

Inspection report for Stretford Children's Centre

Local authority	Trafford
Inspection number	362578
Inspection dates	3-4 November 2010
Reporting inspector	Sarah Drake

Centre governance	Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council
Centre leader	Maria Witcombe
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	Poplar Road, Stretford, Manchester, M32 9AN
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Linked school if applicable	NA
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	NA

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 one additional inspector and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with centre staff, parents and carers, members of the local authority and the advisory board and representatives of a wide range of partner agencies. They observed the centre's work including both group and one-to-one sessions and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Stretford Children's Centre was designated as a Phase 2 centre in June 2007. It has been delivering fully operational services since June 2009, either at the centre itself or from a range of venues across the locality including the Salvation Army building, Stretford library, Sevenways Methodist church and a number of local schools. The centre building dates to the 1970s when it opened as a local authority day nursery. The centre is operated by the local authority and supported by an advisory board comprised of parents and carers, and representatives of a wide range of partner agencies. The centre leader has been in post for 18 months.

The centre serves a densely populated, socially mixed area along one of the southern corridors into Manchester. It includes some pockets of very high deprivation, as well as large expanses of green belt along the Mersey Valley. The majority of local housing is owner occupied with around 20% social rentals and 10% rented privately.

About half the families live in areas designated as among the 20% and 30% most deprived in the country. The great majority are White British but around 18% of families belong to a range of minority ethnic groups the largest of which are Asian or mixed race. Approximately 25% of children live in families where incomes are low.

Around 18% live in families claiming a range of benefits and about 15% live in households where no adult works. Children's skills on entry to early years provision are broadly as expected for their age.

The centre offers: drop-in/ stay and play sessions; health activities including a breastfeeding support group, baby massage, speech and language walk-in assessment, dietician support, dental health resource packs; family support and outreach; parenting support; and a childminder network. Funded places for integrated childcare and education are provided, on an individual basis as part of family support packages, by two private providers. The centre has links to Jobcentre Plus and community learning at the further education college.

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

2

Main findings

Stretford Children's Centre provides a good quality service to its local community, effectively helping parents and carers to improve their families' well-being. All those who expressed an opinion value highly their experiences at the centre. 'You really feel part of the place', 'A godsend', and, 'If I'm having an awful day at home, I can put on my coat to go to the centre and know it's going to be a better day' are typical of their appreciative comments.

The centre's success is underpinned by the outstanding way in which staff assess users' needs and analyse this information to create a unique package of care and support for each family. Good quality partnerships and sharing of information between different agencies lead to swift access to specialist services so that problems can be dealt with at an early stage. A very careful balance between openness among professionals and confidentiality about individuals ensures that children and vulnerable adults are well safeguarded.

A strong sense of respect for all pervades the centre, creating a warm, friendly environment in which both staff and users feel relaxed and grow in confidence. Those with different backgrounds, ethnicity and needs feel equally welcomed and at home and clearly relish the opportunities to share experiences and learn from each other. The wide range of activities attracts good numbers of participants and leads to good improvements in families' health and awareness of safety issues.

The level of local children's skills by the end of the Reception Year is above that achieved nationally and the gap between those with the highest and lowest skill levels is narrowing significantly. Children contribute well to the community through their good behaviour and developing social skills. Good numbers of their parents and carers contribute to developments in the centre and also actively canvass others in the community to benefit from the centre's services. There is access to adult courses and some liaison with Jobcentre Plus but little hard evidence that this is having a significant impact on improving users' economic stability.

Good quality leadership and management ensure that the centre’s multi-faceted provision runs smoothly and is successfully focussed on improving the outcomes for children and their families.

However, although the advisory board comprises a useful mix of members with different expertise, attendance at meetings by some members has been relatively poor and there is currently no designated chair. This has an impact on the board’s capacity to offer support and challenge to the centre’s leaders.

Similarly, while centre staff do evaluate the impact of their work in broad terms, leaders are at an early stage of systematically collecting and using impact data as a tool for planning. Nevertheless, the centre has a clear understanding of its users’ needs and those groups that it wishes to cater for more effectively. It is constantly adapting its provision and seeking to improve its practice. This, together with the centre’s on-going success in relation to a broad spectrum of outcomes for children and families, demonstrates its good capacity to continue to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve the support and challenge provided to the centre through development of the advisory board.
- Make more effective collection and use of data to identify gaps, plan provision and evaluate its impact on outcomes for users.
- Ensure that links with Jobcentre Plus and adult learning provision are effective in supporting parents and carers to achieve economic stability.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Users enjoy attending the centre and many do so for a number of different activities. Parents and carers greatly appreciate that their views are listened to and acted upon but are also prepared to praise staff when they achieve a positive outcome in the face of some opposition from users. For example, a change from toast to fruit at snack time was initially not popular but now parents and carers are quick to acknowledge the benefits to their children’s health and some say that they now eat more fruit at home. Levels of obesity among local children have fallen, from well above to broadly in line with national levels over the past two years, in response to such initiatives and also to the good quality, on-site, input from dietetic staff. Centre staff are well aware that outcomes are not as positive in relation to smoking cessation. A great success is the impressive increase in breastfeeding by local mothers, many of whom now act as volunteer peer counsellors in the community and even provide guidance about breastfeeding to trainee midwives.

Evaluations of the popular baby-massage sessions, as well as, for example, guidance about sleep training and parenting courses, confirm the benefits

experienced by centre users to their family relationships and mental well-being. Such support, combined with close interagency working, is very effective in promoting the safety of those on child protection plans. Similarly, staff's excellent analysis of individuals' needs and good quality sharing of information between relevant professionals lead to looked after children and those subject to Common Assessment Framework processes receiving good continuity of care. For example, joint working between social care, the local college and the centre has ensured that the funded day care for one child is all delivered at one setting, providing the necessary consistency to help the child develop confidence and enjoy learning. Within the centre, almost all children behave in a safe manner and enjoy exploring the good quality, well organised resources. The secure, well-maintained accommodation, combined with staff vigilance, creates a relaxed, safe haven for adults and children alike.

Effective, early intervention by speech and language therapists is having a positive impact on children's communication skills. A neighbouring school has evidence that those children who have attended sessions such as Chatterbox, Talking Together and Two Can Talk, which are jointly delivered by therapists and centre staff, are more likely than others to join the school with the expected communication skills for their age. Parents and carers also learn new skills that contribute to their families' well-being. This may be on an individual basis, such as the better organisation of their home environment, or in groups, for example about how to extend their children's learning at home. Many receive certificates for successful completion of such courses but there is little evidence that many progress to more advanced, certificated courses. Nor can the centre provide evidence about users that have been enabled to return to work. However, users clearly benefit from the recently introduced drop-in sessions with Citizens' Advice Bureau personnel who have provided useful guidance about concerns ranging from working tax relief to customer rights in relation to a broken washing machine.

A vibrant parent group and a parent forum ably provide a voice for users of the centre and make a significant impact on decisions about its provision. Members of the group have recently carried out a leaflet drop in the local area which has inspired newcomers to attend sessions. They are currently developing a project plan to raise awareness of the centre's services through their organising a community celebration of the Chinese New Year. This follows on from the centre's successful Jamaica Day which, users say, '...helped to share our cultures and create a real sense of community.' This atmosphere of acceptance and welcome acts as a magnet to parents and carers who usually make first contact for Stay and Play sessions or breastfeeding advice but then capitalise on the holistic support available to improve their children's well-being.

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	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare	2

concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	
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	3

How good is the provision?

2

Due to staff's outstanding and sensitive assessment of users' needs, the centre provides a range of services that is well-balanced between universal, drop-in sessions and bespoke programmes that are tailored to individual families. Staff make skilful use of single-agency referral forms and the recently introduced graded care profiles and 'soul records', through which users evaluate their own mental well-being before and after intervention. They use them to build up a comprehensive picture of the family's situation and allocate to them a dedicated centre worker. Added to this is staff's expertise in homing in on the hidden messages being given by the parent or carer, or realising when, in the words of a health visitor, 'they are being economical with the truth.' Questions such as, 'What do you want from us? What do you think you need help with?' ensure that, from initial contact, users are being guided to take charge of their own lives. Staff are sensitive to, for example, some parents' and carers' reluctance to join group sessions or fear of attending appointments with professionals, and will provide support in the home or accompany them to meetings outside the house. Users greatly appreciate that, 'Staff seem to sense when you need to talk.'

The wide range of activities available at different venues within the community caters well for most groups. Plans are in place for the new year to introduce early intervention health services and more for young parents. Based on analysis of need, much emphasis is placed on promoting children's communication skills and on supporting victims of domestic violence. Stay and Play sessions are very popular, providing access to good quality resources, including a spacious outdoor area, and opportunities for social interaction as well as access to staff expertise. Planning for the sessions is guided by the children's centre teacher whose work across a number of venues ensures the quality and purposefulness of the provision. Monthly drop-in sessions with a speech and language therapist provide professional guidance close to home that can alleviate concerns and provide useful tips to help children develop normal speech patterns. They also mean that more deep-seated developmental delays can be identified early, leading to, for example, involvement with the special educational needs service and individual support. Courses run by the adult education college, such as the current Rubbish Revamp during which users learn craft skills and the usefulness of recycling, are enjoyable, popular and worthwhile. Dads and male carers find their dedicated sessions very useful for sharing experiences and helping

with, for example, toilet training and playing with their children. A recent session at the Imperial War Museum North introduced men and their children to story-telling, based on animals in wartime.

Health visitors describe the support provided by centre staff for families, some of whom have very complex needs as, 'above and beyond expectations'. Users' comments are overwhelmingly positive, summed up by one from the parents of a child with disabilities, 'You would never know how much this has helped the family and the relief it brought to the home.'

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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	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

A sense of dynamism and purpose runs throughout the centre, stemming from the leaders and extending to staff at every level. All are dedicated to ensuring that the centre serves its users well. Roles, responsibilities and accountability are clearly understood, with good access to support and training which are designed to enhance staff's expertise in the best interests of the families. The roles played by the centre leader and assistant leader complement each other well. Regular communication ensures that all, as necessary, are aware of any developments. Leaders understand the importance of evaluating the impact of centre activities and have recently introduced session feedback books for users and staff to record their views. Case studies and the new soul record sheets provide further evidence of the effectiveness of intervention. Through the local authority, there is good capacity to produce numerical data, provided the basic information is available, but the leadership's use of this as a tool to aid strategic planning is at an early stage of development.

Thoughtful reorganisation and planning of the membership of the advisory board has created the makings of a strong team of stakeholders, including good representation by parents and carers. In practice, apart from centre users and the representative from the early years department, attendance at meetings has been inconsistent leading to only satisfactory governance. At family support level, partnerships are good between centre staff and those working for a large number of different agencies. Good procedures for sharing of information between those who need to know ensure that work is not duplicated and families receive the support they need. Social workers comment that discussions, 'really do involve the team around the

child. Centre staff ask, what are you doing with this family? We hold each other to account.’ Staff from, for example, child and adolescent mental health services or the parenting service find the ready access to a quiet room, crèche facilities and other professionals at the centre, make meetings with families far more useful than in other venues where they might feel less relaxed.

Rigorous checks ensure that all who work or volunteer in the centre are suitable to work with children and vulnerable adults. Staff are well trained with regard to safeguarding and all place a very high priority on ensuring confidentiality. The accommodation, inside and out, is well maintained and staff conduct regular checks to assess safety. A broad range of services is in place to support those families where either the adults or the children have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Translation services are available if necessary and there are some dual language books in the library. Staff and established centre users work hard to include more isolated and vulnerable members of the community and the centre is in the process of gaining the Trafford Inclusion Friendly Stamp. Comments from parents and carers such as ‘the centre has helped me to continue interactions with my child at home,’ and ‘the Incredible Years course has been really beneficial especially when my son has his little paddies,’ and ‘staff give you confidence to support your own parenting’ confirm the good value for money that the centre provides.

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	3
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

The findings of the inspection report of St Matthew's CE Primary School, dated July 2010, were taken into account during this inspection.

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 Stretford Children's Centre on 3 and 4 November 2010. To help us make our judgements we observed activities, looked at documentation and spoke with a large number of service providers, professionals and parents and carers. Thank you very much indeed to all of you who helped us to understand the quality of services provided by staff. We judged the centre as good overall.

An outstanding feature of the centre is the highly skilful way that staff assess your needs and then create a package of provision in order to meet them. It may be that attendance at Stay and Play sessions is all that you and your child need to help you meet others and share experiences. However, many of you told us how good staff are at picking up the odd word, maybe your concerns about weaning your child or their stumbling over their words, and then arranging a meeting with an expert who can provide support at just the right moment. Together, you and centre staff enable your children to make good progress in their skills development so that they are well prepared for starting school. The centre also helps you adults to learn useful skills, such as baby massage or how to organise yourselves better or to eat more healthily. We know that some of you progress to college courses but we have asked the centre leaders to make sure that they do all they can, including developing stronger links with Jobcentre Plus, to help more of you achieve economic stability.

We were very impressed by the numbers of you who successfully breastfeed your babies and also by those of you who provide peer counselling support and have even advised trainee midwives about breastfeeding. It is also good that you are involved in attracting new parents and carers to the centre. I do hope that your Chinese New Year celebrations go well. Centre users have a strong voice in service development and are well represented on the advisory board. Although you attend its meetings regularly, some others who represent outside agencies do not attend as well as you do, so we have asked the leadership to improve attendance at the meetings. In this way the board can support the centre, ask lots of questions, and hold the leaders to account in a more robust manner.

Good quality partnerships between staff who work for many different agencies mean that the support on offer is cohesive and supports your families well. Centre staff are good at asking your views on the usefulness of sessions and also at noting how, with the right support, individual families become more confident and self-sufficient. At the moment they are only in the early stages of collecting less subjective information about the centre's success and using this to help develop further services. We have asked them to use such data more effectively. However, all in all, they have a good understanding of your needs and a great determination to keep on improving.

We wish you all well in the future.

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