

Inspection report for Dulverton Children's Centre

Local authority	Somerset
Inspection number	367790
Inspection dates	22–23 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Hazel Callaghan

Centre governance	Local authority
Centre leader	Samantha Fahey
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	All Saints First School Dulverton Middle School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Dulverton Children's Centre Nursery

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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 shortly before the inspection of the centre under Section 3 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 the centre manager and other staff of both the children's centre and the attached child care provision, with representatives of the local authority and with the executive headteacher of the schools that share the same site. They also met with representatives of a number of partner agencies, including health professionals, Home-Start and CLOWNS (Creating Learning Opportunities in Western Somerset) as well as with parents and carers. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including the centre's business plan, case studies and group activity evaluations, safeguarding policies and records.

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Information about the centre

The centre is situated on the same site as All Saints First School and the Dulverton Middle School. The children's centre nursery is within the children's centre building and is attached to the school-managed nursery who share the same secure outside area. The centre nursery caters for children from nought to three years of age. The school nursery takes children from three to five years. The children centre is a phase one centre that opened in November 2005. It provides the core offer of integrated childcare and early learning (through the full day nursery care), stay and play sessions, health services such as health visitor developmental checks, the Bumps and Babes group, family support and outreach services and training. It has links with Jobcentre Plus by referral but they do not attend on site.

The centre reach area is extremely large and spreads over a large part of West Somerset that has a very dispersed population. The vast majority of users and the local community are of White British heritage and the number of families in the reach area with English as an additional language is very small. The centre is not in the most deprived of areas. There are pockets of deprivation mostly linked to poverty and the rural position which creates significant isolation for families and their children. The number of families in receipt of workless benefits is in the region of 12% and the number of teenage pregnancies, rates of obesity and other national indicators are fairly low. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with a range of knowledge and experiences similar to those expected for their age.

The local authority provides the overall governance of the centre. An advisory board has been established but has not yet met formally. A new manager has been in post for two months. She also manages three other local children centres. Her deputy, who acts as centre leader, took up post in April of this year.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Dulverton Children’s Centre satisfactorily meets the needs of the families and their children in its reach area. The range of activities and services provided at the centre are satisfactory. The accommodation is not large and this limits some of the courses that could be otherwise provided and so parents are signposted to the services provided by other local children’s centres. Parents and carers say they are happy with the range of services provided, however, and state that the centre is an important place in their lives where they can meet other parents and gain support and advice from the very professional and helpful team of staff. The centre’s particular strengths lie in its provision for children in the nought to three nursery and in its outreach work with isolated families.

Children in the centre nursery enjoy attending, settle quickly each morning to their favourite activities and toys and are well looked after and secure. They move confidently from one activity to the next and feel safe and happy in their environment. They get on well with the children in the school nursery that uses the same secure, well-resourced outside area. This eases transition to the school nursery when the children are three because many of the staff and activities are already known to them. The good achievement in the nursery supports their ongoing development well but there is a lack of shared planning between the two nurseries, which creates a hiatus in their learning and restricts their continuous development.

The centre's reach area is large but lightly populated. Outreach workers from Home Start and CLOWNS or the centre's family support worker bring company, support and advice to these scattered families. They provide really strong levels of support for those parents and carers who are isolated in their homes, often long distances away from any other family contact or access to services. The focus is on supporting the families' most pressing needs, to alleviate stress and sometimes depression caused from being alone with several children under five, and to build confidence and self-esteem so the family is able to start to cope on its own. This support is greatly appreciated and recognised literally as a life-saver. One parent is reported to have said that the support she received from CLOWNS came to her rescue when she didn't know where to turn.

Safeguarding is given high priority and keeping children, their parents and carers and staff safe is central to the work of the children's centre. All families, whatever their circumstances and backgrounds, are made to feel welcome. Parents talk highly of Stay and Play sessions and the various opportunities for new mums to meet. At the Bumps and Babes sessions, for example, which are well supported by health professionals, checking on the baby's weight and giving advice on weaning, sleep patterns and individual worries or concerns is highly regarded. Some of the centre's activities are longstanding and very little review has taken place to ensure that the activities match the families' and children's needs. Parents and carers are involved in evaluating the success of the activities but there is very little data about the users or methods of monitoring and evaluating the success of the centre's services in meeting the needs of registered users or of other families in the reach area. The needs of fathers and their ability to access activities that enable them to have quality time with their children have not been thoroughly explored, for example.

The centre manager has only been in post at Dulverton for two months but in that time, she has already made a significant difference. The staff have come together under her leadership to develop a clear vision for the centre and its priorities for the provision for families and children in their reach area. A new well-defined management structure has resulted in staff being much clearer about their roles and responsibilities and they feel supported and energised by the new regular opportunities to discuss their work and how to improve. The senior leadership team meet regularly to review the centre's work and a comprehensive business plan sets out the areas for improvement. It is rather long and actions are not yet prioritised, but it shows that the staff, especially the manager, have a clear view of what needs

to be improved. The plan does not yet set out how the actions for improvement are to be monitored and evaluated, and the centre has not benefited sufficiently from either the support or challenge of the local authority or from the advisory board which has yet to meet formally. Consequently, there are no challenging targets to support its greater improvement. It is still too early to see the impact of the new management in terms of improving the range of services available and developing robust methods of evaluating its work but a positive start has been made, showing a satisfactory capacity for further improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- With the full involvement of the advisory body, develop systems for evaluating and monitoring the impact of the children centre in improving the outcomes for families and their children.
- With the local authority, set challenging targets for the centre's improvement based on accurate assessment of families' needs, including those of fathers and those in the wider community.
- Develop greater links with the adjacent school Early Years Foundation Stage provision that ensures the positive continuation of children's learning and development.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The nursery provides a variety of opportunities for children to develop a positive understanding of how to stay safe and to be healthy. Although very young, children in the nursery show a delight in sharing fruit at snack time and in making choices in what they enjoy to drink. They enjoy opportunities for energetic play in the safe outside area and understand the need to be careful in their play so as not to hurt others. The children are kept very safe and staff take great care when preparing their lunches so that any allergies or specific nutritional needs are adhered to. Children recognise the need to wash their hands before eating and respond well to the adults' expectations and support. Through the Bumps and Babes sessions, new mums and mums-to-be are given advice about breastfeeding, weaning and the importance of a balanced diet as well as information on home safety. Those who want to know more are currently signposted to other courses run at other local children centres. The centre staff and outreach workers are strong role models in the ways of keeping children safe and in this way support families to develop safe routines. There are no specific links with organisations such as ROSPA but the health visitor and family support worker responded to the parents' request for a first aid course which parents and carers and staff all attended. There are no children with a protection plan currently in the reach area but the good use of the Common Assessment Framework ensures that possible vulnerable children are identified and families are helped to ensure their safety.

The most important aspect of the centre's work and that of the outreach workers is

one of building parents' confidence and self-esteem, combating stress and promoting mental well-being. Many parents spoken to, and evidence from case studies, show how important this kind of work is for isolated families. One mum commented that it gave her focus for each day and helped her cope, and another stated that the centre had made a huge difference to her as it enabled her to meet new people and get advice when it was most needed. The mountain biking sessions for mums and dads was a huge success, developing health and self-esteem through fun, so much so that some parents continued with the activity after the course was over.

Children achieve well in the nursery because of the good strategies for supporting children's academic and personal development. The centre provides a good start to closing the gap in achievements at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Parents are encouraged to attend the various activities, such as the Stay and Play and Messy Mondays that help them to understand how their children learn through play. Parents say that the activities are really fun and they learn a lot from the family support worker or play leader and from the experiences of other parents. Many praised the Baby Signing course and the Play to Talk session that made a big difference in their child's speech and communication skills.

Children behave well and contribute to the nursery by completing simple jobs such as giving out plates ready for snack time and tidying away. Opportunities for parents to contribute to the work of the centre have been limited in the past. Parents and carers are regularly asked for their opinions of the courses and informally asked for suggestions but until recently there was no formal parents' forum. The new manager has now established the 'Parents Circle', which has had its first meeting. The parents who attended were very positive and this looks to become a regular feature. The Triple P parenting programme has been very successful in developing parenting skills but there have been few opportunities for parents to extend their learning or develop skills which would support them back into employment. Sound advice is available through the Shaw Trust and Home Start on finance and debt advice.

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 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	3

How good is the provision?

3

The assessment of families' needs, especially of those who are isolated and those who are potentially vulnerable, is good. Effective systems are in place to follow up the assessments, made initially by the health visitors, by the family support worker and the outreach workers from Home Start or CLOWNS. Both charities provide really strong levels of support for those parents and carers who are isolated in their homes. Other services are engaged as required, such as debt counselling, and they work with the CLOWNS worker, for example in the family's home whilst the children are engaged in play using the toys and resources made available through the outreach van. Similarly the family support worker and the volunteers from Home Start bring positive emotional and physical support and advice, enabling families to access the various services available at the local children's centres. Effective use of the Common Assessment Framework identifies the variety of needs, and families are monitored and tracked through the local information sharing organisation DCCIS (Dulverton Children Centre Information Sharing) which is supplemented by the Somerset multi agency meetings of ARCHEY and MASEY ((Action & Review of Children in the Early Years and Multi Agency Intervention and Support in the Early Years.). Through this effective monitoring by the full range of local services and support agencies, the needs of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are identified before they start compulsory education.

The system for assessing the needs of families new to the area or those who did not need initial support is less effective. The range of data about the local area is not sufficiently detailed to ensure that the needs of all families or of individuals, such as fathers, are effectively identified. There are very few opportunities for parents and carers to access further education and training or develop the knowledge and skills required to support them into employment. The centre accommodation is too small to run further education courses so those adults who are interested are signposted to those courses available in other local venues but which families often find difficult to reach. Similarly, the centre does not provide courses or advice other than by leaflets on how to stop smoking, about sexually transmitted diseases or alcohol and drugs misuse. Such courses are held in neighbouring children's centres to which the families are signposted. On an individual basis, staff, both those in the centre and outreach workers, provide good levels of care, guidance and support but this is not yet extended into the services available.

The centre nursery provides good opportunities for the youngest children to achieve and enjoy and their needs are effectively assessed and monitored. Details of their needs and progress are passed on to the adjacent school nursery but at present there is no form of shared planning or discussion about the best way to develop children's learning in the shared outside area and this creates a hiatus in children's continuous development.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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	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	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Governance of the centre is satisfactory but the recently developed advisory board is not active as yet to support and challenge the centre in its work. Staff at all levels now benefit from good professional development sessions because the new manager has developed effective systems by which staff at all levels are well trained and suitably supported. They now have the opportunity to meet with staff at the other local children's centres to discuss their roles, ideas and share good practice. The manager is very aware of the need to find value for money, and activities are satisfactorily planned with these issues in mind. She has successfully tapped into other funding such as the Living Well Programme for some of the activities such as Mountain Biking sessions to support the centre budget. She is currently considering how the sustainability of the nursery can be best accomplished, given the high ratio of staff needed for children of this young age. A start has been made to develop stronger links with the school nursery and more effective transition arrangements have been agreed to ensure children move up into the school nursery happily and the school nursery staff have a better understanding of their personal and learning needs.

Safeguarding is good. There is strong focus on keeping children safe and in promoting the emotional well-being of parents and carers and thus the well-being of the children. The manager has tightened up the review of policies so that all staff are now very clear about procedures for safeguarding children and supporting vulnerable families. Staff recruitment is carried out appropriately and good focus is given to ensuring all adults who work with the children are suitable and appropriately qualified. The centre site is very secure and its premises and resources checked regularly. All staff have been well trained in recognising safety issues and potentially vulnerable families and agencies are well informed when support is needed.

Families of all backgrounds are made to feel welcome in the centre. The nursery successfully supports children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and, children from families in which English is an additional language and those from traveller families are also well supported. There are good partnerships with the

various agencies and outreach workers who work together with the centre staff to share information about the families and children so that they are well supported. Outreach provision is well organised and effective. Commissioning arrangements made directly with the local authority are effective but not all partners have service level agreements with the centre. Appropriate systems are already in place at the other local children centres with which the manager works and these are now in the pipeline for Dulverton to ensure there are clear and shared ways of working.

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

The report from the recently inspected children's centre nursery.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Dulverton Children's Centre on 22 and 23 June 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall. During the inspection, we talked with parents, staff, partners and members of the local authority linked to the centre. We would like to thank those of you who spared the time to speak to us to share your thoughts about the centre.

All of you we spoke to told us how much you enjoyed using the centre. It has made a big difference in many children's and families lives. In particular, we know those families who live a long way away from villages and towns deep into the countryside often feel very isolated and alone. We have heard about the good work of the CLOWNS outreach van and the play bus that comes to your homes to provide fun and play opportunities for your children and a listening ear and advice for you mums and dads who are caring for them. We have heard of the very practical help that is given sometimes to help 'lift the load', such as cleaning and cooking meals when it is all getting a bit too much of a strain. We have heard also how the Home Start visitors have also provided support which has enabled isolated families to gain confidence in accessing the services and support they need. This really strong support is a strength of the centre and all the partners who work with the centre.

We have also seen the good provision in the centre nursery and agree with you and the recent OFSTED report that children are happy there. They achieve well in the sensitive care and support provided by all the staff. They are kept safe and secure and they feel very safe building comfortable relationships with the staff. They very much enjoy playing in the well-resourced outside area where they meet and play with children in the school nursery. We have asked that the staff in the two nurseries develop links in their planning and provision so that the children's learning is supported and promoted continuously through the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Many parents told us about the activities and services that are provided by the centre that they enjoy with their children, such as the Bumps and Babes, Baby Massage and the Play to Talk sessions that supported them and helped their children to develop. The centre's accommodation is not large and this frequently prevents the staff from holding courses and activities they want in the centre. We know you are provided with regular information of similar courses that are held in other local children's centres but these are sometimes difficult for you to attend.

The new manager has only been in place a short time but she has already started to make changes which provide a good basis for improvement and the staff feel very positive about the new management structures she has put in place that are enabling them to talk to colleagues about what they are doing and sharing good ideas. As yet, the systems for evaluating the activities and services provided are not fully developed and we have asked the centre to work with the newly established advisory board to ensure the systems for monitoring and evaluating the work of the

centre focus closely on how it is helping you and your families. This process can be helped even further by the setting of clear targets that help the staff see how far they have improved in meeting your needs.

Thank you again for helping us with our inspection and I hope you will find time to support the new Parents' Circle so that the views of parents and carers are also an important part of this process of evaluation.

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