

Inspection report for Charlestown Children's Centre

Local authority	Manchester
Inspection number	367773
Inspection dates	17 - 18 August 2011
Reporting inspector	Linda McLarty HMI

Centre governance	The local authority.
Centre leader	Mrs Nicola Peak
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	21 Colmore Drive Charlestown Manchester Lancashire M9 7GB
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY382065 Brighter Beginnings Day Nursery Ltd

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.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the acting head of centre, outreach worker, administrator, service users, senior leaders and managers from the local authority and partners. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Charlestown Children's Centre serves an area ranked within the 30% most deprived areas in the country. The child poverty index places the Charlestown estate in the most deprived 1% of wards in the country and also indicates that the next-highest deprivation is localised to the Damshead Estate, Crosslee and the Mill Estate housing estates which are in the 5% most deprived areas nationally. Those living in the Charlestown area are twice as likely to suffer from mental health issues and there are high levels of residents claiming incapacity benefits and low levels of employment compared to Manchester and national averages.

The phase two centre provides the full core offer through a range of integrated services that include health, family support and outreach, adult training and integrated childcare and early education provision. Although the centre was designated in 2008 the building was not fully operational until January 2009. The local authority is responsible for the governance of the centre and a full service review and reorganisation of the children's centres in the local authority area was under way at the time of the inspection. Since 2010 the centre has operated as part of an informal cluster with Higher Blackley and Plant Hill Children's Centres, with a joint advisory board. Charlestown is the main hub, with Belthorne Children's Centre functioning as a satellite, although registered independently. The wider-core-offer services are delivered in partnership with other agencies.

The population is predominantly White British with a small but growing proportion of residents from minority ethnic groups, particularly those from Black and/or African heritages.

There are 1010 children under five years old in the centre's footprint and 79% are registered in the centre. Most children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage in the locality with skills below the level expected for their age.

The on-site private day care provision, Brighter Beginnings Day Nursery Ltd, is registered for up to 70 children in the early years age group and 38 children in the out-of-school provision. They were last inspected in April 2009 and the report can be found on Ofsted's website www.ofsted.gov.uk

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

Charlestown Children's Centre experienced a very turbulent period in its initial operating period which resulted in significant management changes. Since the appointment of the acting head of centre, who has made notable improvements, it now makes a satisfactory contribution to improving outcomes for local residents. Service users unanimously praise the warm welcome, the emotionally safe environment created in the centre and the dedication of every member of staff to improving the life chances of residents.

Provision is generally satisfactory, although the leader acknowledges that this could have been much more responsive to local needs over the summer holiday period. During this time not enough resources were available from partners to provide sufficient activity to meet the needs of families in the reach area.

Leadership and management are satisfactory overall. One strength of the centre is the honest appraisal by the local authority and the leadership of the factors which have limited the centre's performance, such as weak governance at local authority level. The centre is not set any targets by the local authority, which limits the authority's ability to challenge or hold the centre to account. The current full service review has plans already in place to address the deficits in governance and accountability arrangements. The advisory board supports the centre satisfactorily despite the lack of training for its volunteer members, but it is still developing its role to challenge and hold the centre to account. There is only one

resident of the Charlestown reach area on the joint parents' forum and joint advisory board, which limits the contribution of Charlestown residents to influence decision making.

The staff team are forging effective relationships with partners, but the information exchange about the impact of the partners' work is of variable quality and restricts how well the leadership can plan services to meet the needs of residents. Attendance by partners at advisory board meetings is sporadic. Social care partners share summary information about the numbers of children leaving child protection plans, but without their names and addresses there is insufficient detail to help the leaders meet the safeguarding, safety and welfare needs of these families.

Procedures to check the suitability of staff to work with children and their families meet statutory requirements. Safeguarding is satisfactory rather than good because, as leaders acknowledge, the use of the Common Assessment Framework is not yet regular or systematic enough to assess need, coordinate support and monitor the impact.

Equality and diversity are promoted satisfactorily. Provision is targeted to prioritise the needs of the residents in the most deprived super output areas and is informed and reshaped swiftly when necessary by the available data about the profile of changing needs in the reach area.

Capacity for future improvements is affected by the major service review, which has already resulted in cuts to key posts such as the early years teacher. Despite shrinking resources and a very small team, the leadership is committed to maintaining and improving services and is proactively marshalling partnership support to do this. This, and the impressive improvements already made by the acting head of centre in her short time in post, demonstrates a satisfactory capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve the way the local authority and advisory board challenge and hold the centre to account by setting clearly defined targets by which progress can be measured by the centre and its partners.
- Improve the exchange of detailed information with social care partners to enable the centre to support the most vulnerable families and improve the use of the Common Assessment Framework processes to identify need, coordinate support and monitor progress.
- Work collaboratively with partners to improve systems for measuring and evaluating the impact of provision on outcomes.
- Increase the involvement of residents in the decision-making process and take their views more fully into account when planning services.

How good are outcomes for users?

The centre is at an early stage of gathering and evaluating measurable evidence of impact of its work on outcomes for the reach area. The strong start made to this process is limited by the partners' ability to provide timely and measurable evidence of the impact of their work. This means the centre cannot provide robust evidence of a better than satisfactory impact upon outcomes.

Powerful case study testimony shows that the centre is working effectively with many residents who experience severe challenges, including mental health issues. The centre is strengthening mental health resilience in the community through their productive links with the Manchester Psychological Service, Anxiety UK, and by encouraging the informal online support group set up by a local resident. 'I was desperate, with a baby in arms in a foreign country, with no family or close friends. If it wasn't for the support of Sure Start I don't know how I would have coped, I really believe that I couldn't have done it without their support!' stated a mother who is now an articulate and confident advocate of the centre to her neighbours.

Breast-feeding initiation levels fluctuate, with 46.2% in April 2011 showing a good increase from the 25.6% in September 2010. However, only 22.7% of Charlestown mothers currently sustain breast-feeding at six to eight weeks, which is well below Manchester and national averages. The leadership acknowledges they have had too little success with their breast-feeding support initiatives. There is insufficient data available at local and city-wide levels to demonstrate success with smoking-cessation initiatives. Obesity is a problem in the more affluent super output areas and provision is organised to address this, such as the Little Super Stars weekly session, Cook and Taste and other activities to promote healthy habits organised in partnership with ZEST, a North Manchester Healthy Living project.

The centre is risk assessed satisfactorily and maintained to a high standard of cleanliness, with safety given a high priority. All visitors including parents sign in, wear visitor badges and have to comply with safety policies such as that prohibiting the use of mobile phones. Safety in the home is enhanced by the provision of subsidised safety equipment to families. The behaviour of children, adults and visitors is respectful and contributes well to how safe centre users feel. The Common Assessment Framework is not used often enough to secure sufficient support for those made vulnerable because of their circumstances, and this was a point for improvement raised by the local authority in their last annual challenge conversation in April 2010. The centre is not fully able to support families with children who are coming off a Child Protection Plan, due to lack of information about the identity and location of these families.

The centre does not yet have sufficient evidence to show how well it is raising adult achievement, but course evaluations and discussions with users demonstrate that the sessions attended are enjoyed by adults and children. The newly established tracking system has not yet had time to demonstrate the difference that the centre is making to children's achievement, but transition arrangements with receiver schools have significantly improved. The gap between the lowest-performing 20% of children and their peers

increased by 2.6% between 2009 and 2010. Targets to raise achievement are too modest. They aim only at returning to the 2009 level, where 50% of children gained more than 78 points including six or more points in personal, social and emotional development and communication, language and literacy, as shown in children's Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores. In 2010 the percentage of children achieving that level had dropped to 47.6% which represents an overall improvement of 13% from 34.6% in 2008. Anecdotal evidence from local schools reveals that they can see a positive difference in the 'school readiness' of Charlestown Centre children in recent years.

Information about user satisfaction with the services is sought through post-activity evaluations, and attendance is monitored as a gauge of continuing usefulness. However, the leadership has already identified that there is insufficient consultation with centre users and too few Charlestown residents formally represent the area at the joint parent forum and the shared advisory board. Evidence-based parenting and behaviour-management courses and individual behaviour plans are used to improve challenging behaviour in families and for individual children. Positive links with the local community police keep the centre very well-informed about emerging community problems such as a recent spate of night-time burglaries in the more affluent parts of the reach area.

Three residents recently gained employment and the volunteer programme is successfully raising aspirations, confidence and skills to help adults on their path to future employment. Volunteers are enthusiastic ambassadors for the centre. 'I was existing, not living a full life volunteering in my community makes me feel part of something and makes me feel useful.' This quotation shows the impact the programme is having on raising self-esteem and confidence, and in contributing to community cohesion.

The centre has not offered any accredited courses in literacy and numeracy, although one resident recently acquired an accredited qualification in volunteering practice and more adults have booked for the autumn course. Jobcentre Plus does not have a regular presence on site. Users are signposted to Jobcentre Plus and other employment support schemes, such as Blue Orchid, and the latest jobs are displayed on site, but systems to monitor the impact of this are still developing.

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, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
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
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How good is the provision?

3

Assessment is only satisfactory, partly because the current registration arrangements do not always give the centre the information it needs to identify families' circumstances at the point of contact. Registration is high at 79% but levels of active engagement are uncertain. The Common Assessment Framework is not used sufficiently often to assess need, galvanise support or monitor progress. The leadership and local authority are aware of these issues and have plans in place to improve assessment arrangements. However, the small staff team are skilled and very caring communicators who know the needs of their users well. Discussion with parents and case studies provide extremely compelling evidence that the centre is making a difference to the ability of users to cope with some highly challenging situations. The centre is aware of those groups not yet engaging enough with services, for example fathers, where take-up to the Dads' session is low.

Learning and development for adults and children are promoted satisfactorily and achievement is celebrated. Evaluations of the 'Ready for school' course, aimed at the most vulnerable families, show significant gains in the children's personal, social and emotional development and in their communication, language and literacy skills. Parents' comments show the impact this course had. 'I'm going to change the way I think. It's not about making a mess, it's part of learning.' 'I turn the television off....I make time to read to him and let him pick his own book.'

Adults' progress towards employment is not systematically recorded. The acting head of centre is liaising effectively with partners such as the Regeneration team to work with Tesco in order to target their training packages for posts in their proposed new superstore towards residents in the most deprived super output areas.

Although there were too few activities going on in the reach area during the period of the inspection, records and case study evidence show that, overall, the range of activities provided is meeting the needs of the area satisfactorily. Provision is targeted at those residents in the most deprived areas or those who need most help because of their life experiences. Provision is delivered in partnership with many community groups and city-wide organisations. The 'Service Assessment Planning Toolkit' was recently introduced to assess the usefulness of any proposed activity or service in terms of how well it meets identified needs, promotes the Every Child Matters outcomes and how success will be measured. However, it is too early yet to see the effectiveness of this. Attendance levels at courses and activities are analysed as a measure of their continuing relevance, and provision is reshaped accordingly.

Strong relationships enable families to confidently approach the centre for care, guidance and support, particularly during times of crisis. Provision is then matched to their need. The centre has suitable arrangements to host supervised contact visits for separated families.

The outreach worker is rightly seen as an indefatigable force for good in the area by residents and by partners, but she and the leader acknowledge that to meet the full range of needs they need more outreach staff. Capacity issues limit how well signposting is followed up; although the leader has set some systems in place to monitor the impact of signposting, it is too early to gauge the usefulness of this. Moving written testimonials show high levels of appreciation for the difference made by the ongoing practical and emotional support offered by the whole staff team.

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	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Leadership of the centre is focused on sustaining and improving the quality of service offered despite the climate of change and uncertainty. Day-to-day management is good, with satisfactory performance management of staff, so morale remains high. However, capacity to improve is vested too heavily in the temporary acting head of centre who, with the very small field team, is solely responsible for the work of the centre. The shared advisory board supports the centre leadership well but does not yet fully challenge or hold the centre to account for its work.

Partnership attendance at the advisory board meetings is too variable and the untrained volunteers carry the majority of the advisory board responsibilities. Not all partners are fully engaged and information sharing is not fully supporting the leadership to evaluate how well outcomes are promoted and to use this information to target services where they are most needed.

Historical weaknesses in governance are admitted by the local authority, which is consulting widely upon plans to improve support, target setting, challenge and accountability arrangements. The leader is a strong catalyst for improvement and, although very ambitious for the residents, has set some targets which are not aspirational enough, although they go some way towards compensating for the lack of any local authority targets.

The centre works within budget and financial probity is assured by sound monitoring arrangements. Diminished staff resources limit the extent to which provision can promote outcomes which are better than satisfactory, especially in the light of inconsistent partnership working. The accommodation is well used, but service level agreements with the

private day-care provider limit how much provision can be offered on site during the holiday periods. The centre provides satisfactory value for money.

Equality of opportunity is promoted adequately, although the achievement gap widened by 2.6% in 2010 from 27.7% in 2009. To address this, there are local authority plans in place to replace the early years teacher posts with Early Years Professionals. The on-site linked day-care provider has engaged the early years teacher as a consultant from October 2011 to retain her positive influence on progress and outcomes. The manager has a sound knowledge of the profile of residents in the reach area and provision is carefully targeted where needs are greatest. Twelve childcare places are reserved for children in need at the linked day-care sites. Families with disabilities are supported satisfactorily, with good encouragement given to users who wish to set up informal support networks in the locality. Attendance and take-up of services by those groups at risk of exclusion, discrimination or disadvantage are monitored satisfactorily, and provision swiftly reshaped to encourage greater participation.

All staff are trained to the level appropriate to their safeguarding responsibilities and have a satisfactory knowledge and understanding of the local safeguarding expectations regarding referral. Those experiencing domestic abuse and violence are signposted to expert agencies for support, and case studies attest to good levels of support for individuals. Strong relationships with the Early Intervention Team ensure that the centre is made aware of new referrals, but poor information exchange with social care colleagues and inconsistent use of the Common Assessment Framework limits the centre's ability to support some families in crisis situations.

One strength is the leader's honest evaluation of the current provision and its impact on outcomes, which gives a solid foundation for the improvement planning. What data are held are used well and the leader constantly solicits the additional information she needs from partner agencies. Evaluation is only satisfactory because it is not yet sufficiently informed by evidence of impact of the centre's work or that of the full range of its partners.

The leader is proactively forging some durable relationships and partnership representatives are unanimous in their appreciation of the staff at the centre. As yet some partners are unable to fully demonstrate or share the evidence of the impact of their work in a sufficiently timely fashion to help the leader drive improvement. Partnerships are most productive with the Early Intervention Team, Childcare Commissioning Team and health services.

Reduced staffing capacity, such as the reduction in the crèche service, the disestablishment of the early years teacher post and the small size of the existing staff team, limits the centre's ability to reach out to or engage the wider community. Nevertheless, registrations have risen to 79%, although it is unclear how many of these are actively engaged with centre services. Too few Charlestown reach area residents are involved in the advisory board and the views of the wider community are not sufficiently represented in the decision-making process.

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	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	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

Information from the most recent inspection of the on-site linked day-care provision was read prior to the inspection, as were the comments made about children's attainment on entry to maintained school made in Ofsted reports for primary schools within a one mile radius of the centre.

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 Charlestown Children's Centre on 17 and 18 August 2011. We judged the centre to be satisfactory overall.

'If it wasn't for the support of Sure Start I don't know how I would have coped, I really believe that I couldn't have done it without their support!' reflects the opinions of many residents about the positive impact your centre is having on your lives.

Thank you to those of you who made time to speak to the inspectors about the difference your centre is making to your lives. We agree with you that the staff team is dedicated to improving your lives now and to advancing your future prospects. The acting head of

centre has brought the centre out of a difficult period and deserves full credit for the centre being judged to be satisfactory.

You are being supported satisfactorily to live healthy lives, especially those of you experiencing mental health challenges who now have access to professional and informal support. You say you feel safe in the centre and inspectors could see that staff work hard to ensure that you and your children are protected both at home, by giving you access to subsidised home-safety equipment, and in the very safe and well-maintained centre. The staff realise that they could improve the way they use the Common Assessment Process to assess your needs and to swiftly organise the support necessary, and we have asked them to improve this aspect of their work.

They, and the local authority, know that there is still room for improvement in the way the authority and the advisory board check how well the centre is doing. The local authority did not set the centre any targets, so there is nothing to measure the centre's performance against, but the authority already has plans in place to address this.

The advisory board offers the centre good support, but some of the volunteers need more training to help them challenge and hold the centre to account for the quality of its work. The local volunteers on the advisory board are highly committed, but the partnership representatives do not attend meetings often enough to share information, question, support and check on how well the centre is helping local residents. There is a need for more Charlestown representatives on both the parents' forum and the advisory board, to help the management really know what Charlestown people need.

We've asked the centre to improve the way it includes local residents in the decision making of the centre, so please play your part and get involved. That way, perhaps things won't be so quiet over the summer months, when you told the centre that you needed more activities to do with your children.

The leadership are hampered in their ability to help Charlestown families by the lack of detail in some of the information they get from their social care partners, and by the fact that some partners are not yet sharing enough information about the impact of their work. We've asked your centre leader and the centre's partners to work together to make sure the centre gets useful, timely information to help them know what is working and what is less successful, so that the leadership can use this information to plan activities which meet your needs.

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