

Inspection report for Newcastle-under-Lyme Children's Centre

Local authority	Staffordshire
Inspection number	367843
Inspection dates	18–19 May 2011
Reporting inspector	Aelwyn Pugh HMI

Centre governance	Staffordshire County Council
Centre leader	Carol Commins
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Newcastle Early Years and Childcare Centre

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, 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.

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre managers, representatives of the management advisory group and the parents' forum, staff, local authority representatives and members of partner organisations. They also held informal discussions with parents and carers.

They observed the centre's work, on site and at other venues, and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including key policies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its development plan, evaluations of services and data about the people who use the centre.

Information about the centre

Newcastle-under-Lyme Children's Centre was designated in 2004 and is run directly by the local authority. It is a purpose-built phase one centre and has developed from a Sure Start local programme. It has a management advisory board, which includes parents and carers, members of the local community and representatives of the local authority and partner agencies, including the voluntary and private sectors.

Most activities take place at the centre, although several are also run in other venues in the community. They cover the full core offer. The centre is large, well-equipped and accessible by wheelchair. The health services which it provides include a weekly baby clinic, antenatal and postnatal checks and an oral health programme. They work with Jobcentre Plus and offer financial advice to help families manage their finances and gain employment. There is a nursery, as well as a crèche, on site. The centre also works with the local primary school.

The centre serves one of the 30% most deprived areas in the country. Within its catchment area, there are approximately 1,134 children under the age of five. Of those aged nought to four, 27% are living in poverty. The population of the area is

predominantly White British, with a small increase recently in the number of families from minority ethnic groups.

The centre is open from 8am to 6pm on weekdays and also offers some weekend activities, such as a father and children’s group which meets every three weeks.

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

Newcastle-under-Lyme Children’s Centre provides a wide range of services. These make an important contribution to the successful outcomes for users. This is because managers and staff are highly committed to improving the lives of the parents and children in the area and work very effectively as a team and in collaboration with other agencies. Staff know the community well. They have worked hard to identify the reasons why some families are reluctant to use the centre and have adapted the provision to suit those people’s needs.

The head of the centre and the senior managers have an accurate understanding of the strengths of their services and where improvements can be made. In conducting their self-evaluation, they draw on a range of sources, particularly oral and written feedback from users. The leaders make limited use of quantitative data to assess the impact of their services and to set targets. However, together with the local authority and other agencies, they are now gathering the necessary information to refine their evaluation processes. They recognise that fathers are not sufficiently involved in the centre’s activities and, before the end of the inspection, they were already beginning to think through a range of interesting ways of tackling this issue. These factors, together with the success of the centre to date, show that it has good capacity for further improvement.

Parents and carers value the support provided for them personally, as well as for their children, and several described the ‘excellent advice and guidance’ they had received when facing particularly stressful events in their lives. They also spoke very highly about the very good help they received in preparing for parenthood and in keeping themselves and their families healthy and safe. They enjoy the opportunities

to play and learn alongside their children. These activities have enabled them to widen their own horizons and to gain the skills and knowledge to support their children's development.

The centre places a considerable emphasis on helping to build a cohesive society and has worked hard to extend its resources and approaches to ensure that the increasing number of families for whom English is not the first language are made welcome and can take part in the services offered.

Parents commented on the high level of trust they had in the staff and on the high level of care that their children received at the centre. Clear policies and procedures and rigorous monitoring of their implementation ensure that children are able to play and learn in a safe, stimulating and attractive environment.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Analyse data more precisely in order to monitor the effectiveness of services and their impact on specific groups of users and to set measurable targets for further development
- Develop the centre's services so that there is greater provision for fathers.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Users benefit from the centre's strong emphasis on improving the health of children and families. The centre holds the 'Healthy Eating' and 'Oral Health' awards. The work that has led to these awards helps to ensure that children have plenty of opportunities to enjoy fresh air in the play areas and outdoor classroom. The 'Fit Kids' programme is popular and has contributed to the considerable reduction in the number of children in the area who are obese or overweight. Its smoking cessation programme has also been effective. Over the last three years, the rates of breastfeeding in the area have risen by four per cent, mainly as a result of the work of the 'Friendly About Breastfeeding' (FAB) sessions which are heavily subscribed. In an area with a very high incidence of post-natal depression, the centre has provided what several mothers described as a 'lifeline', through activities such as 'Feeling Good', 'Looking Great', and 'Grapevine'.

Ensuring the emotional well-being and safety of users is a very high priority for the centre. The Common Assessment Framework is used effectively to identify and support families experiencing particular difficulties and several complex situations have been successfully resolved through this. Another valued source of support is the on-site 'Citizens' Advice Bureau'. However, mothers are clear that the greatest contribution is made by the 'fantastic' staff who take the 'greatest care' of the children and treat everyone with 'tremendous respect'. As a result, the children are

able to flourish in a safe and stimulating environment. Courses and day-to-day advice help parents build up close and positive relationships with their children. Good support is given to victims of domestic violence and staff are well trained to identify signs of this.

Over the last three years, the centre has succeeded in increasing the proportion of children from the most deprived homes who gain at least 78 points across the Foundation Stage Profile and in closing the gap between them and others of the same age. Several initiatives have contributed to this, including sessions such as 'Stay and Play', 'Babies Love Music' and the sensory room activities, all of which are valued by mothers and enjoyed by the children. Parents and carers describe how observing staff at work has given them the ideas and confidence to help their children at home. One mother commented: 'I now know that all play is learning'. Through the early partnership programme, parents learn about child development and are given packs so that they can try out ideas with their own children. Further support for this is provided by the toy and book library. Through these activities and courses, parents, carers and children are prepared well for the next stage of education.

The behaviour management programme has been effective in helping parents and carers reflect on, and modify, the way that they approach their children. A typical comment was: 'It has helped me see things through my child's eyes'. Specialist staff provide extra support for those with special educational needs, or for whom English is an additional language, to ensure that their views are heard. The centre places a considerable emphasis on promoting social cohesion. For example, it has contributed to activities organised by the local residents' group and to the development of a similar centre in Malawi. Several users work on a voluntary basis 'to give something back' to the centre and some have built on these experiences to progress to training and employment. The centre has established a forum so that parents can contribute their ideas for development. However, this is small and no fathers take part in it.

Users benefit from the centre's good focus on helping them develop economic stability and independence. The percentage of teenage mothers in the area is high. The centre has run a successful programme for them, in conjunction with the local college. A high number of those taking part have continued with their education, gained qualifications and entered employment. This course is no longer held at the centre but the centre continues to provide nursery and crèche places for the children of mothers who are attending a similar course at the local college. Other courses have enabled users to extend their skills, gain employment and, in two cases, to establish their own small businesses. The 'Kitchen Confidence Programme' has helped parents prepare healthy meals on a tight budget and support from the Citizens' Advice Bureau and financial advisers has helped parents avoid the pressures of 'loan sharks'.

<p>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</p>	<p>1</p>
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The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	1
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

Considerable efforts have been made to ensure that the centre caters for families who most require support and meets the needs of users and the wider community. The close links with the neighbouring school and the detailed knowledge that staff and members of the management advisory board have of the area have helped them. A significant element in these developments is the 'Magnet Project' which focuses on families who are not taking advantage of the centre's provision. Through careful analysis and interviews, staff have identified some of the barriers to parental involvement and adapted the provision accordingly. This includes giving individual support to families in their homes and providing courses and advice at a range of venues outside the centre, to make them more accessible to families. The outreach team has made a vital contribution to these developments.

Comments made in written evaluations and in conversations with the inspectors reflect the impact that the centre has had on users' lives. Mothers talked of how they have been helped to make friends, to increase their confidence and to gain a better understanding of their children's needs. They have also been given a wide range of opportunities to learn alongside their children and to develop their own skills. Being given the time to focus on themselves as well as their children is also an important contribution that the centre is making to improving users' lives.

Several mothers commented on the trust they had in the staff and the way they had been able to discuss their problems in a climate of 'complete confidentiality' without feeling that they were being judged. Because parents and carers can be open about their concerns, the staff are able to provide the right support or to guide them to others who can help.

The centre makes a wide range of provision for mothers but far too little for fathers. Apart from the 'Big bears, little bears' group, which meets every three weeks on a Saturday, there is no specific provision for fathers. Attendance figures for other activities show that almost three times as many women as men take part in them. Given the high level of male unemployment in the area, too little has been done to

provide activities for fathers during the week or to research what types of support they would find valuable in bringing up their children.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	1
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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre meets its statutory duties extremely well in relation to safeguarding, both for its full time staff and for staff from other agencies. There is a clearly defined policy which is reinforced through notices around the building, for example on the appropriate use of photographic equipment and mobile phones. In working with children, the staff are consistently alert to any health and safety risks. The centre also encourages safety in the home, through the loan of equipment such as socket covers, stair gates and fire guards.

The staff work very closely with a range of agencies on safeguarding. This includes contributing and leading case conferences, core groups, 'Teams around the Child' and reviews of statements of special educational needs and personal education plans for looked after children. Regular training is provided to support this work. Staff also provide support for victims of domestic violence and are alert to possible indications of this.

The centre has reacted very positively to the increased diversity among its child and adult population. This is reflected in the visual timetable in several languages and the 'Every Child a Talker' resources which enable children to name objects in English and in their home language. Children with disabilities are supported well, with activities and equipment being adapted suitably to their needs. Their parents are also given additional advice, for example to help them with breastfeeding. In these and other ways, the centre ensures equality of access to its services.

The centre has a well-defined management structure, with clear lines of

responsibility and accountability. The performance of all staff is formally reviewed twice a year when clear targets for development are agreed. The management advisory board has a representative range of committed members who have a detailed knowledge of the local community. In contributing to governance, they provide helpful advice and support to the head of the centre. However, they have not yet received the information and training to be able to conduct a rigorous analysis of data and establish what impact the centre is having on its users.

In the last year, the head of the centre has led a very rigorous review of provision. As a result, staff and resources have been re-deployed and commissioned services now have to produce detailed quarterly reports on how effectively they are meeting the requirements of their contracts. These developments have resulted in a decrease in costs and in increased efficiency and ensured that the centre provides very good value for money.

The senior managers have high ambitions for the further development of services. These ambitions have been communicated successfully to the rest of the staff, users and partners. All staff are professional, committed and purposeful in their approach to their work and held in high regard by users.

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	1
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	1
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	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	2

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

None

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Newcastle-under-Lyme Children's Centre on 18–19 May 2011. We judged the centre as good overall, with some outstanding features.

Through the centre, you and your children are able to take part in a wide range of courses and to get the support, advice and services that make a difference to your lives. The head and staff at the centre work very hard to find out what services you and your children want and need. They either provide these themselves or guide you to others who can help. Where it is difficult for you to get to the centre, they have come to your homes or put on courses in buildings closer to you.

The staff are very keen to make the services as good as they can be and they take very careful note of your comments and suggestions. We saw the letters that many of you had sent in to say what a help the centre had been to you. Another way of finding out how well the centre is doing is to look at figures. In your area, for example, the figures show that far more mothers are breastfeeding their babies than in the past, no doubt because of the very good work of FAB. We have asked the staff to make more use of figures like this to see where services are having an effect and where there is still more work to be done.

We heard about the 'Big bears and little bears' sessions and how fathers enjoy going to these activities with their children but, apart from this, there is not much on offer for fathers. So we have asked the centre to look at this. If you have ideas on how to get more fathers involved, please let the staff know.

The centre is helping you to keep your children healthy in several ways. Because of programmes like 'Fit Kids', the number of overweight children in your area has gone down. When they are at the centre, your children have well prepared, healthy food and you are given good advice on how to help your children develop good, strong teeth.

Several of you have told us how 'fantastic' you think the staff are, how much you trust them, how they always treat you with respect and how well they care for your children. The very good systems for checking on anyone going in or out of the building, and on where they are at any time, are very important in helping to keep

your children safe and giving you peace of mind. You and your children enjoy playing and learning together and gain a great deal from activities like 'Stay and Play', 'Babies Love Music' and the 'Sensory Room'. Watching how staff work with your children has given many of you good ideas on how you can help your children at home. As one of you said: 'I now know that all playing is learning'. The toy and book library and the courses on child development and behaviour management have also been very helpful for many of you.

Other ways in which the centre has helped you is by giving advice on money matters, by showing you how to plan cheap but healthy meals and putting on courses which give you the skills to be able to carry on with your education or to find work. Several of you also told us how valuable the centre has been in supporting you through difficult times in your lives.

We met several parents who are so grateful for the help that the centre has given them that they are now working as volunteers in order 'to give something back'. Not all of you will be able to find the time to do this but there is one way in which you can help and that is by joining the parents' forum. This is a very important way for the head and staff to find out more about what you think of their work and get ideas on how to make the centre even better. At the moment, only a few people go to the forum and, so far, no fathers have been to it.

We very much enjoyed our visit to the centre and hope that it will continue to give you good services and will improve further.

We would like to thank all of you who gave up your time to talk to us and to wish you and your families all the best for the future.

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