

Inspection report for Cockleshell Children's Centre

Local authority	Southend-On-Sea Unitary Authority
Inspection number	366552
Inspection dates	22–23 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Katherine Beck

Centre governance	The Pre-School Learning Alliance
Centre leader	Lynda Baksh
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	Southend Adult Community College
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Linked school if applicable	
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY284617 Cockleshell 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.

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.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out in November 2010 prior to the inspection of the centre under Section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one additional inspector and one childcare inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager and her deputy, the nursery manager, community teacher, outreach worker, manager of another local children's centre, family support worker, childminding network coordinator, interim college principal, Jobcentre Plus, parents, carers, and representatives of the local authority and the advisory board. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Cockleshell is a phase one children's centre, managed by the Pre-School Learning Alliance that serves three electoral wards, St Luke's, Victoria and Kursaal, in Southend-on-sea, Essex. It is based in central Southend. Originally it was a day nursery and was designated a children's centre in March 2006. It is located in a building behind Southend Adult Community College. The centre has use of a reception area, office space and a multi-purpose room that is shared with the nursery. The area, among the 30 per cent most disadvantaged areas in the country, is characterised by high unemployment rates, families on benefits and workless households. The centre provides the full core offer including childcare, family support, Jobcentre Plus and links with child and family health services. It works closely with other centres and the college. Three quarters of the families are from White British backgrounds, while others are from Black African, East European or Asian groups. The area has a mix of housing types, including privately rented homes and flats. The Pre-School Learning Alliance has a contract with the local authority to run the centre. Governance also includes an advisory board and parents' forum. The centre manager is also responsible for managing Shoebury Children's Centre and is

based there. Day-to-day responsibility for managing Cockleshell Children's Centre rests with the deputy manager who was appointed nine months ago. The on-site nursery admits children from the age of six weeks. Most children enter the day care and early education with abilities much lower than those expected for their age.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Cockleshell Children's Centre is meeting the needs of users and the wider community satisfactorily. The centre has been through an unsettled time. For a while, part-time staff were presenting programmes in the centre and playing an active part in outreach work. This limited the number of users gaining support at the centre. The uncertainty about the start date for a building project to extend and improve provision for the nursery and the centre also held back further developments. The cancellation of the building project and the appointment of a deputy manager based at Cockleshell have enabled the centre to focus on developing its role within the community.

Changes to the managerial structure and deployment of staff means the outreach worker is increasing rapidly the number of families engaging with the centre. Staff are available to support families effectively in times of crisis and ensure the centre is a warm, welcoming and safe place to meet. Staff quickly put fresh programmes and procedures into place to support users. The centre manager, deputy manager and staff, who work well together as a team, are now implementing a clear development plan to drive the promotion of the full range of services more widely in the community. Sharply focused, challenging targets have been set and 'centre champions' appointed to enhance significantly the centre's role within the community.

Good care, support, guidance and safeguarding for all staff, children and their families are at the heart of the centre's work. Families know they can trust staff who are well aware of their individual and personal needs and help them in times of difficulty. They are assisted to attend meetings with the most appropriate professionals who help them to overcome their challenges. These include how to

keep themselves and their children safe from domestic violence. Case study evidence and personal testimonies show that the centre has provided good support to parents and carers in gaining confidence in their social and parenting skills. They particularly enjoy learning how to cook healthy food on a budget and ways to 'Play to learn' with their children. Some have gone on to become volunteers within the centre. Among the positive comments about the centre, one says, 'They know when to step in and help and when to step back and let me do it. They never overstep the mark.'

All children and families are welcome at the centre regardless of their need or background. To ensure that the centre promotes greater equality, demanding targets have been set to increase the number of families from minority ethnic backgrounds and workless households using its services. While there are signs of improvement in the engagement of these groups, they have not yet been fully secured.

There are strengths in the new leadership team and the manner in which it works effectively with the local authority and Pre-School Learning Alliance. These, together with a clear plan for the future, underpin the centre's satisfactory capacity to improve. However, systems to engage parents, carers and key partners in offering challenge and evaluating the quality of provision are not fully established. Meetings of the advisory board and the parents' forum are not well attended. Parents' and carers' views are sought about the content of the programmes and their overall satisfaction with what the centre offers. That said, few parents, carers or key partners are formally involved in the governance of the centre or contribute to its self-evaluation, decision making and development plan.

Leaders and managers have rightly focused on developing the provision for children, their parents and carers. Some staff work successfully across the nursery, the centre and with other centres to enhance provision. The accommodation, while small and limiting the provision on site, is utilised to maximum effect. Data are used well to target families and to provide universal services. It is acknowledged that the evaluation and proof of impact of the services on users' lives in the long term are not robust. Consequently, staff at the centre are unclear if they are meeting fully the needs of the community. A new system to help collect data is to be introduced with the support of the local authority shortly.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Collect and use statistical data to demonstrate the impact of the work of the centre in meeting the needs of the community in the longer term
- Implement self-evaluation procedures that enable all involved with the centre to reflect on its effectiveness and contribute to the centre's development plan
- Enable parents, carers and other key partners to have greater involvement in the governance of the centre, so that they offer challenge to the centre leaders and contribute to decision making
- Increase the number of families from minority ethnic backgrounds and workless households which use the centre and sustain their involvement.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The centre's provision enables users to acquire physically, mentally and emotionally healthy lifestyles. Children in the nursery and those attending sessions in the centre are encouraged to be healthy. They eat well during the day as an on-site chef cooks nutritious meals and provides healthy snacks. She shares her expertise with parents and carers in 'Bangers and Mash' courses that help them to provide healthy meals for their families on a tight budget. A volunteer dietician works with individual families to help them reassess their eating habits. The centre can point to examples of families where this is beginning to prove beneficial. Children take part in daily exercise, and the imaginative session, 'Pushy mums' assists post-natal mothers to get fit while pushing a pram. Advisory clinics for breast feeding, immunisation, significant mental health issues and teenage pregnancy are situated in other centres and users are signposted to them. There is insufficient information to show that provision to adopt healthy lifestyles is impacting on their lives away from the centre.

Children's behaviour in the nursery and around the centre is good. Staff ensure that all users of the centre are kept safe. Child safety week is promoted strongly and advice and resources are provided to help parents and carers understand safety in the home. Individual families have benefitted from support so that children have been protected from neglect and domestic violence. Case study evidence shows that the centre works effectively with a range of services to support children on a protection plan or subject to a Common Assessment Framework programme in order to keep them safe. The nursery provides a crèche or respite for families in times of difficulty.

To promote users' mental health, courses such as 'baby massage', 'Play to learn' and 'Place to meet' sessions contribute to enhancing the relationship between parent and child. Worries and concerns are eased through counselling, meetings with the Citizen's Advice Bureau, domestic violence and housing advisors, and home visits. These services provide the guidance needed for users to gain the confidence to make informed decisions. Parents and carers say that all the activities provided reduce their sense of isolation. Users can access advice to stop smoking and reduce their reliance on drugs and alcohol, but there is little information to show how effective this is.

Children in the nursery make good progress. The 'Every child a talker' project and nursery provision prepares children well for school. They are contributing to improvements in the number of children reaching nationally expected levels of achievement by the end of the Reception Year. The centre is enabling parents and carers to enjoy learning, make good progress and celebrate their achievements with the award of a certificate at the end of a course. One father wrote to the centre to say that the 'Play to learn' group had proved invaluable to him and to his son. All those spoken to said they were proud of the gains made in their confidence and ability to help their children more effectively. A small number are now thinking of a career in childcare and others have taken up courses to improve their skills so they are equipped to find work. This success stems from the good relationships

established between staff, parents, carers and children.

Links with Jobcentre Plus, the local Citizen's Advice Bureau and housing services are enabling users to obtain the advice they need to obtain work, the benefits they are entitled to and improve their living conditions. 'Fish and Chip' suppers and small group meetings are held from time to time to enable parents and carers to contribute their ideas about improvements to the centre. However, generally their contributions to decision making are limited.

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	3
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?

3

Appropriate assessment procedures ensure the centre makes provision that is suitable for users' welfare, health and social needs. Local knowledge, comprehensive data from the local authority and suggestions from staff and individual users inform the programmes presented at the centre. The prime objectives are to engage more families from workless households and minority ethnic groups. In planning the programme the centre places good emphasis on promoting purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users. The programme is an appropriate balance of individual targeted help and universal services. It enables fathers and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities to participate fully. Volunteers who speak English as an additional language support a popular session, 'Place to meet'. This successfully enables parents and carers to feel less isolated, develop friendships and enhance their children's language development. Other elements of the programme such as 'baby massage' are not always well attended. Limited space restricts the breadth of provision on site. The centre is actively looking to find ways to take its courses, such as 'Play to learn' to provisions such as The Storehouse, a centre that provides support with food, to engage families who may be reluctant to attend elsewhere. Too little data are collected to show the impact of the services on

users' lives, especially in the long term.

The centre's services are adapted to meet the changing needs of the community, but much of the health provision for young mothers, baby clinics and breastfeeding advice are provided elsewhere. To avoid new mothers having to visit two centres baby weighing is included in 'Play to learn' sessions as appropriate. Take up of courses and provision is at its highest in the summer months and lowest before Christmas. The outreach worker promotes the engagement of more users through leaflets, home visiting and word of mouth. They gain the trust of individuals and provide practical support as well as advice about the services available. Case studies show they are successful in encouraging new users to gain confidence and take advantage of the positive atmosphere offered by the centre. Adults or children with special educational needs or disabilities access all the programmes, drop in sessions and counselling, giving them increased confidence.

Good quality care for young children, parents, carers and other users is improving the outcomes for individuals and families. Free childcare facilities, combined with ease of access to the local college have made it possible for users to access training and development opportunities easily. Jobcentre Plus provides opportunities for users to enhance their educational and personal development. A few parents and carers benefit from the courses in the college to acquire skills in English and mathematics. Users also benefit from workshops that give good advice about how to be successful in a job interview.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
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	3
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?

3

Arrangements for governance and accountability are in place, but they are not consistently understood by parents, carers and some professionals. The advisory board and parents' forum have only been re-established recently. The advisory board does not have sufficient representation, especially from parents and carers, to ensure consistent high quality, integrated provision. Some key partners, such as the nursery manager and interim principal of the local college, are engaged individually in supporting and cooperating with the centre to develop integrated provision. Other partners, such as health workers are not engaged as fully as they might be because

of limitations with the building and health provision that users can attend in other centres close by. A clear development plan, drawn up by the centre leader and her deputy, sets out the centre's priorities for development. It covers improvements to be made across all aspects of the core offer and is shared with staff. The targets it contains are linked to individual appraisals so that all staff in the centre know the high expectations leaders have of them. Criteria to check the impact of improvements on outcomes for children and users in the plan are not always easily measurable.

All staff at the centre are resolute in their determination to make a difference to the lives of children, parents and carers within the community. The inclusion of children and families from all backgrounds and abilities is actively promoted. The 'Every child a talker' programme, together with signing, implemented in the nursery and now demonstrated in 'Play to learn' sessions, is improving children's early communication skills. The centre is aware that its engagement with families from workless households or minority ethnic groups is not as good as it should be. To help it meet the demanding targets set to meet the needs of these groups, leaflets have been translated into community languages with the help of parents and carers. The outreach worker attends sessions at The Storehouse, and is working with families from a nearby refuge. The nursery offers good child care, including crèche facilities for families attending the centre or courses at the local college.

Since the appointment of the deputy manager, resources are used more effectively. Her presence in the centre on a daily basis enables staff to work in roles that best match their skills. The outreach worker has time to support and involve more parents or carers individually. Space indoors is restricted, but its use is maximised. While attendance rates at some of the activities are low, if it is not possible to use the room in the centre, another is hired in the college to ensure the programme of activities continues and nothing is cancelled. Overall the centre provides satisfactory value for money.

Good policies and procedures ensure that all involved in the centre are safeguarded. Robust vetting checks are made when staff are recruited or a volunteer commences their duties. All staff are well-trained in child protection, first aid and other safeguarding training. Some have undergone training to empower those in abusive relationships to escape from domestic violence. Protocols for safeguarding have been agreed with other services where staff meet with users. Clear policies that are rigorously implemented protect staff when working alone or in challenging circumstances. All staff are alert to issues related to child protection in order to intervene quickly where parents, carers or children may be subject to abuse. In this aspect of the centre's work there is good multi-agency partnership to benefit the family and the children.

The overall evaluation of the centre's effectiveness lacks rigour in part due to the limited contribution made by key partners and the wider community. Data are used effectively to monitor the progress of the centre in its engagement of different groups and to set targets. However, there is a lack of information to check the

impact of the centre on outcomes and offer greater challenge. Case studies give the centre a clear view of its impact on individuals in the short term, but the centre is less aware of its long term effectiveness.

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	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
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	3
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	3

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

Cockleshell Nursery, EY284617 was inspected in November 2010.

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 Cockleshell Children's Centre on 22–23 March 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

You will recall that I visited Cockleshell recently with my colleague. We are grateful to you for taking the time to talk with us during the inspection. You said you trust the staff, they make you welcome in the centre and are helping you to begin to make important changes to your lives and to those of your children. Two of you have just become centre champions. You are looking forward to telling others about your successes and the way in which the centre may be able to help them. The volunteers clearly enjoy supporting the centre.

Cockleshell is meeting your needs, although some of its services are provided in other centres close by. This is because the centre has only one shared room to use to help you develop your parenting, social and cookery skills. You told us you enjoy learning at the centre and we know you are proud of your achievements and the certificates that you are awarded when you complete the courses. Some of you make books to keep a record of your achievements and show how you now play in a different way with your children at home. Children in the nursery and the crèche enjoy their learning and achieve well too as there are fun things to do. If you are really upset there is someone to listen to you and advise you how to get the help you need. Among the positive comments about the centre, one of you mentioned, 'They know when to step in and help and when to step back and let me do it. They never overstep the mark.' You find staff helpful but not intrusive in your lives.

You probably know that there have been changes to the staff and that the proposed building work was cancelled. The outreach worker is now encouraging more people to attend the centre. They are knowledgeable and helpful and know the right person to help you. If necessary they will go along with you meetings to support you until you feel confident to go alone. We know that you really appreciate the way the crèche gives you a break to give time to your studies and help you out when you are under pressure. You are confident that the centre takes good care to ensure that you and your children feel safe while you are there and when you are at home.

You know that all children and families are welcome at the centre, regardless of their need or background. Currently, staff are trying to encourage more people from a wider range of backgrounds to come to the centre. There are signs that they are being successful, but it is important that even more people are encouraged to come to the centre often to improve their lives too.

All the staff at the centre are keen for it to become much better. Systems to help you and others to have a say in how well the centre is doing and is having a positive impact on your lives are not fully established. We are aware that your views are

sought about the content of the programmes and if you are satisfied with what the centre offers. We know that the centre listens to you, but not many of you or representatives of the groups the centre works with are formally involved in the making decisions about the centre.

The leaders and managers have rightly focused on developing the provision for you and your children since the building work was cancelled. Some staff work successfully across the nursery, the centre and with other centres to help you. The centre has information about the areas you live in to ensure that it provides the assistance you need. It is not yet collecting information to show how well it is helping the community over time.

We have asked the local authority, leaders and managers to:

- Collect and use numerical information to show how well the centre is meeting the needs of your community over time.
- Introduce self-evaluation procedures that help everyone involved with the centre to reflect on how well it is doing and contribute to what the centre needs to do to become more successful.
- Enable parents, carers and other key partners to become more involved in the governance of the centre, so that you offer challenge to the centre leaders and contribute to their decisions about future developments.
- Increase the number of families from minority ethnic backgrounds and workless households who use the centre and sustain their involvement.

We wish you all every success for the future.

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