

# Inspection report for Sure Start LARK Children's Centre

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Local authority	Plymouth City Council
Inspection number	362590
Inspection dates	22–23 September 2010
Reporting inspector	Jane Burchall HMI

Centre governance	The local authority
Centre leader	Elizabeth Knight and Julie Roberts
Date of previous inspection	N/A
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Linked school if applicable	N/A
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Sure Start LARK Children's Centre Daycare Sure Start LARK Early Years Centre

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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 provision was carried out at the same time as 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](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an additional inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with representatives of the centre's management group, the local authority, the management committee, partnership agencies, members of staff and users of the centre

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of documentation including key policies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its development plans, evaluations of services and data about people who use the centre.

## Information about the centre

Sure Start LARK Children's Centre has developed from a Sure Start Local Programme and covers the North Prospect and Ham wards of the city of Plymouth. The centre is a Phase 1 children's centre providing the full core offer of services and is run by LARK Children's Centre under contract to Plymouth City Council. It serves a densely populated urban area which is within the top 20% most deprived areas of the country. The area has few employment opportunities and, when compared with other centres in the county, a higher than average proportion of families are dependant on workless benefits. Educational attainment in the area is significantly lower than the national average. The vast majority of users are White British.

The centre provides services from four buildings all located within easy reach of each other. Early Years Foundation Stage provision is delivered at two sites: the LARK Children's Centre Daycare and the LARK Early Years Centre. Both were inspected as

part of this inspection. A Sure Start Shop is located in North Prospect Road where users can drop in and seek advice and guidance on a range of services.

## 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**

<b>2</b>
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### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

<b>2</b>
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## Main findings

Sure Start LARK Children’s Centre is making a good contribution to improving outcomes for users and the wider community. The centre is rightly proud of the central position it plays in the local community. Much work has been successfully completed in bringing communities together and the centre is central to the planning for the forthcoming regeneration project.

Many users make an excellent contribution to their community by volunteering their services within the children’s centre. This is actively supported and encouraged by staff who provide them with both confidence and skills. For example, young parents develop courses for other young parents due to the positive impact the centre has had on developing their skills as parents. Users play an integral role in shaping the range of services provided by the centre. The parents’ forum brings together the views of the community and is very well represented on the management committee.

The centre draws upon recognised national and international good practice models in order to develop the quality of early years provision. Self-evaluation processes are used well to enable the centre to reflect on the quality of provision and take account of the views of partner agencies and users. The centre recognises areas that require development and staff and leaders work hard to address these. Leaders are particularly tenacious in their endeavours to remove barriers to improvement in order to develop both the quality and the accessibility of their services. As a result, the centre has a good capacity to improve further.

Staff and leaders are well supported by a management committee who are all committed to improving the life chances of those in the local community. Together with the local authority, they challenge the centre to improve. However, data regarding the make-up of the community is poor. This means that effective targeting

of services can not be assured and the centre is unable to fully evaluate and evidence its success.

Safeguarding arrangements to share concerns and record information are well developed. Systems to ensure the suitability of both those who are employed by the centre and partner agencies are robust. However, systems to assess and reduce risks and maintain appropriate staff ratios are not consistently implemented across all of the centre's sites. Parents are improving their understanding of how to keep themselves and their families safe. They are learning how to prevent accidents at home through the implementation of a very successful home safety package.

Inclusion is at the heart of the work of the centre and staff are diligent in promoting equality and diversity effectively. Effective partnerships with other agencies and a good understanding of how children develop means that staff are able to identify when a child may need additional support as early as possible. Their good understanding of the needs of those who use the centre means that they are able to offer services in a way in which enables as many as possible to access them. For example, the provision of child care means that parents are able to access both training and programmes to improve their health, with crèche facilities provided for users who undertake the centre's weight reduction programme. The Sure Start Shop is an accessible and well-used facility that brings together advice and information about services provided by both the children's centre and other agencies. Outreach workers effectively engage with those who are isolated or harder to reach and successfully encourage them to engage in services.

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

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Together with the local authority and partners, improve the quality of data collected regarding the make-up of the community to enable the effective strategic planning and targeting of services and the monitoring of impact.
- Ensure the centre has effective risk assessment in place for all sites and that steps are taken to minimise risks.

## How good are outcomes for users?

2

Parents' understanding of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle for their whole family is developing well. They participate in activities that promote cooking healthy foods, learn about how to store food appropriately and, more recently, have begun to grow their own vegetables in a newly introduced allotment. Children learn about food that is good for them as they eat healthy snacks during activities and in the early years settings. Children and adults alike access increased opportunities for exercise such as 'Jumping Jacks' sessions, adult exercise classes, and running and walking groups. A number of users successfully completed the 'Why Weight?' weight management programme and have adopted this approach further to support the weight management of their families and children. Despite concerted efforts by the children's centre staff and their partners, smoking in the community remains high. However, many users have been successful in achieving smoke-free homes as a result of their developed understanding of the impact of passive smoking on their children and family. Both centre staff and partner agencies have worked hard to support the uptake of breastfeeding and are having some success, although numbers remain low.

A significant proportion of young children in the centre's reach are kept safer in their homes due to parents' increased understanding of how to reduce risks. This is as a direct result of the centre's successful implementation of a 'Safe at Home' initiative which provides parents with free safety equipment, correctly installed by trained fitters, and good quality information.

Ensuring the emotional well-being of users' is a high priority for the centre. Outreach workers are successful in engaging those who are hard to reach or isolated in accessing services. Users appreciate this support and comment it 'keeps us sane' and it 'stops feelings of isolation'. Those at risk of domestic abuse are well supported to recognise what constitutes abusive behaviour and are provided with good, targeted support. Users state that they feel valued by centre staff who provide them with many opportunities to express their views in ways in which are accessible to all. They also ensure they have a voice through the centre's active parents' forum and good representation on the management committee, ensuring effective two-way communication.

Children attending the day care setting make good progress in their learning and development and are developing excellent skills for the future. They are very well behaved and have a good understanding of what constitutes acceptable behaviour. Parents are developing a sound understanding of how to provide their children with quality play experiences and many recognise the benefits of playing with their children. They are developing a good understanding of the importance of early communication, even before their babies are born, due to the very high emphasis placed on this by the centre.

Adults access a range of learning opportunities both to enhance family life and to develop their skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology. In addition to signposting users to specific classes, the centre provides opportunities for users to explore these skills in meaningful ways, such as weighing ingredients, making shopping lists and budgeting when shopping. Users' levels of confidence and self-esteem are significantly raised through the support provided by staff and opportunities that the children's centre opens up for them. They report that their contact with the children's centre has raised their expectations and aspirations. For example, 'Everything I have achieved has been because of the children's centre' and 'I want the best for my children', were comments made by one user and are reflective of the views of many. Many users have successfully developed both economic stability and independence through the support, help and guidance they have received from the children's centre. The centre signposts users to services which provide them with useful advice and guidance on return to work skills; however, these are very heavily oversubscribed, resulting in users often having to be placed on a waiting list. The centre has plans to work closely with partner agencies to identify ways in which this gap can be addressed. Despite this, many users have been successful in gaining employment within the children's centre and beyond and act as very positive role models for other users.

<b>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable 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 users 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 users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training</b>	<b>2</b>

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

<b>2</b>
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The centre is effective at assessing the needs of the children and families who use its services. A good understanding of the specific needs of the community has developed over time, and leaders use this knowledge well in order to shape and develop their services. Excellent relationships with a range of key partners such as health providers, local schools and Jobcentre Plus ensure there is a consistent and cohesive approach to the planning and delivery of services to meet the needs of the most vulnerable families in the area. Centre staff and outreach workers develop good relationships with users. They use their good knowledge of the needs of the community and their influence to encourage service users to engage with a range of

professionals in order to improve their life chances. Many families are offered continuing long-term support in order that they are able to make permanent, positive changes to their lives. Partnerships with agencies such as the Malezi Worker mean that young parents receive very good support.

Users engage in a range of relevant training courses and sessions. These provide them with information to support them in making improved choices in their lives, such as learning about healthy eating and how to communicate with their young children. The provision of childcare ensures courses and services offered by the centre are accessible to all. The centre implements innovative strategies to engage the whole community. For example, following consultation with users, they have recently developed an allotment particularly aimed at engaging fathers in the services of the centre. The centre takes pride in celebrating the achievements of their users within the centre, the wider community and beyond. For example, they provide certificates to mark users' achievements and success stories are reported in both the local and national press.

In times of crisis families are able to confidently seek support from the children's centre staff. For example, they provide child care support to relieve family pressures and provide a voice for families who are struggling with the upheaval of the forthcoming regeneration programme. The Sure Start Shop is an effective point of contact and a conduit for accessing a wide range of other services. Reception and administrative staff are exceptionally knowledgeable about all of the services available, including those not directly offered by the children's centre. They go out of their way to help and guide enquirers to the shop and ensure that they signpost them to the most appropriate support. They show true care and compassion for members of the community; for example, when they have not seen regular visitors to the shop for a period of time, they ensure the centre manager is alerted to this fact in order that their well-being can be assured. Users describe the shop as 'invaluable'.

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<b>The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>

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

<b>2</b>
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The centre is led and managed by an extremely dedicated and passionate team of staff who show huge commitment to improving the life chances of all in their community. They are supported by a management committee all of whom are equally committed to the community they serve. The make-up of the management committee is such that a range of stakeholders, including parents, are represented and this results in effective working together to ensure high-quality, integrated provision. While a good relationship with social care is apparent, the involvement at strategic level is yet to be secured. The leaders and managers of the centre work consistently at developing these relationships further.

There are sound structures in place for the management of both the setting and staff. However, the centre managers were without professional supervision for a period of two years as the centre chair was seconded to undertake other projects. During this time, suitable systems of peer supervision were adopted in order that the managers could access support. However, the temporary lack of direct management supervision meant that the professional development of the centre managers could not be assured. A programme to address this is now in place.

The centre completes a regular cycle of self-evaluation, which is closely monitored by the local authority. The local authority sets the centre challenging and aspirational targets based upon both the city-wide and the local agenda. These are supported by the direction set by the management committee who know and understand the needs of the community. This enables the centre to tailor the services they provide to what they know about their local community and to the particular needs of their user group. Independent and internal evaluation is effectively used in order to assure the quality of service provision. Feedback from users indicates a high level of satisfaction, and influences change and improvements to services that reflect the changing needs of the local community. While the centre staff make good use of the community knowledge they have developed and the limited data that is available to them, a lack of current, good-quality comparable data hampers effective strategic planning and the centre's ability to effectively evaluate and demonstrate their success. They also can not be assured of how successfully they manage to reach those most vulnerable within their community.

Centre leaders effectively seek and target funding for projects which meet the specific needs of their users. For example, they were very successful in obtaining early funding for two-year-olds. Concerted efforts by centre staff have resulted in them gaining continued funding to provide equipment to promote safety in the home. The centre has been at the forefront of several city-wide initiatives such as leading the 'Safety at Home' and the 'Why Weight?' projects. This demonstrates their commitment to improving life chances for the local and wider communities. The centre is realistic in the way in which it allocates funding to ensure that users are provided with underpinning skills, knowledge and experience in order to improve their life chances. For example, the management team have identified the crucial impact of the low confidence and self-esteem of users and focus their services on addressing this to support the long-term ambitions and expectations for their most vulnerable families. Powerful life stories demonstrate the high impact of this strategy.

The centre works very effectively with the local inclusion service and staff are very proactive and accurate at identifying children who may be in need of additional support. Accurate and comprehensive use of the Common Assessment Framework process significantly aids families in gaining early intervention. Good individual support is given to families who speak English as an additional language to support them in accessing services, combating isolation and promoting their children's learning and development. While the ethnic make-up of the community is not diverse, the centre engages in city-wide and local celebrations of different cultures in order to improve community cohesion.

Staff are well trained in child protection procedures and understand what they need to do should they have a concern about a child. They are supported by a suitable policy which underpins this work. Effective systems ensure that all staff directly employed by the centre are suitably vetted and agreements exist with partner agencies. Successful early intervention for families at risk has resulted in a reduction in the numbers of children placed on a child protection plan. However, while all staff provide effective pastoral supervision, systems across all sites do not consistently safeguard children. For example, risks are not always fully considered or reviewed regularly enough and staff ratios within the early years setting are not always sufficiently complied with.

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community</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</b>	<b>2</b>

<b>statutory duties</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>3</b>
<b>The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>

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

This inspection took account of the inspection findings from the concurrent early years inspections of Sure Start LARK Daycare and Sure Start LARK Early Years Centre.

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### **Summary for centre users**

We inspected the Sure Start LARK Children’s Centre on 22 and 23 September 2010. We judged the centre as good overall.

We found that both leaders and staff provide you with a good service. They play a very important part within Ham and North Prospects and work hard to establish relationships with all local communities in your area. Staff understand how they can help to make a difference to the lives of many of you and your children. They are committed to supporting your children’s development and to developing adults’ skills and confidence. They have excellent relationships with other professionals and organisations and this means that they are able to offer you a good range of support, information and guidance. We agree with you that the staff at the children’s centre make a very positive impact on the lives of you and your families. They are working closely with you to help make the upheaval of the forthcoming regeneration project as easy for you all as possible.

We noticed that you make a strong contribution to the running of the centre. You help make decisions through the parents' forum and the management committee. Many of you are willing to help out at the centre and volunteer your services. The centre listens to people well and you tell us that you feel valued by staff.

The centre provides good guidance to parents on how to keep their families safe and healthy. You tell us that the 'Safe at Home' scheme has been an invaluable service which has raised your understanding of potential accidents and has provided you with vital safety equipment. The centre is a good place for users to meet other parents and people who can help them and their families. Staff work well with other professionals to ensure that children who may need extra help and support are provided with it.

The Sure Start Shop is a facility that is well used by the community. Staff there go out of their way to offer you all the help and advice they can. You have told us that if you need to know anything, you go to the Sure Start Shop, as staff there will find the answer.

Leaders and managers of the centre have a good understanding of what steps they need to take to improve their services even further and they are determined to make your lives the best they can be. However, they are not currently provided with information in enough detail to make sure that they are able to fully meet your needs. They have taken the correct steps to ensure that anyone who works with you and your children is suitable. However, staff do not always make good use of the systems they have to ensure that all safety risks are reduced.

We would like to thank those of you who spared the time to speak with us and were willing to share your positive thoughts about the centre.

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