

Inspection report for Willows Children's Centre

Local authority	Portsmouth
Inspection number	362674
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Reporting inspector	James Henry

Centre governance	The governing body of Willows Centre for Children
Centre leader	Margaret Dunford
Date of previous inspection	N/A
Centre address	Battenburg Avenue Portsmouth Hampshire PO2 0SN
Telephone number	0239 2666918
Fax number	0239 2666918
Email address	inbox@willows.portsmouth.sch.uk

Linked school if applicable	Willows Centre for Children Nursery School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Willows Centre for Children day care

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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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 two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with centre leaders, local authority officers, health professionals, local community partners and parents and carers that use the centre.

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

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Information about the centre

Willows Children's Centre serves a less disadvantaged residential area in the Copnor district of Portsmouth. While providing separate services, it is based in Willows Centre for Children, which is a maintained special nursery school and Early Excellence Centre, which serves children from across the city who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Most families in the areas are working and the majority come from White British backgrounds. There are few families on benefits. On entry to the pre-school provision, children's development varies but is generally below that expected.

The local authority has delegated responsibility for the governance of the children's centre to the governors of Willows Centre for Children. The children's centre opened in October 2005 as a Phase 1 Sure Start children's centre. It does not provide the full core offer of services but users can access a range of services including child care, pre-school education, health care, family support and home visits.

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

Willows Children's Centre is a friendly, welcoming place. Parents and carers appreciate not only the services that are provided but also the staff, who are approachable and caring. As one parent commented, 'They really listen to you.' Users have confidence in the work and support given by staff because they feel safe in the centre. Safeguarding procedures are fully in place, robustly followed and reviewed regularly. Staff are well trained and vigilant in order to ensure the well-being of the children and parents and carers using the centre's services.

Centre leaders have developed effective relationships with other local service providers so that they can work cohesively as a team. Children, parents and carers enjoy the activities provided, as shown by the high participation rates. However, the centre is aware that it is not fully reaching all groups of potential users, especially the more vulnerable groups in the community. Being based in a special needs nursery school unit has meant that some in the community view the centre's provision as being primarily for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. To reach out into the community more effectively, centre leaders are beginning to use other venues, especially local churches, to deliver the services on offer.

While the centre is a welcoming place, parents and carers from all sections of the community are not fully engaged in systematically informing the centre about activities that would meet their needs. However, the services provided, including parenting strategies, are making a real difference to some of the more vulnerable families, due to the multi-disciplinary support given.

Willows Children's Centre is inclusive in its approach. For example, 'Men United', where fathers, grandfathers, uncles and brothers share breakfast and creative activities such as singing with children in their families, is very popular. Also parents who arrive from other countries are welcomed and supported to access services that are available both at the centre and across the city of Portsmouth. Using the expertise of staff in the special needs nursery unit means that children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress in their personal development given their starting points.

Recent data from the local authority and local schools shows that the work of the centre is beginning to improve children's basic communication, language and literacy skills and help them attain levels that are closer to those expected nationally. However, there is a lack of robust evidence, including data, to measure the overall impact of the centre's work. While governors monitor and receive reports on the work of the children's centre, the availability and use of data to identify the most vulnerable groups within the centre's reach is at an early stage of development. Therefore leaders at all levels in the centre, including governors, are not fully informed about the needs of the most vulnerable groups and how their requirements can be met. There is satisfactory capacity for sustaining further improvements. Leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of the centre and have the commitment and ability to continue developing provision, particularly for the more vulnerable groups in the local community.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- With local authority support, develop a more robust system for collecting evidence, including using data, to inform and hold leaders to account for the impact of the centre's work.
- Ensure that the centre identifies and accesses the more vulnerable groups in the community to engage them in appropriate services to raise outcomes for families and children.
- Raise the profile of the centre through engaging more parents, from all parts of the community, in the work of the centre so users' needs are more effectively identified and met.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

Outcomes for users are satisfactory overall but the centre has a lack of statistical evidence to show how effective services are in improving the lives of families in the local area. Parents and carers and their children are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles. When asked, parents and carers spoke enthusiastically about the swimming lessons provided and the need to be proactive in booking a place on cookery classes because they were always oversubscribed. Meals at the centre are either brought in by an outside provider or cooked on the premises. Both systems provide children with a balanced and nutritious diet. There is a breastfeeding support group that encourages and gives advice to mothers of newborn babies. The centre also provides users with opportunities to be physically active through activities such as 'Little Steps Gym'. The processes for the common assessment framework are well established and there are good links with other agencies, especially health professionals. This enables project workers to provide positive support for the emotional well-being of individual vulnerable families when they have been identified.

Relationships between the users, children and staff at the centre are good. Children

behave well in the centre and staff consistently ensure that children in their care are safe and well protected. Effective systems are in place to monitor access to the centre, including identifying visitors.

Many families in the area are working. However, the centre does have links with Job centre Plus and, when necessary, signposts parents and carers to access information for employment.

Parents spoken to believe that their children enjoy the learning that takes place at the centre. The collation of data to assess children's progress as they move through the centre and in to school is at an early stage of development. At the moment, the centre does not have an overall record of the achievement and progress that children make in the centre, given their different starting points. However, this is an area that the centre is beginning to develop. The records kept by the centre and the limited statistical evidence available indicate that children make satisfactory progress. However, given the specialist nature of the pre-school provision, children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress in their personal development.

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	3
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

The range of services and activities meet the needs of users as shown by the good participation rates and positive feedback from parents. Activities such as 'Stay and Play', 'Come and Sing' and 'Mothers in Motion' develop good social links and promote the emotional well-being of users. Parents thoroughly enjoy and benefit from the activities and services provided. However, centre leaders are aware of the need to more fully involve parents and carers in the work of the centre and are reorganising the parents' forum to engage more fully with users. Centre leaders also undertake local consultation meetings and survey parents' and carers' needs through visiting local nursery schools. However, the feedback shows that these visits are not fully effective in reaching the views of more vulnerable groups. The centre is beginning to use other venues for its services. This is to attract and engage the wider local

community in order to assess and meet their needs. However, this is at an early stage of development. Centre leaders do have some overall statistical data, for example showing the need to reduce obesity and are beginning to map its area for vulnerable groups. However, this is also at an early stage of development.

Children, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and parents and carers who do use the centre benefit from a very pleasant, safe, positive and well-resourced learning environment. There is a strong emphasis on developing parenting skills and promoting children's personal development. All areas of children's learning are covered. Children have ample opportunities to enjoy their early education and learn through purposeful play activities both indoors and outdoors. Photographic evidence in children's learning journals showed them enjoying a variety of activities, including singing and making faces out of a variety of fruit and vegetables.

Some families in crisis have been particularly helped by the good care and support given by the centre. This is because staff and other agencies work very well together to support all groups of users, especially those identified as vulnerable due to their circumstances. Parents feel that staff are professional, approachable and non-judgemental. They feel very confident that they can seek guidance and help with any individual concerns or personal problems. Staff at the centre are very effective at providing information for users to guide them to other services in the wider community that would meet their particular needs. For example, information is given about courses available in the city that promote home safety.

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	3
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

Day-to-day management enables the centre to run smoothly and efficiently. Centre leaders have used the expertise gained in the specialist nursery school to develop the children's centre. Leaders soundly promote effective teamwork and have the confidence of staff, outside agencies and users. However, they have not fully developed the outreach facilities in order to engage all groups of potential users in the services provided by the centre. Staff performance management reviews are in place and there is a centre development plan that identifies actions needed to improve the centre's provision and outcomes for users. While governors are consulted, not all partners, including parents and carers and leaders at all levels, are fully involved in the self-evaluation process. Leaders and managers are taking action to address this. For example, the parents' forum is being restructured to reflect

users' views, both in the effectiveness of the work of the centre and to shape the services provided. The local authority and a group of governors directly hold the centre to account for its work. However, there is a lack of robust statistical data and analysis of evidence with which to demonstrate the difference that the centre is making to improving users' lives, especially for the more vulnerable due to their circumstances. Therefore value for money is satisfactory.

Safeguarding policies and procedures are given high priority. All staff have been trained in child protection issues and are fully aware of how to identify and take appropriate action to ensure children's safety. Appropriate Criminal Records Bureau and recruitment checks have been made on all staff to ensure they are suitable to work with children. There is good communication between different agencies to identify and intervene if children or families are at risk, as shown by case studies seen during the inspection. There are effective risk assessments, including fire regulations, carried out for the different areas of the centre, with security a priority.

A strength of the centre is its integration with other partners such as other local schools. This is based on the well-established links that the nursery have established over time, especially in providing education and care for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The centre actively promotes equality and celebrates diversity. This is seen through activities that are organised, such as 'Men United', that provide fathers with the opportunity to engage in their children's learning; also, speech and language specialists organise courses for parents whose children have communication difficulties. This allows parents to support their children in giving them equal access to their nursery education. The centre also links in with cultural activities in the nursery school to celebrate diversity, such as when a Chinese dancer came to visit the centre to mark the beginning of the Chinese New Year.

aThe 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	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	3

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Willows Children's Centre on 27–28 October 2010. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Your children's centre is a welcoming and friendly place where the staff are very accessible and professional in their approach. Those of you who use the centre confirmed the good relationships that staff have with each other, parents and carers and their children. This gives you the confidence to seek advice or guidance or attend one of the activities that the centre runs. However, not all groups of parents and carers, especially those who would significantly benefit from the activities and support provided, attend the centre. This may be because they are unsure about the work of the centre or are reluctant to access its services. The centre needs to clearly identify the location and needs of all groups of parents and carers in order to reach out and provide services that will have a positive impact on their lives and hence those of their children.

The centre is good at providing activities that help you and your children know the importance of keeping healthy, for example, 'Mothers in Motion'. There are also a range of health services that the centre either provides directly or are available at other venues to help and advise mothers both before and after their babies are born.

All the parents who use the centre were very positive about the care and education that their children received. The centre is welcoming and works to include different groups of parents; 'Men United' is an example of an activity that encourages fathers, grandfathers, uncles and brothers to use the centre. However, the centre needs to more fully involve all groups of parents in its work so that services provided are informed by, and meet, parental needs.

Safeguarding children is given the highest priority. We found that all the staff are properly checked before they work at the centre. The centre premises are also safe, with good risk assessments and effective security arrangements.

You told us that children enjoy their learning at the centre. It helps children make satisfactory progress overall in their development. The centre is beginning to gather evidence to show the difference their work is making to children's development, especially in their communication, language and literacy skills. However, this is not fully in place.

Centre leaders run the daily activities and work of the centre smoothly and efficiently. They have developed an effective sense of teamwork among staff both at the centre and with other professional partners. Leaders are all very committed to improving the services needed to support and help you and your children. However, they have not fully developed the outreach facilities to engage all potential users in the services provided by the centre. The control of the centre is the responsibility of the local authority, who have delegated that role to the governing body of Willows Nursery School. There is a small group of governors whose responsibility is to particularly check on the centre's work. We found that there was not enough information to hold the centre leaders to account for their work, especially with the groups of parents and carers that would most benefit from the centre's services.

We are grateful for those of you who willingly gave up your time to speak to us. You spoke very positively about the support and guidance given by the centre and we hope that in the future, more parents will take the opportunity to benefit from the services they provide.

Yours sincerely

James Henry
Additional Inspector

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