

Inspection report for River Children's Centre

Local authority	Gloucestershire
Inspection number	367860
Inspection dates	11 – 12 May 2011
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Centre governance	Barnardo's
Centre leader	Beverley Jervis
Date of previous inspection	This is the centre's first inspection
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Linked school if applicable	Severnbanks Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	River Children's Centre (URN 101687)

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 registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with a representative from Barnardo's, representatives of the partnership advisory board, partnership agencies, members of staff and users of the centre.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of documentation including key policies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its development plans, evaluations of services and data about people who use the centre and the local community.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory and 4 is inadequate

Information about the centre

River Children’s Centre is a Phase 2 centre. It was designated in January 2008 and has been run on behalf of the local authority by the charity Barnardo’s since 1 September 2010. It is located in the market town of Lydney but the reach area encompasses a large rural geographical area. The west of the reach area borders onto Wales and some local health services are provided by a Welsh Healthcare Trust. The centre’s reach is very varied in terms of deprivation. Ten of the 18 super output areas are deemed to be in the 25% most deprived areas of the country. The Lydney East 1 Super Output area is in the top 10% of the most deprived quintile for child well-being. The local population is mostly White British, with a very small percentage (1%) from other minority ethnic heritages. The proportion of workless households and families who claim benefits is high compared to the county average. Children start school with skills and abilities which are well below those expected for their age. Around 58% of children achieve a total of at least 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, with communication, language and literacy and personal, social and emotional development being the weaker elements.

The centre is open on weekdays from 08.00 to 17.00 and on some Saturdays. It is open for 48 weeks of the year. Following the change in management to Barnardo’s, the centre is currently undergoing a restructuring of its management and staffing arrangements. Recruitment and selection processes were being undertaken at the time of the inspection. The centre has registered early years provision and this was inspected at the same time as this inspection.

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

River Children's Centre is a satisfactory centre overall with some good aspects. Its ability to respond quickly and provide good levels of support when families are in crisis is a particular strength. Users greatly appreciate the centre, describing it as '...a really great place to come' and as '...being a backbone of support when things have been really tough'. Users receive good care, guidance and support, saying that they can turn to staff at any time and are always listened to with sensitivity and respect.

The provision for children in the registered pre-school is good. Children's good progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage helps many of them to gradually catch up with their peers although there is still some way to go to improve their communication, language and literacy skills. Children's progress in their personal, social and emotional development is good. They have positive attitudes, play sociably with others and behave well.

Parents and carers are confident that they are safe and secure in the centre. Staff are well trained and knowledgeable in safeguarding issues. They engage social care and health partners effectively when children are at risk of harm and to help families through difficult times. Drawing on partnerships with other professional agencies and the appropriate use of the Common Assessment Framework has led to good support for looked after children and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The centre runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis because staff work well as a team and are highly committed to supporting children and families as well as they can. The centre satisfactorily identifies the different groups of users and develops services to meet their needs. Adult users make good gains in their personal development through courses run in the centre, but they have no access to accredited training courses to improve their basic skills and to gain qualifications which would help them to secure employment.

Evaluations of activities and surveys show that users are positive about the sessions they take part in. However, users have few opportunities to be involved in the running of the centre and to share their skills to benefit others. Attempts to set up a formal forum to seek their views have so far been unsuccessful. The partnership advisory board satisfactorily reflects the range of key partner agencies although no users are represented on the board. While awaiting the final outcomes of staffing reorganisation, the board has been slow to develop an approach which challenges the centre and drives improvement.

The range of data about its reach area is generally helpful to the centre in identifying where it needs to target services, for example support for the high number of young parents. However, the centre does not systematically seek feedback from all of its partners and staffing constraints have restricted the building of stronger links with a full range of partners, such as other early years providers, to ascertain further need. As a result, although the centre caters well for those in the immediate vicinity of Lydney, it is not always precise in its knowledge about all the potential users across

the entirety of its reach area. This limits its ability to target services more closely. The priorities for development are only sketched out in the current business plan until new staff appointments are made and roles are established. There are no measurable targets set against which the centre can evaluate its effectiveness in the short or longer term. Nevertheless, the main priorities are satisfactorily focused on the next steps to improvement. This, combined with the resilience of staff and their continued commitment to improving outcomes for users during a long period of uncertainty, shows that the centre has a satisfactory capacity for future development.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Make effective use of all available information to:
 - ensure that the needs of all groups of users are fully known in order to precisely target services and improve outcomes across the whole reach area
 - set precise and measurable targets for success in the centre's business plan
 - evaluate the longer-term impact of the provision on the outcomes for users and give greater strategic direction for the future of the centre.

- Strengthen the role of the partnership advisory board in driving improvement and holding the centre to account for its effectiveness, and ensure users' views are well represented.

- Improve access to accredited training courses in order to raise users' aspirations, improve their basic skills and afford them greater opportunities for employment.

- Encourage greater user involvement in the running of the centre, developing opportunities for them to share their skills for the benefit of all.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

Parents and carers are beginning to understand how to promote a healthier lifestyle for their families. The take-up rates for immunisation are good. Popular cookery courses provide them with guidance on diet and children's well-being through healthy recipe ideas. Children in the pre-school develop a good understanding of safe and healthy lifestyles through expected hygiene routines, visits from the oral hygienist and learning to play safely on the outdoor equipment. Staff support health professionals in their monitoring of children who are assessed as being at risk from obesity. Staff are aware that levels of obesity remain high within the locality and are developing provision further. For example, plans are in place to implement the 'Health, exercise, nutrition for the really young' (HENRY) programme. Breastfeeding support from trained counsellors encourages mothers to continue feeding their babies, but breastfeeding rates at 6 to 8 weeks old in the reach area remain lower than the county and national average. A high proportion of mothers continue to smoke in pregnancy but smoking cessation support has met with very little

enthusiasm.

Good attention is given to supporting the emotional development of children and their parents and carers and to keeping them safe. Case studies show that there are improved outcomes for children who are on child-protection plans. Users say their levels of confidence are much better due to the support from staff, the safe and secure environment and through courses, such as parenting programmes. Those who are vulnerable to domestic violence receive good individualised support although there are not enough trainers at present to deliver the 'Freedom' programme for groups. Information is readily available to users on noticeboards in the centre and through discreet support, for example, chlamydia testing packs within toilet cubicles, to enable information to be accessed privately. Users' understanding of how to keep their children safe is developing well through advice on how to improve the safety of their home environment and through paediatric first-aid training.

Children and adults have good opportunities to socialise in the 'Stay and Play', 'Two Year Old' and 'Young Parents' Group'. Young children learn to take turns, share and learn from others. They behave well and thoroughly enjoy the activities on offer. Centre staff are highly aware of children's low language and literacy skills. Good support for this aspect of their development is provided through the 'Every Child A Talker' project, 'Visible Thinking' group (non-verbal storytelling) and regular access to advice from a speech and language therapist. The take-up of bookstart packs by parents and use of the book exchange is good. Although the centre provides some courses, it has identified the need to develop family learning opportunities with the aim of improving the home learning environment. Users report that they enjoy the courses on offer but would like more opportunities to undertake accredited training, for example in computing, or undertake basic skills qualifications to improve their chances of work. The withdrawal of Jobcentre Plus services from the centre means that users now have to travel some distance to seek advice. The centre has no secure evidence that it has a positive impact on improving the relatively high unemployment figures in the reach area.

Users report that their engagement with the centre is enjoyable. However, the lack of opportunities for them to be included in the day-to-day running of the centre, such as through volunteering their services, and to be engaged in governance or decision making limit their chances of making a positive contribution. Regular coffee mornings for parents and carers are poorly attended.

Users' economic well-being is improving due to good advice and support they receive from some key partners, particularly the Two Rivers Housing Association. The handing over of keys to a group of users in the centre who were moving into the same road had a very positive impact on building community cohesion as they made friends with their new neighbours.

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	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, and 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	3
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

Centre staff know the families well in the town of Lydney itself. The setting up of a Young Parents' Group, a new monthly Dad's group and the Two Year Old group for the most vulnerable children is in direct response to local need. Staff are sensitive in their approach to engaging parents and carers in the centre's activities. There are good partnerships with a range of key agencies, such as health, social care and housing. This means that families who are identified as being in need of support are effectively referred to the children's centre where they can access an appropriate range of services.

There is a lot of data from the local authority available to the centre. However, the precision of this data is lacking in some areas. For example, the centre does not know how many under five's live in workless households in its reach area. This means that the services offered by the centre are not always based upon a sound analysis of the needs of the community within the entire reach area. The community family worker is effective in directing families in crisis to different agencies and to the activities of the centre so that aspects of their lives can be improved. However, staffing absence has limited the impact of this work much beyond the Lydney area and, to a lesser extent, in Sedbury. In recognition of this, the management plans to significantly increase the work done by a larger team of community family workers.

Centre staff develop good relationships with users. They place good emphasis on celebrating the individual achievements of users and support users well in their personal development through the provision of appropriate courses, such as 'Approaches to Change'. Users speak highly of these opportunities saying that they really help to build their confidence and to make them into much better parents. For example, one user spoke about how she has realised the importance of sitting down to eat with her children and to engage in conversation with them rather than having the television on. The quality and range of services offered are satisfactory overall, but are very limited in terms of promoting adults' educational development and

providing employment advice in a bid to reduce worklessness.

In times of crisis, families feel well supported by the centre, knowing that they can confidently turn to staff who go out of their way to help. Users value the opportunities the centre provides for them to make friends and socialise. One user said that the opening of a baby group in Sedbury has been 'great' as it gets her out of the house and she and her child have made new friends through coming. One user reflected that without the centre she would not have been able to take on the role of carer of two children. She reported that everyone had been so welcoming and that all the parents and carers had been sociable and had included her in activities. Two fathers said how much they valued the centre in the life of their community and the quality of care that their children receive.

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

Despite a long period of uncertainty during the change in management, the centre manager and staff have remained dedicated to their roles and motivated to develop services as well as possible for users. They are aware that there are gaps in provision and that the staffing reorganisation is necessary if more community family workers are to be available to access a greater range of users across the reach area. The centre recognises that data are not sufficiently refined to give staff a fully rounded picture of the needs of the whole community, or help them to set precise targets in the business plan and measure the centre's success in meeting these targets in the long term. Nevertheless, the centre has a broad knowledge of its major strengths and areas for development. Since the centre's inception, staff have implemented satisfactory plans and used the available resources adequately in order to improve relevant outcomes. The value for money provided for the centre is therefore satisfactory.

The local authority regularly monitors the centre's progress against the areas for improvement and has an accurate view of its current effectiveness. Members of the partnership advisory board are mostly representative of the key partners in the centre's reach area. They are supportive within their own fields of expertise and when planning integrated services. However, they are aware that they have been hampered by the lengthy process of management change and reorganisation and now need to develop their role in helping the centre to identify its priorities and

holding it to account for its effectiveness in meeting them. Users' views are sought in an annual survey and in evaluations of some activities, but their engagement in the governance and day-to-day running of the centre is not sufficiently developed.

Staff focus satisfactorily upon promoting equality and diversity. Young parents are supported to access services through groups designed specifically for them. Crèches are provided to enable parents and carers to access courses run in the centre. Adults and children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are fully included and have equal access to all the activities and support available in order to improve their skills and life chances. Suitable recognition is given to the needs and welfare of the very small numbers of users who come from minority-ethnic heritages. The centre demonstrates that it helps to close the gap in achievement for the least able children, but does not demonstrate securely that it is equally as successful for other groups of users, particularly users with limited literacy and basic skills.

Staff make appropriate use of the Common Assessment Framework when they consider a family may be in need of extra targeted support. Good relationships with social care and health professionals and close working with families who are at risk result in children being effectively safeguarded. Robust recruitment procedures mean that those working with children and their families are suitable. The centre's accommodation is clean and bright and thorough risk assessments ensure that the centre provides a welcoming and safe environment for users and their children.

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	3
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	3
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

This inspection took account of the inspection findings from the concurrent inspection of the early years provision at River Children's Centre. The overall effectiveness of the registered provision is judged to be good.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the River Children's Centre on 11 and 12 May 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall with some good aspects.

We agree with you that a great strength of this children's centre is the care, guidance and support that staff provide for you. You told us how much you value the support you are given and appreciate that you can always rely upon staff to listen to you and help you when you most need it. The centre manager and staff work well together in order to provide you with services that make a difference to the lives of many of you and your children. They are committed to supporting your children's development and to developing your skills and confidence. Staff clearly know the families who attend the centre well and ensure that the services they provide are suitable for you. However, there are not enough community family workers who can get out into the wider community and find out about other people who would benefit from coming to the centre. At present, most people who access the services at the centre come from Lydney and there are some who go to groups in Sedbury. This needs to be increased so that more users can benefit from the good advice and support that the centre provides.

Staff have developed some good partnerships with other professionals and organisations so that they can offer you the correct advice and guidance. They do all they can to make sure you and your children remain safe. This includes providing you with opportunities to think about how to make your homes safer and by ensuring that the centre is a safe and secure place to visit. Staff are well trained in how to safeguard children and management has taken the correct steps to ensure that anyone who works with you and your children is suitable.

We noticed that you are asked to contribute to a survey once a year and to evaluate some of the activities you undertake. However, none of you is on the partnership advisory board which means that your views are not taken into account enough when making decisions about how the centre should develop. We feel that a number of you have skills and talents which could be put to good use to help the centre run smoothly on a day-to-day basis. We hope that you will take the opportunity to volunteer your services. The centre has been through a period of change with the

management changing to Barnardo's and some new staffing appointments which have yet to take place. It has been a difficult time for the centre while these things have been sorted out. We have asked the partnership advisory board to do more now to ensure that the centre uses all the information about how well it is doing to set the most important priorities for the future and check that the centre is acting on them so that the managers improve the services at the centre as much as they can. You told us that you really enjoy the courses on offer, especially the cookery courses. However, some of you said that you would like more help with gaining qualifications, such as in English and computing, to give you a better chance of getting work. We agree that this is an area which the centre needs to work on more.

We would like to thank those of you who spared the time to speak with us and were willing to share your thoughts about the centre. We are very grateful and we wish you every success for the future.

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