

Inspection report for Ashlands Children's Centre

Local authority	Somerset
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Reporting inspector	Grahame Sherfield HMI

Centre leader	Karen Cooper
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
Centre address	North Street Crewkerne Somerset TA18 7AL
Telephone number	01460 279820
Fax number	Not applicable
Email address	Karen.Cooper@actionforchildren.org.uk

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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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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

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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 one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with parents, centre managers and frontline staff. They also met with a number of partners and representatives from the local authority. The inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Ashlands Children's Centre serves Crewkerne and the rural area stretching to the east and west of the town. It is located on the site of Ashlands First School in modular accommodation with access to attractive outdoor areas, including a sensory garden. Most of the centre's provision takes place on this site, although some opportunities are offered at other locations in the reach area.

Ashlands was first designated as a phase two centre in 2007 and, from the outset, has been managed by Action for Children on behalf of the local authority. The centre leader also manages four other children's centres and the South Somerset Outreach Service. In partnership with various agencies, Ashlands offers a range of services, including child and family health services, advice on parenting and access to specialist services, for example antenatal and postnatal groups. It has secured the engagement of about two thirds of children under five in the reach. The centre is not in an area of deprivation, with the proportion of families on benefit or children in workless households below average. Most families are of White British heritage. When children join Early Years Foundation Stage provision, their skills are broadly at the levels expected for their age.

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

Ashlands is a good children's centre. Parents feel valued and the good relationships with staff enable them to be confident in talking about most issues that worry them. One commented, 'I always know I can talk to them about anything.' The attractive and safe environment is highly valued by parents and provides much useful information to help them in promoting the safety and healthy development of their children. The commitment of the staff to the well-being of families is strong and the support and guidance provided are much appreciated by users of the centre. One parent praised 'a fab bunch of people who go the extra mile'. The wide range of provision is of good quality and, as a result, outcomes are good overall.

The centre has successfully secured a good understanding among parents of how to ensure their family's safety. They are well supported in developing their parenting skills by the good services provided in the centre and through home visits where appropriate. The centre's arrangements for safeguarding children are good and all staff have received appropriate and recent training. All necessary policies and procedures are thorough, properly implemented and understood well by parents. Centre staff go to considerable lengths to ensure that families facing particular challenges are supported well. As a result, confidence and self-esteem improve and families often make good progress in overcoming difficulties.

Parents contribute well to the development of the centre through the Parent Forum and staff frequently seek their views, both formally and informally. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage make good progress from their starting points and reach standards above those expected nationally by the end of the Reception Year. There are many successful opportunities for parents and their children to play and learn together, for example through PEEP (Peers Early Education Partnership) courses. Outstanding partnerships have been established with a very wide range of agencies and organisations and these make a very strong contribution to identifying the needs of target groups, for example isolated parents who need extra support with parenting skills and teenage parents, and to integrating services. Families benefit greatly from the activities provided in partnership with health visitors and

midwives, such as the postnatal group, the baby clinic and parentcraft sessions.

Activities are well planned and those observed were of good quality. Through the family profiling system, staff take considerable trouble to identify individual needs and adjust the activities provided in response. These profiles are then revisited to explore the impact of activities provided and make further adjustments as necessary. Much successful attention is given to readying parents for restarting their learning. There has been some success in promoting the learning and development of parents, so that they can obtain necessary skills and qualifications to access further training and opportunities for employment. However, the centre is not yet fully successful in addressing these needs and numbers involved have been relatively small. There is no easy access to data about the impact of this work to enable the centre to evaluate its approaches.

The centre benefits from committed leadership from the cluster manager and the senior worker and a clear vision for its further development that is widely shared by staff and partner agencies. The advisory board is provided with detailed information on the work of the centre. However, it is not currently providing enough challenge to leaders and managers in order to contribute fully to enhancing the centre's provision. There is a clear view of the centre's strengths and the areas for improvement and detailed plans for the future. There has been much success in increasing the number of families engaging with the centre and in improving partnerships. Consequently, the capacity for sustained improvement is good.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Further develop the opportunities for those not currently in employment to engage with education and training prior to moving into the world of work, and secure data on the impact of such provision on families' well-being.
- Develop the role of the advisory board so that it offers more rigorous scrutiny and challenge to support further improvement in the work and impact of the centre.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Families benefit from a good range of activities to promote a healthy lifestyle. The baby clinic provides support for breastfeeding on a drop-in basis and the centre is seeking to improve provision further by developing a peer support session, with one volunteer already trained. As a result of this provision, the proportion of mothers breastfeeding is above average. Although the level of obesity among children of Reception age has been low, there is some evidence of an increase. The centre's activities to counter this include well-attended health checks carried out during PEEP courses and Dads Stay and Play sessions, as well as promoting a healthy diet and a more active lifestyle, for example through Forest School activities.

Families trust staff and most are confident in seeking help, which is often provided on an individual basis. The Common Assessment Framework is used well when appropriate to establish levels of need and the centre works closely with a range of agencies, for example through the monthly 'healthy child' meetings, to ensure appropriate provision is made. The most vulnerable families, including those where children are on the child protection register, are well supported by the centre through home visits and one-to-one help, as well as through partnerships with other agencies. For example, concerns over children's behaviour have been addressed through home support by outreach workers who subsequently contribute to meetings between the nursery and the parent to review progress.

Families enjoy the varied opportunities provided by the centre. Groups are often popular, for example PEEP and the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P). Parents' confidence in their parenting skills has improved, particularly their understanding of how children learn and develop and of appropriate activities to support this. The centre has very good links with childcare providers and supports them in sharing ideas and approaches and developing the skills of their practitioners. As a result, the gap in the Early Years Foundation Stage profile data between the lowest achieving children and the rest is narrowing.

Ashlands is a hub of the community and frequently provides a venue for partner agencies, for example the speech and language service. Social development is strong and isolated parents, or parents new to the area, are well supported in establishing friendships. One mother commented that she 'wouldn't know anyone without the centre. They've helped me so much...'. Most parents make good use of the frequent opportunities to give their views on the events they attend, and are also represented on the advisory board. Referring parents to Jobcentre Plus, for example for advice on benefits, is well established, and careers-advice sessions are built into some courses. Local job vacancies are kept on file in the centre. It is intended to enhance financial advice available, for example on managing debt, through a partnership with a local social housing group where sessions are about to begin. Parents are encouraged to volunteer at the centre and, although numbers are small, one has recently found this a solid foundation for securing a job in the nearby school. The centre's work to encourage parents to develop their basic skills, for example in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology, is at an early stage.

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	3

How good is the provision?

2

Available accommodation is used flexibly to support a wide range of activities. Much information for parents is readily available in the large reception area, to help them meet their children's needs.

Ashlands knows its families well. Health staff, such as health visitors and midwives, are frequently in the centre which supports very good partnership working. Centre staff also work very closely with other partner agencies, for example the local authority early years team, children's social care and childcare providers in the reach area. Together with knowledge gleaned from home visits, from working with families in particular events and activities, and from the improving data supplied by the county council, such close cooperation results in a good knowledge of the needs of target groups. These needs are increasingly being met through targeted events as well as through universal provision. For example, the recent 'play and praise' course supported young parents in interacting with their children, and the forthcoming Baby PEEP course is also targeted at this group. The centre's considerable efforts to seek the views of families also contribute strongly.

Ashlands is particularly good at helping parents understand how their children learn and in ensuring that activities provide opportunities for children to develop their skills across a wide range of areas of learning. Much attention is given to evaluating the impact of each session, for example on children's enjoyment and achievement and on being healthy. This system is very detailed, but it does not readily support the identification of key strengths and areas for development and centre staff are already planning how to improve this. The centre celebrates the achievements of children through the use of 'wow cards' and 'wow books', and of parents, for example through issuing certificates where appropriate. But opportunities are not taken to celebrate more widely, for example through photographs and features in the newsletter or displays in the reception area in the centre.

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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre is led and managed well with enthusiastic and skilled staff who are keen to develop the centre further to meet the needs of families in the reach. The centre benefits from the opportunity to work in partnership with the other Action for Children centres in the area in order to share practice and concerns, and senior workers sensibly take the lead on different activities. The centre runs smoothly and day-to-day management is effective. The action plan for the centre's development sets out suitable actions and is a very useful working document that is regularly reviewed. The level of detail, however, makes it difficult to access for those checking progress, for example members of the advisory board. The board has clear terms of reference with a wide ranging and appropriate membership. However, some meetings have not taken place due to insufficient numbers. Arrangements for the centre to account for its activities to Action for Children are clear and the local authority maintains suitable oversight of its work.

Safeguarding arrangements are good, with all necessary policies and procedures in place. Staff work very well with other agencies to protect children's welfare and levels of care are good. All activities, as well as the building and the grounds, are carefully assessed for any possible dangers to families and staff. The centre places a high priority on including all families. Staff routinely provide additional support, for example assistance with transport, that helps target groups to engage with the work of the centre to meet their needs. This includes families affected by special educational needs who receive good assistance in gaining any extra support needed. The very small number of families from minority ethnic communities are included and supported well through both individual support and universal provision.

Outcomes for families are good and the centre is successful in ensuring the majority of families from the reach area engage in its services, with ambitious targets to increase this further. Ashlands thus 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	1
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 Ashlands Children's Centre on 16 and 17 May 2012. We judged the centre as good. Those of you who were available to meet us told us how friendly, helpful and welcoming Ashlands is. Our evidence indicates that you are right.

The centre does almost all things well. Activities are well planned to meet your varying needs and we saw much enjoyment in the sessions we visited. You are well supported in keeping your family safe and the centre's arrangements for protecting children's welfare are good. Staff work well to ensure the centre is a safe place and that children have the services they need.

You are provided with valuable advice, sometimes through home visits and one-to-one support, as well as through different groups and activities. Staff also suggest other agencies you could contact, such as Jobcentre Plus, and the centre holds much helpful information for you, including details of local job vacancies and guidance on keeping your family healthy. You are also often given opportunities to say what you think of what the centre does and make suggestions for improvement. There have been opportunities for some of you to take part in training and other courses to help you to prepare to enter, or re-enter, the world of work. But these have been relatively few and we have asked the centre to press ahead with plans for a wider range of courses to help those of you for whom this is relevant. We have also asked them to gather information on how much difference such courses make.

The arrangements for the leadership and management of Ashlands are good. Staff have a clear vision for the future development of the centre and are strongly

committed to developing the services available and engaging with even more families in the reach area. The advisory board occasionally has not met due to very small numbers and we have asked the centre to develop the board's role. Partnerships are outstanding with a wide range of other organisations and groups, such as health visitors, midwives and local childcare providers, and these greatly enhance the ways in which the centre supports you and your children.

We would like to thank those of you who were available to talk to us, both in person and on the telephone, about the ways Ashlands has helped you. It is clear that you value the opportunities and care that the centre provides. We would like to wish you every success in the future.

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