

Inspection report for Exeter Children's Centre

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Date of previous inspection	23–24 February 2012
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Linked school if applicable	Exeter Primary School URN121878
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Little Rainbows EY332046

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 one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders including the centre manager and the consultant head, members of staff and representatives from the local authority, partner organisations and other agencies. Discussions were held with members of the governing body, steering group and parents.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's self-evaluation form, development plans, evaluations and key policies.

Information about the centre

Exeter Children's Centre, a phase two centre, is part of Exeter Primary School – a learning community. It serves the Exeter estate, Oakley Vale, Stanion Village, Little Stanion, Weldon Village, and parts of Corby town centre. Families live in some of the most deprived areas that fall into the top 10% nationally while others live in 30% areas of assessed need. The local authority has delegated responsibility for the leadership and management of the centre to the governing body and headteacher of the school. In the absence of a substantive headteacher, it is led temporarily by a consultant headteacher, and managed on a part-time basis by a separate children's centre manager. The advisory board, known as the 'steering group', includes representatives from the school's governing body and parents.

The centre, designated with the full core offer in March 2010, provides childcare, family support, child and family health, job and benefits advice. The school and centre share some of the accommodation and staff. Services are commissioned or delivered by employees of the centre. Outreach services are provided in Little Stanion and Oakley Vale primary schools, Stanion Pre-school Playgroup and Eden Park sheltered accommodation for teenage parents. The number of lone and workless families receiving benefits is well above the national average. Families are

mostly from White British and Eastern European backgrounds, predominantly Polish. The majority live in social housing or privately owned homes. Children’s skills, knowledge and abilities are well below those expected for their age when they first start in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Little Rainbows private nursery provides respite care for the centre.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Exeter Children’s Centre has improved significantly since the last inspection and its overall effectiveness is now satisfactory. The action plan devised by the centre leaders and strategic managers following the last inspection addressed all the identified issues but lacked the ability to measure if targets had been achieved. The centre users are unanimous in their appreciation and praise for the improvements to their lives as a result of taking advantage of the services and activities provided. The impact of these services on outcomes overall is only satisfactory because there are families and children in the community who are not yet taking advantage of them. Consequently, the equality of opportunity for users in the reach area is satisfactory. The centre is well aware of this and has taken some of the necessary steps to improve this situation by employing a community involvement and participation worker who is successfully engaging some parents from hard to reach families.

Effective liaison with health professionals means that all expectant mothers are visited. Vulnerable families are identified and integrated work with the centre’s family support worker means that referrals can be made through to the appropriate support agencies. Particularly effective work has been achieved with teenage mothers through the Eden Park Young parents support group to develop parenting skills, including healthy eating, literacy and numeracy skills, and peer support. This group has produced a DVD about life as a teenage mother and this is used in local schools as part of personal and social education programmes. As a result one parent commented that she is now thinking seriously about the repercussions of her actions and is taking control of her life. All the users spoken to were very happy and secure about the welcome and care that they receive in the centre. The procedures for assessing the needs of the users and then providing the appropriate services are satisfactory.

Governance and leadership are satisfactory and improving. The governance arrangements have gone through recent structural changes. The local authority procedures to hold the governing body to account are strengthening. The centre's development plan now demonstrates a good understanding of the target groups within the reach area and what needs to be achieved to improve outcomes. However, the success criteria are not sharp enough so that it is difficult for the centre to evaluate the success of its activities in meeting local priorities or to hold leaders fully to account. The parent forum, steering group and governing body that represents the community and services is successful at enabling its participants to voice their opinions about services needed. However, its purpose in overseeing the work of the children's centre is unclear and the governance arrangements are not understood by everyone.

The centre manager and other leaders demonstrate a passion and determination to improve the lives of users. Regular supervision of centre workers, such as the family support workers, has resulted in some services being allocated to meet the needs of the most vulnerable families. However, the evaluation of the impact that they have had on family's needs has yet to be fully developed. Evaluation mainly concentrates on user satisfaction rather than the improvement being made to their lives, or the success of the activity in meeting local priorities. The centre is aware of the need to provide quality assurance drop in visits to all groups to ensure that the learning intentions are being met and the structure of the session is safe. The centre demonstrates a satisfactory capacity to sustain improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Strengthen evaluation procedures so that:
 - the centre can better demonstrate how its activities are meeting local priorities
 - activities are refined to meet the needs of target groups more successfully
 - the centre is better able to demonstrate clearly the short and longer –term impact of activities on improving the outcomes for users.

- Improve the governance and leadership of the centre by:
 - ensuring that the success criteria in the service development plan are measurable so that centre leaders can be held to account for their work
 - clarifying and strengthening the role of the governing body, steering group and parent forum

- Be vigilant in the identification of any new vulnerable families coming into the area, such as those living in the new social housing or within the isolated pockets of deprivation.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

The emotional well-being of users is greatly improved by their engagement with the centre. Parents, such as those who have suffered from mental health problems, spoke highly of the support they have received from the centre. As one parent reported, representing the views of other users, 'My own confidence as a parent and as a person has massively increased, and I feel in control more now with regards to my children and my life.'

Users benefit greatly from baby clinics which are well attended, led by the local health services. There is a session each day of the week, held on site and at the three other children's centres in the locality and at the local health centre. Parents say they appreciate the friendly, accessible and informal atmosphere that the centres provide, encouraging them to attend regularly. There is an adequate range of healthy activities such as the healthy eating activity that users report has improved their understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet. One parent reported her surprise at how much her family had enjoyed the food she had prepared for them as a result of attending 'Big Cook, Little Cook' and was determined to continue to provide healthy meals. However inspectors observed that such activities are not always of high quality and meet the needs of all those who attend.

Vulnerable children, particularly those subject to child protection plans, and their families are supported effectively by the centre and integrated services, such as health, social services, housing and the police. The evaluations show that the lives of these families are greatly improved through processes such as the effective use of the Common Assessment Framework procedures and outreach support. For example, one parent, who had benefited greatly from the one-to-one support of the centre has learned how to deal with family problems better.

The 'Stay and Play' activities on site and at satellite sites in the community provide a happy and secure environment for parents and their children to play together. The social skills of these children are developing, as is the skill of parents in managing behaviour. They are well prepared for the next stage in their education. The centre and education partners are improving the impact of services on the children's readiness for formal education in the reach area, but there are still too many who enter school's Early Years Foundation Stage settings who have not benefited from pre-school services or received their entitlement of free nursery education.

Users are regularly asked to give their opinions of centre activities and there is a parent representative on the steering group and governing body. The 'New Start programme' is run in partnership with 'Homestart' as a result there is a steady stream of volunteers to support activities, such as in the baby massage session. Breast feeding support is also offered by a volunteer. Another volunteer supports staff in delivering the virtual baby course to pupils aged 13-19 years of age in local schools which gives them a greater understanding of what it would be like to have a baby. However the centre is not able to evidence the long or short term impact these initiatives have on the pupils, users or the volunteers.

The adults spoken to by inspectors report how much they enjoy the courses they have successfully completed and are very proud of their achievements. Users benefit from a range of courses designed to improve their economic well-being. For example, users had benefited from courses to improve literacy and numeracy skills. Those speaking English as an additional language improve their spoken English. The centre has successfully referred families to organisations such as 'Citizens Advice Bureau' to maximise their income through claiming all the benefits they are eligible and by rescheduling debt. There is successful partnership working with Job centre plus who hold a fortnightly session at the centre. They provide advice about training for work, improve job hunting skills, application and interview techniques and give advice on benefit entitlement plus much more. They are said to 'go the extra mile'.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

3

Assessment procedures are used by family support workers and over seen by the on-site social worker who also provides supervision. Services are tailored effectively to meet the needs of users attending particularly those who may find themselves in particular difficulty. The centre is also successful in assessing and meeting the needs of parents who come to the centre looking for support and advice about bringing up their children and who have now embarked on training to improve their economic wellbeing. As one parent reported, 'Staff are fantastic they give you the confidence to do courses and go onto further education.' The effective support of the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Jobcentre Plus and the local college has been instrumental to this. The centre successfully nurtures and fosters confidence in users and develops their basic skills so that they are well prepared for training courses and employment. Parents who speak English as an additional language are also supported effectively. The evaluation of users' participation in activities is not yet sufficiently useful in showing the impact that it has on their lives either in the short or longer term.

The centre and some of its partners have accurately identified the services that need to be better targeted to engaging some users such as teenage parents and to encourage more mothers to breastfeed new babies. However, currently there are too many potential users not yet accessing the centre's services. Some users report that initially they too were reluctant to use the centre's services. However, the non-judgemental approach to their needs and the friendly encouragement they encountered quickly overcame their concerns so that they benefit well from the services on offer.

All staff provide a welcoming and secure environment in the centre. This starts from first contact with the well-trained reception staff. Many users say how much they trust the staff and that the centre is where they come for advice and support on a wide range of issues. As one parent reported, 'I couldn't have coped without the centre staff they have been invaluable to me. They have been my emotional rock'.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Centre leaders have faced significant challenges since the last inspection whilst re-structuring takes place. The centre's work in providing services is making a difference to the lives of some of those users who access the centre's services. In this respect, the centre provides satisfactory value for money. There are appropriate performance monitoring systems in place such as the supervision of staff to check their work. However, the quality assurance of activities and groups currently does not take place to ensure that planning and delivery meet both an individual's needs and local priorities. Nevertheless, the centre staff have a 'Can do' attitude and are clearly focused on improving outcomes for all children and families.

Safeguarding procedures are appropriately in place and include the vetting of staff, volunteers and others who have unsupervised contact with children and vulnerable adults. All statutory requirements are met. Early intervention arrangements are effective including those which provide effective services for children with disabilities. Staff are suitably trained to support their role in ensuring users' safety, including child protection and use of the Common Assessment Framework. Staff are alert to the needs of particular families who are encountering challenges and difficulties, and respond promptly and sensitively when referrals are made. Families experiencing crises, including domestic violence, are particularly well supported within the centre. Family support workers ensure that families are provided with a place of safety and

are instrumental in ensuring they access appropriate services swiftly to ensure the safety of the parent and children.

The number of people using the centre has increased since the last inspection and user engagement is now satisfactory. However, there is still a proportion of the community who are not accessing services, and this results in inequality of access. Health visitors work effectively with families who encounter severe difficulties and deprivation and regularly make referrals to the centre to ensure targeted services are prioritised. The data provided by health partners are invaluable to the centre and have helped the centre to successfully identify some of the families who are most in need particularly mothers who have recently given birth.

The inclusion of children and families is helping the centre to begin to engage with those from the wider community, including the Polish community. Children with a disability or with special educational needs and those identified at risk of developmental delay, receive good targeted support in partnership with their parents. The centre's policies and procedures are used to promote the understanding of the importance of inclusion for staff, students and volunteers however some policies are not always specific to the centre and have been developed by the school.

The centre is not fully aware of the impact its services are making because of the lack of detailed and informative evaluation of short and long term impact on individuals lives. The governing body, steering group and parent forum is supportive but are not sufficiently informed to challenge the work of the centre and do not always understand their role as 'critical friend'. In addition, although there is a strong motivation to improve, and a clear understanding of strengths and areas for development, the centre's development plan is not specific enough to allow success to be measured. This is hindering the leaders and managers from making more rapid improvement.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3

The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	3
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	3

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

The nursery provision, known as 'Little Rainbows Nursery' was inspected on the 4 February 2013.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance *Complaining about inspections*, which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected Exeter Children's Centre on 6–7 February 2013. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We would like to thank those of you who spoke to us. Your views were very helpful to the inspection team. We agree with you when you told us how welcoming and helpful the staff are at the centre. We think that the range of services and activities on offer is helping you to improve your parenting skills and enabling some of you to train and gain confidence. We think that those of you who are experiencing difficulty in your lives are well supported to make your families and children safe and healthy. We also know that the centre has helped some of you who have experienced real difficulties in the past to be much more confident and be able to look forward to a brighter future. We watched you thoroughly enjoying the activities, such as 'Stay and Play', where you talked to each other and played with your children. We are very pleased that the Little Rainbows Nursery is giving your children a good start to their education. A few of you have volunteered to help in the centre. This has been invaluable in developing your self-esteem and skills. Those of you, who made your comments known, spoke of the centre and its staff with high regard. However, we think it is a pity that not enough people in the area are taking advantage of the activities on offer.

You told us that one reason why you like coming to the centre is because of the well-trained, helpful and friendly staff who work there. They try their best to help you to make improvements to your lives. For example, the family support workers are doing well. They expertly help you to decide on the services and activities that you need in order to make improvements to family life. They then work well with other agencies like the health service and social care, to make sure that the help is just right for you and your families. Some of you were keen to tell us that the centre is not just about

your children but also about helping you to improve your circumstances. Some of you said how grateful you were that the staff had helped you to gain the benefits to which you are entitled. We are glad to see you on the board so that you can influence how the centre is run.

The centre leaders have been successful in safeguarding the families who use it. They show that they know some of the different groups in the community that could benefit from the centre's help. Leaders do not yet check well enough how the activities on offer are leading to improvements, both for you and your families, and for the community overall.

We have asked the centre to make some improvements. We have asked staff to make sure they are supporting the whole of the community and increasing the membership of the centre and to ensure those of you who most need help get it. We have asked the centre leaders to improve the range of information available to show how the centre is meeting the needs of children and their families and how they are measuring any improvement. We have asked them to improve the understanding of the governors and steering group representatives who oversee the work of the centre. This includes those of you who sit on the parents forum, too so that all groups provide critical challenge in decision-making and makes sure everyone achieves their maximum potential. We have asked the centre to look at ways to improve its evaluation of the centre's work concerning the difference services are making to your lives.

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