

# South Somerset Children's Centre Group

Eastland Road, Yeovil, BA21 4ET

**Inspection dates** 1–3 October 2014

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>This inspection:</b>	<b>Inadequate</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>Previous inspection:</b>	<b>Not previously inspected</b>	
Access to services by young children and families		Inadequate	4
The quality of practice and services		Inadequate	4
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Inadequate	4

## Summary of key findings for children and families

### This group of centres is inadequate.

- The local authority has failed to address serious weaknesses in the group's work. Inadequate leadership and management at all levels have not been challenged or improved.
- Not all sessions and premises are safe. Staff do not consider possible dangers when delivering services.
- Some parents use their mobile telephones and cameras whilst at centre sessions and staff do not prevent this. This could lead to images of children being shared beyond parents' and the group's control.
- Not enough families attend centres in the group; only a minority of some priority groups use its services.
- Leaders and managers do not know the difference its services make to those who use them and so staff are not sure what works well or whether families are being helped enough.
- Too many family case files provide a poor record of family support work. It is not always clear why actions are planned or how families will be helped to improve life for their children and themselves.
- There are not enough opportunities for adults, including those who want to learn English as an additional language, to improve their English, numeracy and language skills. Little advice is given with money matters or on seeking employment.
- Play sessions are poorly planned and do not help children improve their learning and development so that they will be ready for school.
- There are not enough managers to oversee the work of staff effectively.

### It has the following strengths:

- A few families benefit greatly from using centre services and describe it as 'a lifeline'.

**What does the group need to do to improve further?**

- Work with the local authority as a matter of urgency to bring about rapid improvement in all aspects of the group's work.
- Increase the number of families who use the group so that at least a large majority of identified priority groups and those most in need regularly use and benefit from services.
- Improve staff understanding of how to keep families safe by making thorough checks of premises and by implementing policies on the use of mobile telephones and camera devices throughout the group.
- Develop and implement systems that measure the difference services make to families so staff know what works well and what does not.
- Improve the quality of family case files so each shows a clear pathway of planned actions based on an accurate assessment of what each family needs to help children be safe and well.
- Strengthen the group's management of staff so all receive the support and guidance required to fulfil their role effectively.
- Work with relevant partners to provide more opportunities for adults to improve their English, numeracy and language skills and gain help with issues such as debt, benefits and becoming employed.
- Develop closer links with schools and early years providers so children are well-prepared for school by:
  - improving the quality of centre sessions so that any gaps in learning are identified precisely and closed rapidly, especially for boys and children from poor backgrounds
  - improving the quality of communication and language skills for all children.

## 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.

This inspection was carried out by three of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two additional inspectors. The inspectors held meetings with representatives of the local authority, partner organisations and members of the advisory boards. They met with parents, staff and managers.

The inspection covered Birchfield, Chard, Ilchester (Little Marsh), Oaklands and Reckleford Children's Centres. The inspectors visited all five main centres and the de-designated centres used for services in Ile Valley, Ilminster; Ashlands, Crewkerne, The Levels and Langport. They also visited outreach services at a number of locations in the catchment area including Chard Baptist Church, Milford Hall and Martock Primary School. They observed the centres' work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation. They observed a number of sessions including a staff team training meeting, some Stay and Play sessions, baby and toddler play sessions, Active Tots, healthy child clinics and the Young Parents Group. They looked at information provided specifically for the inspection by Action for Children about previous evaluations, management systems and outcomes of those centres previously managed on behalf of the local authority.

During this inspection, inspectors asked additional questions designed to ascertain the group's view of the impact and effectiveness of local authority services to support improvement for children looked after, on free school meals and the most able pupils. This information will contribute to work being carried out by Ofsted to assess the use, quality and impact of support services.

## Inspection team

Susan Mann, Lead Inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Michael Ferguson	Her Majesty's Inspector
Penny Fisher	Her Majesty's Inspector
Megan Dauksta	Additional inspector
Patricia Collis	Additional inspector

## Full report

### Information about the group

South Somerset Group of children's centres comprises Birchfield, Chard, Ilchester, Oaklands and Reckleford Children's Centres. There are 8,916 children aged under five years living in the group's catchment area. The area is widespread and covers 370 square miles. Up until 28 February 2014, Action for Children managed centres in the Chard, Ilchester, Crewkerne, Ilminster and Langport areas on behalf of the local authority. Somerset children's centres underwent a significant reorganisation in June 2014 and now operate as 'getset' hub family centres. Once the reorganisation is complete, all centres will cater for families of children aged from birth to 19 years, although not all cover this age range yet. There have been many staff changes at all levels as a result of this reorganisation. Many staff, including the Service Manager who manages the South Somerset Group, have only been in post for a few weeks. Some key posts are yet to be staffed, including half of all early help officers (middle managers). All centres in the South Somerset Group are directly governed by the local authority. Intended services include health, family support services, play sessions and housing, employment and benefits advice.

Some centres are located in areas of high deprivation, most notably Reckleford and Chard. A small minority of families who live in the group's catchment area live in workless households. A few families have ethnic minority heritage, many of these having Eastern European heritage. Families can access a range of childcare from local early years settings and childminders. Levels vary, but most children enter early years provision with levels below those found nationally.

The centres have identified a number of groups on which to focus services. These include workless households and those with low incomes, families living in poverty, Gypsy and Traveller families, Navy families, families affected by domestic abuse, and families for whom English is an additional language.

## Inspection judgements

### Access to services by young children and families

Inadequate

- Too little information is gained from the local authority and partner organisations about local families and their needs. Leaders do not know the extent of participation of many priority groups, such as those living in poverty, naval families or families from Gypsy and Traveller backgrounds. Where information is available it shows that only a minority of some key groups, such as workless households and families with minority ethnic backgrounds, make use of services.
- Whilst a large majority of all families who live in the catchment area are registered with the group, staff do not make good use of information collected at registration to find out what services are required. Consequently, many families in need of support, including those expecting children, are not seen at the centres once they have registered.
- Staff do not give priority to increasing the numbers of families in need who use services. Family support workers are not present at some child health clinics and so miss the chance to meet many new parents who attend.
- Links with key partner agencies, including health and education providers, are not well established and do not facilitate prompt or easy referral to services available.
- Some sessions are delivered from community halls, schools and other venues located throughout the large catchment area of the group. This helps families access services more easily and without the additional burden of transport costs. However, some of these sessions, such as Active Tots and some Stay and Play groups, are so full that staff are too busy to speak with newcomers and get to know their needs.
- Leaders do not know how many two-year-old children eligible for funding take up their place at an early years setting. Therefore, they do not know which children are missing out or how well those who do use their place benefit as a result. There is better understanding about three- and four-year-

olds, and almost all take up their funded early years place.

### **The quality of practice and services**

Inadequate

- Leaders and staff do not know what difference services make to families. There are few attempts at assessing how well services have helped, but these are of variable quality. As a consequence, leaders do not know what works well, whether services and staff are properly deployed or the difference made to families' lives, as a result.
- Sessions are poorly planned and staff do not give enough emphasis to helping children learn and develop. Not enough parents actively engage with their children during sessions and staff do not encourage this. As a result, parents are not helped to extend play-based learning at home.
- The group currently offers a limited timetable of universal and targeted services that does not meet families' needs well.
- Staff do not make enough use of available information from schools and early years settings to help children fulfil their potential. Consequently, they fail to identify the gaps in children's development, and session activities do not address known areas of concern. For example, sessions do not promote the improvement of communication and language development or help boys and children from poor backgrounds catch up with their peers.
- Many family case files are of poor quality. They do not give a clear record of the work undertaken with individual families in need. There is little evidence of accurate assessment of family need or improvements and it is unclear how planned next steps will lead to a better family life. Management supervision of these files has failed to address weak practice or lead to improvements.
- There are insufficient opportunities for adults to improve their knowledge and skills in English, numeracy and language, including provision for those learning English as an additional language. There are limited opportunities for parents to improve their parenting skills. Parents are not encouraged to attend courses and, as a result, the take up of those on offer is very low.
- Too few parents are helped improve their financial circumstances or employment, despite family poverty being an identified area of local need. Staff signpost families to a few partner organisations including Next Steps and the Citizens Advice Bureau for help. However, the level of use or success of such advice in improving family circumstances is not measured.
- There is no organised volunteering programme in place and very few parents are actively engaged in working in centres as volunteers. Those involved develop workplace skills as well as improving their self-esteem and confidence. However, not enough parents get the chance to do this and effective recruitment procedures for volunteers are not in place.
- For a few families, one-to-one family support has made a positive difference to their lifestyle, health and well-being. It is to the credit of some staff that families already involved with family support work have not noticed the major management restructures that have taken place and their individual support has continued uninterrupted. However, there are very few such examples and only a very small number of families receive the services they require.

### **The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**

Inadequate

- Families are not safe during sessions. Some premises are not secured and gates are left open which could result in children and vulnerable parents being harmed. Staff do not enforce the group's mobile telephone and camera policy, and parents take photographs of children during sessions. This could lead to images of children being shared beyond the confines of the centres without parents' knowledge.
- Weak leadership by the local authority has failed to identify serious faults in practice, systems and management. Mechanisms designed to monitor and drive improvement, such as the Annual Conversation and quarterly reports, are wholly inadequate. As a result, the group does not help enough families improve their circumstances or enable children from disadvantaged backgrounds to

catch up with others.

- The local authority has managed change badly. Key information about good practice and effective systems was lost during the recent reorganisation. There were shambolic circumstances in March when contracts with commissioned partners had ended. Important information and good practice systems were lost, and those centres affected found themselves without computers and other essential hardware such as printers for several weeks. This limited how well staff could deliver relevant services to local families.
- The local authority has failed to act with sufficient urgency to implement the recently introduced 'getset' programme in South Somerset. While there are many plans being developed, most have not progressed far beyond the documentation stage and are yet to be established in practice or their effectiveness tested.
- Much of the middle layer of the group's management structure is not in place owing to delays in recruitment and staff illness. As a result, staff have not been supported and monitored well enough. This has resulted in inadequate evaluation of the effectiveness of services and lack of action to tackle what is not working well.
- The advisory board is currently under review. The new structure of local forums and one strategic board is in the early stages of implementation and its effectiveness is not yet known. Previously, individual boards for centres in the group were in place, but these have ceased to be whilst the new arrangements take shape.
- The new service manager has accurately evaluated the work of the group and has identified several key weaknesses. In the short time she has been in post, many improvements have been started, such as meetings with some schools and other key partners. However, the lack of middle managers significantly reduces the service manager's current capacity to deliver many of the intended improvements.
- Information about the progress of children subject to a child protection plan, looked after children and children in need is patchy because case files do not provide enough accurate information. Records show a few such children do well as a result of family support and partner liaison. Staff are beginning to assess children's needs using the Common Assessment Framework, but too many are in the process of being trained and are not yet confident in the use of this process.
- The local authority does not share information with staff about the learning and development needs of looked after children, those eligible for free school meals and those who are more able. As a consequence, these groups of children do not feature prominently in improvement planning. Thus staff and services do not prioritise their needs or ensure that gaps in inequality are closing.
- Physical resources, such as buildings and toys, are adequate. Groups available to all families are heavily attended but staffed too lightly. Effective staff deployment is adversely affected by some vacant posts and many staff being new to their roles; this means families do not get the support they need.

**What inspection judgements mean**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Description</b>
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.

**Group details**

<b>Unique reference number</b>	80821
<b>Local authority</b>	Somerset
<b>Inspection number</b>	452511
<b>Managed by</b>	The local authority
<b>Approximate number of children under five in the reach area</b>	8900
<b>Service Manager for the group</b>	Saveria Moss
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Telephone number</b>	01935 475938
<b>Email address</b>	getsetsouthsomerset@somerset.gov.uk

**This group consists of the following children's centres:**

20307 Birchfields Children's Centre  
20630 Chard Children's Centre  
21819 Ilchester Children's Centre  
22228 Oaklands Children's Centre  
22479 Reckleford Children's Centre



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