

Inspection report for Cobden Children's Centre

Local authority	Leicestershire
Inspection number	365768
Inspection dates	9–10 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Rajinder Harrison AI

Centre governance	The local authority
Centre leader	Rachel Sharman
Date of previous inspection	N/A
Centre address	Cobden Primary School and Community Centre
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Linked school if applicable	Cobden Primary School
Linked early years and childcare	Cobden Child Day Care and Nursery

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.

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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

An inspection of the maintained nursery and the primary school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre coordinator, representatives from the local authority, members of the Charnwood Partnership for Children and Families, and a range of providers, centre users and centre staff. Inspectors observed the centre's work including provision at the centre and other sites. They looked at relevant documentation including the centre's operational plans, self-evaluations, key policies and safeguarding procedures.

Information about the centre

Cobden Children's Centre is one of seven centres in Charnwood. It was designated a phase one centre in 2007 and serves a large residential area with an ethnically diverse community in the town. The area is one of the 30% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. The area served by the centre is socially mixed and highly populated. A high number of properties are council owned. An above average proportion of families are unemployed. While the majority of families are of White British heritage, a significant proportion, around 15%, represents a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds, the largest groups being Indian and Bangladeshi. The centre's reach area serves an overall population of around 900 children aged five years or under. A high proportion of these children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills that are well below those expected for their age. A significant

proportion come from homes where English is not the first language. Within the area the centre serves, there are significant examples of extreme poverty, unemployment, poor health and low levels of literacy and numeracy.

The local authority governs the centre and has commissioned inter-agency partnerships to deliver the services and activities on its behalf in the local area. Representatives from all these partner providers oversee the projects for which they are responsible. The day-to-day running of the centre is coordinated by a local authority officer who also manages three other centres in Charnwood. The centre offers a range of health, social care, and education and family support services.

Childcare for children aged from birth to five years is provided onsite under the governance of the Cobden Primary School. Education for children aged between three and four years in the Early Years Foundation Stage is provided by the pre-school within the same premises. Education for children aged five plus is provided through Cobden Primary School on the same site as 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 users and the wider community

4

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

4

Main findings

The centre's overall effectiveness is inadequate in meeting the needs of the community in its immediate locality. Overall participation in activities remains too low to improve the learning and social outcomes for the wider local community. Not enough is done to identify individual needs and match provision accordingly. The centre's management processes are inadequate. Leaders do too little to consult with users in order to determine key priorities for service provision. While the short term impact of intervention is monitored by individual evaluation, not enough is done to identify the impact for families over the long term. Strategic planning is weak; the current development plan fails to identify targets against which it can measure success in many of the priorities outlined.

Aspects of the centre's work, for example ensuring that children are safe and healthy, are satisfactory. The environment is well maintained and staff welcome all those who attend the various activities. Parents say that they are happy with what the centre offers and enjoy coming. A typical comment from a parent is, 'I love getting out of the house and having some adult company and my child enjoys making new friends.' They say that the guidance they receive from staff helps improve their lives and supports their children's social development well. Thirty seven per cent of under fives in the reach area are registered with the centre. Those who attend regularly benefit from a satisfactory range of activities.

Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory. All staff and volunteers are checked appropriately to ensure children's safety. Security arrangements are good. All staff and partnership providers follow consistent practice. Risk assessments are generally undertaken for the majority of activities and regular safety checks ensure equipment and resources are in good condition.

The centre's provision is planned in partnership with five other children's centres in order to maximise resources across the area. Various informative courses for parents focus on healthy eating and encourage young children to make wise food choices.

Parents from diverse ethnic backgrounds say that their dietary differences are accommodated well in the cookery sessions. Good hygiene routines are established both for cooking and eating. Some activities, such as the very good library service, are replicated across centres, but other provision is not so immediately accessible. Occasionally, transport is organised, for example, for women to attend swimming sessions and for teenage parents to attend venues outside the local area. However, some users say that they are unable to travel to other centres and cannot, therefore, take advantage of what is on offer.

The centre leads a few of its own activities directly, for example, 'Stay and Play' sessions. However, much of the provision is commissioned through partnership providers. The quality of provision varies significantly. For example, courses to promote parenting skills and improve children's speaking skills achieve good outcomes. Other activities sometimes lack purpose and direction because activity leaders do not always have a secure understanding of the needs of users or how to ensure good outcomes. While children enjoy being at the centre, it is not always clear what they are learning or what progress they have made both socially and in their learning. The systems to monitor the quality of the provision and secure consistently good outcomes are inadequate.

Outreach workers provide effective support for a number of vulnerable families identified through home visits or referrals. Health visitors are diligent in supporting mothers with newborn babies and young children. They distribute information about services available through the centres, but the centre has no system in place to find out why a higher proportion does not participate. The centre does not have an accurate profile of its reach area in order to set priorities that effectively address local needs for all groups. For example, although the centre is aware that obesity levels have risen for children aged six, the 'cook and eat' and physical activity sessions fail to address this issue. The numbers of adults that have been helped back into education remain low, with only 12 enrolling on courses this year compared with 28 last year. No accredited courses for adults are undertaken at the centre. Adults are signposted to other providers, but the centre does not record whether users take up these options or how well they progress. Family learning, promoted through the primary school on site, is proving beneficial in helping parents support their children's learning at home. The centre provides effective support for families who are new to speaking English. Mothers and their children benefit from bilingual support to help their confidence and enable them to settle quickly. So, while the centre cannot guarantee to meet the needs of all, diversity is celebrated and discrimination tackled well.

Governance lacks clarity regarding accountability responsibilities. While each partnership provider ensures their staff are supervised well by their own agency, the centre is ineffective in coordinating the contribution of each agency to the centre's overall aims. The centre has offered a parents' forum for some time, but parents and carers feel they have little involvement in decision-making or taking greater responsibility in shaping the centre's work. As a result of these significant weaknesses, the centre's capacity for sustained improvement is inadequate.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Raise participation levels by assessing the needs of the community more accurately and providing parents and their children with good opportunities to extend their skills and secure future economic stability.
- Set clear and measurable targets as part of the strategic development planning process so that the centre can evaluate its effectiveness accurately.
- Monitor rigorously the quality of provision so that action can be taken to improve the outcomes for all groups in the community.
- Involve parents and carers more in the centre's work by:
 - giving them more opportunities to make suggestions and decisions about the centre's development
 - encouraging them to take greater responsibility in shaping the work of the centre so that more families in the local community achieve long-term benefits.

How good are outcomes for users?

4

Provision to promote healthy lifestyles is satisfactory. In partnership with health visitors, volunteers and others, mothers learn about the benefits of breastfeeding. As a result, breastfeeding rates have increased. Sessions on weaning and healthy cooking are well attended and popular and ensure that children have a healthy start in life. With increasing issues around childhood obesity by the age of six, not all families maintain the good habits the centre promotes. Activities to promote smoking cessation and exercise are less evident.

Baby clinics are well attended ensuring that health and safety concerns are identified early. Through sessions such as 'Babble Back', and 'Chatterbox', speech and language therapists and library services ensure parents have a good understanding of how to help their children develop speaking and listening skills. No data are available on immunisation rates in the local area. Antenatal services are not run on site but users are directed to other venues. Individual users experiencing postnatal depression are supported effectively by health services and other providers. While the rate of teenage conception in the locality remains a major concern, the centre directs teenage parents to a neighbouring centre where a good number benefit from support and guidance to help them take care of themselves and their babies.

Child protection is given high priority. The centre follows the local authority's guidance and ensures that all agencies and volunteers act accordingly to safeguard children's safety and well-being. The centre's child protection policy clearly states the named person responsible and notes what actions to take if there are any accusations against staff. Partnership providers use the Common Assessment Framework to monitor individual cases appropriately. Staff have had relevant training for first aid but, with recent staff changes, some training needs updating. Procedures

are in place to conduct risk assessments but, occasionally, checks lack rigour and potential hazards, for example during play sessions, are not addressed promptly. Fire safety procedures are clearly displayed and practised regularly. Courses targeted at parents who experience difficulties in managing their children’s behaviour help them to cope and effectively modify their approaches to ensure children’s well-being at home.

Children enjoy the activities the centre offers and have fun playing with a good range of toys and equipment. Those who attend the registered day-care provision on site gain confidence and independence as they learn and achieve well. Providers such as the library and speech and language therapy services record children’s progress and share this information with parents so that parents can support their children’s learning and development. However, the centre does not record the progress or development of the children who attend the sessions it runs, so there is no way of measuring outcomes for these children. Similarly, the centre keeps no records of the achievements of any adults that the centre refers on to other providers, such as adult learning. Case studies of those receiving individual support from the Citizens’ Advice Bureau run at the centre or Jobcentre Plus indicate that a few users have improved their prospects. However, the centre cannot quantify from any records it keeps how many parents have improved their economic stability and independence. In the few sessions observed, while enjoyment was evident, with no indication of starting points, progress and achievement are hard to assess. The limited data the centre supplied from partnership providers and the low uptake of accredited courses for adults indicate that users do not make sufficient progress in developing skills to prepare them for the future.

Most children in the sessions observed relate well to others and behave well. A few find it more difficult to sustain good behaviour. Staff treat all with respect and model good practice that most parents mirror effectively. Users regularly have opportunities to comment on sessions they attend, so that staff modify subsequent sessions. However, parents feel that their suggestions are not always considered and that they have little influence on what the centre provides for their communities. They have no representation on the partnership management board. As a result, users do not have sufficient opportunities to express their views or contribute to decision-making.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable 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 users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	4
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	4

The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	4
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How good is the provision?

4

Information is not kept about the centre’s success in narrowing the achievement gap for adults or children. Data are gathered for the wider locality but not analysed carefully enough to indicate whether the services the centre commissions through the partnership have had any significant impact on addressing local issues. The assessment of the needs of children in the centre’s reach area and monitoring their progress and achievement are not undertaken systematically. Although some professionals, such as speech and language therapists, assess the needs of the children they support and modify what they do accordingly, others do not. Centre staff do not track children’s development formally because the same children do not attend regularly. Some activity leaders are insufficiently aware of young children’s needs and development and so the sessions they organise lack structure, interest and purpose. As a consequence, play becomes noisy and boisterous and fails to move learning forward appropriately. Effective assessment by health professionals ensures that requirements are met satisfactorily. They promote healthy eating and sensitively address individual needs, for example, postnatal depression. The centre’s contribution to assessing the needs of the families in its reach area, and thus accurately inform provision that benefits more users, is inadequate.

The needs of minority ethnic groups are generally met satisfactorily. They are keen to participate more, particularly in school holidays when provision is not always as readily accessible at the centre. Weaknesses in assessing needs and using this information to plan provision limit the centre’s success in raising outcomes for more people in the reach area, particularly the most vulnerable. The needs of teenage parents and pregnant teenagers are addressed satisfactorily in the locality, through programmes such as ‘Young mums to be’ and ‘Parents with prospects’. Other than through outreach, the centre does not sustain this support for teenagers in the reach area after they leave the programmes. There is no procedure to register all new mums at the centre so that initial contact is established quickly. A few fathers attend courses or activities at the centre but the numbers are low and attendance variable. The centre has little up-to-date information on the proportions of workless households in the area, or how many seek support through the centre or elsewhere. The Citizens’ Advice Bureau and ‘The Bridge’ offer individual guidance, for example with benefits, debts and housing. Support for families facing severe hardship is particularly effective. The centre does not record such incidents and therefore can not use this information to elicit the key needs in the area or how many families have been helped both short and long term.

Some learning opportunities, such as family learning, parenting skills and English for speakers of other languages take place at the centre and benefit the adults who participate. Much of the education and training is delivered elsewhere. Take up and successful completion of courses is relatively low, resulting in limited improvements

in learning, development or standards in the reach area. As a result, too few participants are successful in gaining employment. Jobcentre Plus helps users explore their options and develop job skills, but the centre does not record the outcomes.

The quality of care and support given to young children and users who have specific learning difficulties is satisfactory overall. Vulnerable families are identified early and health professionals and social care are very prompt in providing appropriate support and are vigilant in monitoring outcomes for both adults and children. Outreach support for a significant number of families has helped them in a time of difficulty or crisis and the centre has involved other service providers effectively. The centre lends its support by referring families to specialist services and encourages these families to use the centre's facilities. The centre has little information to reflect how many children with disabilities it supports or how many of its adult carers are disabled as this information is retained by social care, health and education agencies. Little has been done to support those wishing to give up smoking or lose weight because support is not strategically planned and delivered. The centre does not have a strategic approach to ensure that safety in the home is reinforced rigorously to reduce accidents and injuries, particularly in young children.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	4
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	4
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

4

The responsibility for the overall leadership and management of the centre sits with the local authority. All those involved in the partnership understand the contractual arrangements and the partnership board steers provision satisfactorily. Partnership agencies are responsible for supervising their own staff. Some key partners, for example health, effectively support the centre's approach to integrate provision, but practice is not as consistently embedded among all providers. The centre has no procedures to monitor the quality of the provision or to analyse the impact of this provision on outcomes for users.

The care and well-being of all centre users has high priority. Safeguarding arrangements are secure and satisfactory. All staff understand the child protection arrangements and are vigilant in raising concerns quickly. Centre staff are focused on promoting equality and diversity, and this aspect of the centre's work is effective in supporting community cohesion in the local area. Through various agencies, the centre obtains some information about the needs of vulnerable groups, such as

homelessness, debt issues and drug dependency but, without accurate data, they do not know the extent of such needs in the local reach area. This makes it hard to evaluate how well they meet the communities' needs.

The commitment to serve the community well is strong and all providers recognise the benefits of working together to improve outcomes for vulnerable families and young children. However, this good intent is not supported effectively because strategic development planning lacks focus and monitoring lacks rigour. Not enough is done to assess users' needs and use this information to plan developments so that the gap between the most disadvantaged families and others is narrowed effectively. The current plan for the reach area lacks ambition and drive. It makes broad statements about the priorities for improvement, for example reducing obesity levels, but sets no targets against which success will be measured. Furthermore, it does not identify the resources required to address successfully each improvement priority. As a result, the centre provides inadequate 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 extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	4
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	4
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 evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	4
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	3
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	4

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

The inspection of the Cobden Nursery on the same site as the centre concluded that provision for childcare for children aged three and over was good and children achieve well.

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 the Cobden Children's Centre on 9–10 March 2011. Thank you for talking to us about your children's centre.

We judged the centre as inadequate overall. This is because the centre is not led and managed well enough. The local community is not consulted enough about the services the centre offers and the quality of provision is too variable. Participation levels are too low to benefit everyone who lives in the local area.

We agree that the centre is a pleasant and comfortable place to be and that staff warmly welcome you all. You said that you feel safe at the centre and that staff take good care of your children. You raised one or two concerns about limited space for children to run around in the activity room and staff will look at this immediately. We judge that the safety and safeguarding at the centre are satisfactory.

It was very helpful for us to learn about what you do at the centre and how this helps you and your families. It was good to hear that you and your children enjoy coming and that you find some sessions really helpful, especially cookery where you learn about how to prepare healthy food for your families. The centre gives you many opportunities to talk about eating healthy food and how you can encourage your children to eat more fruit and vegetables. You have a good understanding, through the support you have from health visitors, about how breastfeeding new babies gives your children a healthy start in life. A few of you said you would like more exercise classes to help you and your children keep fit and more activities in the school holidays when some of you have more children at home to look after.

Staff know some of you well and by working with health visitors, the Citizens' Advice Bureau representative and other agencies, you get the individual support you need when problems arise or you are concerned. We saw that those of you learning to speak English are doing well and that your children are learning quickly. While teenage parents do not meet at the centre, we know you have support from other centres to prepare for the challenge of being a parent.

There are a number of things that we want the managers of the centre to improve. We have asked the centre staff to talk to you and others in the community about

what you feel the centre should be doing to help improve the lives of families in your area. Centre staff need to build a more accurate picture of who lives in this area. They carried out an analysis of the community's needs some time ago but should update and use this assessment to plan more accurately the activities and education and training courses that you need. We know some of the other centres run courses that you can attend, but some of you said this is difficult and that you would prefer to have more activities closer to home.

Some of the people who run courses for you and your children have a great deal of experience and knowledge of how very young children learn and develop. However, some sessions are noisy and do not help you or your children to listen, learn and concentrate. We have asked centre staff to monitor, more frequently, how well sessions are run and how much you learn.

The centre's planning outlines what the centre wants to improve but it does not say by how much and how many people this will benefit. Because the plan is not very precise and clear, it is hard for centre staff to know how much difference the provision makes in helping families move forwards in their lives. We know some of you use many centres but the staff at your centre do not know how well you do there and whether the courses have helped you move into education, training or employment successfully.

We have asked the centre staff to give you a voice in what the centre does and how it develops. We know that you are asked for your views on what you think about the sessions you attend, and some of you meet through the Parents' Forum but the centre does not involve you enough in planning activities you think the community around you would like. We have asked the centre to include some of you in making decisions about the centre's work, as happens in other centres.

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