

Inspection report for Acorns Children's Centre

Local authority	Somerset
Inspection number	367732
Inspection dates	13–14 July 2011
Reporting inspector	Robert Pyner HMI

Centre governance	Local Authority
Centre leader	Cluster manager: Robert Odams
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	110 Roman Road
	Taunton
	TA1 2BL
Telephone number	01823 322508
Fax number	01823 282661
Email address	rodams@somerset.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Circles Nursery EY371197

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.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the information in any way.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

No. 100024

© Crown copyright 2010



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 visited a range of provision at the centre. They held meetings with the cluster manager for children's centres in the area, senior leaders and staff from the centre, the chair and members of the advisory board and partners, including health, education, police and children's social care. Inspectors held meetings with users of a range of services and with senior managers from the local authority responsible for services in the area. Inspectors observed the centre's work and looked at a wide range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Acorns was designated in September 2005 as a Phase 1 children's centre, serving an area judged to be within the 30% most disadvantaged in the country. The reach area covers three estates within Taunton: Halcon, Lambrook and Lane. The socio-economic background of the reach area shows some high levels of deprivation. For example, Halcon ward falls within the 5% most deprived areas nationally and is one of the top five most deprived electoral wards in Somerset. Over half of the children under four in the area live in families dependent on social benefits and some six in every ten are in low income families. About half of the children in the reach area have been designated as living in poverty and data shows that the area has low take-up of post-16 education, skills and training. Most families in the reach area are of White British heritage.

Recently the management for children's centres has undergone considerable change. Since April 2011, the centre has been led by a cluster manager who is responsible for four children's centres as well as two local authority nurseries. The centre has a lead centre officer who is also a manager in another children's centre. The leadership team is completed by the child care manager for the linked nursery, Circles, which is situated in a nearby primary school and the early years teachers based at the centre. Until the recent changes in the leadership structure, the childcare manager was the

acting manager of the children's centre. The cluster manager and the lead centre officer took up their duties in April this year.

The centre re-opened in refurbished accommodation in 2010, following closure for nine months as the building work was completed. During this period services continued based in other venues within the community. The accommodation is of a high standard, with purpose-built health facilities, and is a base for community police officers available 24 hours a day. The well-established linked nursery is situated in the local primary school close to the children's centre. Joint working between the centre and the nursery is firmly established.

The centre has an advisory board representing the range of partners working in the centre, users, parents and carers. Formal monitoring and evaluation is through the local authority area management structure. This has been recently reformed, with the new structure operational since April 2011.

Data from the centre indicate that children's levels of achievement on entry to Early Years Foundation Stage provision in the nursery are well below expectations for children of that age, particularly in personal and social skills and communication and language.

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

Acorns Children's Centre provides satisfactory and developing support to the children and families in the community. For those who access the services offered by the centre, outcomes are at least satisfactory and in some cases good. Particular strengths include the partnerships with agencies to ensure children are safe and protected, especially with the community police team. There are good outcomes for educational, personal development and purposeful learning for the children and adults, using the provision and the extent to which equality is promoted. Formal safeguarding arrangements for the recruitment and vetting of staff meet government

requirements. However, there are a few cases where the Common Assessment Framework to support the needs of families is not used completely consistently across the children's centre. Centre leaders have developed monitoring systems to develop consistency.

The leadership's own evaluation of the effectiveness of the centre is accurate, based on local knowledge. This reflects the continuity within the team provided by the child care manager throughout a period of recent and significant change in the leadership structure within the centre, and more broadly within the local authority. The centre has used some innovative procedures to gather information on the needs of the area including 'walking the reach', where targeted areas were visited and surveys conducted with residents, together with open days and links with community events. However, the use of information and data to develop provision and target groups who are under-represented in the take-up of services is at an early stage. The local authority is developing support for centres with the provision of data on the make-up of the reach area together with outcomes for the provision offered, but this has not yet had a full impact on Acorns' services. Centre leaders are aware that the proportion of eligible children and their families using the provision is about one-third and understands the need to increase this figure.

Partnerships with a range of agencies are effective and lead to improved outcomes for families. Examples include effective work by Barnardo's on parenting skills for those identified by health visitors or family support workers and links with Plymouth University supporting research in child development. The close proximity of the Link community centre enables complementary activities supporting the work at Acorns. The presence of a community police base within the centre is effective in providing close links with staff as well as ensuring police involvement in a range of activities provided. Data from the police indicates that this close involvement in the work of the centre has been a factor in a decrease in antisocial behaviour within the community. Issues of equality are dealt with well, firmly based on the needs of the local community.

The partnership with the health service leads to a range of services which are appreciated by users being offered within the centre. Services include antenatal care, weaning support, smoking cessation clinics and regular support for young people regarding sexual health. Health visitors report effective relationships with centre staff and joint visits with family support workers ensure that a range of needs are met. However, capacity issues within the health service have meant that some services, for example post-natal provision, have not been continued since the re-opening of the centre following refurbishment. Moreover, the planned use of the centre's purpose-built facilities for health screening by medical staff has not been developed.

The engagement of users in the work of the centre is effective. The centre has an important and developing role at the heart of the community, although there is still more work to do to ensure that services are promoted to a greater proportion of families within the reach area. The advisory board represents a range of the agencies working with the centre as well as users. Members of the board are committed to

developing the provision of the centre but attendance at meetings has been variable and the group has yet to develop a full strategic role in supporting future developments. The local authority provides satisfactory support and challenge for the centre through the annual conversation but this has yet to focus fully on the measureable impact on the outcomes for users and the drive for the provision of services for a greater proportion of families within the reach area.

Given the generally positive outcomes, the centre's overall effectiveness is satisfactory and improving. This, together with staff commitment and drive leading to effective teamwork, good partnerships and accurate self-evaluation focused on improvement, indicates that the centre has satisfactory and developing capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Work with the primary care trust partner to develop the use of the health facilities at the centre.
- Improve systems within the centre to use data more effectively to identify need, develop appropriate provision for the reach area and measure the impact on outcomes for families.
- Work with the local authority to develop a more structured and robust annual conversation format with a focus on improving the impact of provision on a greater proportion of families within the reach area.
- Develop the role of the advisory board to ensure that it is more involved in decisions about the strategic planning for the centre.
- Ensure that the common assessment framework continues to be used consistently across the children's centre.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The centre plays a clear role in the provision of health-related courses and activities, with a range of good-quality services offered in partnership with the health authority. These include a successful cessation of smoking clinic which supports about 12 people in each session, speech and language support and a weekly sexual health clinic which has supported over 50 young people in the last year. The Newbies group supports young mothers, and guidance such as this and the Straight Talking project for teenage girls has helped to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies in the reach area last year to below the local authority average. Parents appreciate the Little Wonders sessions, supporting, among other aspects of parenting, healthy eating and toilet training. However, the plan to base medical staff in the centre has not yet taken place and the high quality facilities in the centre are currently under-utilised.

Procedures for ensuring children are safe and their welfare concerns addressed are effective. Links with the community police based in the centre and the outreach work by Barnardo's are particularly effective. Staff from across the centre, including Circles

Nursery, are trained to use the Common Assessment Framework to ensure issues are recorded and shared appropriately. Assessment and recording procedures have been developed to ensure systems are more consistent across the centre and are understood by partners. However, in a few cases, the use of these systems is not totally consistent across the centre. Senior leaders are aware of this and have developed monitoring procedures to improve the effectiveness of the use of the Common Assessment Framework system. There are clear procedures for all staff on safeguarding requirements and there are plans to develop these to reinforce systems as part of the cluster arrangement for children's centres.

From low starting points, highly effective work in the nursery means that the children make at least good progress in preparation for transition to school, particularly in personal and social skills and communication and language. Data from the local authority show that the centre has been effective in narrowing the gap in achievement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage between the lowest achieving 20% and the average for children in the local authority. Figures for 2010 show this indicator to be broadly in line with the average for the local authority and the national figure. The gap with the national average for achievement is closing. Parents appreciate the Stay and Play facility and say it helps them develop their understanding of child development. One parent said: 'I really like to come here and talk to other mums. The staff are friendly and I can share any problems with them or just chat.' The centre has strong links with Plymouth University and parents have been involved in projects supporting an understanding of child development. Its work has been shared more widely through a conference for practitioners called Looking Beyond the Expected, which took place in March 2010.

Users have clear opportunities to contribute to decision-making whilst undertaking activities through informal evaluations; for example, members of the Dads' Group have been able to make suggestions about the activities undertaken as part of the arts-based Little Big Bang Project. The centre offers a satisfactory range of support to parents and children in order to develop life skills, economic stability and independence. In this work, there are effective links with the local community centre where, for example, a significant number of referrals are made to the centre for regular interviews with Citizens Advice Bureau personnel.

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 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	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	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 centre has a satisfactory approach to the assessment and review of users' health, welfare and support needs, with data showing that around one third of children aged up to four years within the reach area have benefited from planned provision in some form. The centre is less secure in an understanding of the needs of the wider community who do not access services. Clear procedures for sharing information and a good understanding of families who use the centre result in planned and flexible support being available. This is beginning to be supported by the quality of data on outcomes and provision from the local authority. Users are appreciative of this flexible range of support which is responsive to needs. One parent interviewed from the self-supporting Newbies group for young mothers, for example, noted that the tailored support provided by the centre enabled her to develop her self-confidence, which led to employment opportunities.

Discussions with users and evaluations from the centre show that they thoroughly enjoy the learning provision and have a satisfactory range of opportunities to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills. Activities are firmly based on needs and interests and these include parenting and health-related courses. The nursery has developed a system for recording the learning journeys undertaken by children, using an investigative approach (Possible Lines Of Direction), which has helped to improve achievement and prepare the children for induction into school. Taken overall, the centre is effective in promoting purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for those families who access provision.

A clear range of care, guidance and support is offered by the centre. The centre is welcoming and bright, with a range of information displayed and shared with users by centre staff. The staff are knowledgeable about the range of services available and skilled in signposting users to appropriate agencies, supporting them further at meetings and interviews if appropriate. Where health-related courses and provision are offered in the centre, these are of a high quality. Capacity and information technology issues for health partners have meant that the resources at the centre are not fully utilised.

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	2
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

Formal governance at the centre is satisfactory. The local authority has a system of support and challenge, based on the centre's annual conversation, but this does not currently use data on outcomes to set targets for improvement in, for example an increase in the proportion of families who take up provision within the reach area. The advisory board was established prior to implementation of the cluster management structure for children's centres in the area. The group represents a wide range of partners, including parents and users, but attendance has been variable. The chair of the board is committed to developing its role in supporting improvement in the lives of families within the reach area. However, currently the impact of the advisory board on the strategic planning for the development of the centre is at an early stage.

The inclusion of all children and families is at the heart of the work of the centre. Positive images, resources and tailored programmes highlight the centre's determination to support groups who may be subject to discrimination. For example, the Newbies group of young mothers has been effective in raising the self-esteem of members as well as providing activities to improve an understanding of healthy eating, parenting and work-related skills. The Dads' Group is a strong feature of the centre, and the opportunities to be involved in activities is appreciated by the fathers. One said: 'I like to come and take part in the activities with my child. It's good to talk to the other dads and take part in the trips like the forest walk – even though we got lost.' The centre's safeguarding, vetting and recruiting procedures are clear, leading to the effective systems to ensure that children are safe and protected, involving multi-agency cooperation if appropriate. These are being developed to ensure clear procedures for the centre within the cluster arrangement.

Despite the recent large scale restructuring of the management of the centre as part of a cluster system, the new leadership team has quickly shown that it is fully committed to the development of services. The centre benefits from the support of a highly motivated staff. Central to this has been the development of the 'one team' approach right across the children's centre. Despite some continuing capacity issues within the staff team, the leadership team have shown clear expectations and considerable drive, developing the use of the centre to meet the wide needs of the users accessing its services. Overall, resources of all kinds are used and managed satisfactorily. Self-evaluation is accurate but currently largely based on information from the users of services provided by the centre, for example through 'speech bubbles' whereby users are encouraged to record their views. Leaders are aware of the need to develop provision to engage a greater proportion of families within the reach area.

Overall, the sound outcomes and engagement of users, backed by improving leadership and effective partnership working mean that the centre provides

satisfactory value for money.

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	2
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	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	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	3

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

Circles Nursery was inspected in January 2009 and its overall provision was judged outstanding. The capacity for the nursery to maintain continuous improvement was also judged as outstanding. Management systems were found to be highly effective in the evaluation of provision and identifying ongoing improvements. Staff were committed to improvement and updating their knowledge through training and research. There were exceptional outcomes in children's learning and development and relationships with partners were excellent.

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 Acorns Children's Centre on 13–14 July 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall. A number of aspects were judged as being good.

Your children's centre provides a satisfactory and improving range of services that are helping families and children in the community. For those families who access the services offered by the centre, it was clear that they were well supported to improve their parenting skills and enjoyed the opportunities available to them. During the inspection, some of you told us how you had benefited from the support provided by the centre and how you appreciated the work of the staff. Examples of this are the Stay and Play sessions and the Newbies group for young mums. Others told us that they appreciated the health-related activities such as support to stop smoking. However, you also said that there could be more health support at the centre, using the purpose-built facilities available, and we agree.

Good aspects of the centre include the programmes to ensure children are safe, the achievement of young children through, for example, the work of Circles Nursery, and partnerships with other agencies such as the Link community Centre. The inclusion of all children and families is at the heart of the work of the centre. When families find themselves in difficulty, or even in crisis, the centre is able to help them well by providing information and support, including for general and welfare benefits. The new leadership team have worked hard to ensure that services have not been disrupted by the recent changes in the overall management structure for children's centres in Taunton. Leaders are good at using the information from families who come to the centre to improve services provided but do not know as much about the needs of the larger number of families who do not use the centre.

The centre itself is a very safe environment for users and their children. Staff are welcoming and committed to improvement and the good quality of relationships was mentioned by parents and users who spoke to inspectors.

Although outcomes for parents and carers who use the centre are at least satisfactory and better for certain areas, some aspects could be developed further. For example, there could be better use of the medical facilities at the centre. The advisory board is developing but does not yet play a sufficiently strategic role in developing the centre's provision. The centre's leadership team knows that it could use information better to ensure services are provided for more families in the community. Finally, the centre should continue to ensure its recording systems are used in the same way across the centre.

As part of the report, inspectors have made the following specific recommendations to help improve provision at the centre.

- Work with the health authority to develop the use of the health facilities at the centre.
- Improve information systems within the centre to check how well activities support families and what other services are needed within the community.

- Work with the local authority to increase the proportion of families from the community using the centre.
- Develop the role of the advisory board to ensure that it is more involved in decisions about the development of the centre.
- Make sure that some recording systems to help families are used in the same way right across the centre.

You can help in improving the work of the centre by continuing to take part in the activities that take place there and offering your views on how they can be made better. You can also tell other families who may not know about the centre just how much support they can get from Acorns and encouraging them to take part in the activities offered.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to come and speak to us, 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.