

Inspection report for D.E.L.L. Children's Centre

Local authority	Plymouth
Inspection number	362672
Inspection dates	22–23 September 2010
Reporting inspector	Mark Lindfield HMI

Centre governance	Advisory Board
Centre leader	Claire Devereux
Date of previous inspection	This is the centre's first inspection
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Linked school if applicable	High View Primary
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Playtots Nursery

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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 additional inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with representatives of the centre's advisory board, the local authority, partnership agencies, members of staff and users of the centre.

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

Information about the centre

D.E.L.L. children's centre serves an area with high levels of deprivation. A higher than average proportion of adults in the local area are on income support. A greater proportion of adults are in receipt of disability benefits than in other areas of the local authority. The proportion of vulnerable families within the centre's reach area is above those of other children's centres in the local authority.

An independent provider Playtots Childcare Ltd operates from the same site as the children's centre and is open 5 days a week for 50 weeks a year. The group offers Early Years Foundation Stage provision for children from birth to five years. The setting supports several children with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The overall effectiveness of D.E.L.L. children's centre is good, leading to good outcomes for users. This is because the centre has developed close working partnerships with a range of providers. Protocols for making referrals and sharing information between relevant agencies working within and outside the centre are clear and understood. Professional relationships between key staff in these agencies are based on a mutual understanding of each other's roles and areas of expertise. This allows the centre to refer families on to other agencies confident in the ability of staff to act on the referral and respond appropriately.

The quality of care for young children, parents and other users is a strength of the setting. The centre makes good provision for adults facing challenging circumstances through an active and responsive outreach team. Families expressed their appreciation of this aspect of the work of the centre and several adults spoke of occasions when staff had responded swiftly in times of crisis. An overwhelming majority of users reported that staff listen to their concerns and make them feel valued. Safeguarding arrangements are understood by all members of staff and there is evidence to show that the centre's proactive work with other key agencies has increased children's well being. The centre has clear and consistent approaches to using a common assessment framework and these facilitate the centre's partnership work.

High numbers of users report that they receive sound and timely financial advice. This is primarily delivered by an adviser based part time at the centre who has helped a good proportion of families to make financial savings. Staff have completed training on providing advice on tax credits, thereby increasing the centre's capacity to support a greater number of families in improving their economic stability.

Children within the Early Years setting make varying rates of progress across the different areas of learning. They make good overall progress in their physical and social development because the centre provides good activities in which adults and children can use a range of play equipment. These popular sessions are well

structured so that they incorporate healthy eating and relaxation periods and are differentiated to suit the age levels of children attending. Given the identified number of adults in the local area in need of support and advice in leading healthy lifestyles, activities aimed at increasing users' understanding, while satisfactory, is a weaker aspect. For example, comparatively few users attend the centre's breastfeeding sessions, are helped to stop smoking or attend adult healthy eating courses.

The centre has focused on improving areas of weakness, gaps in provision and outcomes. The centre is increasingly effective in gathering its own data to monitor the relative uptake of different activities and to gauge the effectiveness of provision and services. There are well-embedded systems to enable the centre to continue to improve and to target services at vulnerable families. However, the data provided by the local authority does not provide a clear picture of the numbers of vulnerable families in the local area. This hampers a more effective analysis of local needs and prevents the centre identifying where their services do not align with the needs of different groups of users.

The advisory board are providing satisfactory levels of challenge to enable further improvements to be made. Thorough annual evaluations provide the advisory board with a clear understanding of the centre's strengths and areas of development. However, the advisory board meetings have been too infrequent during the change in centre managers. The newly appointed manager has instigated shared governance with a neighbouring children's centre and is intent on involving parents and partner agencies more fully. She has spent time in her first few months quietly evaluating the effectiveness of the centre and is well placed to improve the centre's areas of weakness.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- With local authority support gather a more complete profile of the local area to enable a more rigorous analysis and identification of gaps in provision and services for vulnerable groups.
- Develop the level of challenge and support provided by the advisory board by:
 - increasing the frequency of meetings
 - ensuring greater representation from partnerships and parents
 - evaluating the extent to which the centre is meeting the needs of all vulnerable users in the local area.
- Improve healthy lifestyle outcomes for users by:
 - expanding the healthy eating training opportunities for adults
 - increasing the proportion of users successfully completing smoking cessation courses
 - increasing the proportion of users electing to breastfeed their child and sustaining this.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Parents show a good understanding of healthy exercise and enjoy the lively, Chatterbox, Tumble Teds and Baby Bears sessions. These activities are well attended and provide opportunities for parents to learn how to increase their children's physical and social development. The sessions are planned carefully and the family support workers use evaluations from parents to modify activities to suit the needs of children of different ages. As a result parents report that they feel valued, their opinions are taken into consideration and they grow in confidence.

The centre makes a good contribution to the safety and well-being of its users. A wide range of home safety equipment is available and in addition staff provide thorough safety assessments of the home. Parents report that these visits make them feel safer and increase their understanding of accident prevention. Good attention is taken over monitoring access to the centre and ensuring that parents and children are safe when using the childcare facility or attending activities. First aid training for parents and carers increases their skills and confidence in responding to accidents and emergencies.

Evidence from case studies and discussions with parents indicates the positive impact of the centre's partnership work. Parents who are experiencing change and challenging circumstances are well supported. A high proportion of users, including those who have been previously hard to engage, report that they enjoy coming to the centre and appreciate the welcoming environment. They are quick to recognise the quality and impact of the help they receive: one parent echoed the response of many by simply stating that without the centre, 'I wouldn't be here today.' Health visitors regularly conduct joint visits with outreach workers to hard to reach families, enabling isolated young mothers to join parenting courses and providing respite care for families with complex needs. Case studies show there is evidence of improved outcomes for children on child protection plans.

Children within the centre's Early Years Foundation setting with special educational needs and/or disabilities make at least satisfactory progress. Children are helped to improve their communication skills through intervention strategies and the support of a designated member of staff. All children within the centre use sign language with increasing confidence and this helps to create an inclusive environment where children of all abilities enjoy and participate together. Children make a smooth transition to local schools through the close partnership arrangements and where appropriate the support of an organised multi-agency approach.

Parents are involved in decision making and their evaluations of services and activities are valued and help to develop provision. The centre has encouraged children to provide their views and opinions of the sessions that they attend. The parent development group meets regularly and they have reviewed the priorities in the centre's action plan. Parents have contributed to developing the home liaison bag, selecting reading resources and play equipment.

The work to develop the outside environment in the 'valley' provides a good example of how the centre plays an important role in the community, helping to develop and foster community cohesion and acts as a focal point for many adults.

Information, advice and guidance available to users on a range of financial issues and to improve families' accommodation is of good quality.

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	2
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?

2

The quality of care for young children, parents and other users is a strength of the setting. Staff get to know families well and have a good understanding of the local area. They are flexible in their approach and responsive to families in need. Provision for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities is good. The interventions with and progress of all vulnerable families are well documented and used to inform partnership working. The views of parents and users are regularly obtained and used to plan and develop activities. Consequently, engagement between the centre and parents is good.

Partnership arrangements and clear channels of communication and referral with a range of partnership agencies help to provide effective tailored support for users. The centre makes good provision for adults facing challenging circumstances through these close partnerships. Outreach workers meet regularly with professional agencies such as child and adolescent mental health services to devise a coordinated approach and compile strategies based on individual need. The centre has developed clear and consistent referral processes and these facilitate the centre's work in partnership with other agencies.

The centre works closely with a range of health professionals such as health visitors, midwives, portage workers and speech and language therapists. Health staff feel a valuable part of the centre and recognise the benefits of close working arrangements in the increasing number of referrals they make to other professionals. In sustaining contact with families over time as they access activities at the centre, they are able

to offer further support and guidance.

The centre's initial assessment of need is thorough and the centre's data collection and analysis are improving as staff become familiar with the process. Data from the local authority and health service is poorer and does not provide the centre with sufficient information on the proportions of vulnerable families in the local area.

The Early Years advisory teacher has provided good support to local schools and to childcare staff within the centre. Local schools recognise the positive impact of her role on developing their Early Years Foundation Stage planning and provision and her encouragement to staff to observe excellent practice in other settings. Parents are encouraged to learn and play alongside the children through the introduction of learning liaison bags. These provide an attractive range of resources, books, puzzles, construction materials, and game suggestion sheets aimed at developing children's language and communication skills. Parents are encouraged and given increased confidence to help their children learn and develop. Childminders are supported through sessions held at the centre and are provided with support in planning and assessment of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Effective multi-agency working ensures individual children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are well supported.

Opportunities to access a range accredited courses and qualifications within the centre are limited by the current lack of space to provide additional crèche facilities. Adults are signposted to training opportunities, but for some families transport and lack of suitable childcare prevent their attendance. The centre staff are aware of these constraints and are confident that the transfer to new premises early next year will provide a remedy.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
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	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre's annual evaluations are thorough and draw on a range of feedback from users and partner agencies. Parents describe how staff gather their views: 'they love their sticky notes and ask you to put your comments up on the board.' These evaluations help a private consultancy firm to produce a clear and comprehensive

analysis of provision and outcomes. Consequently, senior leaders and the advisory board have a clear picture of the centre's strengths and weaknesses. Improvement plans are shared and discussed with the advisory body and the parent development group. There are good systems in place to monitor the centre's finances against quarterly budget reports to ensure that the centre provides value for money. This ensures that the advisory board provides satisfactory support and challenge for the leadership team. The centre manager has improved representation of partners on the board with the inclusion of Jobcentre Plus and is intent on increasing parental participation. However, the advisory board have met infrequently in the last few months and consequently are providing satisfactory levels of challenge and support for leaders.

The centre promotes the inclusion of all families and children. On registration users are asked to provide detailed information of their personal circumstances and interests. This information is used well to ensure that individuals are provided with appropriate services and activities through the centre's good partnership and commissioning arrangements. These arrangements ensure that the majority of users are well served by the centre and their needs met.

The centre gives a high priority to safeguarding and consistently implements policies and procedures to protect users' safety and well-being. Thorough staff training has resulted in routine use of the common assessment framework to make referrals to other agencies and to target outreach work. Protocols and practice for sharing information between agencies are effective, with good evidence of how staff at the centre have been proactive in reducing the risk of harm to children and families. The centre maintains good records as evidence that all staff and volunteers have appropriate checks and these are well maintained and up to date.

The centre gathers data and this is being used increasingly effectively to monitor the uptake of different activities and to gauge the effectiveness of provision and services. Key staff are set annual performance targets and are familiar with the use of data to monitor progress. Resources are managed well and there are clear procedures to plan services within budget and review finances through the year. The centre has increasingly targeted its actions on the more vulnerable groups and can provide evidence of good improvements for users. However, the local authority does not currently provide the centre with a clear and precise analysis of vulnerable groups in the local area. This hampers the centre's identification of those users who are not accessing services.

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	2

The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
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	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
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	2

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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the D.E.L.L. centre on 22–23 September 2010. During our visit we looked at the centre's plans and documents, visited a number of activities and talked with staff, representatives of the local authority, schools and with you. We judged that the centre provides good support for you and your families.

We were impressed by the close working relationships between staff at the centre and staff from a wide range of other professional groups. They work well together because they understand each other's roles and are willing to get the best possible advice and support for you. Over time they have developed confidence that your concerns will be taken seriously and that you will be provided with the right help and support.

We found that the centre makes you feel welcome and takes good care to give you their support and advice. Staff at the centre are prepared to drop what they are doing and pick up the phone or visit when you are finding things particularly difficult. Many of you told us of the times that this had happened and how their quick support

had helped you. Health visitors, midwives, family support and outreach workers were all praised for their friendly manner and the way they listened to what you had to say and acted quickly. We have asked the centre to obtain more accurate figures from the local authority about the numbers of families in the area who might be facing challenging times or difficulties. We recognise that the centre is helping many people, but it must ensure that it is not failing to reach families who need support and help.

Several of you told us about the good support from staff in helping you to sort out financial difficulties. You appreciated that they were willing to come to your home and discuss your concerns or that there were regular opportunities to visit them at the centre. Staff had also helped you to apply for work and had helped to prepare you for job interviews and sorted out your problems with housing.

You told us that the centre provided good support for those of your children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. We noticed how well children played together and how all children were encouraged to develop their speaking and listening skills. Knowledgeable and caring members of staff help to support your child's learning and development and prepare them to attend the local schools. The centre has developed some good resources to interest your children, especially their physical play. You are encouraged to help your children, for example by the learning bags that help them to learn and develop new skills through play.

You told us how the centre has helped you to develop and grow in confidence as parents. You are given opportunities to access training and qualifications, but this was made more difficult for you by the fact that the centre cannot provide a crèche at the moment. We have asked that the centre provides you with more opportunities to access learning and courses, especially on healthy cooking and eating.

We found that a wide range of staff and services help you to keep yourselves and your children safe. For example, you recognised the benefits of the home safety checks and the wide range of safety equipment on offer. The welcoming and friendly greeting you receive on entering the building was matched by the care taken to ensure that all adults signed in and out and were supervised by staff.

The centre often asks for your views and thoughts and uses these to change things to suit you. A small number of parents support the centre through the parent's development group where they are involved in discussing the centre's plans to improve. The centre's advisory board have met occasionally over the last year and we have asked that they meet more regularly so that they can provide stronger support and more closely monitor the work of the centre. The advisory board would benefit from the involvement of more parents and would welcome any of you who wanted to help.

Thank you for those of you who took the time to meet with us. We appreciate your time and send you our best wishes for the future.

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