

Inspection report for Little Lions Children's Centre

Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	365762
Inspection dates	23–24 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Sheelagh Barnes

Centre governance	Castle Point Association of Voluntary Services
Centre leader	Dawn Delgaty
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
Centre address	Northwick Park Primary School
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Linked school if applicable	Northwick Park Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Busy Bears Childcare

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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, the centre team leader, senior managers, the chairman of the advisory board, the monitoring, evaluation and children's centre support administrator of the Castle Point Association of Voluntary Services (CAVS), the chairman of CAVS, the chairman of the parents' forum and representatives of the local authority, parents and carers, a health visitor, the family support team leader, the manager of the neighbouring children's centre, volunteers and a local councillor.

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

Information about the centre

This is a phase two children's centre, funded by local authority and children's centre monies. It opened in 2009 and provides the full core offer. Most services run on site, but there is also outreach provision at a local junior school.

The centre is administered by the Castle Point Association of Voluntary services, to whom the local authority has devolved authority for governance. The centre manager has been in post for a year. The centre is open from 08:00 until 18:00 all year round. Commissioned childcare is provided by 'Busy Bears' pre-school group and the nursery class, which are run by the school with which the centre shares a site.

Levels of deprivation in the area range from the bottom 30% nationally to relatively advantaged families. A third of the children under five in the area live in families who receive out-of-work benefits and tax credits. The reported income of a third of the families is less than 60% of the median. The level of crime in the area committed by youth is high.

The majority of families in the area are White British. Teenage pregnancies and the proportion of teenage parents not in employment, education or training are relatively high. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years' provision is below that expected for their age.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for 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 quality of the provision is satisfactory and leads to satisfactory outcomes. Those working in the setting are committed to bringing about sustainable improvements and have confidence in the leaders and managers. The centre provides a clean, bright and attractive welcome, including informative displays which reflect diversity well. Information is available to parents and carers on a range of topics, such as childcare options in the area, health information and leaflets for families in times of crisis. The quality of the centre's procedures for safeguarding and the extent to which the centre promotes equality and tackles discrimination are satisfactory. The centre has a satisfactory capacity to continue to improve.

Performance management has been introduced and is having a positive impact on staff confidence. Staff development and training are effective in order to meet current and future needs. Representatives of the responsible body ask suitably challenging questions of senior managers to improve provision and outcomes. Currently 65% of families in the reach area have been contacted. The centre is working to make contact with 70% by September. Some of the families who have registered regularly use the centre. They make comments such as, 'The centre has been very informative and helped with anything I need to know, there is always someone I can talk to, to get up-to-date information.' However, some other families who have registered do not regularly attend. For example, only a third of lone

parents who are registered with the centre attend sessions.

The centre's self-evaluation is satisfactory and gives those in charge an appropriate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision. Users are meaningfully involved in the self-evaluation process. Parents and carers are represented on the advisory board and there is a parents' forum. They have brought about recent changes, such as the Christmas party and a trip to the local country park. Users who attend regularly are happy with the work of the centre.

Centre leaders lack some essential information to help them plan work. This information is held by partner agencies, but not yet shared with centre leaders. The manager is collating information of the impact of sessions and services that are run. However, the centre has accumulated little evaluative data so far to measure its successes or for use in strategic planning. A small number of parents have gone on to undertake national vocational qualifications at the centre. A few parents and carers have gone on to gain employment or qualification as a result of voluntary work at the centre. The achievements of those who undertake courses and complete sessions are celebrated. The leader monitors the outcomes of services provided directly by the centre. However, while the staff signpost parents and carers to other agencies for help in seeking work or gaining qualifications, such as the local college and Jobcentre Plus, the outcomes for these groups are not tracked systematically to see what works well and what does not. As a result, leaders are aware that they have minimal information to use in evaluating, modifying or improving some services. In particular, in relation to adult education and preparation for work. They cannot measure the value for money of their work, or, for example, the crèche they provide for these agencies. The evaluations completed by parents, carers and children at the end of each session are helpful in pinpointing what went well and what was enjoyed. The leaders have placed less emphasis up to now on objective measurement of impact of sessions or of finding views from those who do not attend and why this is the case.

Actions taken to tackle identified weaknesses are appropriate. An initiative linked with Jobcentre Plus has been delayed in implementation, due to advice from that partner agency. Initiatives which have been identified and underway or due to be started shortly involve the work with lone parents, and young teenage parents who are not currently in education, employment or training.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ask partner agencies to provide more information to the centre, such as live birth data and the outcomes of training and preparation for work of parents and carers that the centre has signposted users to.
- Sharpen the collection, collation and analysis of service users' success rates to enable the centre to use this information when strategically planning for the future.

- Extend the numbers of families from vulnerable groups in the area who use the centre, such as teenage parents not in education, employment or training, families with disabled children and lone parents.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

Those who attend sessions regularly at the centre are enthusiastic about it. They make comments after sessions such as: 'It is so friendly, it makes everyone feel welcome. It is certainly not cliquey!' They say that the friendly atmosphere and approachability of staff are key factors in encouraging them to come back. Those who attend activities are routinely asked for their opinion of how useful these have been. Children also indicate how they feel after sessions, by pointing to either a smiley or sad face. In addition, there are opportunities for parents and carers to make a positive contribution to decision making through regular involvement with the parents' forum and the advisory board.

Health outcomes for children and families that the centre serves are satisfactory. Breastfeeding rates in the area have declined. The proportion of children who are judged as obese in the Reception year remains steady at broadly the national average. A number of mothers were identified recently as needing emotional support following the birth of their babies. Despite the centre setting up sessions for these mothers, only half attended. The centre followed this up with telephone calls and offered alternative support from the family support team. The sessions that are run promote healthy lifestyles appropriately through activities such as playing in the covered outdoor area and healthy eating, and are much enjoyed. Comments from parents and carers such as, 'We did painting and colours and tried a new fruit today' or 'Another great morning...with different toys!' are commonplace. Children enjoy coming to the activities and their behaviour is good.

The safety and well-being of children is at the heart of the centre's work and care is taken to ensure that policies are up-to-date and put into practice. Users feel safe and understand safe practice. Staff are fully trained in safeguarding and child protection issues. However, the centre currently has no information on the numbers of children in the surrounding areas with a child protection plan or how many may have been involved in the Common Assessment Framework process.

Enjoyment and achievement is satisfactory. Local schools recently identified a decline in children's skills in speech and language and their confidence in mark-making and early writing skills. As a result, the centre ensures that there are regular opportunities to practise these in the sessions it runs. In addition, a course was run for parents and carers as part of family learning. Parental comments are then gathered as to how well they think their children are progressing. However, no systematic measurement of progress is made at the centre using the Early Years Foundation Stage framework. Children in the school nursery and commissioned childcare in 'Busy Bears' make excellent progress. There has been an improvement in the proportion of children attaining at least 78 points at the end of reception and the gap between the lowest attaining children and the rest is being successfully eroded.

Information on the progress made by parents and carers in developing skills and qualifications is limited. Support for parents who wish to extend and further develop their skills and qualifications is mainly in the form of signposting to other agencies. Some of these directions have had positive outcomes and the centre hears back from a small number of users with whom they have continuing links. However, on many other occasions, the outcomes of advice and support remain unknown.

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	2
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

Assessment is used satisfactorily to identify the needs of those who use the children's centre and evaluate their progress. For children in the commissioned childcare and the Nursery, the assessment of their progress is of high quality. The information is then used to plan activities to meet children's individual needs well.

Centre leaders are aware that there are sections of the community, particularly some of the most vulnerable, who do not gain enough from the services that are run, and who have not yet been persuaded of the benefits the centre has to offer. When parents are concerned that they might not know anyone attending, they are encouraged to bring a relative with them. There is also the possibility for families who are anxious about coming into the centre to have three weeks support from the family support team. Homestart provide outreach services for the centre and visit families in their homes, giving them information of the services available to them at the centre and encouraging them to attend. Some support with individual families has been very helpful and appreciated greatly. Those who have been helped in this way speak of the value these services have been to them and their children.

The centre provides an appropriate range of activities and celebrates the success of these through attractive displays and books of photographs. Recent work has been undertaken to identify some of the most vulnerable groups in the area. The centre

leaders have identified that there are around 48 families who have children with disabilities in the reach area, but less than a tenth of them currently make use of the centre's facilities. There are high proportions of teenage parents and pregnancies and high proportions of teenage parents not in education, employment or training. The numbers of lone parents are high and a significant number have registered at the centre. However, only around a third of them attend sessions run at the centre. As a result, work is in progress to address these areas and some new staff appointments have been made. 'Stay and Play' sessions, run for the centre by the Canvey Youth Project, benefit those who attend. The centre has started preparation for a mental health group, to register more families with disabled children and a job club for parents and carers all to be in place by September. As part of this, there has been a recent appointment of a young parents' coordinator who is qualified to run accredited courses for teenage parents.

Care, guidance and support are satisfactory. Advice is provided to parents from safety services, such as the fire service and local police. The Citizens Advice Bureau hold appointments on a monthly basis at the centre. The quality of care and support offered to individual families in times of crisis is good. There are a number of success stories of parents and carers who are frequent visitors to centre. A recent initiative to encourage fathers to attend with their children has led to a small group of them coming regularly. The parents and carers who do attend, enjoy courses and fill in evaluations positively. They say things such as 'My child has asked for more trips, following the trip to the country park, and particularly enjoyed the football.' and, 'My child really enjoyed the bug hunting.' About messy play, parents say 'My child enjoyed the messy play and the fish in the ice-cubes.' However, at some activities, registration is low and, in a few instances, not all those who sign up actually attend. The centre does not systematically seek evaluations from those who choose not to come as to why this is the case. Nor does it measure the impact of information given about universal preventative treatment, such as dental services or immunisations or advice and guidance about smoking, alcohol and drug misuse.

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 leadership and management of the centre at all levels are satisfactory. There are

satisfactory links with other agencies, such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Homestart and with other local children's centres. Staff training is targeted towards developing skills and services further. Governance is satisfactory. There is appropriate rigour in the challenge provided to leaders and managers. Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory, including those for child protection. The review and improvement of policies and practice are given suitably high priority. All required checks are made to ensure the safe recruitment of staff and regular updating of health and safety training is undertaken. Security systems are rigorous. Centre leaders ensure sound use is made of the skills of staff and the centre's resources. Inter-agency work is developing, but the centre lacks some information from partners to help it improve its effectiveness; for example about the social context of its reach area.

Both the centre manager and the centre team leader are aware that they do not evaluate the impact of the centre's work in relation to meeting the needs of all vulnerable groups in the area as rigorously as possible. Nor do they have access to all potential data to plan to meet the needs of all groups. Senior leaders ensure a satisfactory range of enjoyable services are matched to the wants and needs of the families who use the centre. The impact of sessions is evaluated through obtaining parental views, staff views, partner agencies and children's views on how effective these activities have been. A computer tracking system is also used as an evaluation tool by leaders. Very little use is made in the centre of the Early Years Foundation Stage levels of development as a tool to measure the progress of children and babies. In addition, little information is gained from agencies such as the local college and Jobcentre Plus as to the outcomes for parents and carers who are signposted there for support in gaining qualifications or employment.

Leaders are aware that have not yet extended the range of users sufficiently to include more from vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups, such as lone parents, teenage parents, especially those not in employment, education or training and families who have children with disabilities. The centre provides satisfactorily for equality and diversity. Equality of opportunity is given suitably high regard in the planning of sessions and all staff work to ensure that activities are inclusive. Celebration of cultural diversity is a particular strength. The welcoming atmosphere is something with which parents are particularly pleased. Provision to ensure disabled access for any user is good.

A great deal of effort has been put into trying to advertise the centre's work to a wider part of the community, including walking in the area and having a stall at school fetes. The centre leaders are in the process of trying to tackle the lack of involvement of members of vulnerable groups through the appointment of several new staff, each with particular responsibility for one of the identified three main vulnerable groups. A number of initiatives are due to start in the Autumn. Value for money is satisfactory.

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	3
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understood	
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	3
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	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

The inspection of Busy Bears childcare and the nursery and reception provision of Northwick Park Primary School. The inspection of these services judged that the provision at these settings was excellent and enabled children to make rapid progress.

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 Little Lions on 23–24 June 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you to those who met with us and shared your views of your experiences at Little Lions. It was helpful to us in finding out about the centre and its work. We

agree with you that the activities are enjoyable and valuable for those who attend and that all of the staff involved in the centre work hard to help you and your children. You told us how you find it easy to talk to staff and how friendly everyone is. We could see, from the views you have left in the comments book after each session, how much those of you who use the centre regularly enjoy and benefit from all that it has to offer. We know how much your children enjoy coming and how excited they were to see the fire engine and other safety services during child safety week.

We judge that the overall effectiveness of the centre is satisfactory, because many of the more vulnerable families on the island are not yet benefiting fully from the centre's work. One of the things we have asked the centre to do to be even more effective is to try to reach out to those people who live in the area who do not yet know of all that it does and how easy and beneficial it is to come in. I am sure some of you could help with this, as I know how enthusiastic you are about the centre's work. To help with this, we have asked the other agencies that work on the island to share more information with the centre leaders so that they have a clearer and more accurate picture of needs in the area.

We think that the range of things that the centre plans for you and your children is satisfactory. The centre helps you in many ways, by giving you advice on where to go to resolve any problems you have. We know that the staff have plans to provide even more targeted support for some families, such as those who have children with disabilities and those of you who are teenage parents. We know that some of you who spoke with us, already contribute to decision making at the centre through the parents' forum and the advisory board. We agree with centre leaders, that your input into what the centre does is extremely important to make sure that what is planned really matches what you want. All of the people who work at the centre are working hard, supported by the Castle Point Association of Voluntary Services (CAVS) and the local authority, who have ultimate responsibility for the centre. We know that often the centre leaders tell you about courses you could attend elsewhere and that they sometimes run crèches for you to be able to attend these. We have asked the centre leaders to find out more about how successful the services are that they point you to, so that they help you develop skills and find work. As yet, the centre is not making as much use as possible of this and other information to measure the impact of what it is doing and to use this information for planning future sessions.

It was a pleasure to meet you during inspection and to hear your views. We hope that you, your children and many more families who live in the area will continue to enjoy and benefit from the many services the centre offers. Thank you for contributing to our inspection by sharing your comments and thoughts so openly.

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