

Inspection report for Stratford Children's Centre

Local authority	Warwickshire
Inspection number	365855
Inspection dates	29–30 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Helen Groves

Centre governance	The Parenting Project
Centre leader	Debbie Smith
Date of previous inspection	N/A
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Linked school if applicable	Bishopton Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Ginghams Pre - School and Polka Dots Day 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.

Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents and carers, prospective parents and carers and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents and carers, prospective parents and carers 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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with parents and carers and carers, staff, partners and representatives of the local authority linked to the centre. They observed the centre's work and also looked at a range of documentation including the centre's operational plans, evaluations, and safeguarding procedures.

Information about the centre

Stratford Children's Centre is a phase one centre designated in December 2006 and provides the full core offer. It is located in a modular building opened in February 2008 and sited at Bishopton Primary School. The Parenting Project, a registered charity, has the contract to manage the children's centre on behalf of Warwickshire County Council and is responsible for maintaining the site. The area served by the centre is largely affluent with a mixture of urban and rural communities. There are some areas of significant deprivation that sit alongside contrasting affluent areas. The number of families claiming benefits is below the national average and the incidence of worklessness is low. Most families are of White British heritage but an increasing number of Eastern European families are moving into the area, particularly from Poland. Within the reach of the centre there are significant issues surrounding debt and financial management, domestic violence and substance misuse. Most children from the reach area enter early years provision with skills at the level of those expected for their age.

Governance of the centre is provided by the management board of the Parenting Project which also oversees three other children's centres in the area. The centre manager has been in post for six months and is supported by a senior manager who is responsible for the four centres of the Parenting Project.

Childcare is provided through an arrangement with an independent provider in the Gingham's Pre-School, based within the school site and Polka Dots Day Nursery

located half a mile away. The centre also offers regular 'Stay and Play' and crèche sessions. The range of integrated services for children and their families offered by the centre is supplemented by specialist services provided by external partners such as health, social care, adult and community learning service, housing and credit union.

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 overall effectiveness of Stratford Children's Centre is good, leading to good outcomes for users. It provides good quality education and care to children and families. A key feature of the centre is the very warm, welcoming and safe environment it offers to all users. Safeguarding procedures are good. An overwhelming majority of users reported that staff listen to their concerns and make them feel valued. They appreciate the centre's support and value the positive impact this has on their lives. The centre is effective in its analysis of local need which allows it to align its services with the needs of a wide range different user groups. However, a minority of hard to reach families in the area are not accessing the centre's services and specific strategies to engage these families are not fully established.

Centre staff promote an excellent ethos of care and support. Those who use its services gain in confidence and self-esteem and take greater responsibility for themselves and their families. Services, activities, support and guidance are planned well and tailored to meet the specific needs of individuals and families. Links with a wide range of external partners providing specialist support are excellent. There are close links with the neighbouring school but joint strategies to address the needs of some children entering the school with low levels of attainment have not been developed.

Attendance at the centre is increasing steadily. All managers and staff form a highly committed team that is determined to improve provision and extend services to the wider community. Parents and carers are involved in decision making. Their evaluation of services and activities are valued and help the centre to develop its provision. The centre is becoming increasingly effective in gathering its own data to

monitor the relative uptake of different activities and to shape provision and services. However, the extensive range of data gathered is not sufficiently streamlined or used effectively to provide a full and clear assessment of the impact of the services provided. Several new systems have been introduced but it is too early to evaluate their effectiveness in improving the quality of the centre's work.

Governance arrangements are good. The management board of the Parenting Project provides an appropriate level of challenge for managers. The newly established advisory board is well attended by a diverse range of community members and service providers. The centre is aware that the roles and relationships of the two boards are not fully defined. The centre has a good capacity for sustained improvement, shown through its clear focus on improving areas of weakness and gaps in provision.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Streamline the evaluation systems and use of data to help the centre show the impact of its work.
- Establish close working links with the neighbouring primary school and develop joint strategies to address the low attainment levels of some children entering school.
- Develop specific strategies to encourage hard to reach families to access the services offered at the centre.
- Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the advisory board and the management board of the Parenting Project.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Parents and carers are developing a good understanding of how to keep themselves and their children healthy. Good quality activities are well attended and are having a positive effect in helping families increase their children's physical and social development. Sessions are planned carefully and centre staff use evaluations from parents and carers to modify activities to suit the needs of children of different ages. As a result, parents and carers report that they feel valued, their opinions are taken into consideration and they grow in confidence. The excellent and long established relationships with health professionals provide consistently good advice and support on a wide range of issues such as breastfeeding, weaning and parenting skills.

The centre makes a good contribution to the safety and well-being of its users with the safety of centre users given a high priority. Monitoring of access to the centre is vigorously enforced by all staff including those from external agencies. Parents and carers feel that it is a very safe environment for them and their children. All staff members hold first aid qualifications and those working with children are trained specifically in paediatric first aid. Safety assessments of the home are made by centre staff. Parents and carers report that these visits increase their understanding of accident prevention. The centre's work in supporting families at risk of domestic

violence is particularly strong and there are very close links to a local women's refuge.

Relationships between staff and families are very trusting, with a high level of mutual respect for all. Parents and carers feel their opinions are valued and that staff do not judge them harshly when things go wrong in their lives. Health visitors regularly conduct joint visits with outreach workers to hard to reach families. This allows staff to identify any safety concerns quickly and sensitively and intervene appropriately before a crisis occurs. Centre staff work closely with health visitors and community nurses to build the confidence of young parents, carers and families experiencing challenging circumstances. The Common Assessment Framework process is used very effectively to support families who are vulnerable due to their circumstances. This ensures that all services can help support them where appropriate, resulting in improved quality of life. One parent commented that 'When I came to the centre my life was a mess and the staff here have helped me find direction and improved my life in every way – and the life of my little girl'.

Children attending the centre have good learning opportunities that impact positively on their social and personal development. Effective strategies help develop children's language and communication skills. Projects such as 'Chatter Matters' have been taken out into the local community helping to raise the profile of the centre's work. A group of childminders meets at the centre regularly to share good practice and to give children quality time to make new friends and socialise. However, the centre and the neighbouring primary school have not identified ways in which they can work together to improve the very low attainment levels of some children entering the school.

The well managed volunteer programme allows volunteers to develop a wide range of transferable skills. Several volunteers have been successful in achieving vocational qualifications and employment. Opportunities for adults to undertake courses in order to promote their economic well-being are limited by the lack of facilities and childcare within the building. The adult and community education service provides courses for some adults to improve their numeracy and literacy skills. When more specialist vocational training is required the centre effectively signposts adults to other providers, but does not systematically monitor how many users take up courses and training after referral. Case studies indicate that some adults have been successful in achieving vocational qualifications. The centre recognises the escalating problems of budgeting and debt management for families as a priority area for adult learning and development. These problems are effectively addressed by direct access to support from credit union and the Citizens Advice Bureau, who visit the centre frequently.

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	2

concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	
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 and carers are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

The outstanding quality of care for young children, families and other users is a significant strength of the setting. Staff get to know families well and have a good understanding of the local area. Assessment of users' needs is rigorous and staff are very responsive and flexible in their approach to families requiring support. There is a strong emphasis on tailoring support programmes to meet the specific needs of individuals and families. Detailed records of interventions and progress of all families who are vulnerable due to their circumstances are kept and used effectively to inform partnership working. Outreach work has helped to forge useful links with other independent community play groups. This has enabled the spread of good practice and the provision of specialist support outside the centre. Support groups have been set up to meet the specific needs of young parents, older mothers and parents of twins. A fortnightly 'Daddy Cool' session and a play group aimed at extended family groups are offered on Saturdays. Both sessions are well attended.

The views of centre users are regularly obtained and used to plan and develop activities. Initiatives such as the running of a local allotment encourage collaborative working across different parent and children groups. Sessions and courses are of good quality and informative. They are planned well and detailed observations of children's behaviour are used effectively to inform future planning. The profile of the centre has been raised by taking projects out into the local community. The centre works closely with a wide range of health professionals such as health visitors, midwives, and speech and language therapists. Health staff feel a valuable part of the centre and recognise the benefits of close working arrangements in the increasing number of referrals they make.

The quality of care, guidance and information is excellent. Attractive leaflets are freely available around the centre providing useful information on a wide range of subjects and services available. Through its accurate assessment of need, the centre ensures that families are referred to the most appropriate provider of specialist support and guidance. Referrals to external agencies are supported by the timely exchange of relevant information. Social care professionals value highly the support provided for families in times of crisis and frequently refer families to the centre for advice and guidance on parenting skills. Practical advice provided to families is actively reinforced by the good role models provided by staff.

A good understanding of early years education is developed by parents and carers through watching how staff interact with their children and adopting this practice at home. Parents and carers recognise how their parenting skills have improved and feel more confident in supporting their children's learning more effectively. Support for users' well-being is a high priority. Families report that their lives are better as result of the help they receive from the centre, particularly at low points in their lives. They feel staff treat them with respect and value their comments and suggestions. These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and carers 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	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Leadership and management of the centre are good. The management board of the Parenting Project is stable and strong. It provides clear strategic direction and governance with an appropriate level of challenge for the centre management team. The centre benefits from the strong links which the project's senior manager has with local policy and decision making boards. This allows the centre to anticipate the effects of national and local government policy and to work proactively in shaping the service. The newly established advisory board has representation from a wide range of agencies and community members, including parents and carers, police, housing, schools, credit union, health and social care professionals. This facilitates a rich interchange of information focusing on the needs of the community. The information is used effectively by managers to inform decisions about the range and suitability of services offered by the centre. However, the relationship between this group and the management board of the Parenting Project is not fully understood by all staff and centre users. The roles and responsibilities for each group often overlap.

Staff are well qualified and deployed appropriately according to their skills and expertise. They are supervised well and effectively supported to improve their practice through opportunities for professional development. Strong working links with other children's centres in the Parenting Project ensures that resources are used effectively and efficiently, providing good value for money.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The centre actively promotes the inclusion of all families and children. Families registering with the centre are asked to provide detailed information on their circumstances and interests. This information is used well to ensure that centre users are provided with the most suitable range of

services to meet their needs. The extensive range of services and partnership arrangements ensures that the majority of users are well served by the centre. For example, the growing Polish community has access to a dedicated antenatal clinic where the midwife is supported by a translator. Information leaflets are also available in Polish and the mini library offers dual language books in English, Polish and Arabic. However, the centre does not always recognise opportunities to celebrate ethnic diversity by preparing children and young people to function in the increasingly multicultural society.

The centre gives a high priority to safeguarding. It implements a comprehensive range of policies and procedures consistently to protect users' safety and well-being. All staff are appropriately trained and have a good awareness of the importance of safeguarding and the extent of their responsibilities. Protocols and practice for sharing information between agencies are effective. Staff at the centre have been proactive in reducing the risk of harm to children and families. The centre holds good records as evidence that all staff and volunteers have appropriate checks. These are well maintained and up to date.

Self-evaluation is well established within the centre with all staff fully committed to improving the range and quality of services. Centre users are frequently asked for feedback on how effective the centre is in meeting their needs. This information is used well to inform the annual self-evaluation report. The report is very detailed and reflective and accurately identifies the key areas for improvement. Some sections are too descriptive with insufficient evaluation of how the centre is having an impact on the community it serves. Managers are highly effective in involving staff, partners and centre users in formulating plans for improvement. Targets are agreed with the local authority and the management board of the Parenting Project before being widely publicised. The format of the centre's improvement plan lacks detail on timescales and specific allocations of responsibility. Although managers regularly monitor progress, they are not always clear whether deadlines have been met or not.

The centre collects an extensive range of data and information to inform their developments but this is not always used effectively to evaluate impact of areas of work for the centre and its staff. Several new systems have been introduced to make good use of data but it is too early to evaluate their effectiveness. Some of the systems are not uniformly implemented by all staff and their understanding of the measurement terms is variable. Although detailed financial information is collected and analysed, it is not fully integrated into the system of evaluation and performance measurement.

Partnership arrangements are excellent. The centre is a valued partner for a wide range of external agencies who report that their work is greatly enhanced by the contribution made by the centre. A conference event organised by the centre held during the inspectors visit was well attended by health visitors who contributed enthusiastically to formulating the centres plans for improvement. Parents and carers speak highly of the longstanding partnership with health professionals and how it has

made a significant difference to the lives of children and families in the area. The local authority has very close working links with the centre and provides very useful support and challenge for managers.

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	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	1
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

The judgments made in this inspection took into account the management reports provided by Warwickshire County Council.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Stratford Children's Centre on 29–30 March 2011. We judged that the centre's work is good. It has some outstanding features.

The children's centre provides a good range of services that are helping you and your families to improve your lives. Staff are good at making sure that the centre is a safe place for you and your children and that you feel welcome every time you visit. Parents and carers were keen to explain how the centre has helped them make new friends and feel less isolated. The excellent partnership arrangements the centre has developed over recent years allows it to call upon a number of specialist services to provide a programme of support that meets the individual needs of each family.

Attendance rates at the centre are increasing and the team work hard to promote the centre in the community. Staff provide excellent support for children to make sure that they get a good start in life and adults are guided well so that they can take responsibility for themselves. Some adults now work as volunteers in the centre and attendance at courses has resulted in several receiving formal qualifications and employment.

Managers at the centre are keen to involve centre users in improving services. They are always looking for ways to make improvements and to make sure the work of the centre is serving the community well.

We have made some recommendations to help improve the centre even further. The centre collects a large amount of information but we have asked the staff to streamline this to evaluate how the centre is having an impact on the community it serves. We want them to work more closely with the neighbouring primary school to help prepare children for starting school. We have also asked them to make it clear how the advisory board and the management board of the Parenting Project work together and to make sure that all families benefit from the centre's services.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to come and speak with us. We are very grateful and wish you and your families every success for the future.

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