

Inspection report for Whittlesey Children's Centre

Local authority	Cambridgeshire
Inspection number	366437
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Reporting inspector	Heather Weston AI

Centre governance	Local Authority
Centre leader	Bryonie Smith
Date of previous inspection	N/A
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Linked school if applicable	New Road Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	New Road Pre-School

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out 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.

An inspection of the maintained nursery was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one additional inspector and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, centre staff, a representative from the local authority, a health visitor, advisory board members and representatives from the parents' forum. They met and talked to parents and children. A visit was made to the outreach centre at Coates Primary School. A telephone conversation was held with the local counsellor who has responsibility for children and families.

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

Information about the centre

Whittlesey Children's Centre, which is managed by the local authority, was designated as a phase two centre in March 2008 and reached full core offer in December 2009. The centre is purpose built and is accommodated on a shared site with the primary school and the pre-school provision. The majority of the children in the reach area live in the rural town of Whittlesey, with small clusters of population in the villages of Benwick, Coates, Eastrea and Turves. Some children live in isolated situations on farms and some live outside the area.

The reach area is within the Fenland district of Cambridgeshire, with encompasses some areas with high levels of deprivation, low educational outcomes and low

aspirations. One hundred and eighty five children come from workless families with 16% from families on benefits. Whittlesey’s ethnic background is almost entirely White British, with a very few Traveller families who live within the community and a small proportion of migrant workers from mixed, mainly Asian backgrounds. Access to the centre can be difficult for families who do not have their own transport as bus routes are limited.

The staff team has been through a period of significant change since the centre opened, but there is now an established staff team. The centre leader has been responsible for the running of two centres without additional support. A deputy centre leader has recently been appointed thus increasing the capacity of the centre leader. In addition, there have been four locality managers and one development manager overseeing the work of the centre since the centre reached its full core offer.

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

Whittlesey Children’s Centre makes satisfactory provision for children and their families in the reach area. Parents praise its work and those spoken to stated that staff are knowledgeable, respectful, friendly and very approachable. The centre can rightly claim that it has made a difference to the lives of those who do access its services, whether their needs are complex or whether they need opportunities to meet and mix with other parents and children. The centre gives well-matched support for vulnerable individuals, and to families with immediate and urgent need. Equality is promoted well, although there are still a large number of families in the reach area who do not engage with the centre. Parents appreciate the fact that they are not judged in any way. Support is thoughtful and highly practical. One mother who admitted to smacking her child at the centre reflected that staff have been a real support in helping her with behaviour management. The activities run by the centre are adapted well to meet the needs of users. For example, to improve breastfeeding rates, the centre ran a support group, but attendance was poor. The centre then provided one-to-one sessions which were successful and the support

group has now been re-instated. The approach has been used to set up a group for teenage parents, who are now, with a mentor, contributing to shaping services to meet their needs. If necessary, the centre provides free transport, either through their willing volunteer drivers, or by providing taxis.

The centre has had to overcome a significant number of barriers in order to establish trust within the area. One health professional openly expressed that she did not want a centre in the town and this reflected the view of not only professionals, but also parents. This professional now says she does not know what she would do without the centre. Other barriers have included significant staff change and uncertainty, organisational change within partner agencies and the constraints caused by cross-border partnerships. The centre leader has worked hard to overcome these issues, while running two centres. The staff team is now established. It is strong and mutually supportive. The centre leader has the support of the recently appointed deputy leader and this has given her greater capacity to drive improvement at the Whittlesey Centre. The centre leader and staff are now reaching out to meet families wherever they are getting together, including at the local pub! They have attended for example, school induction evenings, fetes, and church support groups with the express aim of reaching children and families in the area. Despite this commitment to liaising with other settings, liaison with the adjacent pre-school is underdeveloped and the potential of strong links to promote children's learning is underused. Day-to-day leadership and management of the centre are good. Staff performance is managed well and staff are aware of the high expectations of the centre leader and locality manager. Good safeguarding arrangements are in place and staff training is of good quality. Everyone follows agreed procedures to ensure safety, and rigorous risk assessments are made for all areas of the centre's work.

The centre's anecdotal and observational data relating to families and individuals are satisfactory. Staff know users' needs well and ensure they receive relevant services to meet their needs. The parents' forum, individual parents and carers, staff and the advisory board contribute to evaluating and planning activities for the near future. However, the centre is aware that it has yet to develop effective systems for measuring precisely the impact of its services on outcomes for users and to develop an effective longer-term strategic plan. Data provided for the centre are not all up-to-date and relevant for its reach area, but those which are available are not being used well enough to set challenging targets for improving outcomes. The centre has only recently started to include measurable outcomes for its activities, and it is too early to use this information to judge the impact of its services on outcomes. As yet, the centre is not sufficiently looking to promote the achievement of individual children by noting the progress children make in their learning and development at each session, and planning future activities in the light of this knowledge.

The centre is aware of its strengths and key weakness and judges evaluation to be inadequate. This awareness, together with the progress made in developing provision and the energy with which barriers have been overcome to establish the centre in the community is indicative of the centre's satisfactory capacity to sustain improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Develop systems to evaluate the longer-term impact of provision on outcomes for children by:
 - carrying out a thorough analysis of data provided for the reach area
 - ensuring the regular evaluation of progress against outcomes for all activities and using this information to inform future planning
 - assessing the progress of individual children’s learning and using this information to promote further learning

- Ensure development planning sets out clear priorities, with ambitious targets for improvement, and includes details as to how and when they will be delivered

- Improve liaison with the adjacent pre-school.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

Outcomes for users are satisfactory. The centre can demonstrate impact through case studies, but it has no assessment information to demonstrate the level of its impact on outcomes. Many of the services offered by the centre are popular and some, for example, ‘Choices’ a series of cookery sessions run with ‘Mums about Food’, have high attendance. In these sessions, as we saw during our visit to Coates Primary School, parents learn the essential elements of cooking while preparing tasty healthy food for their children. This has given parents the confidence to cook for their children at home. Children are persuaded to try fruit and vegetables as snacks by chopping them up into bite size samples, and to try a variety of vegetable soups at the weekly ‘Credit Crunch’ lunch. Advice and guidance are offered by the health service, for example at the ‘Baby Weigh and Play’ sessions. Those activities to promote physical exercise have been less popular, and the ‘Healthy Trainer’ session and ‘Healthy Walks’ were dropped due to poor attendance. A ‘Gym tots’ session is being planned in conjunction with the adjacent pre-school.

The premises are secure and parents feel that they and their children are safe. Children and adults have good opportunities to learn how to stay safe, for example by attending first-aid training and the parenting programme. This programme, together with home visits and the modelling of behaviour management skills are helping parents to develop their skills in managing their children’s behaviour and their ability to play constructively and enjoyably with them. Safety packs are given to all new families when they join the centre, and safety items such as car seats and stair gates are available for them to borrow. Help and advice are given to parents about a range of issues, including mental health issues, anxiety, drug problems and domestic violence. This advice has successfully persuaded at least one person to stop smoking, one to lose weight and three to contact a drug agency. The Common Assessment Framework is used effectively to support children and families who are vulnerable owing to their circumstances.

The centre provides appropriate play-based activities for young children, encouraging them to have fun and learn at the 'messy play' sessions such as 'Cheeky Chimps' and 'Little Explorers' where they explore and investigate with paint and junk materials. It is reaching out with its services, offering 'Rhyme Time' in the learning centre at the local library to encourage users to visit and join the library, with some considerable success. The centre's attractive and well-resourced sensory room is used by local schools and settings as well as by families supported by centre staff.

The centre promotes tolerance and understanding and all who use the centre, staff and families alike, treat each other with consideration. Parents are being encouraged to make informed choices, for example, when shopping. Those who do not wish to join the parents' forum are happy to help shape services through one-to-one discussions with staff at the centre or by providing feedback on questionnaires and evaluation sheets. They are encouraged to join the advisory board but as yet only one parent is on the board.

Jobcentre Plus provides a vacancy board at the centre, which is regularly updated by centre staff, and a worker attends monthly to support parents who are seeking work. Centre staff are aware of the local childcare on offer and support families in accessing this. Some families have benefited from free funding for two-year-olds. Young parents have been offered support to consider training, for example the Level 1 Youth Award. Children learn to play well together, and to eat together, thus developing key social skills. Through new experiences, such as 'messy play', outdoor play and play which encourages independent learning, children are learning new skills, which will help them in the future.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	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 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

Centre staff are effective at sensitively assessing the needs of vulnerable users on an ongoing basis. Evaluation forms for each activity include a section for noting their individual developments or needs, with a 'Windows to Watch' section to note key issues. Staff take all opportunities to talk to parents. Staff meet fortnightly to discuss and review these needs. The centre promotes effective partnerships with other agencies, settings and schools to support their use of the Common Assessment Framework.

Through its range of activities, the centre promotes purposeful learning for children, but this is not always sufficiently individualised. Also, although users' personal developments and achievements are noted and targets for improvement are discussed, they are not recorded, and it is unclear how challenging these are. Users' achievements are celebrated to improve their confidence and to raise aspiration, either verbally or through the use of certificates on completion of courses.

The quality of the services provided by the centre is satisfactory. As yet it is not doing enough to evaluate its impact on outcomes, either by assessing the progress made by users session by session or against national data. Many of the activities are good and some are high quality, due to very effective training and specialisation of staff. The centre is meeting the needs of its users, but although attendance rates are satisfactory they are variable. In addition, although the centre is striving to reach out to increase participation, there are a number of families in the reach who have not engaged with the centre and who still could engage. This is in part due to historic, geographical issues, with some families identifying more with reach areas for other centres. Some families from other reach areas attend Whittlesey Children's Centre.

Parents are very positive about the quality of care, guidance and support they receive. Those with children with particular needs such as Asperger's syndrome were fulsome in their praise for the individual help they had had in times of crisis. The centre has set up a support group for parents of school-age children with special educational needs, which has been welcomed, although those who also have children of pre-school age say they cannot attend as there is no crèche. The centre provides a comprehensive range of informative leaflets.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	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	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre leader provides strong day-to-day leadership, well supported by her line manager, the locality manager, who is based at the centre. Staff speak highly of performance management arrangements. Expectations of staff are high, but they know that the centre leader is always there for them if they need support in any way. Gaps in provision from outside agencies, often caused by the cross-border issues, do not have an impact on provision. This is because the centre leader ensures a member of staff receives the necessary training to fill the identified gap. Staff have been trained to provide quality support, for example with weaning, breastfeeding, bereavement and with regard to supporting families with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Staff have received specialist training to help parents develop their children's speech and language. The centre leader is actively reaching out to bring more families into the centre, and has been pro-active in developing the effectiveness of the advisory board. However, although these aspects of forward planning are addressed well, the centre lacks direction in the longer-term. The strategic plan is limited in its effectiveness. It has no timelines for action and no clear targets for improving outcomes. Governance arrangements are satisfactory and the centre is effectively held to account by the local authority. Until recently, although vocal in requesting provision, the advisory board has not taken sufficient responsibility for assisting the effective operation of the centre and for driving improvement.

The centre has a good range of resources available for users and the wider community. Local groups, including schools and pre-schools were invited to an open day to look at these resources and are actively encouraged to use them. However, while some groups, including the adjoining pre-school, make extensive use of these, others have not taken up the offer.

Inclusion is promoted well by the centre, by centre staff and in partnership with other providers. Difficulties with some partners are not of the centre's making and the centre works hard to overcome them. The centre is actively supporting local groups such as the local childminders' group. Increasingly, it is aware of its most vulnerable children and families and takes steps to engage them in its work. Case studies show that work for vulnerable individuals and groups is leading to improved outcomes. For example, the centre has worked closely with the Youth Offending team and local secondary school to support a teenage parent. However, data are not being used to identify necessary improvements. The local authority is aware of the problems caused by the fact that data are not all relevant or up to date, in particular those relating to health. However, those which are available are not being used to best effect. In addition, the centre is only using case studies to demonstrate improved outcomes and has no data of its own to track these.

Safeguarding arrangements are good. Child protection arrangements work effectively and ensure children are kept safe. Information regarding safeguarding concerns are

shared appropriately, both internally and with other agencies. All staff have undergone the relevant checks by the Criminal Records Bureau and staff information is kept on a single central record.

The centre's evaluation of its own performance is highly accurate. However, systems to evaluate the longer-term impact of provision on outcomes for users, for example the impact on the achievement of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage, are underdeveloped. Evaluation is not being used sufficiently to inform the centre's development plan, and this aspect of the centre's work is inadequate.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	4
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

None applicable

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Whittlesey Children's Centre on 24–25 March 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

During the inspection, we visited activities in the centre and at Coates Primary School. As well as talking to a number of you, we talked with staff and with others who work with you and the centre, including members of the local authority. We looked at the centre's plans, records of the activities run by the centre, and other documents.

Like you, we think that all the staff at the centre are friendly and welcoming. You told us that you find the staff respectful and knowledgeable. Inspectors agree with this view. Staff are well trained and do their best to help everyone who uses the centre. You also told us about the difference the centre is making to the lives of those of you who attend the centre and your families. We saw that staff are highly dedicated and do all they can to support those of you who seek their help. The centre is trying hard to reach out to make sure that more families use the centre but, as you told us, there are a number of families in the area who have not joined activities.

The centre provides some good resources, including staff, to help your children enjoy learning through play. Activities such as baby massage help you bond with your children, and activities such as 'Monday Mums and Dads' and 'Little Explorers' encourage you to engage in play with your children from a very early age. We know that the 'Choices' cookery programme is very popular and is helping you to cook healthy meals for your families. However, we know that activities to promote physical exercise such as the 'Healthy Trainer' session have not been popular. Staff help some of you at home to manage your children's behaviour and you said that this is a great support. The centre lets you know about other services in the area through the good range of information leaflets which are displayed in the centre. We know that because of the centre's support, a few of you have been successful in finding work or in starting training. The centre is good at making sure your children are kept safe. They make sure the centre is secure and that all the staff who work at the centre have the right checks made before they are allowed to work with your children.

The centre is committed to working with other organisations, such as schools and the library. However, the links with the pre-school next door are not being used as effectively as possible to extend your children's learning.

The centre is doing a lot of good work, but staff are not making sure that they know how well you are doing by collecting information to show how successfully their services are improving outcomes. Also, they are not doing all they can to make sure that your children learn as much as they could during the activity sessions. Although they change their activities to make sure they are ones that you will like, centre staff are not planning well enough for the future, and not making sure that you get the very best benefit from their services.

We would like to thank everyone who came to speak with us. It was a privilege to be able to talk with you. Your honest and open discussions with us helped us considerably during the inspection. We are very grateful for your help and we wish each of you every success for the future.

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