

Inspection report for The Willow Children's Centre

Local authority	Brent
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Centre governance	Local authority
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	The Willow Children's Centre 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.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 49 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 of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Early Years Inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the senior leadership team, frontline staff, centre users and representatives of the management board. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

The Willow Children's Centre is a phase 1 centre situated in the Kingsbury locality of Brent. It serves an area that is one of the 30% most disadvantaged, with high levels of debt and overcrowding. Children's levels on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage provision are generally below those expected for their age.

Centre users are from a diverse range of backgrounds with the highest percentage of users from an Indian background. The centre is a stand alone centre offering the full core offer including full day care and outreach services. The centre provides 12 places in the nursery for children referred by the special needs panel from across the whole of Brent. These children are provided with transport to the centre. The centre also provides places for children in need from across the local authority area. The centre has a management board that mirrors the set up of a governing body with parent, community and local authority representation.

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

The Willow has been through a long period of uncertainty and change. However, this satisfactory centre now has in place firm foundations to enable them to move forward so that they are better able to meet the needs of users and the wider community. The executive and associate heads have rightly concentrated on ensuring there is good provision in place, with a clear structure and strong senior leadership team to support the new head of centre when she takes up the role full time in January 2011.

The concerns about the lack of staff continuity and finances of the centre have been tackled robustly by the executive and associate heads. They have worked with the centre since April 2010 as an interim measure to look at the issues and propose a way forward. This has resulted in agreement to a more permanent structure for the centre that will reduce the amount of change in staffing which concerned parents. However, the finance issues have been complicated and have entailed the interim leadership team spending more time on resolving them than was envisaged. The executive head acknowledges that, as they have had so much to do to bring the centre back on track, they have not consulted with parents as they would have liked to before informing them of changes. To resolve the concerns parents raised over the lack of consultation, the head held two meetings to help nursery parents understand why the changes were needed and what it will mean for their children. However, users of extended services have not been involved in the meetings as the centre initially concentrated on nursery parents' issues, where they have had the most impact.

The centre has no clarity or information from the local authority about their reach area and funding allocations. The centre's reach area has changed twice since designation, making it difficult for the centre to show the impact of their services over time. This is further complicated by the lack of demographic information from the local authority about the make-up of their latest reach area which means they are not clear about the needs of the wider community or those that may be hard to reach. They have clear funding for children with special educational needs but there

is a lack of transparency over the funding for children in need. This aspect of the centre's work currently attracts a lump sum of funding without indicating the number of children the fund is intended to support. This makes it difficult for the centre to forward plan to meet these children's needs or to allocate their resources appropriately to ensure they are supported.

Although partnership working on the ground with health partners is effective, the centre is not provided with information from the Primary Care Trust about new births and new to area children. They also lack data from health about the need for, and effectiveness of, health interventions such as breastfeeding support and smoking cessation. This means they cannot identify whether they are reaching those most in need, nor do they know the impact they are having on the community as well as individuals. The centre carries out its own evaluations of the effectiveness of health interventions on centre users, and case studies clearly show the positive impact they have had on improving health outcomes for children and families. One parent commented on how the support from the centre for her child with special educational needs has been seamless so that she has not had to worry about who she needs to contact, to ensure her child's needs are met, as the centre does it for her. A representative from Jobcentre Plus sits on the management board. However, despite repeated attempts, the centre has been unsuccessful in gaining their involvement to provide information, advice and guidance to centre users or data to support the centre's setting of priorities.

The centre's approach to safeguarding, safe recruitment and child protection meets statutory requirements. Staff and users have a good understanding of safeguarding and the centre has a cross authority remit for supporting children in need. There is good promotion of inclusion with good access and support for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities being particularly good.

The interim leadership has focused on improving the areas of most concern in the provision and the centre is now showing a trend of improvement in its overall performance. However, the new structure and systems have only recently been put in place and are not yet fully embedded. This, along with general uncertainties about the future of children's centres in Brent, means the centre's capacity to improve is satisfactory.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Continue to build on the foundations now established to further improve outcomes for users by:
 - building on current partnerships and relationships to securely identify the centre reach and possible users
 - reviewing and implement strategies to engage the wider community and to assess and analyse their needs
 - developing services and activities in the centre to enable greater

engagement of the wider community.

- Ensure all centre users, and not only nursery users, have opportunities to put forward their views and ideas and to be involved in decision making.
- To enable the centre to continue to move forward, the local authority needs to:
 - provide clarity to the centre on its reach area and the demographics of the area to enable the centre to identify possible users and gain involvement of the wider community
 - work with the Primary Care Trust and Jobcentre Plus to gain their involvement in The Willow Centre services and to provide information that will enable them to analyse their impact on outcomes
 - ensure the central commissioning and decommissioning of services for children's centres is based on sound consultation with the centre about its particular needs.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The Willow provides a good range of healthy eating courses and initiatives with a nutrition worker offering a centrally commissioned service to families on healthy eating. Cook and eat sessions have helped parents to gain an understanding of healthy diets and this is supported by providing tasty, nutritional food in the centre. The Somali community worker confirmed that the sessions for Somali parents had helped them to use less oil and fats when cooking because they now know how to feed their children healthily and cheaply. The speech and language therapy service is very popular with users who especially enjoy the 'Time for Rhyme' sessions. The service is flexible to meet users' needs and can show real improvements for individual children. However, the 'Time for Rhyme' sessions are so popular that they sometimes have to turn away families and they are concerned as the most vulnerable are those that arrive latest and are the most likely to be turned away. The service also supports staff in the nursery and childminders, with agreement from parents, if concerns are identified for minded children. This is a centrally commissioned service that is able to work flexibly to meet users' needs for either group or individual support.

Users mainly say they feel safe in the centre, though some parents still express concerns about safety aspects in the nursery that they feel have not yet been adequately resolved. Dads especially state that they feel safe in the centre and prefer to use The Willow to other centres nearby. There is a rigorous entry system that restricts access to both the nursery and to the upstairs activity rooms, to ensure those using the services are kept safe and confidentiality is maintained. Parents have opportunities to attend child protection training to learn how to protect and safeguard their children. Some training programmes include information about safety

in the home with more specific home safety training planned for the new year. The Common Assessment Framework is used appropriately to support children and families who are in need of additional services outside of the children's centre. Case studies show this is having a positive impact on individual families. In some cases, this has prevented children from going into local authority care. However, the ongoing changes and lack of information about the reach area means the centre is unable to show the extent to which they are involved with the most vulnerable families and those who are hard to engage.

A qualified teacher provides support for the day-care setting, and childminders who use the centre, to improve their knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The nursery now has a clear structure and permanent staffing that will provide a familiar face for children and parents, and a more consistent and improving approach to supporting children's learning. The outreach workers lead the parent and toddler group held in Chalkhill Community Centre, modelling good practice that in turn supports parents to interact and play with their children. The centre also provides Schema training sessions for parents, focusing on different aspects of children's learning. As a result, children are now making satisfactory progress and parents are becoming more involved with their children's learning. However, the good practice that is sometimes observed in the nursery is not yet consistently embedded in all staff's practice.

The 'Strengthening Families' course helps parents successfully improve their parenting skills and is adapted to suit the specific needs of the group who attend. Parents who access the English language courses are becoming more confident. They form friendships that support them to access other activities in the centre. This training, along with an active volunteer programme, has supported some parents to go on to complete further courses and qualifications and a few have gone on to gain employment. The advice and guidance provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau is helping families to deal with issues related to debt and housing. Despite repeated requests for engagement with Jobcentre Plus, their lack of involvement in the centre, other than at board level, means that users do not always have ready access to information about benefits and tax credits. However, the Citizens Advice Bureau do what they can to help individuals and the 12 appointments available each week at the centre are nearly always taken.

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 concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and	3

governance of the centre	
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment.	3

How good is the provision?

2

The interim leadership team have rightly concentrated on improving the quality of provision so that it better meets users' needs and the priorities for the centre. The assessment of the needs of centre users is effective and ensures outreach work and activities are targeted appropriately. The Family Support Worker has formed good working relationships with social services that support families experiencing difficulties and change. She is a lead professional and is responsible for completing the Common Assessment Framework when there is involvement of agencies outside of the children's centre services. This ensures there is a coordinated approach to each child's care. Case studies clearly show how the centre's intervention in times of crisis has helped parents to identify and deal with the issues that affect them with the knowledge that the centre will be there to support them. However, although the centre provides places for children in need from across the local authority area, they are not provided with information about their own specific reach area to enable them to clearly show the impact they have made.

The Community Development Officer has formed good working relationships with health visitors in the Wellford Centre. The health visitors take out packs of information from the centre to new parents in the area and share information about any families who they feel may benefit from children's centre services. The centre has managed to set up an ante-natal clinic for teenage parents but has not yet been successful in getting this service for all parents to be provided from the centre. There is a baby clinic provided in the centre each week that has changed times so that it takes place on the same day as the peer breastfeeding support group. This enables parents and volunteers to have better access to advice from health visitors if needed. The new Head of Centre now attends case conferences to better understand needs and to clarify if the centre is able to provide the support needed.

Some of the centre services are centrally commissioned by the local authority. This can work well, as in the case of speech and language therapy, but sometimes services are commissioned or decommissioned without consultation with the centre about the impact it will have. For example, there was a very successful partnership in the centre with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) that was removed from the centre leaving a gap in provision where there was still a need. The centre commissioned its own counselling service as a result; however, limited finances mean local commissioning is not always possible.

Parents have many opportunities to be involved in purposeful learning. The centre currently has 14 volunteers with some volunteers attending childcare courses leading to qualifications. Some of those who completed the training for breastfeeding peer

support have since gained employment, with one volunteer being asked to set up a similar service in another London authority. Certificates are given on completion of courses and a big award ceremony celebrated the achievement of users who had completed the 'Strengthening Families' course, to which the local press were invited.

There are good links with community groups, such as the Somali community, to gain an understanding of any specific needs. The centre has 12 places for children from across the borough with complex needs. Adaptations are made and specialised equipment is available to ensure all children have the opportunity to be fully involved in centre activities.

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	3
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?

3

There is a recently established management board that is clear about what they want the centre to achieve in the future. However, there are several members new to the board, including four parents, who acknowledge they will need further support and training to enable them to carry out their duties effectively. The management board, that is in effect an advisory board, has been set up to mirror a governing body but without the legal powers as this is a local authority-led centre. However, both the management board and the centre leadership are concerned that the local authority does not always interact with or challenge the centre appropriately. The extended services team are skilled and committed to improving outcomes for children. They continued to drive the outreach and activities in the centre even when they were without clear leadership or the ability to make strategic decisions. The new structure and substantive head of centre post will ensure there will be someone at a senior level to stand up for the centre in the future. The changes to staffing and recruitment to posts are not yet completed but the centre leadership has wanted to ensure they have the right people in post to take the centre forward, which means that appointments have not always been made after the first advertisement.

Inclusive practice is at the heart of this children's centre. The Somali women's group value their links with the centre and many attend other services and activities following on from their good experiences on the English language course. The dads' group at the centre is very popular and courses and activities are targeted at their particular needs. Staff and volunteers from different backgrounds, including bilingual staff, support families who speak little or no English to access services in the centre.

Work with the teenage community is also progressing. Access for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities is particularly good.

All required safeguarding policies and procedures are in place. Checks are completed on staff before they start working in the centre. Risk assessments are in place with daily risk reviews carried out by staff. Staff know and understand what to do to ensure children are safeguarded. Parents feel secure enough to be able to raise safeguarding issues, and are referred on to counselling or for outreach support if needed.

Partnerships with other agencies are effective on the ground but partners such as health are not fully engaged with the centre at all levels. An effective partnership with the neighbouring primary school is resulting in some joint activities and support groups. User involvement is increasing, with parents sitting on the management board and parent forums that the head and parent representatives attend. This enables more parents to put forward their views, ideas and concerns.

The process of planning and self-evaluation shows that the interim and new heads of centre have a good understanding of the priorities for the centre and the order in which these need to be tackled. The operational plan identifies clear targets for improvement with dates for completion. This is supported by Red-Amber-Green (RAG) reports to the management board that provides them with the information they need to challenge the centre leadership and monitor the centre's progress. Much qualitative analysis is undertaken by the centre and local intelligence and work with partners are used well to assess the needs of users and targeted groups. However, there is insufficient information from the local authority or other essential partners such as health and Jobcentre Plus. This prevents the centre from being able to fully analyse their impact or compare data to help set performance targets to drive improvement and provide services for those who are hardest to reach. Data on outcomes for users has been gathered in the past and e.start can show progress for individual families. However, this has not been analysed recently due to the pressure of sorting out the financial problems. The Performance Monitoring Officer has put in place clear evaluation forms that provide both quantitative and qualitative data about the services and activities being evaluated. She provides a report for the board about what went well, and includes actions and recommendations for future improvements. There is now a clear operational plan in place and regular reports to board but this is just at the beginning and is not yet showing the impact of the changes.

The centre is very well used, and some popular sessions also take place at Chalkhill Community Centre. Currently, the centre is aware it is only reaching a limited range of users, but has rightly concentrated on getting things right for current users before reaching out to the wider community. Users state that provision generally meets their needs, though capacity limits the number of activities available or users who can attend. Finances are now back on track but the centre is aware that it needs clear information on future funding and centrally commissioned services to enable them to ensure they can improve on their satisfactory value for money.

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	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	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

An inspection of the registered early years provision in the centre took place on Monday 29 November 2010. The outcome of the inspection was used to inform the judgements made during this inspection.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the The Willow Children's Centre on 1–2 December 2010. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We would like to thank those of you who made us feel so welcome and took the time to attend one of our meetings or talk to us as we moved around the centre. We listened carefully to what you had to tell us and included your views when we made our judgements about the centre. Your comments were very important to us.

The Willow has been through a period of significant change but a new structure has been agreed. The executive head is busy putting as much in place as possible before the end of December so that the new head is well supported when she starts working full time at the centre in January. Some of you told us that you would have liked more consultation about the changes. The head recognises she needs to keep you well informed about any changes and is holding monthly meetings to ensure you are kept well informed in the future.

Most of you told us that you feel safe in the centre and value the opportunities to learn how to ensure your children are safeguarded. The outreach services are particularly good at supporting users in times of crisis, and have formed good relationships with health and social services to ensure those of you who need additional support receive it. Those of you we spoke to told us that the centre provides a range of services that help you and your children to learn new skills, make friends and develop as healthy and confident people. The centre clearly helps you to be healthy by providing good opportunities for you to learn to cook healthy meals and provide healthy food for your children. You also appreciate the opportunities for your children to play outdoors and be involved in physical activities. We liked to hear how you have been supported to access training, which in some cases has led on to qualifications and getting back into work.

We have heard that some of you are now involved in the management board and will be able to put forward parents' ideas, concerns and challenges to the centre leadership and the local authority. However, the centre needs clear information from the local authority, and partners such as health, so that they can clearly identify who is in the centre's reach area, to ensure that services and activities meet the needs of current users and the wider community.

The centre is good at helping you to get to know each other and understand the wide range of cultures in your community. The way that we saw you get on with people from such diverse backgrounds was inspiring, and we thought that the support for children with complex needs was particularly good at ensuring they were fully involved in activities and the life of the centre.

We have asked the centre, and Brent Council, to do a number of things that will make it even better for you and your children. We have asked the centre to build on the foundations put in place by the executive head so that they are better able to identify and meet the needs of the wider community. We recognise that many of the changes have had the most impact on centre users who use the nursery provision, so the head has rightly concentrated on making sure those of you who use the nursery have had an opportunity to express their views. However, we have asked the centre to ensure that all parents, including those who use only extended services, have opportunities to put forward their views and ideas at parents' forum meetings.

To make sure the centre is supported to do this, we have asked the local authority to work with partners like health and Jobcentre Plus to provide information about the

reach area of the centre and to consult with the centre about centrally commissioned services.

Thank you once again for your time.

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