

Inspection report for Central Shropshire South Area Children's Centre

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| Local authority | Shropshire |
| Inspection number | 404516 |
| Inspection dates | 19–20 September 2012 |
| Reporting inspector | Nicholas GadfieldHMI |

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| Centre leader | Julie Duncan |
| Date of previous inspection | Not previously inspected |
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| Linked school if applicable | Meole Brace C of E Primary and Nursery |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | None |

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

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

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

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

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior managers from the centre and its partner agencies, support workers including those in outreach, health and education professionals, representatives of the local authority and service users. They observed the centre's work, spoke to parents and other users of the centre and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Central Shropshire South Children's Centre is a phase two centre, designated in October 2007. The centre reach area covers a population of 12,436, of which 632 are children aged nought to four. The area is on the edge of Shrewsbury and covers a mixed urban and rural area of approximately 50 square miles, giving a population density of around 13 children per square mile. The head of the centre is currently responsible for six other centres and reports to the local authority. One advisory board covers a cluster of five centres, although this is currently being reviewed as part of a re-organisation of children's centres. A linked satellite centre based at Oakmeadow Primary and Nursery School, several community venues and a play bus are used for outreach work mainly in the rural areas. The centre fulfils its core purpose at these venues in partnership with a range of public and voluntary sector organisations and independent providers. There are five primary schools in the reach area. In an adjacent children's centre area, there are two post-16 colleges, and the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, which has a consultant maternity service and an accident and emergency department, together with a wide range of health services, clinics and wards.

The population served by the centre is overwhelmingly White British, with less than 3% of the population being from other ethnic heritage groups. The area economy is very mixed, with pockets of affluence as well as social and economic disadvantage.

The number of people registered as unemployed is very small, but there is a lot of part-time and low-wage employment so that the number of children living in households depending on work-related benefits is relatively high. Children’s skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are below those 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

Central Shropshire South Children’s Centre is improving the lives of children and their families through its particularly effective joint work with a range of partner organisations. It has supported a rapid improvement in children’s levels of ability when they start school and, with its health partners, has encouraged parents to keep their children safe and healthy by the very good take-up of immunisation and the relatively low levels of children’s obesity. Smoking by new or expectant mothers is an area of concern, but the centre is unable to measure the impact of its work to reduce this because of a lack of relevant data. Similarly, although the centre works hard to encourage parents to use dental services for their children as early as possible to establish good habits, it is unable to judge the success because of a lack of data on children’s oral health.

The range of services offered is good, and the centre draws well on the experience of partner organisations as well as its own knowledge to identify where families live who would most benefit in order to plan its offer. The number of families using these services has grown rapidly in the last three years, although the centre recognises that it needs to do more to enable fathers to participate. Support workers are particularly good at responding rapidly to referrals from health and children’s social care partners in order to provide support at the earliest opportunity. This is particularly effective in encouraging children’s language and communication development and in providing early, targeted support for children with additional needs. Many parents use the on-line consultation facility set up by the local authority to contribute their views to service planning which significantly helps to overcome the more limited opportunities to contribute to the single advisory board.

Parents and carers recognise the benefits of using the centre and its services, and readily acknowledge the progress their children make as a result. Children enjoy attending the centre's activities, particularly those who do not otherwise have opportunities to meet or play with other children. Information sharing and signposting between partners are particularly strong, so that most professionals are well informed about what services are available across the area served by the centre. This enables them to offer very detailed advice and guidance to parents and carers seeking help. The number of self-referrals demonstrates that the centre has established a high profile in its community. The centre promotes safeguarding well and gives a very high profile to children's safety and wellbeing in its activities. A small team of local authority social workers provides an effective point of contact for child protection referrals, and the centre provides support to families when children are taken off protection plans. This helps to reduce the chance of a repeat referral.

There are few childcare settings in the reach area, but the centre supports well the network of registered childminders so that it is in a good position to advise parents about childcare options. Childminders share their good practice and support one another in weekly sessions hosted by the children's centre which provides opportunities to use and evaluate their good learning resources. Links with the two schools whose sites host the linked centres are good and the schools recognise the impact the work of the centre is having on children as they start school. However, these links are less well developed with other primary schools that families may elect to use.

The centre benefits from good leadership and an accurate recognition of its strengths and areas for development. Together with a continuous record of improvement in outcomes for children since its opening, and a clear plan for further developing its services, these factors ensure that the centre has good capacity to make even further improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Continue to improve engagement with families in the reach area, particularly fathers.
- Improve access to up-to-date health data.
- Further strengthen links to schools especially those not co-located with a centre.

How good are outcomes for families?

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Excellent partnership work between health professionals and centre support workers is helping parents to keep their children healthy. Immunisation rates are good and above the national average for all types of protection. Children's obesity levels and

the teenage conception rate are below the national average, the latter being at a 10-year low. The involvement of centre staff in providing an outreach portage scheme supports early intervention very well for families whose children have additional needs, and successfully engages parents in the 'Playpals' programme for children with disabilities. Although breastfeeding initiation rates are satisfactory, the number of young mothers who are still breastfeeding after six to eight weeks is low, and higher-than-average smoking among mothers-to-be is a recognised priority area for development.

Children engage well with the centre and readily make friends, even when they have shown initial reluctance to attend. They clearly enjoy attending the activities and parents speak of the difference they are making to their lives and their children's welfare. Typical of comments from parents are: 'Staff are friendly, they do a good job here.' 'Children love the activities; I go to other groups they run in the community [as well].' Children's behaviour in the centre is very good. They interact well together and with adults and feel very safe in the sessions, which encourages them to become independent.

Parents are helped to keep their children safe at home through the high profile given to safety, which involves support to carry out risk assessments at home and equipment to make the home safer for small children, particularly those who are disabled. The centre was part of a home-safety scheme by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents which resulted in having staff able to carry out safety checks in homes and show parents how to use specialist safety equipment. The excellent partnership working leads to the early identification of children's welfare needs and effective signposting to a wide range of appropriate support such as healthy eating, speech and language therapy, and behaviour management. The number of children subject to child protection plans for two years or more is very small and support staff work well with parents whose children are coming off a child protection or children in need plan to minimise the chance of re-entering.

The proportion of children who have reached the expected level of development when they start school has improved significantly over the last three years to be above the local authority average, and the gap between the least able and the rest has narrowed more quickly and more successfully than in the rest of the local authority. Centres play a significant role in their communities, and their role and services are well known to partners and potential users. As one parent said, 'I tell all my friends about the centre; I would recommend it.' Very few people in the reach area are registered as unemployed. Over two-thirds of families are economically active and the number of children living in families depending on work-related benefits is relatively low.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

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| <p>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</p> | <p>2</p> |
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| 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?

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The centre knows its reach area well and uses its excellent links to identify families most in need and provide a full range of universal programmes and targeted services which meet the needs of families well. Much of the provision is delivered through outreach often led by partner organisations in community venues and through the 'play bus', as well as intensive individual support in the homes of those most in need. Most services are delivered as universal service with additional support in the sessions for targeted groups. This is characterised by very sensitive and thoughtful support, particularly for teenage parents, lone parents, parents living with domestic abuse and parents of children with disabilities. Fathers are particularly welcomed into open sessions rather than separate provision, but the centre is aware that not enough is done to meet the needs of this target group.

Signposting to services at other sites, such as immunisation sessions, jobcentre information, positive parenting classes, further education, housing information and breastfeeding support, is excellent. Health resources to support dental health, healthy eating and sexual health are particularly attractive and age-appropriate. Parents say they feel safe and welcomed in the centre, and they and their children benefit from the opportunity to mix with other parents and carers and from the range of activities on offer. As one parent said, 'I like the structure of the group – the outdoor play, health snacks, activities,' while another commented, 'It's a friendly group – children benefit from interaction with other children and sharing.' Self-referrals are an increasing feature of the centre's activity which demonstrates growing awareness of the centres in their community. The resulting process is well developed and ensures good-quality care and guidance for those who refer, often with a need that only becomes apparent during subsequent individual discussions. One parent's comment is representative of the views of many, 'You can talk to staff about concerns, it's just so welcoming.' Parents have influenced the design of a series of very practical first-aid courses that reassure them about how to deal with lower-level or routine concerns not usually covered in more traditional paediatric first-aid programmes.

Although there is no on-site childcare provision in either of the centre bases, the

'Stay and Play' sessions focus well on learning and development, particularly in language and communication skills. The quality of neighbourhood independent childcare, including that provided by childminders, is at least good. Direct links, which are particularly strong with the co-located schools, as well as indirect links through health professionals or local authority staff, are used very well to promote the importance of continuity in learning and development. Schools readily acknowledge the positive impact the centre has had on children's school readiness and the reassurance they provide for parents during their children's transition to school. Success is celebrated for parents who complete courses in the centre such as the 'Freedom' programme for those living with domestic abuse, or adult literacy courses.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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| 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?

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Governance and accountability are well understood by staff including those in partner organisations. The centre leader has taken a strategic role in developing the network of children's centres from the beginning and leads a strong and well-established team. Day-to-day management is very supportive and transparent. Support for families is highly integrated across the local authority and draws well on local information as well as contributions from its partners including voluntary organisations.

Self-evaluation is accurate, draws well on the analysis of available data and leads to the setting of appropriately challenging targets. Professionals share a very clear understanding of the key priorities and how best to support the most vulnerable children and families. Regular monitoring and sharing of information on outcomes also ensures that all partners understand how well the services are meeting the needs of their communities. There are gaps in some health information for the area served by the centre that make it difficult to demonstrate the impact of some of the centre's work, for example in encouraging mothers to give up smoking.

Well-established integrated working with partners is leading to innovative solutions to the challenge of meeting the needs of vulnerable families in a reach area that includes high levels of both rural and urban deprivation. The best partnerships are with health professionals and local authority officers in wider services, but links with voluntary organisations are also good. Professional boundaries are clear and centre staff know when to refer a family on to other professionals for more specialist help or

support. The centre's success is shown by the continuous increase in the number of families registered with the centre since its designation to around 80% of those in the reach area. Agencies readily share information about the families they meet so that services can work together to provide the best support. This is helping to ensure the services are sustainable and offer good value for money. Childminders attend regular well-established network meetings hosted by the centre to share good practice and provide opportunities for the children they look after to interact and play with other children. Childminders value these sessions and the good range of resources available to them. They are quick to refer families to the centre when they identify a need, and the centre is equally helpful in signposting families to this range of good-quality childcare. Childminders are very supportive of the centre but would value the opportunity to take a more active part in planning or contributing to its work.

The proportion of families from minority ethnic heritages in the area served by the centre is very low, but the centre works well with those few families who are newly arrived to ensure their needs are met. Despite these demographics, diversity is celebrated and promoted well in the centre through displays and activities linked to festivals such as Eid. The centre is helping to significantly reduce inequalities in children's levels of attainment when they start school. The promotion of equalities and inclusion is particularly good for children with a disability.

Good safeguarding arrangements are based on a clear and shared commitment to children's safety and well-being. The centre's policy is comprehensive and reviewed annually. Recruitment processes including Criminal Records Bureau checks for staff directly employed, and written confirmation of these checks from other agencies, meet government requirements and recommendations. Activities run or supported by the centre are appropriately risk assessed. All staff are trained to use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) for children whose needs are supported by more than one agency, and they are being trained to implement a new version designed to be more child-friendly. Centre staff are confident users of the child protection referral arrangements. Child protection information and referrals flow well both ways to ensure the right support is provided to families in need, including when their children are being moved from a child protection plan to a child in need plan or completely off a plan. Parents are routinely reminded about safeguarding and child protection. Child protection arrangements are well understood, including by child minders who attend the network meetings.

The centre routinely gathers feedback from users about the services it provides. Parents are successfully consulted on a range of topics through the use of an innovative on-line consultation panel, which is a successful way of drawing on the views of those in the rural part of the reach area. However, parents find it more difficult to influence strategic decisions through a single advisory board that covers five centres and the authority has yet to establish a mechanism to enable this to happen.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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| 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 | 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 Central Shropshire South Area Children's Centre on 19–20 September 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like very much to thank those of you who spoke to us during the inspection and readily shared with us your thoughts about the centre and its work. Your views were essential in helping us to reach our judgements.

The centre staff work well to provide a good range of services in Shrewsbury and the villages around, alongside colleagues from the health trusts and voluntary groups. It is clear from your comments that you are very well informed about these activities, and many of you are happy to travel to the different venues around the area to take part in them. Many of you told us how much you valued the centre and what difference it was making to your lives and those of your children. You spoke about

the way that attending sessions in the centre and its outreach venues has improved your self-confidence and skills as a parent. We saw that the children behave well in the centre, and are sociable and confident in the 'Stay and Play' sessions. Many of you told us that you recognise how much they have learned and developed through attending these sessions and we know they are better prepared for school as a result. We have asked the centre to keep up this good work in the future so that children are prepared to do well as soon as they start school.

The partnership work with the health services has been very successful in encouraging so many of you to have your children immunised and to encourage healthy eating. We know that the centre gives a very high profile to safeguarding and child protection, and that they work with you to help you ensure your children are safe. We were impressed with how many parents have come to the centre directly rather than being signposted to it, for example by midwives, health visitors or family information service advisors, as this shows that the centre is well known and well established in its community. Several of you told us that you had recommended it to your friends as well.

The centre is led and managed well by the dedicated team, and many of you told us how welcome they make you feel. They regularly ask you to give them feedback on the sessions they have organised, and make use of your views to improve or spread the activities further afield. A good proportion of families in the area are registered with the centre, but we think that more children could be benefiting from the good work of the centre. We have asked them to look at ways of achieving this, as well as to do more to enable fathers to attend sessions. We have also recommended that the centre should find a way for more of you to contribute to deciding how the centre should work in the future.

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