

Inspection report for Valley House Children's Centre

Local authority	Coventry
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
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.



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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 representatives from services that work in partnership with the centre, including the National Health Service, centre staff, the chair of the advisory board, representatives from the local authority and the project director of Valley House. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Valley House Children's Centre is a phase one children's centre. It provides the full core offer of services, including family support and links to Jobcentre Plus. The centre has crèche facilities on-site. Valley House Children's Centre is an integral part of, and on the same site as Valley House, a multi-service voluntary sector organisation. The organisation offers a range of services to the local community, including supported accommodation, counselling and personal and vocational training. The centre is located in North East Coventry and has a reach area which is within the 10% most disadvantaged areas in the country. Unemployment is high, with 18% of children from households where no one is working. The centre also serves families facing issues of domestic violence, homelessness and lone parenting. The majority of families living in the area are of White British heritage. There is also a range of minority ethnic groups living in the area. They are predominately of Asian, Caribbean and Polish heritage. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills and knowledge that are below those expected for their age.

A commissioning agreement was set up between the local authority and Valley House in July 2006 for the delivery of children's services. The centre is managed by a centre manager who is accountable to the Valley House management committee. The committee represents the views of some service partners.

Since its designation in 2006, the centre has been through some significant organisational and staffing changes. Following the long-term absence of the centre manager, and her eventual resignation in January 2010, the management committee

appointed an interim centre manager. A new permanent centre manager was appointed in August 2010. In April 2010, Valley House closed its registered child care provision following a Coventry City Council cut to its funding which rendered child care provision unsustainable. The centre now provides parents and carers with information on where childcare provision can be found. It also has links with the local childminder network.

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 overall effectiveness of the centre is satisfactory. Some aspects of the centre's work are good. It provides a calm and safe environment. In the words of one parent, 'It is a cosy centre where we are all made to feel welcome.' Arrangements for safeguarding are good. In order to ensure staff have the skills required to ensure the safety of children and families, staff training is given a high priority. The quality of care, guidance and support is good. Those in most need of help receive prompt and effective support. Parents and carers who spoke with inspectors were particularly complimentary about the support and guidance they have received at times of crisis.

The centre knows its community well and has identified the groups who would most benefit from its services. However it does not yet have precise information about the percentage of families from all its target groups living in the reach area, because Coventry City Council currently collects this information by Wards. As a consequence, the centre does not know what proportion from the target groups of families could be or are currently engaging with the centre. During the inspection, inspectors reviewed participation data for children, parents and carers taking part in the different activities. Senior leaders correctly acknowledge that further work is required to increase contact with children and families in the reach area, and especially from all of its target groups. For instance, there are too few fathers and adults seeking employment or training accessing the centre's activities and services.

Self-evaluation is broadly satisfactory. The centre's evaluation of its impact on families is generous. This is because the centre does not yet have a rigorous system for evaluating or demonstrating the impact of its work on all its families. Senior

leaders collate a range of individual feedback from those who use the centre and review attendance data. However, this is not analysed systematically. Moreover, evaluations tend to describe what happens during sessions rather than the impact of the activity on the participants.

Information from observations during the inspection, case studies and feedback from users indicates that outcomes for the vast majority of children and families are satisfactory and improving. For instance, through the use of 'Treasure Baskets', staff work with parents and carers and demonstrate how children can learn through play. Support such as this makes a sound contribution to children's learning and development. The centre works effectively in partnership with the other services at Valley House to have a positive impact on outcomes for young parents. As consequence, outcomes for this particular group of users are good. One young parent who was helped to participate in a local health event wrote, 'I really enjoyed having the opportunity of organising a health stand; it made me realise how much information I have to share.'

Annual consultations and informal discussions are just some of the methods used to gather the views of families who attend the centre. In response to these views, the centre has introduced new resources and adapted some of its services. For instance, it has established a 'Brunch' group which gives families the opportunity to learn about healthy eating and using nutritious ingredients when cooking. The management committee is aware that opportunities for parents to regularly evaluate the centre's services and influence its strategic direction are limited.

Leadership of the centre has been through a number of changes in the past two years. Since her appointment in August 2010, the centre manager has worked with staff and the management committee to review the services and activities offered at the centre. Provision has been adapted in order to ensure that there is a stronger focus on improving outcomes for children and families in the reach area. Many of the changes that have been introduced are still at an early stage and have yet to make a significant impact on families in the reach area. This, coupled with steadily improving outcomes, means that the capacity for improvement is satisfactory.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase the proportion of children and families, and especially those from all of the centre's target groups, participating in the centre's services and activities.
- Ensure parents and carers are given further opportunities to evaluate services and influence the strategic direction of the centre.
- Strengthen self-evaluation by ensuring:
 - leaders and managers rigorously evaluate information and data in order to demonstrate the impact of the centre's work

- members of the management committee provide senior leaders with robust support and challenge
- key partners develop strategies which will enable them to demonstrate the impact of their work on children and families
- targets for improvement are measurable and focused on improving outcomes for children and families in the reach area.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

'Mini-Movers' and 'Teddy Bears Picnic' sessions enable parents and carers to develop a satisfactory understanding of the importance of living a healthy lifestyle. One parent spoke with pride about the opportunity he had been given to share a healthy recipe with other parents and carers during a cooking session. As a result of improved links with health visitors and midwives, the number of women attending antenatal and postnatal sessions has steadily increased. Children who visit the centre benefit from the use of a wide range of indoor and outdoor equipment. Staff promote children's physical development well by incorporating active play into all sessions.

Parents and carers' understanding of how to keep their families safe while participating in centre activities and at home is sound. Through the 'Safe as House' project, some families have been provided with home safety equipment. Case study information shows that the Common Assessment Framework process is used successfully to secure relevant support for families whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Written feedback shows that parents and carers who have been victims of domestic violence, value the work of the centre in ensuring their safety.

Children are encouraged to cooperate, and take it in turns to use equipment. Consequently, they behave appropriately during sessions. 'My child has really grown in confidence and learnt to play with others,' reported one parent. Children, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, make steady progress in their learning and development. On occasions, staff miss opportunities to extend children's language and mathematical skills. The centre places a strong emphasis on developing children's creativity. As a consequence, progress in this aspect is good. An effective example of this was seen during a 'Creative Play' session when children used a variety of materials to design and make Christmas decorations and cards.

In partnership with a local college and Jobcentre Plus, the centre is enabling an increasing number of parents and carers to return to education, training and work. A few have achieved accredited qualifications. The centre has effectively helped young parents to build their confidence and develop skills for the future. For instance, during a 'Motorvate' driving course, they learnt about basic car maintenance and road safety. One young parent wrote, 'This has encouraged me to follow up this course by doing some driving lessons.'

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

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

How good is the provision?

3

There is an adequate range of activities available for families in the local community. A crèche enables parents and carers to attend meetings and centre activities. The centre is increasingly tailoring its activities better to meet the needs of families in the reach area. For instance, staff from the family support team have recently started to offer drop-in sessions at a local shopping precinct and school. This outreach work is enabling the centre to engage with a greater number of families from the centre's reach area, including those from its target groups.

Activities during sessions such as 'Stay and Play' are varied and satisfactorily promote children's language and mathematical learning. Assessment information is not always used to plan activities for the different learning needs of children. The centre is planning on introducing 'Learning Journeys' so that staff can more effectively monitor and evaluate the progress of children.

'I don't know what I would have done without the centre staff,' 'They are always here for me,' and 'The staff really care,' are representative of the views expressed by parents and carers during the inspection. Family support workers, in collaboration with the voluntary organisation Valley House, make an important difference to the well-being of families in difficult circumstances. Together they ensure families access relevant services and quickly acquire the support they need.

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	3
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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre manager has a secure understanding of what the centre needs to do to improve outcomes for children and families in the reach area. She is supported by a cohesive team which is committed to her vision for the centre. Leaders at other levels have yet to take greater responsibility for monitoring and evaluating the work of the centre. Similarly, the partner agencies that work with the centre do not fully contribute to the evaluation process. The targets for improvement in the centre's action plan are appropriate. However, the plan does not contain measurable targets for improvement, against which success can be measured.

Governance and accountability arrangements are satisfactory. Members of the management committee meet regularly and review the centre's work. They provide senior leaders with a suitable level of support. However, they do not focus enough on the impact of the centre's work on families, and especially those from target groups. The management committee has recently been subject to an independent review of its performance. As a consequence, members now have a clearer understanding of the role of the committee and how to hold the centre to account.

Children who have specific learning and developmental needs are treated with sensitivity. Equality and diversity are promoted satisfactorily. Personalised activities for young parents have had a beneficial impact on their well-being and self-esteem. However, there is more to do to increase take-up rates for other target groups, such as fathers. The impact of the centre's provision is satisfactory. As a consequence, the centre provides satisfactory value for money.

Procedures for checking the suitability of staff are robust. Centre staff take effective action to support parents and carers experiencing difficulties, such as domestic violence. They work well with a range of agencies to support families where there are child protection concerns. Posters and displays around the centre make it clear to adults who use the centre what to do if they have any concerns.

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	2

agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable 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 the Valley House Children's Centre on 13 and 14 December 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you for talking with us about your children's centre. Thank you for making us feel welcome. We enjoyed talking with you. We also read what some of you had written about the centre's work. Your views were very helpful to the inspection. You told us that staff are friendly and helpful. We agree.

The quality of care, guidance and support you benefit from is good. We found that centre staff are quick to step in and provide effective support to those of you who are experiencing difficult times. Staff are well trained and make sure that children and families who attend the centre are kept safe.

A number of you told us that you and your children like taking part in the centre's activities. Children who attend the centre make satisfactory progress. Sometimes they make good progress. Sessions such as 'Brunch' and 'Teddy Bears Picnic' are helping you to understand the importance of eating healthily. Centre staff are particularly effective at planning activities which encourage your children to be creative. We could see how much you were enjoying making Christmas decorations and cards with your children in the creative play session. Your children behave well and learn to play with others and take turns.

The centre provides a satisfactory range of services for families in the area. Some of you have been helped to grow in confidence, access training, gain qualifications and find paid work. We were impressed by the number of young parents who have been helped to gain useful skills, such as learning to drive. We have asked the staff to

increase the number of families who use the centre from the local area, especially those who would benefit from its services and activities.

The centre staff listen to your views and ask you to take part in annual consultations. They have introduced new activities, such as 'Brunch' in response to your feedback. We found that the centre could do more to involve you in making decisions about the centre's work. We hope that you will take the opportunity to get involved in the parents' forum. Some of you might also like to join the management committee.

We have asked the management committee, the centre staff and the agencies that work with the centre to make sure they are able to demonstrate the difference they make to your lives. We have also asked them to carefully check the work of the centre so that they can make sure the services and activities are right for you.

Thank you once again for your help and for your contribution to the inspection. We wish you and your families the very best for the future.

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