

Inspection report for Reckleford Children's Centre

Local authority	Somerset
Inspection number	366338
Inspection dates	30–31 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Margaret Dickinson HMI

Centre governance	Local authority
Centre leader	None
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Reckleford Community School and Children's Centre

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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 the centre leader from another local children's centre who is due to take over as cluster manager from 1 April 2011, the acting centre leader who led the centre for four months from September 2010, staff based at the centre who work directly with children and families, representatives from partner agencies, an officer from the local authority, members of the centre's advisory board, and parents who use the centre.

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

Information about the centre

Reckleford Children's Centre shares a site with Reckleford Community Primary School. The centre incorporates a full day care nursery which was inspected in May 2010 and judged outstanding.

The centre provides the full core offer through on-site services and through signposting to services delivered through other children's centres and linked providers. Action for Children, a charitable organisation, is contracted to provide outreach services. The centre was first designated in March 2006 and its reach includes areas with high levels of social need. The proportion of families who live in workless households is above the national average and much higher than the average for the local authority. Within the community, a wide range of languages is spoken, with Polish being the most common. The proportion of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage working at the expected levels for their age is below the national and local authority averages.

The centre has been without a permanent manager for around two years. Between September 2010 and February 2011, the local authority arranged for a member of the integrated services team to work as acting centre manager for three days per week. The inspection week coincided with a major reorganisation of children's centre

arrangements in the local authority. This children’s centre is to become one of a cluster of four local children’s centres under the leadership of a cluster centre manager. A part-time lead centre officer will take responsibility for the day-to-day management of the centre. Both roles are new and due to take effect from the 1 April 2011. The new cluster manager offered support to the centre during the two weeks prior to the inspection and during the inspection itself.

The centre’s governance is currently through an advisory board. At the time of the inspection, the board was without a chair. The arrangements for governance are due to change as a result of the reorganisation of the children’s centre.

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

4

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

4

Main findings

Reckleford Children’s Centre’s overall effectiveness is inadequate. The centre is not serving children and families in its reach area as well as it should. This is due to inconsistent leadership and management over the last two years. Difficulties in recruiting a centre manager, sickness, and a recruitment freeze have contributed to the absence of a permanent manager. Posts for a family link worker and an early years support officer have also been vacant for some time. These weaknesses, and the centre’s recent track record, indicate that the centre has insufficient capacity to improve.

Leaders from other children’s centres have been asked to provide support from time to time and more recently, a member of the local authority’s integrated services team has been acting manager. These steps offered some stability but, essentially, the centre has suffered too long from a lack of sustained drive and direction. The centre’s work has not been monitored and evaluated to identify priorities for improvement or to drive forward new developments. Too little use has been made of the available data from the local authority, information from the centre itself and users’ views to steer services. The centre cannot demonstrate how well it meets the needs of the most vulnerable and excluded groups in its area. It has not identified groups who are insufficiently engaged or made strategic decisions to broaden its impact.

Despite the extremely difficult circumstances, the centre staff have shown resilience and determination in providing much valued services for children and families. Strong teamwork has enabled staff to keep services going. Overall, the centre provides satisfactorily for those who access its services. Parents and users find the centre both friendly and supportive. They can speak openly and know that staff will listen and advise. There are many examples of successful partnerships providing support for families. Where appropriate, the centre signposts users to other sources of support and advice.

The on-site child care provision was inspected in May 2010 and judged to be outstanding. The centre provides extremely well for babies and young children, many of whom attend through supported child care places. The children's centre teacher has led several initiatives in support of the local authority's targets by promoting children's early communication and language skills. Activities for babies and young children are very well organised and carefully planned to take account of the children's different stages of development. The sessions support children's learning well and promote valuable interaction between babies, children and parents. There have been other successes. Families registering for sessions with the centre are increasing, for example, breast-feeding is promoted successfully, and some fathers are joining regular 'on the ball' sessions.

The centre's arrangements for keeping children safe and free from harm are satisfactory. Links between the family support workers and the team of health visitors, based on site, are effective. Both work closely to support families, some of whom are in particularly vulnerable situations. The centre's work in reaching out to families and users who do not attend the centre or draw on its services is limited because of a shortage of family support worker hours. Staff have not been proactive in engaging those not currently using the centre's services and therefore cannot demonstrate sufficient equality of opportunity for all groups.

Arrangements for holding the centre to account are insecure. The local authority was unable to carry out an annual review last year as there was no centre manager. The advisory board has been without a chair for some time and although supportive of the centre's work, the absence of a manager has hindered its role. The board has not drawn on the views of parents and users sufficiently and has not been able to make a strong enough contribution to driving improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The local authority should establish sustained and effective leadership for the centre, setting clear direction and priorities for improvement, based on accurate evaluation of current services.
- Strengthen the role of the advisory board in driving improvement and ensure parents' and users' views are well represented.
- Ensure leadership makes better use of the available data and information to identify, target and support the groups in the reach area including those not currently engaged.
- Improve the range and effectiveness of outreach and home visiting services to

enhance outcomes for the families who are most in need.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

There are many examples of improved outcomes for families using the centre. However, the centre is not meeting the needs of the most vulnerable and those groups excluded from its services.

Children make good progress in their learning and development in relation to their capabilities and starting points. Their progress is monitored well and together with local authority targets, such information is used effectively to plan activities. Initiatives such as story telling and activities encouraging spoken communication are helping to address the weaker aspects of children’s below average language skills. Valuable opportunities are provided in sessions such as ‘stay and play’ for parents and children to socialise, play and eat healthy food together. One parent said the centre had ‘given us and the kids a life, experiencing new things, being adventurous, getting dirty’. These sessions promote community cohesion well. Another parent commented how the activities had made them ‘more open minded to other cultures’ because they had come into regular contact with local families from the Polish and Asian community.

Parents in the breast-feeding group find it very supportive and encouraging and many parents attending continue to breast-feed their babies after six months. Parents benefit from healthy eating courses and report that they have led to a wider range of fresh foods being prepared and eaten at home. Through the good links with the on-site health visitors, the centre can point to individual successes with families made vulnerable by their circumstances. Parents who are experiencing change or difficulties in their lives report that the centre’s work has helped to boost their confidence, develop their parenting skills and improve family relationships. Links with agencies that support families with training, employment or benefit advice have improved over recent months. The centre can point to several cases where parents have benefited from this support. This has contributed to their economic well-being by leading to volunteering and employment opportunities.

Staff are alert to safety concerns and keeping children safe from harm. Safeguarding training is provided for all staff. The full-time family support worker contributes appropriately in supporting families where the Common Assessment Framework is used. The centre cooperates with other agencies to reduce the risk of harm to children and families. Several families have benefited from advice on improving safety in the home, for example, by home safety assessments, visits from the fire brigade organised by the centre, or first aid courses.

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare	3

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	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	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	3

How good is the provision?

3

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	4
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

4

Although much of front-line worker support is effective, the centre does not provide adequate value for money. The lack of consistent leadership has limited the extent to which the centre reaches the most vulnerable and excluded groups and makes a difference to their lives. As a result, the centre cannot be sure that it is meeting the range of users' needs in its reach area. Evaluation at the end of sessions gauges parents' and users' responses to services. Such information has not been used to identify priorities and set targets or to monitor the outcomes of target groups. These important aspects of ensuring equality and demonstrating the centre's commitment to inclusion are not met adequately.

The acting centre manager achieved much in a short period of time. This included setting up regular healthy child meetings, a systematic evaluation of the centre's work and a new development plan. This period of interim leadership was the first time for some years the centre had experienced an effective, focused plan for development. Links with partners providing support for training and employment improved and a new volunteer support and training group was also set up. The interim leader was quick to establish contact with key partners to re-launch the advisory board and three meetings were instigated. All these initiatives are positive and appropriate but they have not had time to embed and demonstrate sustained impact on improving outcomes.

Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory. Family support workers link appropriately with other agencies to secure children's safety and well-being.

Although the centre has not had a permanent manager, arrangements for ensuring there is a designated person with lead responsibility for safeguarding on site are secure. Staff receive the required training but the arrangements for recording training undertaken by staff, including dates, are disorganised.

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	4
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	4
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	4
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	4
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	4
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	3

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

The childcare was inspected in May 2010 and its overall provision judged outstanding. The environment was found to be calm and purposeful. Staff were well qualified and dedicated, and providing excellent education and care. There was careful attention to ensuring that all children were included with high-quality, individually targeted learning experiences. Self-evaluation was judged to be rigorous, leading to continued improvement. These strengths in provision were contributing to children's excellent progress.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Reckleford Children's Centre on 30 and 31 March 2011. We judged the centre as inadequate overall.

The centre has been designated since March 2006 and for the last two years has been without a permanent manager. This absence has had a negative effect on how well the centre has been led and managed. It has not had anyone in the driving seat to move the centre forward, find out what is working well, identify what is less effective, and take the lead on new developments.

Over recent months, the local authority arranged for a member of the central team to work for three days a week as an acting centre manager. Some positive developments occurred during this time. The advisory board was re-established. A review was carried out of the support the centre provided and gaps in provision were identified. This helped the centre to set priorities. These were steps in the right direction but the acting manager was only in post for a few months and there has not been enough time for these to improve the centre's overall effectiveness.

Many of you may be surprised by the outcome of this inspection because of the hard work of staff at the centre. They have carried on, strengthened by their good teamwork. They have been determined to provide services and support for families in the area, while working in very difficult circumstances. Not only has the centre been without a manager, there have also been two vacancies in key positions. This has put a limit on how much time the family support worker team has had to help families in their homes and reach out to the families that may feel reluctant or nervous about coming to the centre itself. The team know, for instance, that there are many young parents in the area, and the teenage pregnancy rates are much higher than the local authority figures as a whole. These are two groups that need support but the resources of the centre have been stretched and, without leadership, it has not been possible to cater for them as effectively as staff would have liked.

There are many good things happening at the centre, which are beneficial to the parents and users who visit it and use its services. Many of you told us how valuable you find the centre's activities and groups, and how much it supports and enhances your family lives. We heard from parents who had taken steps to make their homes safer following safety advice. Others had experimented with healthier and fresh foods as a result of the cookery courses. Several dads spoke of how they enjoyed sessions like 'Stay and Play' which gave them quality time with their baby or child, to play and learn together. The football sessions are also very popular with dads and some mums. The family support workers have good links with health visitors and midwives, and this has helped to improve health outcomes for many families. Several parents have also had valuable support in accessing benefits and exploring opportunities for volunteering or finding training and employment. Above all, many of you will know that the quality of the childcare is outstanding and the babies and young children who access this day care make excellent progress in their learning and development.

In contrast, there are several things that are not effective and all these are linked to the lack of leadership. You may know that the centre has been reorganised from the 1 April 2011 and a cluster manager and lead centre officer are being set up as new posts. A key recommendation from this report is that the centre has sustained and effective leadership so that it moves forward with clear priorities. We have also recommended that the advisory board plays a stronger role in driving improvement. The centre is asked to make better use of the information that is available to it to check how well it is targeting and supporting the needs of all the groups in its area. Improving the quality of the outreach work is vital so that families who are reluctant to come to the centre, for whatever reason, can receive the breadth of support and advice that is available to them.

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