

Inspection report for Cowley St Laurence Children's Centre

Local authority	London Borough of Hillingdon
Inspection number	386078
Inspection dates	12–13 October 2011
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Date of previous inspection	This is the first inspection
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Linked school if applicable	Cowley St Laurence CE Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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.

Report published: November 2011



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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 held meetings with the centre's staff and senior staff from the school, a representative from the local authority, members of the advisory board, the Chair of the Governing Body and representatives from some of the centre's partners. They had informal discussions with parents and users of the services. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documentation including case studies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its service plan and action plan, and data about the area.

Information about the centre

The centre serves the Cowley area of Uxbridge, Middlesex. It is a phase 2 centre originally designated in January 2008, although it was not until December 2009 that it provided the range of services for its designation: drop-in sessions; family support; child and family health services; and Jobcentre Plus. Services have changed since then and Jobcentre Plus is no longer a partner. The centre now offers some short sessions of child care. Staff provide advice and guidance to users about other services locally, including those provided in two local children's centres.

This small centre occupies part of a new building that links the two main buildings of the primary school. It comprises two multi-purpose rooms with an outdoor area and office space. Until the building was completed in November 2010 the centre operated services from a number of venues in the local area. The centre has undergone many changes in staff, including a period when there was no administrator. The centre manager is the only full-time member of staff; several part-time staff have joined the centre within the last few months.

The area that the centre serves has some pockets of deprivation as well as more affluent areas. Over a quarter of families in the area are in receipt of workless benefits and 39% receive incapacity benefits; 17% are lone parents. There is a local women's refuge and mother and baby unit in the centre's reach area. The majority of the community, 70%, are of White British heritage. The remaining 30% represent a

wide range of cultural heritages. Children’s levels of skills and experiences when they start school are lower than is typical for their age, especially in language development.

The centre is managed by the governing body of the school on behalf of the local authority. Reorganisation in the local authority has led to some changes to key personnel with responsibility for overseeing children’s centres. A parents’ forum has been established very recently and an advisory board advises the centre’s leaders on the type of services to offer the community.

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

4

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

4

Main findings

Despite some positive features, the centre is not as effective as it should be. Observations of children and families using the centre show that they are engaging with activities and gaining skills and confidence to improve outcomes for their children. While many of the outcomes for those who use the centre are satisfactory, the centre is not having enough impact on supporting families to develop economic stability through access to training and employment. Although some individuals gain success at the adult education course provided at the centre, few go on to further training or employment. There is a lack of evidence to show how such courses are benefitting those most in need of them. Sessions providing guidance about employment are not well attended.

The centre does not use the data provided by the local authority well enough to be sure that it is reaching out to all those children and families that could benefit from its services. Some targeted services for specific groups are successful but some general services have low rates of participation.

The centre does not have effective systems for keeping records about which families attend activities to use when designing new services and to help staff evaluate the impact of the centre’s services. There is a perception that all is well and, certainly, parents who engage in the centre’s services are very happy with what the services they receive. Parents find the centre staff welcoming. They are comfortable to

approach staff with problems and appreciate the centre's support. However, the centre finds it difficult to offer evidence to demonstrate its impact on improving outcomes. For example, the centre cannot demonstrate in any concrete way that it has helped to improve the achievement of the children that are now in the school.

The centre is effective at working with some target groups and families who need specific support to help them overcome difficulties in their lives. This work benefits from positive partnerships with other services locally to ensure that families have the right mix of support. The centre's partnership with the school, especially joint working with the Early Years Foundation Stage, is still developing and not yet consistently sharing appropriate information.

The governing body and school leaders responsible for holding the centre to account have only recently begun to ask appropriate questions about the centre's effectiveness and its impact on outcomes for children and families. Although the local authority agrees annual service-delivery plans and regularly reviews them, as it does the performance of the centre, it does not set quantifiable targets for the centre and neither does the advisory board. For too long the centre has operated without clear direction and lines of communication remain blurred. As a result, development planning for the centre is weak. Improvement plans lack clear measurable targets by which the centre can measure its effectiveness.

The centre got off to a slow start, with building difficulties and as a consequence, it has not been fully operational for long. Staff changes have not helped to ensure consistency. The numbers of people coming to the centre are rising, but participation levels are low in some sessions. There is commitment and willingness to improve but, at present, the centre does not demonstrate that it knows how to go about making such improvements and so lacks the capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve the quality and effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels by:
 - ensuring that the governing body sets clear direction for the centre's strategic development and clarifies line management and accountability
 - improving systems for monitoring what is working well in the centre and what needs to improve
 - devising plans of action with clear targets that are ambitious but realistic and measurable to demonstrate the centre's success.
- The local authority should provide further support to the centre to:
 - make better use of its data about the families in the area to identify and target those who are not using the centre but who could benefit from its services
 - devise systems for keeping track of information about families who use the centre's services to measure the difference that services make to

outcomes.

- Strengthen the partnership with the school, especially the Early Years Foundation Stage, to share information and activities that will benefit children and families.

How good are outcomes for families?

4

A number of activities at the centre encourage families to adopt healthy lifestyles, and those who attend have a growing awareness of the importance of keeping their child healthy. Examples include healthy snack times in the centre, 'Veggie gang' cooking sessions, 'Friday shake-up', 'Buggy fit', and dance classes for children of Reception Year age. Cooking sessions held in the women's refuge as part of the centre's outreach services help this particular target group of parents to learn ideas about healthy eating on a budget. However, sessions provided by the health services have had a mixed impact and are overall satisfactory rather than good. The centre's focus on encouraging breastfeeding has helped to improve the rates of those continuing to breastfeed their babies for the first six to eight weeks. Baby clinics ensure more children have the two-year check, and immunisation rates have risen. However, there is more to do to tackle higher-than-average obesity rates in the area and poor dental health.

The welcoming atmosphere in the centre engenders an environment in which families can relax and adults are not afraid to speak about their concerns or problems. Adults who attend say they feel comfortable and the children show by their positive behaviour and interaction with staff that they feel safe in the centre. Sessions focusing specifically on safety in the home have resulted in the centre providing families with safety gates. Children are aware of the centre's simple rules and expectations that help keep themselves safe. Parents know rules and expectations too. Adults and children develop positive relationships and the adults from a range of economic and cultural backgrounds demonstrate mutual respect for one another. Participants are encouraged to give feedback on the centre's services and feel that their views are listened to and taken into account. For example, some sessions have been repeated at the request of families. However, the parents' forum is very new and so parents' current, formal contribution to decision making about the centre is too limited.

Case studies show that parents from target groups have benefited from specific support to improve their skills and confidence in managing their children's behaviour. One said that she knows she is a 'better parent' as a result. Families assessed under the Common Assessment Framework are being helped by the parent support worker to cope with significant difficulties in their lives. Parenting courses also give parents a range of support in helping to get their children ready for school life. Support includes training to observe their children and ideas about how to engage with their children's learning at home as well as support for potty training. Family fun bags are popular with nursery children and their families. However, the centre holds just one adult education course three times a year because space is at a premium and any signposting to courses elsewhere is not monitored. As a consequence, impact on

families is not known. Although some participants gain qualifications, the number going on to employment following participation is low. Jobcentre Plus can no longer staff sessions at the centre and so a drop-in session of guidance and advice is provided through Next Steps. Attendance at these weekly sessions is low and parents from target groups do not always keep the appointments they make and do not make adequate progress.

Children who attend the centre are enthusiastic and enjoy their learning. Those in 'Little Roos' were observed developing their skills and experiences by making choices about the toys and activities and making friends with other children. Children with speech and language needs were observed making small, crucial steps in their progress. Anecdotal evidence suggests that children who have attended 'Little Roos' and other centre activities, such as 'step up' sessions over the summer holidays, settle better at the nursery. The centre has devised a satisfactory system for tracking the progress of children who attend the centre. However, it does not have a system to check children's outcomes at school to demonstrate that its services have had an impact on children's progress.

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 concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
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	4

How good is the provision?

3

In general terms, staff at the centre know a lot about the reach area and the challenges that face some families. The centre engages well with some target groups. Its work with the women's refuge and the mother and baby unit are examples. The centre is, in the main, effective at supporting the learning and development needs of registered families who use its services regularly. However, the centre is not effective at analysing the information on the reach area and is unclear about which groups are using its services and which are not. Staff cannot be sure that the centre is reaching all those in its area that could benefit from its support.

The centre has responded to some issues of low attendance at some of the sessions it offers by adapting what is provided, but has not always followed up quickly enough why attendance is low. At times it has responded to the requests of some of its users to repeat popular activities. However, the centre has been slow to respond to other needs in the community, such as the need for affordable child care.

Families who use the centre speak highly of the level of support they receive from the staff. One parent called the centre 'wonderful'. The way that staff build relationships with these families is a strength. Some of these families include those that need the most support and care during times when they face difficult circumstances. Case studies show that families receive a wide range of support, guidance and advice from the parent support worker. Close partnership working with health services and social services who refer families to the centre ensures that support is coherent and meets the families' needs. Joint work with other centres ensures staff are able to refer families to appropriate services, such as a dads' group on Saturdays.

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	4
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

4

Members of the advisory board are supportive of the centre. Recently, members have begun to ask more questions about the centre's effectiveness. For example, members of the advisory board acknowledge that more needs to be done to engage the wider community. However, both the advisory board and the governing body to whom the board reports have been slow to provide clear direction for the centre, to set targets, and to hold it accountable for meeting those targets.

While there is a commitment to providing the best for the community, there is not a clear vision for the way forward. Self-evaluation is weak. Lack of systematic record keeping means data about participation are not readily available and not analysed in any meaningful way to provide a clear steer for the provision of activities. Data provided by the local authority are not readily understood or analysed to help precise identification of potential needs in the area. Action planning is too general and not rooted in clear target setting. Although parents using the centre express a high level of satisfaction with its services, the centre's resources are not always used to best effect to benefit local groups. For example, a successful session of speech and

language therapy observed during inspection was attended by families from outside the centre's reach area.

Generally the centre runs smoothly. Staffing difficulties in the past meant that for some time the centre operated just a skeleton service. New staff are keen and enthusiastic, although some are still becoming accustomed to their roles and responsibilities and to the programmes they are providing for families. The centre manager's monitoring of the quality of activities is too informal to ensure new staff adopt consistent approaches to their work. Safeguarding measures are effective. All partners are aware of the centre's procedures. Staff are well trained and all staff who work at the centre have had appropriate checks. A range of risk assessments ensure that potential dangers are anticipated to reduce the risk of accidents.

There is a mixed picture of the quality of partnerships. Some are successful and enable the centre to meet the needs of families. Links with the school's provision for early years are underdeveloped. Information is not always shared in a manner that enables these two elements of provision for children under five and their families to operate in a seamless way. By contrast, the work with identified families who need support from both the school and the centre is effective in providing a coherent package to meet their needs.

The centre is keen to ensure that no groups are prevented from attending its services and staff encourage people from a diverse range of backgrounds to engage in the centre's services. Early intervention support for those families who have been identified as having children with additional learning needs is satisfactory and underpinned by joint work with a number of services. Parental feedback from 'team around the child' meetings is positive about the clear guidance and support offered. However, with no system for following up the outcomes of children as they progress into education, the centre cannot demonstrate that it is narrowing the achievement gap for children. While the centre has many positive features, the negative ones are significant and so, currently, the centre offers inadequate value for money.

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	4
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	4
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	4
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	4
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable	3

adults	
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	3
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	3

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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Cowley St Laurence Children's Centre on 12 and 13 October 2011. We judged the centre as inadequate overall.

During the inspection we held meetings with the centre's staff and some from the school. Other people who work at the centre came to talk to us, as did some of those who advise the centre and make sure that it is providing the right activities. We were pleased to talk to some of you about the centre and its activities. We looked at some of the evaluations that you have completed about the sessions you attend and the results of the satisfaction survey done in August.

The centre is not doing as well as it thinks. While many of the outcomes for those of you who use the centre are satisfactory, there is more to do to help you; for example to help you to attend training and gain qualifications that might lead to employment.

The centre does not have effective systems for keeping records about which families attend activities and it does not know enough about the families in the area who might need their help but do not get it. The centre does not always respond quickly enough to the needs of families and we have asked staff to make sure they can do this in future by looking more carefully at the information given to them by the local authority.

Those of you who use the centre enjoy coming. You think that staff are welcoming and approachable. We saw your children enjoying the activities and toys in the centre too. Those in 'Little Roos' were making new friends. We know that a number of activities are raising your awareness of how to keep your children healthy and safe. Some of you are learning how to help your children with learning at home. Some of you are gaining confidence in managing your children's behaviour. It is

helpful for the centre to have your feedback on the activities you enjoy. The centre told us about some of the sessions it has changed in response to your ideas and suggestions. The centre has set up a parents' forum so that you can get more involved in some of the decisions about the centre's services.

Staff work well with those of you that need specific support to help you cope with problems. They do this successfully by working in a joined up way with health services, social services, and speech and language therapists. We have asked them to work more closely with the staff in the school's Nursery and Reception classes, particularly to share information about children as they transfer into school and to find out how well they do there. The centre needs to be able to show that the support it gives your children makes a difference to them as they begin their education. We have asked the centre to find ways to do this more effectively.

There has been some confusion in the past about who is responsible for checking the work of the centre and making sure that it is providing the right kinds of services for the people in the area. The governing body of the school has this responsibility, but governors have only just started to carry out this role properly. We have said that the centre needs to have clear targets that are reflected in its plans for the future and in the services it offers you. The centre does not have clear systems for checking whether or not it is successful.

The centre got off to a slow start. Some of you may remember the problems the building caused and how some of the activities had to be held locally. There have been quite a few staff changes too. Now that the centre is fully operational more families are registering with the centre, although some of the activities are not well supported.

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