

Inspection report for Lewes Children's Centre

Local authority	East Sussex
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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 the centre management team, the local authority, health professionals, a social worker, representatives from the local advisory group, front-line staff, parents and partner agencies. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Lewes Children's Centre is one of six centres in the Lewes district of East Sussex. It is a phase two centre which was designated in 2008. The centre serves the historic county town of Lewes and the surrounding rural villages. In addition to services provided from the centre, many services operate within the community at local venues and at neighbouring children's centres.

The centre serves an area which is exceptionally mixed in terms of deprivation. There are an estimated 1,083 children aged under five years living in the centre's reach area. Of these, 15.5% live in communities categorised as being in the 30% most deprived areas. There are pockets of affluent areas and smaller pockets of lower deprivation. Homes consist of social housing, rented accommodation and privately owned homes. There is a category B prison within the centre's reach area and Traveller communities. Around 13% of children in the centre's area live in households dependent on workless benefits.

The vast majority of families in the reach area are of White British heritage. Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills that are either just below or in line with those expected for their age. In 2011, 59% of children achieved at least 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The centre provides the full core offer and works in partnership with a number of agencies. Governance arrangements are provided by the local authority. A local advisory group oversees the work of the six centres within the locality.

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Lewes Children's Centre plays a key role in improving outcomes for the most vulnerable families. The local health visitor exemplified this by stating, 'The centre has had a positive impact on local families and has definitely improved outcomes for children.' Services are aligned effectively and partnership arrangements between all agencies are strong at both local and strategic level. This is particularly evident for safeguarding arrangements where practice is exemplary. Representatives from children's services were keen to explain to inspectors the significant difference the centre makes in protecting vulnerable children. Highly effective partnership working ensures referrals between agencies are swift. This leads to a significantly reduced number of children becoming subject to a child protection plan.

The local authority demonstrates a particularly strong commitment towards securing improvements to services for families, and utilises every opportunity to review provision and set challenging, yet realistic, targets to aid improvement. The centre is currently reaching approximately 50% of families in the reach area. Of these, almost 62% are families from the most disadvantaged communities who represent all key groups. Due to the location of the centre, the local authority is aware that some families find accessing services difficult. Consultation is underway to develop strategies to increase the range of services available to families in targeted areas and to further promote the centre's services in the rural villages and areas where reaching the centre is more challenging.

Despite extensive engagement with parents, staff have found it difficult to encourage parents to become involved in the centre's governance arrangements. Therefore, at present, few parents are actively involved in the key decision-making process. Opportunities for parents to develop their skills through volunteering roles are being developed, although this programme is still in its early stages and at present, only a few parents are involved. For those who are engaged, the programme is having a positive impact. One parent told inspectors, 'Volunteering has boosted my confidence in being a mum.'

The management structure is strong and highly effective. Staffing arrangements are clear, and roles and responsibilities are fully understood. The commitment shown by the local authority in investing in its staff and supporting professional development is particularly good, and results in consistent improvements in reach to families who reflect all key groups. Performance is closely monitored and analysis of data is rigorous to ensure all groups are targeted, and a good proportion of families most in need are successfully reached and engaged with appropriate services. Good partnership work has successfully engaged the local Traveller community into the centre's services.

Action planning is detailed. Strong leadership from management at all levels ensures the centre delivers effective provision to families most in need, leading to continually improving outcomes. Attendance levels at groups have consistently improved, and there has been sustained improvement in all key national indicators relating to children's healthy development and progress within the Early Years Foundation Stage. As a result, the centre demonstrates good capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Extend strategies to increase the centre's reach to a greater number of vulnerable families within targeted areas and to further promote the centre's services within the rural communities
- Increase the involvement of parents in the centre by:
 - encouraging more parents to be represented in the governance arrangements
 - developing the volunteer programme.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Family health promotion underpins all of the centre's services. As a result, breastfeeding rates at six to eight weeks after birth exceed county and national averages at 61.3%. Obesity levels in children of Reception age are well below county and national averages. Families clearly understand the importance of being healthy and a wide range of cookery courses, health walks and active play sessions help support healthy development. Regular child health clinics and a wide range of midwifery services ensure the healthy development of expectant mothers and young children. Immunisation rates are continually improving. Parents appreciate the close contact they have with health professionals and confirm the positive impact this has on improving children's healthy development. Groups such as baby massage encourage strong emotional well-being of both parent and child, and the 'Stop Smoking Clinics' help to improve family health.

Families comment how safe they feel at the centre. Excellent links are made with the emergency services to support the centre's work. As a result, families receive expert advice on issues such as water safety from the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) and fire safety from the fire brigade. The centre regularly organises a themed safety week with a range of external agencies to help families recognise potential dangers and keep children safe. Parents undertake paediatric first aid courses and become much more confident in identifying potential dangers within the home as a result of the comprehensive safety checks carried out by centre staff. As a result, the number of children having accidents is reducing.

Outcomes for children supported by the Common Assessment Framework are excellent. This is due to exceptional inter-agency working. Children subject to a child protection plan are extremely well supported and have excellent improvements in their outcomes. Parents thoroughly appreciate the support they receive from staff, and particularly strong praise was offered to the Family Outreach Service. One parent voiced the views of many by stating, 'The centre has been an essential resource. I can't thank everyone involved enough.'

Children are well prepared for starting school as a result of their participation in centre activities. Data show that throughout the reach area, children achieve well across the Early Years Foundation Stage from their initial starting points. Particularly good promotion of speech and language development results in children's improved progress in communication, language and literacy. The achievement of children from key target groups is good, and boys and girls generally achieve equally. The gap between the most disadvantaged and the rest is closing as a result of the consistent promotion of high quality early years provision. Parents improve their skills through many parenting courses, covering issues such as language and communication, and behaviour management. Groups such as 'Pop In and Play' and 'Baby Time' help parents clearly understand the importance of promoting purposeful play to support children's learning. Childminders are supported well through the centre's work with Early Years Foundation Stage Improvement Officers and this leads to enhanced delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Parents are starting to take a more active role in the centre. Those accessing services readily share their views and some are beginning to offer suggestions for further development. The centre's managers are particularly accommodating in adapting provision to meet parents' requests. For example, crèche operating times have been extended as a result of parents' feedback. The format of the centre's newsletter is being adapted in response to parents' requests. Further opportunities for parents to become more actively involved in the governance arrangements are not yet fully in place, despite the centre's efforts to encourage this. Relationships between families using the centre are positive and there is good engagement with all key target groups. Good links with the prison have encouraged positive family relationships. Case study evidence from the recent Prison Family Day states, 'Spending extra time with family is fantastic.'

Parents using the centre receive advice on training and employment issues, and some parents are supported in accessing accredited courses which lead to formal qualifications. A total of six parents completed a level two childcare course in 2011 with a 100% completion rate. Lone parents accessing the centre are supported effectively in seeking support to help them prepare for employment. The number of parents currently developing their skills through the volunteer programme is still low as this is only newly established.

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	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
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 good range of services and activities are well matched to local need. The family outreach workers and the community development worker know the area particularly well and are successfully engaging with families who represent all target groups. Staff work effectively with key partners, such as midwives, health visitors, early years settings and social workers, to offer cohesive support to families. Good links with partner agencies, such as the fire service, have improved accessibility of some services. For example, the fire station is now used as a venue for some centre activities. Dedicated support for young, vulnerable pregnant mothers is provided through the additional support midwife. Outreach services in the most disadvantaged areas are developing well, such as through the use of the community flat on the De Montfort estate, and the local authority is currently working at strategic level to enhance this. The centre recognises there is a need to increase provision in some of the rural villages and harder to reach areas.

The wide range of activities and courses provided by the centre help both children and parents develop their learning and acquire new skills. Parenting courses are particularly popular and many parents praised the courses in helping them develop closer relationships with their children and understand how to promote positive behaviour. The centre actively celebrates the achievements of all centre users and there is a positive ethos towards inspiring others.

The level of care, guidance and support is good. Staff are particularly skilful in identifying and supporting families who are facing difficult circumstances. As a result, parents develop strong, trusting relationships with staff and are confident to seek help. One parent stated, 'You are so comfortable with staff you can tell them when you're at rock bottom, as you know they will help you get up again.' Good networking between all agencies, commissioned services and charities ensures families are supported well at times of crisis. For example, bursaries and grants are accessed from different organisations for transport arrangements and the purchase of essential home equipment.

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?

2

Governance arrangements provided by the local authority are good. Data are used particularly well to monitor the centre's performance and identify areas for development. Strong lines of accountability are in place ensuring the centre's performance is consistently monitored and measured. The centre's management team is strong. The Area Coordinator leads a dedicated, supportive team who are totally committed towards supporting local families and providing high quality services. Good systems are in place for fully evaluating all services and a new tracker system has recently been implemented to start measuring the centre's impact through its long-term contact with families.

Safeguarding is given the highest priority. Robust recruitment procedures are implemented and excellent attention is given towards ensuring the health, safety and welfare of all centre users and staff. Meticulous records and scrupulous assessment ensure families most in need receive excellent preventative services. There is strong provision to support families experiencing domestic abuse and a dedicated programme to help parents affected by postnatal depression and mental illness. This includes a counselling programme and signposting to relevant services.

The centre has a very welcoming, inclusive ethos and it actively promotes equality and diversity. Information about centre activities is adapted to a range of formats to ensure it is easily accessible to all families. There is good provision for children with disabilities through community groups such as 'Butterflies' and access to specialist sensory rooms at neighbouring centres. The centre works particularly well with community groups, such as 'Pippa's Group', to support children identified as requiring

enhanced pre-school provision in preparation for school. Dedicated groups for fathers and male carers are developing and the local authority managers are currently looking at further ways to improve this.

Services are consistently monitored and good links at strategic level with partner agencies ensure targets are aligned and fully reviewed. Partnerships are good at all levels ensuring effective service delivery. The local authority's model for children's centres ensures resources are deployed effectively to target areas most in need without duplication. As a result, the centre delivers good value for money.

Good quality professional development for all staff ensures services are of high quality and make a positive impact on families most in need. Parents clearly value the centre and benefit from its services. One parent expressed the view of many by stating to inspectors, 'Using the centre has lifted a weight off my shoulders.' Parental engagement is improving, although it has been challenging for the centre. A Parents' Forum is in place but has not been routinely used by families. Parents' views are collated informally and staff continue to encourage parents to be represented in the governance arrangements, although this has not yet been fully successful. The centre is committed to using different strategies to consult with families not yet engaged with services to further increase its reach and develop its range of services.

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	2
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	1
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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Lewes Children's Centre on 17 and 18 May 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank all of you whom we met for telling us about how much the centre helps you, your families and your children. You told us how much you gain from using the centre's services and that you value the work of the staff. Many of you told us how approachable and supportive you find the staff and you know they are always there to help you, particularly when you are facing difficulties in your life. We noted how well the staff know the local area and understand the issues facing local families.

Your centre works exceptionally well with other agencies, such as health services and children's services, to keep you and your families safe. All of you told us how safe and secure you feel at the centre and we saw the excellent systems in place to keep you and your families protected from harm. We were particularly impressed with the range of agencies which work together to help you understand safety issues, such as the fire brigade, RNLI, police and ambulance services.

We noted the difficulties some of you face in accessing services due to the centre's location. The local authority managers are very aware of this and are currently looking at ways to improve this. We have asked them to continue to do this so that the centre can support a greater number of families. We also noted that, although staff have been encouraging parents to become involved in the Parents' Forum, not many of you have taken part yet. The centre's managers recognise how important it is to have parents involved in important decision-making procedures. We have asked them to continue to look at ways for you to be more closely involved in decisions about the centre's services.

The centre provides a good range of services for both you and your children. The regular child health clinics and midwifery services enable you to speak to health visitors and midwives easily, and this makes a positive impact on your children's development and family welfare. There is a good selection of activities which help you to understand how children learn and this helps you to support your children's development at home. We recognise how well children are doing at school as a result of this. Many parents told us how much they value the centre's services and it

has made them feel more confident as parents. We noted the wide range of courses and activities available to you, and the positive impact these have on improving family relationships and giving you ideas of activities to do with children. A few of you are now involved as volunteers and the centre is working hard to encourage more of you to become involved with this.

We would like to thank you once again for being involved in the inspection and 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.