

Inspection report for Cowes Children's Centre

Local authority	Isle Of Wight Council
Inspection number	383492
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Centre leader	Laura Villa
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
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.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager and staff, representatives from the local authority and members of the Core Offer Monitoring Group (COMG). They also held meetings with partner agencies, including the health services and voluntary organisations, parents and other users of the centre.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's service action plan.

Information about the centre

The centre was designated in October 2009 as a phase two centre. It offers the full core offer of a children's centre. Since April 2010, it has been commissioned to, and managed directly by, The Children's Society, with the Core Offer Monitoring Group (COMG) involved in the day-to-day management. It is open 51 weeks of the year offering services at the Lanes End School site and Cowes Medical Centre. The centre serves five 70% less disadvantaged lower super output areas with a mix of social and private housing. The centre's reach area does not include any wards that are considered the 30% most disadvantaged lower super output areas. The percentage of children aged 0 to 4 living in households dependent on workless benefits is 17%. The percentage of eligible families benefiting from the childcare element of Working Tax Credit is 20%.

The majority of families are of White British heritage. About 7% of families are from a minority ethnic background. The remainder is made up of those who prefer not to state their background or small numbers from a range of East European countries. There are approximately 725 children under five in the reach area of whom 76% have been registered by the children's centre. Children's levels on entry to early year's education vary across the reach area from below to in line with that expected for their age. Communication, language and literacy are relatively weak aspects across the reach area.

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Cowes Children's Centre provides a good service. It provides outstanding care, guidance and support to those who use it because staff are knowledgeable, approachable and caring. This is particularly so for the most vulnerable families in the community, many of whom have benefited greatly from the contact with the centre. One parent whose views reflect those of many others said, 'It is a wonderful facility with some amazing staff and I have a lot to thank them for.' Outcomes are good and improving, especially in relation to how well parents understand how to keep their children safe and early childhood development. Consequently, the gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the rest narrowed considerably in 2011 and the results at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage rose substantially. Staff are particularly adept at identifying any safeguarding concerns and the good partnerships that are in place with many different agencies are then deployed to put in effective support. As a result, families feel very safe in the centre and see it as a haven. The skills and opportunities of a large number of adults are also being enhanced through good quality training and information.

The centre is highly inclusive. Everyone receives a warm welcome. 'The staff are incredibly welcoming and friendly,' was a view voiced by many. Families feel that their views are valued and acted upon. However, more formal methods of involving them in the governance of the centre are not yet well developed. As a result, although target groups are represented, there are not enough who present their views formally through the embryonic Parents' Forum or the COMG. In addition, while the service action plan devised by the local authority, that the centre is obliged to use, covers the main priorities for improvement, the document is too unwieldy and targets are not measurable or specific enough. Also, some of the data in relation to the centre's specific reach area has proved hard to access from the local authority, which limits the centre's ability to set challenging targets. However, managers do have a clear and accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for development and the centre has had an increasingly positive impact on those it serves. Staff have identified those who most need their support and have been effective in engaging

them. There is a good capacity for sustained improvement because there is a strong commitment to build on past successes, and strong leadership and management.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve the centre's service action plan so that targets are measurable, specific and challenging by:
 - strengthening the involvement of the Core Offer Monitoring Group in devising the action plan and setting targets
 - gathering and using data to measure the centre's impact in more aspects.
- Increase the formal involvement of those who use the centre by widening the range of parents and carers who participate in Parents' Forum meetings.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The centre has had a positive impact on families' understanding of how to lead healthy lives through a range of activities, such as healthy cooking taught at the Young Parents' group. The local park is also used to encourage exercise. Childhood obesity levels in the reach area are reducing but the latest data available show that levels are still broadly in line with those seen nationally. Strong and mutually beneficial links with the health services has had a positive impact on families' health. The centre actively promotes and supports breastfeeding in conjunction with midwives and health visitors, with a consequent increase in the sustained breastfeeding rates in the reach area. Immunisation rates are very high. The centre is particularly effective in supporting those with mental health issues, especially among the most vulnerable in the community.

Keeping families safe and protected are high priorities for all the centre staff and their wide range of training reflects this. Staff assist with home safety and there are regular paediatric first aid courses for parents and carers and links with the fire service and with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. These have greatly improved parents' and carers' understanding of how to protect their children at home and outdoors. The number of emergency hospital admissions for children is low and reducing year on year. A very high level of trust has been built up between staff and the families who use the centre and, consequently, all feel safe and protected there. The capacity of the centre to respond effectively to safeguarding concerns is widely recognised. As a result, some families who are subject to a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) have not escalated to child protection plans and the number of such plans has declined from three last year to none at present.

Children and adults attending the centre show very high levels of enjoyment during centre activities. Planning for all the sessions is very much focused on improving children's independence and their communication, language and literacy skills.

Experienced, well-trained staff and a range of relevant courses help parents and carers support their children's learning well. For example, sessions such as 'Penny Saving Play' and 'Chatter Matters' have had a positive impact on the achievement of children. This is being seen in the Early Years Foundation Stage results where the number of those achieving the age-expected levels rose from 55% in 2010 to a provisional 70% in 2011. Also significant is the way the gap between the lowest 20% and the rest reduced from 22% in 2010 to 18.75% in 2011. Adults also benefit well from courses run by and located at the centre. These include classes for those who speak English as an additional language and adult numeracy classes run by the Isle of Wight College. Contact with the centre has led to demonstrable improvements in achievement and personal development for a significant number of families, including the most vulnerable. 'The centre helped me to open up' and 'It's lovely to feel more confident' were typical views expressed by parents and carers.

Children behave well in the centre and are consistently encouraged to experiment and to develop their independence. They express their views and the preferences of even the youngest are taken into account, for example when choosing which nursery rhyme to sing. Very high levels of respect are shown by everyone using the centre, reflecting the good role-modelling of centre staff. Families feel fully involved in the way the centre is run and requests for changes or specific workshops, such as to help with children's sleep problems, have been acted on. Volunteers are providing valuable help to the centre as a result of the well-structured programme. However, the recently established Parents' Forum has not attracted a wide cross-section of families which is an aspect the centre is aware it needs to improve upon.

The strong focus on early years' development means that children are making good progress in enhancing their skills for the future. Adults are given good advice and guidance to help them develop the skills and confidence to return to work, training or access the correct benefits. This includes those in the most vulnerable groups such as teenage and/or lone parents and those on workless benefits. As a result, there have been many examples of where, with enhanced language skills, adults have progressed to employment, and with greater confidence, some have set up their own businesses.

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	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 children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2

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	2
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How good is the provision?

2

Some of the centre staff are long-serving and have a detailed knowledge about the community the centre serves and have analysed all the target groups who are registered at the centre. They know they are reaching a high proportion of each group, as well as those they deem to be most in need of intervention and support, such as where there are mental health issues. However, the local authority has been unable to provide a breakdown of all the target groups in the reach area. The centre uses the information it does have to develop programmes and courses to meet specific needs especially around those of young parents, children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and developing parenting skills.

Enabling adults and children to learn and develop is at the heart of the centre's work. Most of the activities and sessions are focused around developing early learning skills, improving parenting skills and increasing the numbers from the different target groups and the most vulnerable groups who use the centre. The centre celebrates achievement well whether it is the small but significant step of a child doing up a zip or adults completing their language courses. This has a positive impact on their self-esteem and confidence, helping them to build on their achievements.

The quality of care, guidance and support provided by the centre staff is outstanding because of the non-judgemental, caring nature of all those who work there. A typical view was, 'Staff are always there, smiling, helpful and available, showing a willingness to listen.' Their perseverance to enable some of the most vulnerable groups to attend and then benefit from the support offered has had very significant outcomes for many. 'They helped me every step of the way', was a common view. This is especially so in times of crisis when staff will galvanise the expertise of the many strong partnerships that are in place, such as with the health services and HomeStart. Families with highly personal or complex problems are given excellent support so that many report a profound impact on their lives.

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	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre is very well organised and runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. Lines of responsibility are clear among the centre staff, the local authority and The Children's Society. Agency partners are well represented on the COMG and members understand their supporting roles well; they have a clear view of the strengths and areas for development and have analysed the needs of the area well. They all have a strong commitment to improve outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable and have had notable successes in this respect. Evaluation, ambition and prioritisation are satisfactory, however, because this understanding of strengths and weaknesses is not rigorously and clearly recorded in the action plan in relation to clear key priorities. In addition, the formal involvement of families in identifying key priorities has been limited as the numbers on the COMG are small.

Centre resources, especially those to develop early learning skills, are of a very high quality and are used effectively to meet the needs of target groups and those most in need of support. Although small in number, the well-trained staff are organised and deployed effectively and their targeted expertise has had a palpable impact on improving outcomes for families. The numbers using the centre, especially from target groups, are increasing year on year, despite a decrease in the funding available and, consequently, the centre gives good value for money.

The purpose-built centre is fully accessible to those with disabilities and meets statutory requirements. Equality and diversity are promoted and celebrated well and consequently the range of families using the services reflects the local community well. Fathers, grandparents, young parents and those who speak English as an additional language attend the universal activities. An autistic spectrum disorder support group is held regularly. Weekly HomeStart groups ensure that the more vulnerable families are served well by the centre. Crèche facilities enable parents and carers to attend training and other activities. Budgetary constraints have meant that the centre is not open as often as it used to be on Saturdays.

Safeguarding policies are comprehensive and procedures meet statutory requirements and are an inherent part of the centre's work. All appropriate Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are carried out and the relevant assurances given by partner agencies. Staff are well trained and are very adept at spotting any potential concerns among those who use the centre, for example if there are suspicions of domestic abuse or risks to children. They play an effective role in leading and monitoring assessments using the CAF and have high levels of knowledge of the families involved thus significantly reducing the risk of harm.

Well-established, trusting relationships with key partners have had a positive impact on many outcomes for families, especially those most in need of support. The links with the health services are particularly strong and have led to antenatal classes being held in the children's centre and staff attending baby clinics at the health centre. This has had a positive impact on the way families engage with the centre as

well as with health services and has led to an improvement in outcomes. The links with Jobcentre Plus (JCP) have until recently been restricted due to delays in staff receiving CRB checks. While there has been regular support and guidance given to families, this will be extended imminently as a member of JCP will be based in the centre two days per week.

Families who use the centre are 100% satisfied with the service it offers according to the annual survey undertaken in the reach area. They feel listened to and that their views are used to shape the services offered. The work of the family support worker in reaching out to more vulnerable groups has been very successful in engaging those who may not have accessed the services otherwise. This includes lone parents, teenage parents and those with specific and often complex needs. Consequently, the outcomes for these groups are good and improving.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The 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	2
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	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	2
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	2

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

Nothing Applicable

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Cowes Children's Centre on 10 and 11 November 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

During our visit, we looked at your centre's plans for improvement and numerous other documents. We spoke to a wide range of partner agencies working with the centre as well as staff, members of the Core Offer Monitoring Group (COMG) and representatives from the local authority and The Children's Society. We also observed activities taking place during the inspection and spoke to a substantial number of families using the centre.

Thank you for your participation in the inspection. Those of you we spoke to, or who wrote to us, were very positive about what the centre does for you and especially for your children, helping them to learn and develop well. Typical views expressed were 'It is a wonderful facility with some amazing staff and I have a lot to thank them for' and 'The staff are incredibly welcoming and friendly'.

The staff provide outstanding levels of care, guidance and support. This is because of the excellent knowledge they have of those who use the centre as well as the local community as a whole. One person summed up the views of many by stating 'Staff are always here, smiling, helpful and available, showing a willingness to listen'. Well-trained and skilled staff are also very effective in spotting where there may be concerns and then in harnessing the appropriate expertise and support that has developed from the good partnerships with others such as the health services and HomeStart. The centre has been effective in improving outcomes for many in relation to how well you understand how to lead healthy lives and keep your children safe. Courses such as paediatric first aid and support for breastfeeding have had positive outcomes. The staff are especially effective in helping children learn and develop. They also help parents and carers to help their children learn at home through activities such as 'Penny Saving Play' and 'Chatter Matter' classes. This has had a positive impact on the outcomes for children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and in how confident and independent children are when they start school.

Centre staff work well with a wide range of partners to ensure that families are safeguarded at the centre but also at home. This means that everyone feels safe and has high levels of trust in the staff. Many of you spoke highly of the support you have received from the family support worker. You told us how you trust and admire all the staff and how you feel the centre is a haven for you.

The centre listens to your views well and staff use them to adapt the programmes and activities to your needs and interests. However, not enough parents and carers from different groups in the community are attending the Parents' Forum meetings so that your views can be put forward in a more formal way. Although families are represented on the COMG, not enough from different groups in the community attend these meetings either.

The COMG understands the centre's strengths and areas for development but the centre's service action plan is too unwieldy to highlight the key priorities and does not always set targets that can be measured. This is partly because the centre has not had access to some data about the make-up of the community it serves. We have asked the COMG to make improvements in how it sets targets and measures success.

The well-trained staff and other high-quality resources are used well and have had a positive impact on outcomes for many, especially where help is needed most, and so the centre provides good value for money. Everyone is enthusiastic and committed to improve and involve even more in the community who could benefit from their services. There has already been a positive impact on many outcomes especially in relation to children's early development and for those who need the support most. As a result, the centre is well placed to continue to improve.

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