where families are given a warm welcome and the quality of care, guidance and support is good. One parent summed up the way many expressed their view about the services and staff at the centre: 'They'll help me with anything and I can go at any time – it feels like my children's centre.' Outreach work is particularly effective in supporting families. Those who find themselves in difficult or distressing circumstances are given a high level of care and practical help to support their emotional well-being and help them improve lives for themselves and their families. Users are actively involved in the centre. They are asked for feedback on courses and services, and this information is used to shape future groups. Staff are positive role models for other users, modelling good conduct and promoting an atmosphere of mutual respect between centre staff and adults who use it. Children and adults make satisfactory progress in their learning and developing knowledge and skills.

The centre's role within the community is good and improving. The centre gives this aspect a high priority and has developed strong and beneficial partnerships with local community groups. Links with local residents and members of the wider community

are fostered well through centre projects. For example, the centre outdoor area was recently created with the help of members of the local area, who now join parents and staff on a regular basis to tend some of the garden to grow vegetables.

The centre has good safeguarding practice. Safety is promoted well throughout the centre. Adults say they feel safe at the centre and feel confident to trust staff with personal and confidential matters. The centre is experienced in inter-agency working to promote the best outcomes for vulnerable children and those subject to child protection plans.

The centre has an agreement with a nearby nursery, Buffer Bear, to provide its early years provision for crèche and play session provision on the children centre's site. The quality of this is monitored by the centre and the attached early years advisory teacher, and children generally have an enjoyable experience in their play. However, their learning and development are limited by the variable quality of this provision.

The centre promotes inclusion appropriately, and it knows the area it serves well, although not all key groups are engaged in the centre at present. Some areas of equality and diversity are developing well. For example, a group for Polish-speaking families is very well attended and is valued by members of the local Polish community. Children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are given helpful support by the partnership the centre has with the portage service and with 'Short Breaks', which provide assessment, emotional and practical support, and respite care.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Implement effective systems to make use of the information gathered about the reach area to target services more accurately to engage those families and groups who are hard to reach.
- Develop the existing advisory board so that governance arrangements become embedded, in order to enhance the leadership of the centre.
- Improve the quality of play sessions so that parents and children have good opportunities to play, have fun, and learn together.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The centre promotes outcomes for children and families reasonably well. Partnership working with health services is helping some families to have a healthy lifestyle. There is some improvement in the rates of sustained breastfeeding as a result of support and guidance offered through the centre, most notably from the 'Bosom Buddies' group peer supporters and counsellors. There is case-study evidence of

parents being helped to stop smoking, especially those in receipt of ante- and post-natal services.

Children benefit from targeted provision such as speech and language support, and parents state that this is having a positive impact on their communication development. They are generally well prepared for school through visits and sharing of assessment information, and most make a smooth transition. Adults develop their parenting skills through individual outreach and support work, and there is evidence this has been effective. Adults and their children benefit from their involvement with the 'Peeps' group, which supports communication and early attachment. There is case-study evidence of how this is improving attachment, especially for those most vulnerable families. One parent explained how this course has helped her to speak to her young child, leading to improved outcomes for both herself and her child. This parent says they are both 'much happier now'. There is anecdotal and case-study evidence that adults are having some success in attending further education and training to improve economic stability for their families. Adults receive individual support to claim benefits and access further education in literacy and the English as a second language course. Several gain valuable skills by participating in the centre's volunteer programme, which gives them experience to help support job applications.

Parent involvement with the advisory board and parent forum leads to positive and enabling relationships between one another, and with the centre management, partners and staff. Children arrive at the centre eager to play and they demonstrate good behaviour and strong relationships with one another and with the staff. The caring and inclusive ethos of the centre fosters good outcomes for positive contribution. As one parent said, 'It's the people that make the children's centre – all under one roof – the receptionist, the staff, everyone.'

Those families who receive support from the centre and benefit from outreach work develop a good understanding of how to keep themselves and their children safe. Children who are subject to a child protection plan benefit from good improvements in their outcomes as a result of the centre's involvement and its focus on each family's physical and emotional well-being. In addition, families benefit from the practical assistance for the purchase of essential equipment such as beds, which has helped some families recover from episodes of disturbance or distress in their lives. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their families have improved outcomes owing to individual support and referral to other agencies which promote their development. The 'Fun Times' group has a positive impact on lives through its provision of emotional support and respite care for these families.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

<p>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</p>	<p>3</p>
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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	3
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 and employment.	3

How good is the provision?

3

The centre already engages with some groups in its area and has a clear picture of those groups it has not yet successfully reached. The leadership team work closely with the local authority to identify those groups who are hard to reach. There have been recent improvements in systems to collect and analyse data. These are beginning to give a clear indication of groups that are not yet using the centre, and of the changing composition of the reach area. These systems are yet to be embedded in the centre's targeting of services.

The centre is beginning to make links with the minority ethnic communities living in the reach area. It adopts a planned approach which is sensitive to existing provisions and cultural needs so that new services that will be offered are likely to be successful in meeting need. Outreach services are good in engaging some of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups. One parent who has received support from the outreach workers at the centre and used some of the groups said it has 'been a lifesaver' for her. Attendance rates are monitored rigorously and user evaluation is robust to measure the level of satisfaction and impact of services, and this information is used to develop provision so that it better meets need.

The centre provides satisfactory opportunities for adults to learn and develop, most notably through its volunteer programme. These adults benefit from an appropriate volunteer training programme, and this is supplemented by learning opportunities which range from completing a deaf awareness course to learning how to use computer spreadsheets. Children have an acceptable range of activities which promote their learning and development reasonably well. Parents and their children engage in a suitable range of resources and activities at sessions such as 'Let's Play Together'. During this session, for example, staff help children to use scissors and glue to make fruit pictures, and there are books, construction toys and role-play resources for them to play with. However, staff do not consistently extend children's learning while they play, and they do not encourage children to access the outdoor environment to benefit from activities in the fresh air. As a result, the quality of these sessions is inconsistent and staff do not encourage children and their parents to make full use of resources and the environment.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	3
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?

3

The leadership of the centre is satisfactory and improving. The centre manager and senior leadership team have worked well together since the centre opened to provide services which will improve the outcomes for local families, and they have made a promising start with this. Day-to-day management is efficient and prioritises the needs of the users in service delivery. The local authority is actively involved in development and monitoring of strategic planning for future improvement. All relevant partners are involved in the evaluation processes to promote improvement in all outcomes. The recently formed advisory board has robust composition with a good level of representation of centre users and partners to help move the centre forward. The parent forum group has made enabling links with the management of the centre so that the views of users can inform management processes and influence decisions to best meet the needs of families.

The centre has an inclusive ethos. It is beginning to serve all groups known to live in the reach area. There has been success at engaging fathers in events at weekends and in the community garden work. Those who attend have enjoyed participating. The centre has identified the need to target groups and resources more effectively so that groups meet identified needs. For example, staff have evaluated the popular 'Let's Play Together' sessions and have concluded that a supplementary group is now needed for some families to focus on better supporting parent and child interaction. The centre has limited space for running groups on its main site, which has one main activity room and a large outdoor area. However, it makes use of one additional site at present, and has plans to locate other similar facilities, so the provision of necessary services is not curtailed. The centre offers satisfactory value for money.

The centre has good safeguarding procedures. All staff who work with children are subject to rigorous checks to ensure their suitability and protect children's welfare. Staff are pro-active in liaising with other agencies and they foster good inter-agency working to provide collaborative support and progress. Families who are in situations of domestic abuse are given enabling and encouraging support for their emotional well-being and practical help. One parent said, 'There is time for me here – it makes

you feel valued that someone cares.’ The centre fosters emotional health well, and all staff take great care to adopt a ‘whole family’ approach to cases. Family outreach workers, support staff and others work well with partner organisations to identify and meet all the needs of the family to facilitate early intervention and promote the best outcomes.

Partnership working is satisfactory and developing well. Relationships with parents who use the centre are strong and enable successful identification of need and improved outcomes. There are sound links with health services which range from the strategic level to frontline services. This provides clear vision and realistic plans to implement services which have a proven and positive impact on outcomes. Links with other organisations such as early years support, childminding services, portage, community and voluntary sectors are becoming embedded and enhance the services families can access. Partners are involved in the evaluation of services and development planning and the centre’s management team work collaboratively with them to enhance and improve provision. Links with Jobcentre Plus are developing satisfactorily. The centre’s involvement with the local community is good, and events such as the multicultural day help make good links between the families at the centre and other members of the community.

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 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	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	2
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	3
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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Old Town Children's Centre on 17–18 February 2011. We judged the centre to be satisfactory overall.

We would like to thank those of you who took the time to meet with us and talk about the centre to help us with the inspection. It was very useful to speak with you and learn what the centre means to you and your families. Our discussions helped us to find out more about the advisory board and the parents' forum and how your views are represented in these meetings to affect the decision-making processes of the centre. We know that the advisory board was formed recently, and we have asked the centre to make sure it continues to develop so that it becomes more effective in its role. The centre's involvement with the local community is a strength, and projects such as the garden and events such as the multicultural day make good links between the families at the centre and other members of the community.

Your children's centre has many good features. Procedures for making sure children are protected from possible harm and abuse are good and you have told us that you feel that you and your children are safe when at the centre. The manager and leadership team of the centre are clear about the strengths and weaknesses of the centre and they know what is needed to improve the service it offers. Some groups within the local area are not yet using the centre's services, and we have asked the centre to improve the way they identify and encourage some groups to find out about the work it does.

The groups for children have appropriate activities and children enjoy themselves when playing. However, the quality of these activities is variable and children do not always benefit from sufficiently stimulating activities to help them learn through their play.

Finally, we were impressed by the quality of the care offered by the staff at the centre, especially to those families in great need and for those with children who

have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The centre is a welcoming and happy place where people respect and look after one another well.

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