

# Inspection report for Sopwell and Verulam Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Hertfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	384077
<b>Inspection dates</b>	28–29 March 2012
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Jean-Marie Blakeley

<b>Centre leader</b>	Pippa West
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not applicable
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<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	Mandeville Primary School Watling View School
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	Not applicable

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 additional inspector and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with staff and senior managers from the centre and Watling View School. Inspectors also met with parents, members of the governing body and representatives from Hertfordshire local authority as well as a number of partners, including those from the health and education services and the voluntary sector. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

Sopwell and Verulam Children's Centre is a phase two children's centre. It fulfils its core purpose by offering family support, health services, family play, parenting sessions, adult learning and job and benefits advice. The centre serves a predominantly affluent, working community with two specific areas and pockets of deprivation. Its reach area covers the wards of Sopwell and Verulam. It is located on the site of Mandeville Primary School in St Albans, Hertfordshire, within the Sopwell ward. This ward includes one lower super output area which is ranked as one of the 30% most deprived in the country. It delivers services on its main site and in outreach venues.

Hertfordshire County Council has commissioned the governing body of Watling View School to govern and manage the centre. An advisory board, comprising professional partners, parents and community members supports the work of the centre.

Data from the centre indicate that of the 1071 children under four years old in the reach area, 8.4% live in workless households. The centre does not have accurate data for the number of families that are in receipt of the childcare element of working tax credit.

The majority of local families are of White British heritage; 29% are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The majority of these families are Bangladeshi but an increasing number of African, Pakistani, Polish, Russian and other European families are moving into the area.

Other than those provided at the centre, there are no local baby clinics, doctors' surgeries or dental services within the area.

Children enter Early Years Foundation Stage provision with skills and abilities that are at or slightly below 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 families**

**2**

### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

**2**

## Main findings

Sopwell and Verulam Children's Centre provides a good quality of service for children and families. Good leadership, management and effective partnerships are leading to cohesive provision and good outcomes for families.

The centre gives safeguarding a high priority; clear policies, procedures and staff training contribute to the safety and protection of families and children. Effective communication with other agencies enables timely sharing of information. As a result, the safety and progress of children identified as in need or those subject to a child protection plan are good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The inclusion of all families and children is central to the vision of the centre and is fully promoted in all aspects of its work. The centre has a good understanding of its key target groups and engages well with the majority of these families. A key strength of the centre is the very good support for disabled children and their parents.

The results from the Early Years Foundation Profile for schools in the area indicate that results have improved over the last four years from 55.9% to 66.1% of children in Reception Year achieving at least 78+ points and 6 points in communication, language and literacy. Data indicate that the overall achievement gap between the

highest- and lowest-achieving children is narrowing. This has reduced in the last four years from 41.9% to 34.3%.

Adults from minority ethnic groups and those with previously low educational achievement benefit from well-planned learning, including parenting programmes and literacy and numeracy courses. As a result, their personal development is good. One parent said: 'Coming here has opened up so much for me – there's such a variety going on.' Although staff evaluate sessions and group outcomes, systems to monitor individual adults' and children's progress are not fully implemented.

Case studies and anecdotal evidence demonstrate that some families are improving their economic well-being by gaining qualifications or progressing to further training, education or employment. However, the centre does not closely monitor the progress of adults in order to measure the full impact of their work in improving families' economic well-being.

Care, guidance and support are good for a steadily increasing number of families from the target groups. Partnerships with health professionals help ensure that families improve their health and well-being, and health outcomes are good. As a result, obesity rates of children in Reception Year are low at 5.4% and below local and national averages. Breastfeeding rates are high and above the national average at 56%.

The centre manager's operational leadership is excellent. She provides high-quality professional supervision for the staff team, which improves performance and drives up standards. The local authority's quarterly monitoring of the centre's performance contributes well to the improving provision. Governance and accountability arrangements have not been consistently understood because of changes in the leadership and the governing body of the managing school. As a result, governors have provided minimal performance monitoring and support for the centre.

The centre demonstrates a good capacity for sustained improvement. Outcomes are good and continuously improving because the centre constantly monitors the quality and impact of services and identifies how it can improve them. Families' views are highly valued and help to shape the range of services and activities offered. However, some of the available data lack sufficient detail, accuracy or relevance to the reach area. Therefore, it is difficult for leaders, managers, governors and the advisory board to analyse the full impact of the centre's work on the most vulnerable families in order to set precise targets.

The centre provides good value for money. It uses its resources effectively and provides good quality of provision leading to good outcomes for families.

## **What does the centre need to do to improve further?**

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Strengthen the role of the managing school and its governors in the support for and performance management of the centre.
- Measure the full impact of the centre's work with the families with greatest need by:
  - increasing the collection, collation and analysis of data
  - setting precise improvement targets
  - carefully monitoring the progress of individual children and adults.

## How good are outcomes for families?

2
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The centre is a safe and secure environment. Children who are subject to a child protection plan or the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process receive effective individual support and, as a result, their progress is good. Families develop a good understanding of how to keep safe and reduce the risk of injury. The centre's successful courses, including 'First Aid' and 'Parenting Puzzle', result in parents improving their confidence and parenting skills. One parent said: 'I suffered with postnatal depression, this was the only place I could go – it's been brilliant. They used to phone me every day to see if I was ok.' Another parent said: 'There's no judging of you here – it makes such a difference. My biggest fear is that this place will go.'

The centre promotes health and well-being well through its range of activities and partnerships with health services. Families using the centre are developing a good knowledge of healthy lifestyles because of advice and support which promote healthy living. However, the centre does not have access to local data on the full impact of health services on such things as immunisation or smoking cessation rates.

The enjoyment of children attending the centre is evident from their happiness and results in their good overall progress. Through a wide range of play and development opportunities, parents are learning how to support their children's learning. One parent told inspectors: 'Coming to literacy and numeracy classes has been amazing – I can now help my children with their homework.'

Activities to promote economic well-being are satisfactory. Adult learning courses and referral for employment advice are helping improve the economic well-being of some families. However, the centre does not have accurate data or records to demonstrate its impact on families. Case studies indicate that some adults improve their skills, gain qualifications and progress to further or higher education or employment. One parent said, 'The centre supported me to train as a baby massage tutor. That really helped as I had been made redundant.'

Parents and children of different social, economic and minority ethnic backgrounds treat each other with respect. They make a positive contribution to the development of the centre. As members of the advisory board, parents participate well in making strategic decisions for the centre. Centre staff routinely listen to and use the feedback of families to shape and develop its services. One parent said: 'If you

mention something, they will always try and change things to meet what we need. They are very welcoming of any ideas and feedback.' Volunteers make a good contribution to the centre and the community by supporting activities, running sessions and managing the toy library. This helps the sustainability of the centre.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

<b>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment</b>	<b>3</b>

## **How good is the provision?**

**2**

The centre's clear knowledge and understanding of the community it serves lead to the delivery of good-quality provision. The building is well equipped to provide activities for families. The centre makes good use of partners' venues to extend its capacity to deliver services and reach target groups. The majority of families with children under four-years-old living in areas of most need engage well with services at the centre. Services specifically provided for disabled children and families from minority ethnic groups have a good impact on their outcomes. The centre effectively provides specific support and learning opportunities for target families. However, not many of these families currently access the more general open sessions.

The centre promotes and celebrates learning effectively for children and adults. Sessions are well prepared and are of a high quality. Parents are encouraged to support their children through enjoyable activities such as 'Stay and Play' and 'Baby Chat and Rhyme'. Typical parents' comments were: 'Messy play is great; I wouldn't be able to do this at home,' and 'We come to Saturday group and that is a godsend – it is also a great opportunity for dads to come too.' Staff model good parenting in activities and use every opportunity to promote children's and adults' learning. They carefully evaluate sessions and group outcomes and use this information to plan subsequent activities. However, there is little assessment of individual starting points or monitoring of progress.

Strong partnerships result in effective care, guidance and support for families including advice on smoking, alcohol and substance misuse and sexual health for

adults. Family support workers are successful in working with families with circumstances that make them vulnerable. Parents particularly value home visits and individually tailored support and say that the centre has made a big difference to their lives. The effective approach to care, guidance and support results in improving outcomes for targeted families. Parents have access to information, advice and guidance on training, benefits and work. Typical of parents' comments was: 'The staff supported me by attending the "Team around the Child" meetings with me and looking around schools – they are like family to me now,' and 'It's built my confidence. It's nice to be able to talk and be honest.'

These are the grades for the quality of provision

<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>

### **How effective are the leadership and management?**

<b>2</b>
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The centre manager sets high expectations and clear direction for the centre's development. Day-to-day management is excellent and teamwork is a significant strength. Roles and responsibilities are very clearly understood and effectively delegated to centre staff. Governance arrangements are satisfactory. Governors have recently sought advice from the local authority in order to improve their role in the governance and management of the centre. As a result, the headteacher and governors are reviewing systems to improve the support for and performance management of the centre.

The centre staff team demonstrates a clear vision of inclusion and commitment to the success of the centre. Staff and partners share high expectations and ambitions, and their drive has improved services for families. Professionals from a range of agencies make an effective commitment to partnership working and to improving the life chances of children and families, which results in good and improving outcomes. The centre seeks and welcomes the views of all families and uses them well to develop the provision.

The centre promotes the inclusion of all families and children in all aspects of its provision. Staff ensure that their diverse needs are well supported and barriers to access are removed. Good individual support is provided for disabled children, which helps their progress. One parent said: 'I didn't know anything about the statement process – the staff here have supported me all the way through it. They helped me get her a part-time place at school and she is doing really well – much better than the doctors had predicted.' Families from minority ethnic groups benefit from on-site English classes while their children are looked after in a crèche.



The centre gives the safeguarding of children a high priority. It is effective in ensuring children and families stay safe through close attention to child protection processes and robust vetting and recruitment procedures. Strong partnerships are minimising duplication and enhancing safeguarding. Good links with a local women's refuge provide effective support for women subject to domestic violence.

Outcomes for families are good because the centre constantly monitors the quality and impact of services and identifies how it can improve them. Clear priorities are carefully identified within a detailed action plan. However, some data are imprecise and are not analysed effectively to monitor the full impact of the centre's work with the most vulnerable families.

The good resources at the busy centre are managed efficiently to meet the needs of families, leading to good outcomes. Families using the centre express high satisfaction and state that provision and support are good and make a strong contribution to their families' well-being. The centre, therefore, provides good value for money.

These are the grades for leadership and management

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision</b>	<b>2</b>

## **Any other information used to inform the judgements made**

## during this inspection

None

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](http://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](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

## Summary for centre users

We inspected the Sopwell and Verulam Children's Centre on 28–29 March 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you very much for talking to us and letting us come into your sessions. The information you gave and the stories you shared with us helped us to make our judgements. Many of you talked about how the centre has helped you and your children. You told us how the centre has supported you to improve your lives and how you now have more confidence. It was clear that you are proud of your achievements. You told us how it has become easier to ask for help and support because of the friendly welcome and the relationships that you develop with centre staff. You also told us about the friends you have met and the things you have learnt because of your involvement in the centre's activities.

You enjoy the sessions with your children such as 'Stay and Play', and the centre is very busy with high numbers of families attending. We found that children benefit from accessing services at the centre, but the centre has not introduced systems to measure their progress. The centre works well with the adult education service to give you access to courses to help improve your own education and future employment opportunities. The centre is successful at engaging with the majority of local families that need support. Provision for minority ethnic families is good.

We found out that many of you have learnt new things and developed new skills, and some of you gain qualifications, go on to further training or find work. You told us how the involvement with the centre and courses such as 'First Aid' and 'Parenting Puzzle' are improving your ability to keep your children safe. We found that staff have a good understanding of child protection procedures and that they are well trained.

Your children behave well and you learn more about how to stay healthy. We found that health outcomes are good overall. The number of babies that are breastfed at six-to-eight weeks and the impact on childhood obesity is good.

The centre listens to you and asks you what you think of the services and activities they offer. They change how and when they do some things because of what you say. Everyone seems to get on well together at the centre and there are lots of opportunities to volunteer. Some of you are involved in making strategic decisions about your centre through being a member of the advisory board. The governance

and accountability arrangements delegated by the local authority to Watling View School are clear. However, because of changes in the leadership and in governors of the school, governors have provided minimal support and performance management of the centre. We have asked them to strengthen their role in supporting and monitoring the performance of the centre.

We found that all the staff are keen to promote equality and diversity. Many of the families with the greatest needs are enjoying sessions to help them and their children. Families treat each other with respect. The centre works well for everyone in the community, irrespective of their background or disability. The support and specific sessions for disabled children and their parents are a particular strength of the centre.

The centre manager sets high expectations and clear direction for the centre's development. Day-to-day management is excellent and teamwork is strong. The centre has been continually improving and knows what it needs to do to improve further. However, we have asked them to improve the availability and use of data so they can more carefully monitor the full impact of their services on the families with greatest need and set targets for improvement.

We thoroughly enjoyed spending time at your centre, meeting you and your children, and we wish you and your families all the best for the future.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).