

Inspection report for The Link Children's Centre

Local authority	Gloucestershire
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	The Moat Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	The Link Children's Centre Nursery – EY421425

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.

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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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors met with senior managers and leaders of Barnardo's, health and social care professionals, a representative of the local authority, community partners, family support workers, early years professionals, and parents.

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

Information about the centre

The Link is one of seven children's centres managed by Barnardo's in the county. It is a phase one centre which was designated in April 2006. Centre services are provided at The Link and neighbouring school. The centre's core purpose is provided through a range of integrated services which include health, family support and outreach work, adult training and sessional childcare provision. The head of centre reports to Barnardo's, which manages the centre on behalf of the local authority, and is responsible for the governance of the centre. Currently, there is no advisory or partnerships board in place to support the governing body.

Statistical data indicate that the reach area includes significant social and economical disadvantage. The percentage of workless households and those dependent on benefits is above the national average. Children start nursery with skills and knowledge that are often well below the expected levels, particularly in personal and social and speech and language development. The population is predominantly White British with a small but growing population from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The centre has partnership links with The Moat Primary School where a range of centre services are provided. The Moat Primary School and the nursery were inspected separately and they have individual reports which can be accessed via ofsted.gov.uk.

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 families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The Link Children's Centre's overall effectiveness is satisfactory. It is a warm and welcoming centre and provides effective support for the families who use its services. Senior leaders have built a team of staff who are enthusiastic, caring and confident in their roles. They feel empowered through training and well supported in taking significant responsibility for key areas of the centre's work. The centre's engagement with families has increased steadily each year. Outcomes for families are satisfactory overall because the centre has yet to engage with the full range of families in the area. However, outcomes for families made vulnerable by their circumstances are good and improving.

A particular strength of the centre is its approach to safeguarding. Staff have a good understanding of child protection procedures, they are well versed in safeguarding protocols and procedures, and ensure that any concerns are promptly shared with relevant agencies. The centre provides many good quality activities and strategies to improve families' health and well-being, learning and development, and especially their economic stability. These all contribute to families' improved health and help them enjoy and achieve. As a result the care, guidance and support offered to families are good. The centre knows the needs of its target groups well because partnership working with health professionals and those from the voluntary and private sectors is strong. The bulk of its work is with the most vulnerable families: target groups, such as lone parents, young parents, and survivors of domestic abuse, who are well represented in the membership of the centre. Families have made invaluable contributions to the development of services through their suggestions and in their roles as volunteers.

Equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination are central to the work of the centre, which is why increased access by hard to reach and vulnerable groups is at the heart of its improvement plans. However, the centre is judged to be providing satisfactorily in this regard because it is not able to demonstrate how these positive approaches impact on a range of families in the area.

The Early Years Foundation Stage and childcare provision are good and children

make good progress given their low starting points. This is as a result of the good quality care and learning within the centre nursery and the systematic support and guidance provided to children by staff and speech and language therapists.

The centre's capacity to improve is satisfactory. There have been improvements to the provision in the last three years and strong and effective partnerships with other agencies have been established for some time which has a positive impact on families. Senior leaders and managers have a range of suitable planning strategies and they demonstrate appropriate developments. Leaders and managers at all levels and all other staff demonstrate a passion and determination to improve the lives of families. Regular monitoring is carried out by senior leaders within the organisation. There are regular opportunities provided to evaluate families' satisfaction with the good quality range of provision, and strategies to capture user engagement are effective. In general, self-evaluation is accurate, but it does not include enough contributions from families or key partners. Leadership and management arrangements are secure but the roles and contributions of families in the strategic governance of the centre are limited.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve outcomes for the large majority of families by increasing the proportion of families in the area who access and use the centre's services.
- Develop the effectiveness of the centre's self-evaluation by involving families and key partners more; and ensure the views of parents contribute on a regular basis to the governance of the centre by engaging them further in decisions.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Powerful case study testimony shows that the centre is working effectively with many families who experience severe challenges, including mental health issues and domestic abuse. However, there are a large number of families living in the reach area who are not using centre services enough. Therefore, outcomes are no better than satisfactory. The centre is making increasingly effective use of data to contribute to the evaluation of outcomes for the most vulnerable families in the reach area. As a result they are able to demonstrate that outcomes are good and improving for these families who make use of the centre and its services.

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used well. Children and families referred to the centre for targeted input and those on child protection plans access valuable support and services in good time to meet their needs. The centre is a safe and secure environment where users feel they can share their concerns. One parent described the centre as 'relaxed, (with a) friendly atmosphere'. Regular meetings and effective communication between centre staff and partner agencies mean that

families who may be at risk of harm and children assessed under the Common Assessment Framework are closely monitored. Parents' written evaluations show that the lives of these families are improved through the effective implementation of the Common Assessment Framework procedures and support from outreach workers. Relevant risk assessments ensure the safety and welfare of children and users. Parents are made aware of how to keep themselves and their children safe through a range of visits, workshops and home safety initiatives. For instance, the fire service visits the centre and provides families with fire safety advice and equipment.

The economic well-being of families is significantly improved as a result of the effective services provided to reduce debt and to develop families' financial awareness. The centre provides successful activities, for example 'Active Tots', and healthy eating programmes to support the authority's obesity strategy. Membership of the breastfeeding support group continues to increase and the take-up of breastfeeding at birth shows promising improvement as does the number of mothers who continue to breastfeed after six weeks.

The centre's data show that parents have completed a range of courses in literacy, numeracy, vocational and leisure skills at entry level and above, which are likely to improve their chances of employment. Some parents and carers have subsequently found employment. The volunteer programme is successfully raising aspirations, confidence and skills to help adults on their path to future employment. Volunteers are enthusiastic ambassadors for the centre. However, information provided by the centre about the participation rates and outcomes for parents taking part in educational and vocational activities is not always sufficiently clear to demonstrate good outcomes.

Strong and trusting relationships are formed between families and staff. Good quality parenting and behaviour programmes are leading to improved parenting skills and confidence. The views of parents are well considered by staff and senior leaders and are used to influence decisions. However, families are not systematically involved in strategic decision making at the centre.

Parents and children play and learn together through 'stay and play' sessions, behaviour programmes, 'busy babies' and the young parents' group. In the nursery, staff value parents and carers as learning partners, supporting their child's progress, learning and development. Parents' and children's comments and views are recorded in the children's learning diaries. There is convincing evidence in the Early Years Foundation Stage profile data that the gap between the lowest achieving children and their peers is narrowing securely.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families:

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare	3

concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

2

The centre offers a good range of services for the target groups that it works with, and the quality of care, guidance and support is successful. Impressive provision is targeted at those residents in the most deprived areas or those who need most help because of their life experiences. The centre offers a good range of support for all groups, although the attendance rate for some groups is lower than others. As such, the leaders are working to ensure that all families are equally well represented.

Provision is delivered in partnership with many community groups and private, voluntary and statutory organisations. Strong partnership working with health and social care professionals has ensured that the needs of families made vulnerable by their circumstances are quickly identified and are well met. Child care plans are developed in partnership with families by skilled practitioners and their success supports the centre's good quality provision. Case studies and data show that good quality and timely services and support make a discernible difference to the most vulnerable families. The staff know the families they deal with well and the support families receive is tailored for their individual needs. Parents who made their views known are highly appreciative of the care provided by the centre. Levels of worklessness in the area are high as are the levels of debt experienced by families. These aspects are well provided for through outreach services, debt and financial management support, adult learning and development opportunities and the centre's volunteering scheme. The centre is successfully engaging with teenage and young parents through good quality support and parenting programmes. Parents report increasing levels of parenting skill and confidence and improved self-esteem as a result of their engagement with services.

The centre's volunteer scheme membership reflects the range of families using the centre. Several volunteers have achieved nationally recognised qualifications through the effective support and encouragement provided by the centre's senior leaders. One parent involved in the volunteer scheme commented, 'Staff are very helpful to me, supporting me with my work and study. Gaining the NVQ was such a sense of achievement for me.' Parents improve their literacy and numeracy skills, and take-up rates for these courses are good. The centre is responsive to the wishes of families as well as their needs. For instance, parents, carers and volunteers benefit from successfully attending paediatric first-aid courses run at the centre at the request of

families and this is having a positive impact because parents feel more confident to know how to respond in the event of an accident.

Weekly sessions take place in the centre run by the health visitor who provides families with invaluable information and advice on a wide range of child health matters, for example sleeping, weaning and toilet training. There is a wide range of leaflets and written information displayed throughout the centre to ensure that users have easy access to details about issues such as welfare benefits, sexual health services and services to support survivors of domestic and sexual abuse.

These are the grades for the quality of provision:

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The arrangements for the leadership and management of the centre are clear and are well understood by staff. There are well-established supervision and performance management systems in place and professional development is promoted and encouraged. The senior leaders of the organisation hold the centre to account through established monitoring and auditing systems.

The centre has effective procedures for safeguarding. The suitability of all staff and volunteers is closely scrutinised in accordance with the centre's well-considered and thorough safer recruitment procedures and processes. The way in which staff are recruited and checked includes additional information regarding staff training and development including training renewal dates. Staff are knowledgeably trained in a range of safeguarding matters. The centre is particularly effective in early intervention work because of the close cooperation and strength of effective partnerships with health and social care agencies. The centre provides an inclusive, accessible and safe environment. Parents and children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are well supported and they access good quality provision. Families who use the centre and professional partners highlight how all children and families, regardless of background, aptitudes or other differences, are valued and how services are tailored to meet individual need. Leaders are now securely focused on ensuring that there is a greater evenness in the attendance rates for parents beyond those from the most vulnerable groups.

Parents and carers play an active role in the life of the centre and user engagement is strong. The Parents' Forum provides regular opportunities for the views of families

to be heard. Arrangements to re-establish the partnership board are in place but have yet to be realised. Therefore, families have yet to take a vital role in the governance of the centre in relation to decision-making. In addition, families and key partner views are not yet embedded in the centre's self-evaluation process. The centre provides satisfactory value for money as outcomes for the majority of families living in the reach area are uneven, despite the good outcomes for families who engage with the centre.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	2

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

The Link Children's Centre Nursery report dated 04 August 2011. The Nursery was judged to be good in all aspects.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected The Link Children's Centre on 26–27 October 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you for making us welcome. We would like to thank you for contributing to the inspection by sharing your experience of the children's centre.

Many of you told us that the centre is welcoming, accessible, that staff are friendly and you feel safe there. We could see that children and families enjoy many of the activities on offer. We know that 'Stay and Play' sessions are very popular with families. The centre is particularly effective at safeguarding children and families. Services and the care, guidance and support provided to families who are experiencing particularly difficult times are very effective. Unfortunately, there are still too many families living in the area that are not using the centre or accessing services to best effect, especially as there is a good range of services and support.

The centre works well with a wide range of good quality partners such as health and social care to support children's development and help families to learn new skills and gain confidence. The Volunteers' Scheme is proving to be an effective way that parents and carers can gain valuable work experience and develop essential skills for the workplace. Children make good progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage and are preparing well for school.

We found a number of ways that families take an active role and are involved in the life of the centre. For instance, the Parents' Forum is a good way for families to express their views and make suggestions for improvement to help the centre drive forward. The centre has useful business and development plans in place which identify targets for improving the centre's work. Leaders and staff at all levels know that there is still more to do if they are to fully involve the community.

We have asked the centre to improve outcomes for families by ensuring that all families living in the area are encouraged and supported to access its services. You, as parents can help with this by spreading the word about how much you value the work of the centre.

We want the centre to ensure that families are well represented in the governance of the centre and actively participate in decision making. Centre leaders are working to re-establish the Partnership Board and are keen that parents are involved in this. We have also asked the centre to give families and key partners more of a say in the self-evaluation of the centre.

I would like to thank everyone who came to talk to us. I would like to wish you, your children and the families who live in the Matson area the very best for the future.

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