

Inspection report for Wareham Children's Centre

Local authority	Dorset
Inspection number	383567
Inspection dates	11–12 October 2011
Reporting inspector	Diane Wilkinson

Centre leader	Ruth Forbes
Date of previous inspection	This is the centre's first inspection
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Linked school if applicable	Lady St Mary's Voluntary Aided Church of England First school
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

The inspection of this Sure Start children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

An inspection of the co-located primary school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. 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 deputy manager as well as members of staff and representatives of the local authority. Discussions were also held with a variety of users who visited the centre during the inspection, members of the cluster advisory board and representatives of the partners who work with the centre. Inspectors observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Wareham Children's Centre is a phase two centre which opened in 2008. It is managed by the local authority. The centre is situated in a building adjacent to The Lady St Mary First School in Wareham, with which it has close liaison. It re-opened in its current location for some services in June 2011 and for full services in September 2011 after extensive refurbishment of the building, during which time it was housed in Wareham Library and Health Centre. There is no daycare provision, but there are links with pre-schools, childminders and other schools in the area. It serves the communities from Wareham to Holton Heath, including the surrounding areas of Stoborough, Sandford, Ridge and Arne. As the result of requests from the community and parents an outreach base was opened at Upton in 2009 housed in the local library where some of the services are delivered. Services are also provided in some other venues including the Upton Medical Centre and the community centre in Sandford. Families who attend the Wareham Centre have access to some services offered by other cluster centres. The centre is supported by a full time family outreach worker (FOW) and full time play-worker, a part time activity worker and an administrative support worker. Staff are deployed flexibly across the cluster to make the best use of their skills and expertise. Local health visitors, midwives and a wide

range of other professionals also provide services to support centre users. The local authority manages the centre and, as the result of recent re-organisation, it is now part of the Purbeck Cluster of children’s centres, oversight of which has been delegated to a manager appointed in July 2011. Day-to-day running of the Wareham centre is the responsibility of a deputy manager and there is a cluster advisory board, with professional representation, and a parent forum which contribute to evaluation and support for the centre’s work.

The social and economic circumstances of families in the area the centre serves vary. Much of the reach area is rural, but there are some areas of urban, social and economic deprivation. The levels of workless households and families on benefits are broadly in line with the local authority average. The majority of families are of White British heritage. The proportion of children working at the age-appropriate levels on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage is broadly at the level expected.

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 families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Wareham Children’s Centre provides a satisfactory range of services and support for families and children in its reach area. There are strengths in some areas of its work, such as in the level of care, support and guidance provided. The support and guidance for vulnerable families is very good, including through joint partnership working and the input of family outreach workers.

Parents are very enthusiastic about services, finding staff very supportive and some calling the centre ‘a lifeline’. Children enjoy the activities and the opportunity to play with others. However, variation in the effectiveness of services in meeting families’ needs results in outcomes for parents and children being mainly satisfactory. Targeted support for vulnerable families is helping to close the gap for their children, especially through encouraging regular attendance when they start school. Achievement by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is rising, although the lack of a coordinated approach to using data and limited partnership work in some areas has prevented outcomes from improving further. This is evident, for example, in the emotional health and communication skills of children and parents and the

acquisition of skills to help jobless parents return to work. However, recently data have been more effectively scrutinised and collated so that accurate self-evaluation is underpinning secure development planning. This ensures the centre is satisfactorily placed to improve, although it is too soon to see the full effect.

Although staff worked hard to minimise the effect, re-organisation, long-term staff sickness and the move to temporary accommodation have limited some opportunities for working with partner professionals. This includes key services such as Jobcentre Plus and speech and language support, and where this has happened the impact of the centre's work has slowed. Currently, more stable staffing arrangements and the newly refurbished accommodation, which includes a room for confidential meetings, are beginning to improve this situation.

Safeguarding is given high priority. Important checks are carried out on all who work with children and security within the building and other venues used is good. The mutual respect between users and staff ensures the former feel totally confident in sharing any concerns they may have. Both adults and children feel very safe and secure when attending activities. Joint working with regard to child protection and the common assessment framework is very good. The centre is well regarded by the community, parents and other professionals, and registration is broadly in line with the local authority average. However, staff have not targeted a small minority of areas where very few families are registered.

The local authority provides satisfactory challenge and support, helping focus the centre's work well on providing for vulnerable groups. The new manager and deputy manager are clear about how to improve the centre. Staff morale is high and there is a strong determination to succeed. Staff are keen to take on more responsibility for improvement work in the future. The work of the advisory board and parent forum gives secure support; however, the lack of parent representation on the board limits families' opportunities to contribute to the centre's work.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Enhance self-evaluation and development planning by ensuring that:
 - full account is taken of all the data available, including that from partners, and that it is collated to provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of services and activities
 - introduce more rigour and analysis into the way in which parents' views are gathered and evaluated
 - find better ways of seeking children's views and use these to adjust activities to meet their needs.

- Improve outcomes for users and increase the effectiveness of partnership working, particularly with regard to offering support and advice for parents seeking work and the emotional health and communication skills of all families.

- Place a greater emphasis on encouraging families in all areas where few are registered to take advantage of the centre's services.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Secure arrangements are in place to help families learn about healthy lifestyles, including in the 'Incredible Edibles' course, which helps families to provide healthy meals. Healthy snacks are provided at activities arranged by the centre, but not always at those provided by partners. Ante-natal support for pregnant teenagers, delivered through the midwifery service, supports their health especially well. Support for breast feeding is good, although there is a reluctance amongst some mothers, especially the younger ones, and ways to address this have not yet been fully investigated. Activities such as 'Baby Massage' support the emotional health of parents and babies well, although there are fewer opportunities for families with older children, which limits their outcomes in this aspect.

Enabling users to feel safe is firmly founded on the supportive and non-judgmental approach of staff, including when working with families experiencing significant problems. The safety of families subject to a child protection order and the Common Assessment Framework has been improved well through the work of the centre and its partners. Safety at home is promoted well, for example when using tools in cooking or craft activities. The 'Safe at Home' scheme has made a significant difference to the families who have been visited at home and their safety needs assessed and addressed. Through notices and staff guidance, parents and children are well aware of how to be safe during activity times.

Children exhibit an enthusiasm for learning new things. Staff, especially the activity worker, provide very good role models, encouraging parents to emulate them, so that children learn to get on well together and sustain interest in activities. Babies exhibit great delight at looking at themselves in the mirrors, with older children using construction equipment, wheeled toys and art and craft activities to develop important motor skills. The effective partnership with the Wareham and Upton libraries has promoted a strong interest in reading among many parents and children. Targeted activities for vulnerable groups have helped improve children's language and social skills. 'Little Gems', the transition group to encourage good attendance at school, has improved levels well. Children who need it benefit from the speech and language service support. However, there is less focus on activities to enhance communication skills for parents and children who do not have communication difficulties, so outcomes in this aspect are satisfactory.

Good behaviour is encouraged well and children develop confidence in expressing their views. Parents' contribution to the centre's work is satisfactory. They provide regular feedback on its work and a small minority, having been trained well, help lead activities. Currently parents are under-represented on the advisory board. Courses to enhance parenting skills have successfully improved the outcomes for some families, notably for young mothers. Current self-evaluation and responses to

parental requests have identified behaviour management for two-year-olds as a key priority for future activities. Through the work of the Citizens' Advice Bureau and Family Information Service, some parents are developing workplace skills and those for managing the family budget. Where opportunities are available, take-up rates are good, but re-organisation of services such as further education and Jobcentre Plus, together with their location outside the reach area, limits outcomes in this aspect.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target 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 children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

3

Although some aspects of provision are good, there is a variation in quality. Effective assessment of their needs means that provision for families most at risk, including through domestic violence and teenage pregnancy, is very effective. Joint agency working, for example with regard to the Common Assessment Framework, allows support and guidance to be especially well tailored to meet individual needs. There is strong evidence of positive improvement, for example in addressing debt, wider access to benefits and improving children's behaviour. Where there is a need, staff receive the appropriate training to support families, for example with regard to special educational needs and/or disabilities. This helps the centre to ensure satisfactory equality of opportunity. Family outreach workers provide valuable support to families, acting as their key worker and coordinating provision to address their needs. Feedback from parents and children is beginning to be used effectively to ensure activities meet the needs of all registered families, for example through the popular parent and toddler groups. However, opportunities are missed to seek and act on the information, limiting the quality of provision for some groups. For example, fathers are very appreciative of the Saturday activities provided for them, one typically commenting, 'I remain deeply grateful for the service.' Less has been done to consult fathers who are the main carers for children during the week about how the centre could support them.

Staff expertise in promoting learning and development is good. Activities to help

families develop parenting skills are satisfactory and some parents are keen to receive more support in managing their two-year-olds' behaviour. Parents are encouraged to share what has worked for them and in some activities staff can sit back and let the parents offer good advice. As transport is minimal in rural areas, with the help of the centre minibus, staff ensure that families have access to the services provided by the large majority of partners. Where this has proved difficult because of distance, the centre has trained staff, for example in providing advice in money management. Access to training and advice on returning to work, although satisfactory, is more limited.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

There is a strong vision and determination to provide effectively for families' needs. A high priority is given to safeguarding, and the level of care for all who work in or use the centre is good. The vetting of staff is good and they are well trained in first aid and in dealing with child protection and domestic violence issues. The centre is swift to act when a concern is raised, sharing information and working very effectively with partner agencies.

Improved self-evaluation provides an accurate picture of where the centre needs to improve and of well-targeted development planning. Some areas, such as safety at home are already being addressed but there is more to be done in aspects such as improving the work prospects of jobless households. The centre promotes inclusion, satisfactorily fulfilling its duties with regard to the prevention of discrimination and promotion of equality of opportunity, including with regard to minority groups such as parents and children with disabilities. Satisfactory governance and accountability arrangements help to ensure that outcomes are adequate. However, re-organisation at senior management levels in some partner organisations over the past 18 months has limited the effect of integrated management and accountability. The outreach base at Upton and the provision of activities nearer to where some families live has increased registration. Users express high satisfaction with the centre and its staff. Effective links with pre-school settings and child minders help bring about a concerted approach and encourage families to register. However, the centre has been slow to identify pockets where few families are registered. Value for money is satisfactory.

The refurbished accommodation and resources support centre activities well. Users

benefit from a staff who are well qualified to support the range of services on offer. However, until recently, not enough use has been made of their expertise in evaluation and development work. Strong partnerships with some agencies benefit users, for example through the work of health visitors, midwives, librarian staff and local pre-schools and childminders. Re-organisation and staff changes in some services such as Jobcentre Plus have limited the effect of the services on offer.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	3
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area 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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Wareham Children's Centre on 11 and 12 October. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We were pleased to speak to so many of you during our visit and I would particularly like to thank those of you who came into the centre especially to talk to us and the partner agencies who invited us to their activities.

From our discussions with you and the comments you have made about the centre services we can clearly see that you value the help and support it provides. Many of you spoke of how approachable staff are so that you are very confident in asking them to give you advice. As a result, the support and guidance they provide is good.

Staff are rigorous in ensuring that you and your children are safe at the centre and other venues it uses. They are also good at helping you to learn ways of keeping your families safe at home. Staff encourage you to support the centre's work, with a small number of you providing good support in helping to run or lead activities. They offer you lots of opportunities to give your views and you respond to them, although we found they could use this information more effectively to improve services. We also consider that there are better ways for staff to judge what your children think about the activities. We agree with staff that it will help the centre's work if some of you become members of the advisory board.

Staff have taken care to ensure that there is a balance between services that are open to everyone and those that are targeted at parents or carers who have specific needs. Some services are especially effective in making a difference to families experiencing difficulties and for young mothers. However, some of the special programmes on offer, especially those related to emotional health and communication skills, would benefit other families as well. Children enjoy the activities that promote their learning and these are helping to improve the levels they achieve when they go to school. There is a range of activities for you to develop parenting skills and staff are aware that more of you would like support in managing the behaviour of your two-year-olds.

Staff work well with some partners like the health visitors, midwives, childminders and pre-school staff to provide you with good support and advice that is not readily available at the centre. Work with other partners such as those who provide programmes to develop communication skills, support emotional health and access advice about returning to work is less effective. Staff are now using the information from the data they collect more effectively to help improve the services they provide.

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