

Inspection report for Dene House Children's Centre

Local authority	Durham
Inspection number	384080
Inspection dates	28 February–1 March 2013
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Dene House Primary School URN 114200
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	The Sunshine Nursery EY345360

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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 registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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

The inspectors held meetings with: centre staff; various members of the health service; the manager and one staff member of the on-site childcare provision; the primary school headteacher and inclusion manager; the qualified teacher linked to children's centres; two local authority strategic managers, the area safeguarding team manager and the operational lead for children's centres and the early years; members of the local advisory board, including the Chair; a senior Family Pathfinder worker; an outreach worker from the Citizens Advice Bureau; and a range of centre users.

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

Information about the centre

Dene House is a phase one children's centre which was designated in September 2003. At the end of a long drive, it shares its site with The Sunshine Nursery, a privately run nursery and childcare provision, as well as Dene House Primary School which most local children attend. Most children's level of skill on entry to early years provision is well below those expected for their age. The linked provisions are subject to separate inspection arrangements. The reports of these inspections are available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

The centre's reach area currently has 181 families with children under the age of five years. All parts of the reach are identified as among the 30% most deprived areas in the country. Half the families live in an area ranked within the 10% most deprived areas nationally. Over

one-quarter of families is dependent on workless benefits and over one-half are eligible for Child Tax Credits. The great majority of families are of White British heritage.

Working in partnership with a range of other agencies, the centre provides the full purpose offer including health services, family support and outreach. It is managed by the local authority, which has recently undergone a major restructuring programme to provide a One Point Service. This has led to significant changes in staffing. The centre now operates as one spoke of a hub which comprises ten children's centres that work independently but in close partnership. Of these, two centres occupy sites less than one mile away from Dene House Children Centre. Governance is provided by a local advisory board. During the inspection, the centre manager was on maternity leave and the centre was being led by a manager seconded from within the local authority.

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

Dene House Children's Centre offers satisfactory provision for the families within its reach area. Effective use of increasingly reliable data, combined with much encouragement of parents to express their preferences and opinions, is leading to growth in the number of local families who use the services of this or its closely neighbouring centres. Currently 55% of families do so, an increase from 42% in October 2012. However, there is room for the numbers of those who are in regular contact with the centre to grow further, especially among male carers and lone parents. Those families who do use the centre appreciate its warm, relaxed atmosphere and the support provided by staff, describing them as, 'brilliant and really easy to talk to'.

All the outcomes for families are satisfactory. The proportion of mothers who breastfeed their babies is increasing and almost all children under five years-of-age are immunised against potentially harmful disease. Appropriate arrangements are in place to safeguard children both within the centre and when families leave its protection. Users act in a safe manner during sessions and say that they feel safe in the centre. The skills with which children leave their Reception Year at school are on a rising trend and the gap in

achievement between the lowest 20% and other children is narrowing. However, although there are success stories, there is scant evidence to demonstrate that many adults improve their skills and, thereby, increase their families' economic stability. Centre users behave well and demonstrate respect for others. They put forward their ideas towards the planning of activities and they make a positive contribution to the centre's success. The celebration of festivals such as Chinese New Year, as well as suitably tailored support for disabled children, confirms that the centre is inclusive and that users are encouraged to appreciate diversity.

The centre mounts a satisfactory range of activities that cater for children of different ages and for families' different needs. Sessions at the different local centres complement each other, ensuring variety for families and efficient use of resources. Staff provide well-tailored and much appreciated care, guidance and support for families. However, although there are examples where centre staff and health professionals work closely together, this is not consistently the case. This sometimes leads to lack of clarity about the actions being taken to support different families.

The local authority's restructuring of its entire provision for young people aged from nought to 19 is reaching its conclusion but has yet to be embedded. Currently, the service is not as manageable and effective as it could be. Roles and responsibilities are clear but at this centre staffing changes mean that there has been heavy reliance on those staff who come into daily contact with families. It has not always been possible to follow up on new initiatives. As one person said to the inspectors, 'It is lucky for the centre that it has had the stability of the family worker.'

Leadership and management of the centre are enthusiastic and there is a clear sense of direction. However, the systems for checking the effectiveness of the centre's work and for planning its future areas for improvement are cumbersome and not sufficiently sharply focussed. Also, the local advisory board is not fulfilling its role effectively enough. Staff are suitably supported and the centre has a positive atmosphere. The manager has a sound understanding of the centre's strengths and areas in need of development. Recent actions are having a positive impact, for example, leading to an increase in the number of families with children aged under one-year-old who attend group sessions. The centre has satisfactory capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Take action to ensure that communication between health professionals and children's centre staff is consistently of good quality.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - making the centre's self-evaluation and action planning more user-friendly and sharply focussed on the most important areas for development
 - increasing the effectiveness with which the local advisory board supports the centre and holds it to account.

- Increase the numbers of potential users, especially lone parents and male carers, who have regular contact with the centre and engage in activities, particularly those aimed at improving their families' economic stability and independence.

To the local authority:

- Ensure that the organisation and resourcing of children's centres locally leads to the provision of a more manageable and effective service for families.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Families have a satisfactory understanding of how to adopt healthy lifestyles. Regular weaning sessions at the well-baby clinic provide good support and advice at a critical time. Children enjoy the healthy snacks available at sessions and are aware, for example, that they need to wrap up warm when going to explore in the outside area. In response to concerted actions by health and centre staff, the number of mothers who start to breastfeed their babies has doubled over the past two years but still remains below the national average. In the most recent quarter, 40% of mothers were still breastfeeding at six-to-eight weeks. There has been good success in smoking cessation with none of the six local mothers who gave birth in 2012 smoking. Obesity levels of children in Reception Year were below national figures for the five years to 2010, after which the data are unreliable.

Children and parents act in a safe manner at the centre and it provides them with a safe environment in which to work and play. They show respect for others and are helpful about, for example, tidying up, contributing to the positive atmosphere that pervades the centre. Children move around sensibly and take care when venturing outdoors. Parents increase their understanding of how to manage their children's behaviour and of appropriate actions to take in response to domestic violence. One commented that the course she had attended, 'helped me understand what had happened in my previous relationship and be aware for the future'. Very few children are subject to child-protection plans, identified as children in need, being supported through the Common Assessment Framework, or in the care of the local authority. Appropriate liaison between different professionals promotes these and other children's safety. Actions, including intensive work with parents pre-birth, have led to, for example, families whose older children have been adopted keeping their baby.

Over the past six years children's skills at the end of Reception Year have risen. In 2012, 56.5% achieved a good level of development, which is in line with the proportion reaching this level in similar areas nationally. During this period the gap between the median score for all children and the average of the lowest achieving 20% has narrowed to 23%, well below the national figure of 30.1%. Liaison between the on-site childcare provision and school helps children, including disabled children and those with special educational needs, transfer smoothly into full-time education. In the centre, children are inquisitive and interested in learning, for example, they listen with pleasure to a story or carefully follow the adult's example when sticking shapes on to paper. The picture for their parents is not so strong.

Adults enjoy the activities. One commented, at the end of an accredited course designed to raise participants' skills and aspirations, that she had, 'found it to be educational, helpful and fun'. Another successfully returned to college, with help from the centre to secure a nursery place for her young child. During the inspection, parents were fully engaged in a Level 2 course helping them to gain confidence in talking with their children about relationships. One of the few male carers from the reach who attend the popular 'Family Man' sessions at a neighbouring centre praised the way in which they, 'helped me to build my relationship with my children and this continues at home'. Through the parents' forum, users contribute their ideas toward the future planning of activities, and they were fully involved in helping to develop the outdoor area which the school has recently released for the centre's use. However, while the contacts with families are increasing, the numbers actually attending sessions, particularly those aimed at increasing their skills leading to further training and employment, are small.

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

Centre staff take full account of parents' views when planning activities and adapt them accordingly. This has led to changes in the timing of sessions and to the introduction of the 'Family Man' group. Staff also take into account families' needs and have, in the past, organised, for example, literacy and numeracy courses, but low numbers have prevented these from running. Contact is maintained with a good proportion of teenage parents and families with disabled children and those with special educational needs but the proportion of male carers and lone parents who are in regular contact is low. Recent actions are beginning to have an impact. For example, analysis of data identified that few families with babies under one year-of-age were attending sessions. Good liaison between the family worker and midwife who runs the weekly clinic has led to the numbers attending 'Twinkle Time' sessions increasing from one or two, to an average of five to seven babies.

With guidance from the qualified teacher, sessions are carefully planned according to prior observations of children’s preferences and needs, so that they lead to sequential development of their skills. The progress of those whose parents give consent is now being tracked in both the crèche and stay-and-play sessions, helping to create a comprehensive picture of individuals’ growing skills and any areas needing particular attention. No such tracking is yet in place for adults and there is no system through which to follow up whether those adults signposted to, for example, the Citizens Advice Bureau or Jobcentre Plus go on to seek advice. However, activities are clearly worthwhile. For example, one parent confidently confirmed that her course had, ‘helped me to stop telling my child he is naughty and to say No’.

Parents say that they like attending the centre because of, ‘the nice friendly staff’ who take account of what they are saying. However, because of its position, as one professional commented, ‘It is not really a footfall centre.’ This means that few turn to this centre in times of crisis. The support that staff provide does make a discernible difference to those families who seek it. However, while posing no concerns in relation to safeguarding, communication between health professionals and centre staff is not always sufficiently clear and up-to-date to ensure that families receive seamless care, guidance and support.

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

Satisfactory leadership and management mean that despite considerable reorganisation at a strategic level, plus staff changes and some absence, the centre has continued to provide a satisfactory service for local families. However, staff changes and absence have led to some inefficiencies. Managers have an accurate overview of the centre’s strengths and the challenges it faces. However, the systems are unwieldy for checking its successes, pinpointing the most important areas needing improvement and planning future actions. Some actions have proved effective, for example, increasing the number of mothers and babies attending sessions. However, others, such as aiming to increase numbers through making telephone contact with those registered with but not using the centre, have not progressed due to there being insufficient staff to follow through on any positive response. Local advisory board meetings are not well attended and the minutes show that they are used more for information sharing than to evaluate the impact of the centre’s work and to help guide its future development.

Staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities. There are suitable arrangements for professional supervision and access to relevant training. Recent training, to enhance the understanding of different professionals across the area in the optimum use of the Common Assessment Framework, is already leading to more children and families being supported in this way through multi-agency cooperation. Safeguarding arrangements, including the checking of adults' suitability to work with children and vulnerable adults, and procedures to ensure health and safety, meet requirements. Throughout the recent changes, the promotion of equality and diversity has continued and the centre's procedures meet all requirements. The centre adopts inclusive practice, facilitates integrated support for disabled children and those with special educational needs, and contributes to the narrowing of the achievement gap. Some partnerships, for example, the sharing of staff between centres or the links with the on-site midwifery clinic, enhance its provision but not all communication between health staff and centre staff is as profitable. The centre provides satisfactory 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	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secures 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 most recent inspection reports of the on-site childcare provision and primary school were taken into account during the preparation of the inspection. The findings of the concurrent inspection of the nursery were considered during the inspection.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Dene House Children's Centre on 28 February and 1 March 2013. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you to those of you who spoke with us and explained the difference that the centre makes to your life and that of your family. This is an outline of the inspection findings.

Increasing numbers of local mothers are continuing to breastfeed their babies for the first few months of life and no new mothers in the last year were smoking at the time of their baby's birth. Almost all of you make sure that your young children receive their immunisations. Your children enjoy the fruit and milk available at, for example, 'Stay and Play' sessions.

You and your children feel safe in the centre. Your attendance at sessions has helped you to become more confident about managing your children's behaviour and about taking sensible action when faced with domestic violence. Support with parenting has helped some of you to keep your baby when in the past your older children have had to go into care.

Children's skills by the end of their Reception Year in school have risen over recent years. In the centre, children enjoy the activities, such as listening to a story or sticking shapes on to paper, and are confident to explore outside. They behave well and are helpful about, for example, tidying up.

You also like to make a positive contribution by volunteering your ideas for future activities. You told us that staff listen well to you and, when possible, make the changes that you ask for, such as the timing of the 'Stay and Play' sessions. Those of you who undertake longer courses are proud of the certificates that you achieve. However, relatively few of you take part in the centre's sessions, particularly lone parents and fathers, and even fewer in activities designed to help you improve your skills and move back into work. We have asked the centre's leaders to take steps to improve this.

We know that there have been lots of staffing changes over recent times but you also told us how much you appreciate the friendly welcome and stability offered by the reception staff and the family worker. We have asked the local authority to make sure that, when all the reorganisation is over, taking account of restricted finances, you are left with a service that meets your needs effectively. To help with this we have also asked the leaders to improve the level of communication between health service and children's centre staff so that it is consistently as good as, for example, that between the midwife and the family worker. We think that this should mean that they can give you more streamlined care, guidance and support.

At the moment, the local advisory board is not playing its part well enough in supporting the centre and making sure that it has a good impact on the well-being of you and your families. We have asked the leaders to improve this. Finally, we have asked the leaders to

make more user-friendly, both their checking of the impact that the centre has on improving your lives and their planning of any future actions. In this way they, and you, should be clearer about what is going well and what the centre needs to focus on next.

Thank you, again, for your help. This message comes with our best wishes for the future.

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