

Inspection report for Shrewsbury Area Children's Centre

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| Local authority | Shropshire |
| Inspection number | 361069 |
| Inspection dates | 19–20 May 2010 |
| Reporting inspector | Brian Padgett HMI |

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| Centre governance | Local authority |
| Centre leader | Mrs Julie Duncan |
| Date of previous inspection | This is the centre's first inspection |
| Centre address | Sunflower House |
| | Kendall Road |
| | Harlescott, Shrewsbury, Shropshire |
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| Linked school if applicable | not applicable |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | Sunflower House 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.

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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 an Early Years Inspector.

Inspection judgements

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

Information about the centre

Shrewsbury Area Children's Centre serves the Harlescott, Harlescott Grange and Sundorne districts to the north of the town centre. It is one of five children's centres serving Shrewsbury and the surrounding district. It provides the main administrative base for the Shrewsbury centres and two other children's centres at Whitchurch and Market Drayton. The head of centre for Shrewsbury Area Children's Centre has responsibility for all seven centres. In addition to the facilities at Sunflower House the centre provides services in a number of other venues nearby, in particular at Buttercup Lodge and Richmond House.

Statistical data for the Harlescott district indicates that the area is one of high social and economic disadvantage. Before the children's centre was opened the area was served by a Sure Start Local Programme. The population is largely White British with only small numbers of families from minority ethnic backgrounds.

A day care nursery, the Sunflower House Nursery, operates within the centre. This is run by a private provider, Hazles Farm Ltd. The Nursery was last inspected in February 2009 and the inspection report can be found on the Ofsted website www.ofsted.gov.uk

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

This is a highly effective children's centre that serves its community very well. It provides the full core offer for children's centres in more disadvantaged areas. It is exceptionally well led and managed and provides high quality activities and support for children and families, including for those who are vulnerable to having a poor quality of life. The work of the centre is making a positive difference to the start children are having at school and it is raising the aspirations of adults, providing practical help and support for parents and families towards achieving better futures.

The centre staff are highly ambitious to improve further. They evaluate rigorously the activities and courses they provide. The assessment of need is excellent. Senior managers are particularly effective in listening to what parents and carers say, whether formally in the governing Steering Groups, through written feedback from participants or informally. The lessons learned inform future plans. The success and quality of what has been achieved has promoted trust with users of the services and with multi-agency partners. Many barriers to improving lives have been overcome and the centre has outstanding capacity to sustain improvement.

Although the centre principally serves the community to the north of the town of Shrewsbury it also acts as a hub for other children's centres in the town. These serve broad geographical regions that include sparsely populated rural areas. Through a well managed and highly effective team of support workers, each with specialist skills, each working flexibly as needs arise throughout the region, the complex and varied needs of different groups of parents and carers within the wider community are met successfully. Support workers are highly appreciated by parents and carers and by the professionals and voluntary agencies working within children's services for health, social care and education.

Outcomes for children and families are good. The day care nurseries serving the centre and its associated venues were judged at least as 'good' in their Ofsted inspections. Local schools report improved attitudes from children who have attended activities within the centre and scores in language and in socialisation at the end of Reception are improving. The gap in attainment between children from poorer backgrounds and the rest is beginning to reduce. Headteachers attribute these trends to the work of the centre and its staff and to the improved partnership they share with early years services. The centre provides an excellent range of courses and activities for parents and carers. These are raising the knowledge of

parents and carers about healthy lifestyles and keeping their children safe. There is good access to adult and community learning with some notable successes where parents and carers have gained accreditations, qualifications and moved into work. There are good and flexible crèche facilities available so that parents and carers can access courses they wish to attend. The centre works especially hard to raise the aspirations of more vulnerable parents and carers, providing short-term placements for such families in day nurseries and with registered childminders. The management and staff are focused and resourceful. Where a need is identified, the centre uses its influence and extensive range of contacts to secure the service it needs. Such resourcefulness is paying dividends in, for example, promoting breastfeeding and in making sure parents and carers have access to information about benefits and advice. The centre provides outstanding care, guidance and support for users. This was observed throughout the work of the centre but was particularly noticeable in the provision for disabled children and their families.

The centre's leadership is acutely sensitive to the need to safeguard children and to promote equality and diversity. It meets all safeguarding requirements and more and promotes diversity and community cohesion well. It engages mothers better than it does fathers at present. It is very successful in supporting the vulnerable, such as working with midwifery services to provide for teenage parents. Through the quality of its work the centre has won the high regard of users and key services for children. It serves its local community well and it has far reaching impact on the wider community within the county. It provides an exemplary service.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendation for further improvement

- Increase the proportion of fathers taking part in the centre's activities so that fathers benefit more from the services provided.

How good are outcomes for users?

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Outcomes for children and for parents and carers are good. Those for helping families keep safe and for developing a healthy lifestyle are outstanding.

Evidence is building that, where children and families have benefitted from contact with the centre, children have a better start to school life. Headteachers record higher levels of communication and language development and better social skills. They report children are better prepared for school and settle into school more quickly. Furthermore, the children most at risk of not doing well at school are catching up in their development with other children because of the support the centre provides for them and their parents. The three day-care providers associated with the centre and its local venues have had good and outstanding reports from recent Ofsted inspections, benefiting from the work of the children's centre area teachers.

Parents and carers are increasingly aware of all aspects of what constitutes a healthy

way of life and of the needs of their children as they grow. Courses on healthy eating are very popular, as are those promoting an active lifestyle for babies. Ensuring the emotional well-being of parents is a high priority for the centre, particularly for those who have children with disabilities and who may be involved with statutory child protection agencies. Parents with a wide range of needs from those needing a little occasional reassurance to those needing intensive support have good outcomes.

Through the centre's extensive range of contacts, parents are able to secure practical help and advice on a range of matters, such as income and welfare benefits and equipment to make their homes safer. This support has a material impact in improving their lives. Parents participate well in feeding back on how effective courses are. They are fully involved in the steering groups that determine what the centre will do next. Many parents, some of who did not have a successful school experience, make good use of the adult and community learning opportunities provided by the centre and go on to gain qualifications and enter training and employment.

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| The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles | 1 |
| The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them | 1 |
| The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development | 2 |
| The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre | 2 |
| The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training | 2 |

How good is the provision?

1

The centre is extremely good in assessing the needs of children and families. Assessments cover the whole range of need, including the most vulnerable children and families. The centre has developed excellent relationships with the statutory, private and voluntary services for children and families. The centre staff have the respect of these organisations and follow clear processes that put children's and parents' well-being first. The centre's support workers play a key role in these relationships and assessments. They are very effective in supporting families, using their knowledge and influence to make a positive difference. They network very effectively, maximising efficient use of resources and expertise within the centre and more widely within the community.

The centre provides a very wide range of courses and activities for the community

aimed at improving parenting skills and life chances. Evaluations by parents are very positive. They enjoy the courses and are clear that they are better parents for undertaking them. The provision in the daycare nurseries is judged at least 'good' in recent Ofsted reports. Some of the courses take place within the centre but staff make extensive use of the other venues and a good number of services are mobile, such as the crèche and the Playbus. This ensures that services are provided where parents can most easily access them. Parents appreciate the opportunity to talk to health visitors during drop-in sessions, and a specialist midwifery service is provided through the centre for teenage mothers.

The good links with midwives and health visitors and good information systems ensure parents are made aware of what the centre offers at an early stage. Once under the care of the centre, parents receive excellent support and guidance, well tailored to their needs. For those whose needs are greatest, support workers provide close, personal support. For the families involved, for example those who may be suffering domestic abuse or those with disabled young children, evidence suggests the support makes the difference between improving life chances and an inability to cope.

The centre is very inclusive. The staff are experienced and have an excellent knowledge of the community and its families. Most families are of White British heritage but the small numbers of families from minority ethnic backgrounds, including Traveller families, are well supported. The centre has some success in involving fathers in its activities, but not as much success as with mothers. It is actively seeking ways of increasing the involvement of fathers.

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| The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users. | 1 |
| The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users. | 2 |
| The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community. | 1 |
| The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community | 1 |

How effective are the leadership and management?

1

The leadership of the centre is outstanding. The local authority provides a clear policy framework for the centre and rigorous oversight. Development planning for the centre shows a clear pathway from the authority's Children's and Young People's Plan and is fully aligned with the national indicators for children and families. There are clear policies on promoting diversity, tackling discrimination and ensuring safeguarding and child protection. The centre implements these policies well and safeguarding is exemplary. The centre makes a good contribution to community cohesion with its celebration of the different cultures within the community.

The centre leader is highly experienced and skilled and leads a team of exceptionally motivated senior and children's centre support workers, each of whom is a good manager with a range of responsibilities and significant outreach case loads. Each has particular expertise and there is a well-established tradition of improvement through training. Morale is high and there is excellent teamwork. Staff know their communities very well and have developed very good relationships with professionals working within health, social care and education. They know their families' needs and wishes and provide a highly effective link between other professionals and volunteers in children's and community services and the families. They have secured the trust of parents and carers, particularly of the most vulnerable and needy, who depend a great deal on the staff for advice, guidance and for practical and emotional support.

Listening to and taking account of what the centre's users think about the courses and activities provided is well established at all levels of leadership and management. Parents and carers participate fully in the centre's decision-making process. The existing steering groups are carefully organised to make efficient use of resources and to provide a platform for local issues to be aired. They provide effective governance. Governance is to be developed further by creation of Advisory Boards in the very near future.

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| The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood | 1 |
| The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community | 1 |
| The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community | 1 |
| The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties | 2 |
| The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults | 1 |
| The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities | 1 |
| The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide | 1 |
| 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 | 1 |

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

The outcomes for children who attend the day care providers associated with Shrewsbury Area Children's Centre were not inspected. However, information about outcomes was taken from recent Ofsted inspections of the day care providers.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Shrewsbury Area Children's Centre on 19 and 20 May 2010. We judged the centre as outstanding overall.

The centre is at the heart of the town's network of children's centres. Many of the key staff are based here. Teamwork is excellent. The children's centre's support workers are very committed to their work and are very successful in making sure that many of the children in the immediate and wider areas have the best possible start to life and that parents and carers are supported in whatever way they would like to be.

The centre is making a very positive difference to children's well-being and early learning. It is particularly successful in helping children have a healthy and safe start to childhood. It is supporting family learning well, working with parents from pregnancy through to when their children move into primary school. There are good and improving links with the local schools to build on the good start in the children's centre. Reports from headteachers and information about children's achievements at the end of their Reception Year suggest that children attending the centre do well in school. Children at risk of underachieving at school and in later life are a particular concern of the children's centre. They benefit most and are catching up on the achievements of children who have an easier start to life.

Parents and families were unanimous in their praise of the work of the centre's support workers. Parents explained how well staff supported families. Support workers help raise self-esteem and confidence, connect parents and carers with specialists, and raise their aspirations of what they could achieve. All the while, the staff provide facilities for their children and help carers develop their parenting skills. Several parents believed that their contact with the centre had been life-changing. Professionals working in multi-agency teams and voluntary organisations, such as the Toy Library and Home-Start, said much the same things about the very effective role played by children's centre support workers. They particularly commented on the effectiveness of the support workers in making sure that the whole family was fully involved in decision making; for example, in services for disabled children.

Behind the scenes, the centre is very well run and managed. Senior staff are constantly on the look out to improve services even further. It is successful across the full range of services a children's centre provides, including courses for adult learners. Activities are run in venues that suit parents and enable them to make quick and easy referral to professionals working within children's services, such as health visitors and speech and language therapists. The head of centre provides excellent leadership for her team. Senior support workers provide good middle management for support workers. The support team is well trained and supervised. Support workers have a wide range of expertise and carry varied responsibilities within this centre and in the other Shrewsbury centres. These arrangements work very effectively. The safeguarding and child protection arrangements are exemplary. The community has a very real say in the development of the centre and parents are always asked about their views on each activity. These help inform subsequent plans for the work of the centre. The links with children's health services and schools are strong and centre staff often act as champions for the family in multi-agency meetings to help children. The centre is well managed to provide equally for the diverse nature of parents' backgrounds, although fathers are not currently as well represented within its activities as the centre would like.

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