

# Inspection report for North Dorset Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Dorset
<b>Inspection number</b>	366425
<b>Inspection dates</b>	30–31 March 2011
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Ken Bush

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<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	N/A
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	North Dorset Children's Centre Nursery

The inspection of this Sure Start children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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## Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

An inspection of the maintained nursery was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

This inspection was carried out by one additional inspector and one early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, the local authority locality manager for North Dorset, front-line staff from the centre, including outreach workers, the Chair of the Advisory Board, other partner professionals, and a selection of centre users. Inspectors observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including those relating to safeguarding and the centre's action plans.

## Information about the centre

North Dorset Children's Centre received its designation in 2005 and was in the first phase of Sure Start. It has two sites located in Shaftesbury and in Sturminster Newton but the reach area covers approximately 100 square miles and is largely rural in nature. The nursery is part of, but securely separate from, the children's centre building, and staff from the nursery use some of the children's centre space. Information is shared between the two teams to support children and families and families access both the centre and the nursery. Shaftesbury Church of England Primary School is also adjacent to the centre. Outreach workers who work in the local community are based on both sites. The centre provides a core offer of family support, adult learning and a signposting service for Jobcentre Plus and other local employment opportunities. Health services, such as breastfeeding support groups, are hosted at the centre. Governance of the centre is provided by an advisory board, but the centre is managed by the local authority. The centre manager is strategically responsible for Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton sites and also has operational responsibility for the nursery, and line management responsibility for nursery staff. Children's skills and understanding on entry to early years education are broadly in line with, or just below, the expectations for their age.

The centre serves a community which includes pockets of high social and economic disadvantage. Levels of unemployment and incidence of families in receipt of benefits are both relatively high for rural areas. Lack of adequate transport is an obstacle to many families accessing services and this is a factor in determining the balance of provision between the two sites. The majority of families are of White British heritage, although a growing number of families of Eastern European heritage also live in the centre’s reach area, along with some from the Traveller community.

## 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

North Dorset Children’s Centre provides satisfactory and improving services for young children and their families. It has successfully developed a good range of partnerships with other agencies and service providers to meet the needs of centre users, especially those who are experiencing major changes or crises in their lives. There are beneficial links, too, with the nursery, although the rate of improvement in that setting has been more rapid than in the centre overall.

The centre is a welcoming and inclusive environment and all statutory requirements relating to equality and diversity are in place. Fundamental to its most successful work is the high priority given to building productive and sustainable relationships with users. Staff consistently model aspects of positive behaviour such as respect for all and the willingness to listen to users in a non-judgemental way. Consequently, users trust staff and report gains in their own self-confidence and self-esteem, often from a very low base. One user reported, ‘I can now come to the centre regularly and talk to other parents like me, when I struggled with that before. The staff here are great.’ The centre gives a strong emphasis to all aspects of safety and welfare. Arrangements to ensure that children are safeguarded are consistently robust, both within the centre itself and, as far as possible, in their own homes. Outreach workers who undertake home visits are well briefed by centre leaders and are knowledgeable about a wide range of aspects of good practice.

Outcomes overall are satisfactory and the centre serves the needs of the users who access its services regularly in most respects. However, the impact of the centre on the wider community is limited because there are a number of groups who are currently under-represented and whose needs are not yet fully known. These include fathers, teenage parents and ethnic minority groups. Similarly, while the range of provision is satisfactory overall, the majority of activities are aimed at all users and there are not yet enough which are targeted at specific disadvantaged groups in the community. The accurate assessment of users' needs is also restricted by the fact that reliable local information has only recently become available. This, too, has made it difficult for centre leaders to measure the impact of their work accurately as users' starting points have not been well defined.

Governance and accountability of the centre is improving because of a recent increase in the level of monitoring and support by the local authority, although the advisory board is at a very early stage in providing strategic advice and direction. The centre has a general trend of improving outcomes and provision over time, although rates of improvement are variable and are largely based on anecdotal evidence because secure systems to measure improvement have not been in place. Self-evaluation is broadly accurate but is only adequately analytical and, consequently, the plans for improvement which flow from it are uneven in quality and are not yet securely linked to data about users' needs and starting points. Consequently, despite some emerging strengths in leadership and management, the centre's capacity for sustained improvement is satisfactory.

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

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Improve the outcomes for users so that they are consistently good by ensuring that under-represented groups within the wider community access, and benefit from, the range of services provided.
- Develop more targeted provision based more securely on known starting points in order to engage and support a wider range of users and, in particular, those from disadvantaged groups.
- Develop more robust systems for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the centre's planned actions in order to consistently improve outcomes for all users over time.

## **How good are outcomes for users?**

<b>3</b>
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Children served by the centre are developing a good understanding of dangers and how to keep themselves safe. During an activity session seen during the inspection, staff modelled safe practices well during snack time by mopping up spillages immediately. Staff also readily take opportunities to raise parents' awareness of safety. In a family learning session seen, the session leader made a point of telling parents to put away scissors and pins from a practical book-making activity before children arrived. Parents report that they are becoming increasingly safety-conscious

in their homes, indicating that the work of the centre is having a positive impact. Children on the child protection register and those whose needs have been identified using the Common Assessment Framework achieve outcomes which are broadly comparable to those of their peers.

Children make at least satisfactory progress from their starting points and, consequently, they are generally well prepared for school. Parents, too, report that they enjoy the activities on offer and derive personal benefit from them. A particularly popular activity with both children and their parents seen during the inspection is 'Messy Play', which promoted a number of positive outcomes. Before commencing this, children enjoyed a healthy snack with staff and their parents. During the activity, children showed growing levels of independence as they moved freely around a well-resourced but safe area, experimenting with soil and seeds, a cornflour and oats 'gloopy' mixture, water in various containers and paint. Positive behaviour management was evident when the member of staff persuaded a child not to throw some soil by asking, 'Shall we keep it in the container?' reinforced with 'That's right!' when the child duly cooperated. Parents appreciated the opportunity to take part in a stimulating activity which they would not have undertaken at home for practical reasons, but also because of the parenting skills they derived. One summarised the activity succinctly as, 'They teach you how to play with your kids better.'

Other activities which are popular and support improving outcomes in leading a healthy lifestyle are those related to cookery and nutrition, such as 'Make Your Tea and Eat It'. Several parents highlighted this as a way of sustaining healthy eating habits because they have the confidence to replicate the recipes at home. Older children prepare the meals alongside their parents and staff, so developing early knowledge of healthy eating options and some rudimentary practical skills. Effective partnerships with health professionals, especially in the well-attended breastfeeding support groups, promote positive outcomes effectively. Some opportunities for health-related education for adults are missed as there are currently no planned sessions in avoiding obesity, smoking cessation and under-18 conception; teenagers in general are, at present, an under-represented group in the centre.

A small but gradually increasing number of users are beginning to take an active role in the centre as volunteer helpers from which they have gained in confidence and an increased sense of belonging. One remarked that being a regular centre user was like being a member of a club and made her feel 'special'. One user spoken to has become a member of the advisory board and felt confident in being able to undertake the role. Users have also been involved to a limited degree in staff recruitment. Centre staff have provided support and encouragement for some users who are currently unemployed to develop the confidence and the skills to re-enter the job market. A computer with internet access is available for users and there is some signposting of job opportunities on display in the reception area. However, although some parents are improving their economic stability, this is a less well developed area of the centre's work.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

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

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

<b>3</b>
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There are adequate and improving systems in place to ensure that the needs of the majority of users are met. The Common Assessment Framework is well understood by staff and is used in most cases well to ensure early and effective intervention to support the needs of vulnerable children and their families. Assessment of the needs of adult users is now developing but has historically not made enough use of local information to establish clearly their starting points or to set clear individual targets and/or expected outcomes before they begin programmes and activities.

Nevertheless, learning programmes are generally appropriately matched to need. The Early Years Foundation Stage goals are used successfully in the nursery as the basis for planning all activities for children in the centre.

One of the most successful and well-attended initiatives in the centre at present is the Incredible Years programme. This focuses on giving parents the skills and the confidence to develop positive behaviour management strategies with their children. In the session seen during the inspection, some parents were first asked to reflect on whether their objective from the previous week of improving the way they praise their children had been met; all said that it had and some gave examples of how. The focus for the next week was 'not to say no' to their child but find more productive ways to explain why the child's behaviour had not been appropriate. In this session, high levels of parental concentration and engagement were evident but parents also enjoyed the opportunity to share their experiences with others. Some typically positive comments from parents included, 'You learn how to say things right' and 'It changes you as a person and not just as a parent.'

Outreach workers play a significant role in delivering services in a predominantly rural area. These services generally are well coordinated by centre staff in conjunction with partners and are an increasingly useful means of promoting the work of the centre more widely so that families in need become more aware of the range of services which the centre has to offer. However, centre leaders are aware

that currently a number of potentially vulnerable groups within the community are not significantly represented in the centre and consequently, provision for these groups is underdeveloped.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

<b>The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>3</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?**

**3**

Arrangements for governance of the centre are fit for purpose and provide a clear structure of responsibilities. However, the current advisory board has only been in place in its present form for a short period of time and therefore its impact on improving outcomes for users is only just starting to become apparent. Nonetheless, under the leadership of an experienced chair, there are ambitious plans for the development of the centre over time. Sound early steps have been taken to promote increased engagement of users in governance through, for example, ensuring that documents are, as far as possible, free of public services jargon. No major concerns were expressed by centre users as a whole and there is a generally high level of satisfaction with the services provided. Some systems are in place to record users' views and there is evidence of how these have led to programmes being modified, for example the establishment of a 'Toddler Group' on a day when there was a gap in provision. One parent remarked: 'They are always prepared to take the time to listen here, even if they are very busy.' However, users' feedback is not yet coordinated in a coherent manner in order to inform overall programme design. Resources are deployed appropriately and have a growing impact on improving outcomes, but for a limited range of users. Participation rates are variable both over time for individual activities and between different activities but generally provide at least adequate value for money.

Improvement planning by centre leaders is slowly beginning to improve but is not yet aligned closely enough to emerging evidence about the impact of the centre's actions on outcomes for users. Leaders' knowledge and understanding about progress against existing priorities is broadly accurate but piecemeal, which limits their ability to plan next steps strategically based on clear evidence. While staff are consulted about specific aspects of their work, including training needs, their involvement in the process of improvement planning generally is not well developed.

The centre provides a friendly and welcoming environment for users and promotes the inclusion of all families and children, including those with disabilities. Close links



with the nursery ensure that support for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities is coordinated appropriately. Partnerships with other agencies are also strong and support improving outcomes, especially for children. Arrangements for ensuring that staff are appropriately vetted when first appointed and then closely supervised in their work are in line with established good practice and consistently applied by managers. There are good systems, too, for ensuring that policies and procedures, such as risk assessments, are securely in place and regularly reviewed and updated.

These are the grades for leadership and management

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>3</b>
<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>	<b>3</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities</b>	<b>3</b>
<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>	<b>2</b>
<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>	<b>3</b>

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

Inspection of Nursery in the building on the Shaftesbury site: 30 March 2011

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## Summary for centre users

We inspected the North Dorset Children's Centre on 30 and 31 March 2011. We judged your centre to be satisfactory overall and improving.

During our visit, we talked to quite a few of you and met with the professionals who work with your centre. Thank you to those of you who contributed to the inspection. We visited some of the sessions and looked at a number of your centre's key documents.

The strongest message that came from centre users was that staff go out of their way to form positive relationships with them, consistently take the trouble to listen without judging and so help to build their confidence and self-esteem. Users feel increasingly involved in the centre, one describing it as being like belonging to a club. There is some evidence, too, that your centre's staff act on suggestions made, such as putting on the Toddlers' Club on Mondays. A few users have started to get involved more formally in helping to run activities as volunteers and becoming members of the advisory board, although the numbers taking these steps are still quite small.

We found that two other areas of your centre's work were particularly strong. First, it makes good links with other organisations and, as a result, helps to bring the services you need together. One of the best examples of this is with the health services and this helps to explain why the breastfeeding support groups are some of the best attended activities. It also is one of the most effective ways that new users are introduced to your centre. We heard from users, too, how other health-related activities such as 'Make Your Tea and Eat It' are felt to be useful and encourage users to try out new healthy meals at home, confident in the knowledge that children and parents will enjoy eating them and that they are not as hard to prepare as they might have thought!

A second key area of strength is that your centre puts the safety of children and others as a very high priority. All staff who work at your centre are checked very carefully when they first start work there and all are carefully supervised by the centre's managers. Those staff who visit people in their homes are very knowledgeable about safety issues and know exactly what to do if there needs to be any follow-up, especially regarding the safety of children. Just as importantly, we saw for ourselves how staff help parents to become more safety-conscious during activities such as 'Messy Play' and parents themselves confirmed how much they learn from the sessions, which helps to make their homes safer places.

We found that the range of activities which your centre offers is satisfactory and improving. Some, such as the very popular 'Incredible Years' programme, are consistently well attended but this does vary quite a lot for activities taken as a whole. We also found that while the activities on offer suit the needs of the users who attend regularly, there are a number of groups in the wider community, such as fathers, teenagers and some ethnic minority groups, who attend rarely, if at all. We have, therefore, asked your centre to adjust the balance of activities so that more

are targeted at particular groups by making better use of the information that the centre now has about the people in the wider community and their different needs.

Your centre has some strengths in the way it is led and managed but also some weaknesses. The advisory board has not been in place for long so has not yet had much chance to give the centre a clear sense of direction. However, under the leadership of the new chair, this is beginning to change. Checking the progress which your centre has made over time has not been precise enough in the past and this has meant that its plans for future development have not been linked closely enough to what needs to improve most urgently. Therefore, we have asked that this is now made a high priority.

We wish you and your families all the very best for the future.

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