

Inspection report for Craven Arms Area Children's Centre

Local authority	Shropshire
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Linked school if applicable	Stokesay Primary School (123398)
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	N/A

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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the local authority, centre staff, partner agencies, parents and carers. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including the centre's self-evaluation form, data provided by the local authority and the centre, documents and policies, and minutes of management meetings.

Information about the centre

Craven Arms Children's Centre is located in south of Shropshire and covers large rural areas. The centre operates from two local authority buildings. The principal site is located on the site of Stokesay Primary School and the linked site is on the campus of Church Stretton Secondary School and St Laurence's Primary School. There are eight partner delivery sites within surrounding villages. Isolation is a major factor affecting families living in this community due to distance and limited public transport services available.

The centre was designated in October 2007 and serves a community that falls into the 70% most deprived areas nationally. The area is served by a number of local amenities such as community centres, women's refuge, health visitor base and housing association base. The large majority of early years provision is provided by the private and voluntary sector.

The Craven Arms Area Children's Centre serves 457 families with children aged under five years. The percentage of workless households and those dependent on benefits is below average. There are approximately 114 lone parents within the reach. The

children's centre serves a community of which the vast majority is White British, with the remaining population being from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds.

The centre provides a range of integrated services that include health, family support and adult training. The centre does not provide full-time early years provision but provides crèche provision to support families identified in need in accessing services. The centre offers advice and guidance to parents and carers on the daycare and childminding facilities available within the local community. On average, children enter nursery education with skills, knowledge and abilities which are below those expected for their age.

The centre is governed directly by the local authority with a strategic advisory board. The advisory board is made up of a cross section of professionals, including representatives from the voluntary sector and parents. It is responsible for overseeing the day to day running of the centre and its strategic development.

The centre works in partnership with agencies to deliver new services or enrich existing ones. The centre's family rooms and other venues are used to run group sessions. It has established working relationships with other professional services to deliver a programme of universal and targeted services to meet the local community's needs.

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

Craven Arms Children's Centre serves the needs of its community well. Care, guidance and support are outstanding. Leadership and management are good and include effective team-working and partnership working with other services. Leaders target and adapt the provision well to meet local needs. They set realistic targets to improve the health, safety and economic well-being of the local community. The good-quality provision, together with very effective family support, ensures that the large majority of families, whose circumstances have made them vulnerable or who are disadvantaged by economic and social circumstances, benefit from a good range of services that are carefully tailored to meet their particular needs.

Inclusion is central to the vision of the centre and all staff have a commitment to promoting equality and diversity. Despite the difficulties created by its rural location, the centre is successfully meeting the elements of its core purpose. The centre's effective team working with adult learning, Jobcentre Plus, family information services and the income and welfare team, ensures the large majority of families is given appropriate information and support tailored to their individual need. As a result, families' income is maximised, children access good-quality early years provision, and parents successfully move into learning, training and employment.

The centre is extremely successful in its targeted work to support children and families who are in most need of support. Effective inter-agency working with skilled professionals means that they identify the needs of potentially vulnerable families at an early stage and intervene quickly. This prompt action and excellent use of the Common Assessment Framework ensure efficient use of resources and reduces the number of children subject to child protection plans. Consequently, the centre is making a considerable improvement to the lives of the large majority of children and families. Although the centre responds very well to families who are referred to its services, and is successful in reaching all groups, it is aware of the need to continue to increase the number of families it engages with, particularly the most isolated and target groups, such as lone parents, the few minority ethnic families and fathers.

The outcomes for children and adults using the centre are good. Parents participate enthusiastically in activities and courses which build their confidence and develop their parenting and life skills. Children who attend the centre's 'Stay and Play' sessions benefit particularly from focused support and a good range of play opportunities that help develop their communication and social skills. Parents and children are developing a good understanding of how to stay safe. Parents are supported in making their home safe and attend training in First Aid. They feel safe when attending sessions and during home visits and have a high level of confidence in the staff. Many say it is their first port of call if they face difficulties. Adult users evaluate activities routinely. Where users make requests for services, the centre strives to meet demand. Users feel listened to and respected.

Safeguarding the users' health, safety and well-being is a high priority. Recruitment and selection procedures are robust and all staff are well trained in safeguarding which equips them well in supporting vulnerable families. Managers routinely monitor and evaluate the work of the centre and implement improvement plans specific to their areas of responsibility. However, there is not a systematic approach to ensuring that improvement work is coherent and fully effective across the whole provision.

The advisory board is supportive and has a strong commitment to the centre and to the ongoing development of its role in the community. However, it does not sufficiently challenge leaders and managers and hold them to account by evaluating the effectiveness of the centre's improvement work against clearly measurable outcomes.

The manager has successfully engaged with a good range of partner agencies to establish good quality provision which meets the needs of the reach area well. As a result, the participation rates are good and increasing. Outcomes for children and families are improving. The centre has established firm foundations and has demonstrated that it has a good capacity to improve further.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase further the proportion of families who engage with the centre's services, particularly the most isolated and target groups, such as lone parents, minority ethnic families and fathers.
- Take a more systematic approach to ensuring monitoring and evaluation information is used effectively to plan for improvement.
- Ensure that the advisory board challenges leaders and managers robustly and holds the centre to account by evaluating the effectiveness of its improvement work against clearly measurable outcomes.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The health and well-being of families are improving. Parents and children are developing a good awareness of healthy lifestyles. They learn how to cook healthy meals on a budget and the importance of physical exercise. As a result, obesity in young children has reduced. Families are engaging well with universal services. Immunisation rates and the uptake of mothers breastfeeding their babies and sustaining breastfeeding at six to eight weeks are higher than the national average. Family support workers and the child mental health services effectively support children's emotional development. Parents suffering domestic violence are extremely well supported. Parents report positively on how the 'Freedom programme' has given them the 'confidence to make positive decisions and choices' and how it 'has changed my life'.

The Early Years Foundation Stage profile data show a continued trend of narrowing the gap between the outcomes for the most vulnerable groups and others. Practitioners promote children's learning and development well through a good range of activities for parents and children to play, have fun and learn together. Parents engage in a wide range of activities to develop children's communication, language and literacy skills. As a result of participation in working with 'story sacks' with their children, talking homework, and families enrolling at the library, the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results have improved significantly from well below average to broadly average. Children are prepared well for transition between home, childcare and school. As a result, children settle quickly and engage well in learning.

The centre equips families well, particularly those who are vulnerable and isolated, to develop socially and emotionally, manage change and respond to challenge in their lives. Families develop their confidence and make positive relationships with others.

Parenting classes improve parents' level of understanding and their skills in managing their child's behaviour and understanding their needs. As a result, children's behaviour is very good. Visits to 'Stay and Play' sessions provided compelling evidence of young children and their parents bonding well and children developing their play, exploration and communication skills.

Parents become increasingly involved in decision making through informal discussion during sessions, completing evaluation forms, contributing to the annual satisfaction survey, and more formally through membership of the advisory board. Prompt action is taken to address feedback from users, such as changing times of sessions and providing information through leaflets and notice boards. Fathers commented positively on how the centre had responded to the request to move the 'Dads' group to Church Stretton. Consequently, attendance at sessions has increased, although not significantly.

The centre has successfully engaged parent volunteers and supported them in setting up and running voluntary groups, such as parent-run toddler groups, a group which supports families with children with disabilities and workshops on developing parents' understanding about mark making and early writing skills.

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

How good is the provision?

2

The centre team knows and understands its community well and works effectively with its partners to improve the life chances and personal development of parents and children. Parents expressed great appreciation of the support they receive and of the positive changes that have resulted for their children and themselves. They talked passionately about how staff support them through difficult times and how their lives would be very different without the centre's help. Parents experiencing domestic violence now have the confidence to come to the children's centre and as a result, they are developing social skills and are leading much happier and less

isolated lives.

Staff demonstrate a very good understanding of the Early Years Foundation Stage provision and promote children’s learning and development well. They effectively support parents’ understanding of age-appropriate learning activities they can provide for their children. The assessment of needs and the tracking of progress are good. The progress of all vulnerable families is documented well, monitored and provide a bank of case studies to help subsequent evaluations. The centre has very good links with family and children’s services: statutory, community and voluntary. Through these, it provides very effective support for the most vulnerable groups, such as teenage parents, lone parents, families in crisis and those experiencing domestic violence.

The centre is increasingly successful in meeting the needs of the wider community. Managers and staff are sensitive to the particular needs of its users and have placed great emphasis and effort on outreach work to meet the needs of those families who are isolated and unable to easily access services. For example, they make effective use of the ‘Play Bus’ to reach isolated groups such as families from the travelling community.

Many children and their families have low starting points to learning, which are sensitively assessed and supported with tailored learning opportunities. The effective team working between the family support workers and other agencies has resulted in over 200 adult learners having accessed some form of training over the past three years. Courses include soft skills, such as learning to cook, first aid, promoting children’s learning and development, basic literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, the effective partnership working with the income and welfare team and Jobcentre Plus has resulted in some families income increasing and some adults returning to employment. Consequently, families are improving their economic stability and independence and outcomes are good.

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 manager provides good leadership and management for the centre. She has a deep commitment to creating links within the community, consistently looking for opportunities to engage. The manager is supported by a very committed, dedicated team who deliver a good service to the families in their reach. Users and partner

agencies expressed how highly valued staff are. For example, one partner stated, 'The manager has done an incredible job developing relationships with other agencies so that families receive the support they need,' and a user said, 'Staff go above and beyond their call of duty to help'.

Regular and effective supervision supports the professional development of staff well. Staff are well trained and fully understand their roles and responsibilities. The inclusion of all children and their families is central to the centre's vision; equality is promoted, diversity celebrated and discrimination tackled. Users with disabilities are supported well including access to additional benefits. The centre makes a positive contribution to community cohesion and the breaking down of barriers between families from different backgrounds, particularly the travelling and Asian communities. They talk about how much they feel safe and respected when accessing the groups, as they are not judged or discriminated against.

Safeguarding is a high priority and at the heart of what the centre does. The safety of children and their families is embedded in the ethos of the centre. Staff are effective in ensuring children and families are safe. There is rigorous attention to child protection, vetting and recruitment procedures.

Governance at local authority level is good and improving. There are clear links between strategic planning, development plans and service provision. The centre manager is supported well in developing the provision. However, the recently reformed advisory board is not fully challenging or holding to account the work of the leaders and managers. Whilst individual managers routinely monitor and evaluate their work within the centre the approach to ensure that improvement work is coherent and fully effective is not sufficiently robust.

Resources are deployed effectively, given the challenge of reaching families who live in rurally isolated villages. Staff look at innovative ways to try to reach the most excluded families, such as taking the 'Play Bus' out into the community and making effective use of local community rooms to deliver sessions. The centre provides good value for money.

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	2
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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Craven Arms Children's Centre on 23 and 24 November 2011. We judged the centre as good. We talked with some of you, your children, staff, and a wide range of partners and members of the local authority linked to the centre. We observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documents.

The centre manager and her dedicated team have provided you and your families with a good range of services that are carefully tailored to meet your particular needs. Some aspects of the centre's work are stronger than others. For example, the partnership working with health professionals and the wider community means that you receive outstanding care, guidance and support. The centre is particularly successful in its targeted work to support children and families who are in most need of support. It ensures you are safeguarded well. Staff are well trained and work effectively with agencies to offer one-to-one support. They provide you with training to help you understand how to manage your children's behaviour. You told us how parenting classes have improved your level of understanding and how you feel more skilled in managing your children's behaviour and understanding their needs. As a result, your children's behaviour is very good. Inspector's visits to 'Stay and Play' sessions provided compelling evidence of how well you bond with your children and develop their play, exploration and communication skills.

Those of you who spoke to us said that you feel the centre is supportive and staff are kind and caring, and give you advice. Most importantly, you said it helps improve your lives, particularly for those of you who are feeling isolated. The centre supports and signposts you to services to help you improve your economic stability and

independence, and many of you take up opportunities to progress to training and adult education programmes.

The recently-established advisory board includes a cross-representation of members, including parents. However, they do not challenge leaders and managers sufficiently to hold the centre to account by evaluating the effectiveness of the centre's improvement work. We have asked the centre's leaders and managers to improve this. Your children's centre staff team meets regularly to discuss the centre's work and to plan for improvement. However, the staff do not have a consistent approach to ensure that their improvement planning is as effective as it could be. We have also asked the centre's leaders and managers to improve this.

Those of you who spoke to us said that you feel the centre is very supportive and staff are very kind and caring, and give you good advice. Most importantly, you said it helps improve your lives, particularly for those of you who are facing difficult challenges. All staff place importance on you and your family's welfare and provide a listening ear for you. They are keen to create a warm and welcoming environment where you feel at home and are able to talk freely about things that matter to you or are causing you concern. As a result, you very much value the centre and use the services regularly. Staff listen to what you have to say about the centre and what you need.

The centre offers a good range of services and activities which are led by skilled and dedicated professionals. Those of you who use the centre are now much more aware of how to stay safe and healthy and to provide for your families. Staff provide you with access to training and home visits, and give advice on how you can prevent accidents in and around your homes to keep your children safe. They are helping you to keep yourselves and your children very healthy by encouraging you to cook and eat healthy foods and by supporting mothers to breastfeed their babies. To develop further the work of the centre, we have asked the local authority and staff team to increase the number of families who engage with the services available to them, particularly the most isolated and target groups, such as lone parents, minority ethnic families and fathers.

We would like to thank everyone who came to speak to us. It was a privilege to be able to talk to you. Your honest and open discussions with us helped us immensely during the inspection. We thoroughly enjoyed spending time at your centre, and we wish you and your families the best for the future.

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