

Christchurch Children's Centre Cluster

Draper Road, Somerford, Christchurch, BH23 3AS
27 High Street, Christchurch, BH23 1AJ

Inspection date 28–29 October 2014

Overall effectiveness	This inspection: Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
		Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Requires improvement	3
The quality of practice and services		Requires improvement	3
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for children and families

This children's centre group requires improvement. It is not good because:

- Not enough of the families most in need are taking part in the centres' activities and only a minority of two-year-olds who are eligible for free early years education take up their entitlement.
- Monitoring and tracking systems do not fully record and evaluate the development and progress that both children and adults make. As a result, some opportunities for moving learning forward and improving the quality of the services are missed.
- Checks on the quality of services and challenge from the local authority are insufficient to bring about the rapid improvement required. Review meetings have been too infrequent and data is not used well to set challenging targets.
- Senior strategic leaders are not monitoring cross-agency partnerships to remove barriers to information sharing or seeking opportunities for integrated working with some key partner agencies. This has limited the ability of the centres to improve the lives of some families in the area.

This children's centre group has the following strengths:

- Effective day-to-day leadership and management means the centre is improving steadily in spite of a lack of strong leadership at the local authority level. The advisory board and the cluster manager have together driven improvements in the numbers of families accessing services over the last two years.
- Staff are well experienced and trained. Together with parents they are passionate about the services on offer and work hard to ensure those most in need get access to the services they need.
- A strong culture of safeguarding is embedded throughout the work of the centres. Relationships with social care are strong and ensure children are kept safe and parents receive good support.
- Parents are well involved in the running of the centre and are very regularly consulted on their views, which are promptly acted upon. Parents feel valued and respected.

Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children's centre group was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006, as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. The centres that form part of this children's centre group are Somerford Children's Centre and Christchurch West Children's Centre.

This inspection was carried out by three additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, managers from the local authority and centre staff. They also met health, education and social care partners, parents, early years practitioners, volunteers and representatives from the advisory board.

The inspectors visited Somerford Primary School, Christchurch West Centre and Little Explorers Nursery. They looked at the centre's self-evaluation, action planning, a survey of parents' views, a sample of case files and safeguarding practice, policies and procedures. The inspectors undertook a joint observation of Somerford Stay and Play with the manager.

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

Inspection team

Penny Mathers	Additional inspector, Lead inspector
Graham Saltmarsh	Additional inspector
Lesley Talbot-Strettle	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the group

Somerford Children's Centre and Christchurch West Children's Centre, together with Little Explorers Nursery, make up the Christchurch cluster. Some management functions are shared across the cluster. Somerford Children's Centre sits in the middle of the Grange Ward, next to Somerford School and Little Explorers Nursery. Both the nursery and school are subject to separate inspections. The reports of these settings can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Christchurch West Children's Centre is in the centre of Christchurch. The area covers the parishes of Stanpit, Purewell, Grange, Mudeford, Christchurch Harbour, Highcliffe West, North Highcliffe and Walkford. The local authority has been responsible for running the centres since 2012. The centres and nursery share an advisory board.

The Christchurch geographical area covers 20 square miles. There are 2,180 children under the age of five living in the reach area. There are high levels of social and economic disadvantage in the Grange ward and to a lesser extent in Purewell and Stanpit wards. There are pockets of deprivation among areas considered to be more affluent.

Priority groups are identified as teenage parents, children living with lone parents and children with additional needs. Most of the population is White British, with smaller numbers of Black and minority ethnic groups. Much of the employment is part time and often seasonal. Most children start school with skill levels slightly above what is typical for their age. A few children live in workless households and a few are eligible for the childcare element of Working Tax Credit.

The centres offer a range of universal and targeted services, including health clinics, family play sessions, parenting programmes, a young parents group, groups for children with disabilities, adult learning, breastfeeding and weaning support, and family support. Services are offered from the two main children's centres as well as at community venues.

What does the group need to do to improve further?

- Increase the number of children and families who use the centres' services and increase the take up of free education places by young children.
- Improve the monitoring, challenge and support provided by the local authority and ensure that accurate data is used to set and agree upon targets, so that leaders can judge the difference the centres are making to reduce inequalities.
- Strengthen senior strategic management, in particular in the local authority, so that:
 - opportunities for integrated working and early intervention are fully explored with partner agencies, for example closer working with midwifery services
 - the centres receive information about when children are born at the earliest opportunity
 - partnership working with schools is more effective in helping children to be ready for school.
- Improve systems to:
 - evaluate and record children's and parents' progress and use this information to inform future planning and drive continuous improvement
 - track those accessing early years education funding to ensure they make good progress and are well prepared for school
 - identify and measure the difference the centres are making to improving the lives of children and families over time.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Requires improvement

- The number of families registered and participating has steadily increased and the large majority of families in the area are now registered with the centres. However, not enough lone parents, teenage parents and pregnant teenagers are participating in the centres' activities.
- The centre has recently been more effective at encouraging vulnerable families to participate, including by visiting areas where they know a number of lone parents live in social housing.
- Effective partnerships with health visitors ensure the large majority of families, including expectant and new mums, are registered, but the links with midwives are not as strong. The low number of midwives has hampered communication and the centre does not get swift notification of new births.
- Work with families most in need is a priority for the centres and they work increasingly with complex cases, including children subject to child protection plans and families who have experienced domestic violence. Many of the parents who receive the good support are lone parents, teenage parents, from Black and minority ethnic groups or have children with disabilities.
- Staff have a good knowledge of the local area and know their families well. The centres work well together and advertise their sessions widely. Staff establish and maintain sensitive relationships with families and, as a result, families stay engaged until their needs are well met.
- Referrals, observations and links with a wide range of agencies are used well to match families to the right services. Many of the assessments at the age of two are undertaken at the centres, and the co-location with health visitors at Christchurch West ensures any delays in development are identified and referrals are quickly made to specialist services.
- Only a minority of children take up funding for early years education. A few families want to place their children in Little Explorers nursery but this provision has not yet been judged as good. While the centre is active in helping families find high-quality provision, they do not want it elsewhere.

The quality of practice and services

Requires improvement

- A good balance is achieved between services available to all and those services which are more targeted for those families with greater needs. Services have a positive impact on those from priority groups who participate in the activities, but too few currently access the centres.
- Parents of children with additional needs told inspectors how they value the specific groups and how in many cases the support they receive has been life changing.
- A good range of parenting and adult learning programmes, including literacy and numeracy, are provided and parents learn skills to manage their children's behaviour and develop their own employability and resilience. However, recording and evaluation systems require further development so that progress can be checked upon and leaders can easily see the difference the centre is making to improve the lives of families.
- Information sharing and communication with partners are generally effective and most families have a very positive experience of professionals working well together. Social care staff are very confident in the skills and ability of support workers to help families, especially in times of crisis. The lives of children and their parents improve considerably as a result of the good support and care they receive.
- Tracking and monitoring of the quality and impact are not consistently undertaken. Systems have not been fully developed to show whether children from priority groups have made good progress from their individual starting points and whether inequalities have been reduced.
- Partnerships with early years providers and childminders are good. Relationships and collaboration with schools are developing slowly and it is recognised that more work needs to be done to ensure children are well prepared for school.
- Staff work hard to meet the needs of priority groups. Specific members of staff focus on each priority group; they undertake consultations with parents and are responsible for improving outcomes. For example, the young parents group has a development plan and specific sessions, and the evaluation shows that this work has made a positive difference to their lives.

- Training and support for volunteers are good and opportunities are well promoted. A significant number of volunteers have progressed into employment either within the centres or externally. Volunteers take part in staff recruitment, attend the advisory board and provide good breastfeeding support as well as support for play sessions.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Requires improvement

- Monitoring, challenge and support provided by the local authority have been insufficient to bring about rapid improvements. Annual checks and reviews by the local authority have not been carried out regularly enough. As a result, the centre has not had adequate challenge to contribute to improved performance and reduce inequalities.
- Data provided by the local authority is not sufficiently detailed for leaders to use to set improvement targets, making it difficult to check on progress and see the difference centres are making.
- The local authority does not yet provide regular information on which children are accessing funding for early years education, so it is difficult for the centre to support or track these children.
- Senior strategic management within the local authority is not providing adequate leadership, and opportunities have been missed to fully integrate the work of the centres with partner agencies. Recent restructuring in the local authority has left gaps in knowledge about the role and responsibilities of children's centres and plans to improve this have been slow to develop. The manager, advisory board and strong staff team have ensured the impact of this has been kept to a minimum, but opportunities to move the services forward more quickly have been missed.
- Leadership and day-to-day management are effective. The manager has high aspirations for the centre and this has led to significant improvements in the numbers of families accessing services over the last two years. She provides good support for staff through regular observations of practice and supervision for both casework and personal development.
- The advisory board is well run and attended, with clear agendas and comprehensive minutes. Members of the board, including parents, give the centre a good level of challenge. Parents are well represented on the board and they report that their views are listened to and acted upon quickly.
- Staff are well experienced and trained and are very loyal. Many staff are parents who previously worked as volunteers. Staff and parents are very passionate about the services and they are keen to improve and work well together to develop services.
- Safeguarding is given a high priority throughout the centres and all staff receive appropriate training. Safe employment checks are completed and safety assessments are carried out on all activities. Good collaborative working with other agencies and good knowledge of safeguarding procedures and assessment frameworks are used well to reduce the risk of harm to children, including those subject to child protection plans and those in need.
- Resources are good and they are used efficiently across the centres. Buildings are light and bright and parents report how welcoming they find the centres. Many families access both venues for services. However, not enough families from priority groups are making the most of these resources.
- Parents are very well involved in the running of the centre. The frequent opportunities to have their say, to take part in recruitment and to be consulted on activities, together with the way their views are valued, results in them having a close connection to the centre. Surveys show a high level of satisfaction with the quality of services provided.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and as a result inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.
Grade 2	Good	Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children's wellbeing and achieve the stated outcomes for families.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.
Grade 4	Inadequate	The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services.

Children's centre group details

Unique reference number	80311
Local authority	Dorset County Council
Inspection number	447589
Managed by	The local authority
Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	2,180
Centre leader	Tracey Densley
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01202 221338
Email address	t.densley@dorsetcc.gov.uk

This group consists of the following children's centres:

- Somerford Children's Centre
- Christchurch West Children's Centre

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