

Inspection report for St Leonards 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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with centre staff, the local authority, the Children's Centre Area Coordinator and members of the advisory board. They met with a number of representatives of services who work with the children's centre, including health visitors and the outreach workers. Inspectors spoke to groups of parents. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including the centre's self-evaluation, development plan, user evaluations and case study information.

Information about the centre

St Leonards Children's Centre is a phase two children's centre. It operates in Central St Leonards and Gensing wards and parts of the of the Maze Hill ward from one site. The centre opened in 2009.

The Children's Centre Area Coordinator is responsible for the day-to-day running of the centre. The advisory board reports to the local authority, which is responsible for the governance of the centre. The advisory board consists of representatives from partner organisations and key stakeholders that work with the children's centre, the local authority and parents.

The majority of the families who use the centre are of White British origin. A growing number of families using the centre have mixed White British and minority ethnic origins. Data for the reach area show that the centre serves a community among the 30% most deprived nationally. The children's centre has 883 children under five in its reach area. About 28% of children and adults who use the centre come from homes that are dependent on benefits or where no-one is in work. When they start in early years provision, the majority of children have skills, knowledge and abilities that are below those expected for their age.

The centre fulfils its core purpose by offering a range of activities, which includes support at the local community baby clinic, antenatal birth clinic, breastfeeding support and baby massage. The centre has links with health visitors, community midwives and speech therapists. It signposts families to a range of providers that offer adult education, volunteering opportunities, and activities designed to support parents back into employment and training. The centre opens 51 weeks each year on weekdays from 8.30am to 5.00pm.

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

St Leonards Children's Centre meets the needs of its community well and delivers good provision. Overall outcomes for parents, children and users, including the most vulnerable, are good. Learning and development opportunities are appropriate and the centre provides good opportunities for purposeful learning. Parents feel comfortable in the centre and know they will get a warm welcome from the staff. These are some examples of what families told inspectors about the centre: 'it's a great place to come and share experiences with other mothers,' and, 'staff are very friendly and can't do enough for you.'

Working with health practitioners, the centre helps to secure good health outcomes. Baby clinics run by health visitors are well attended, and families get ready access to specialist speech and language services following early identification of children's developmental difficulties. Family learning about healthy lifestyles is good, and there has been a fall in obesity rates at the end of children's Reception Year, which at 7.6% is below the local average.

The programme to support and develop volunteers in building their skills has resulted in many adults improving their employability and self-confidence and is making a positive contribution to the life of the community. The volunteers not only support groups run by the children's centre staff, they also plan and develop volunteer-led

activities, such as 'Sign and Shine' involving singing, arts and crafts.

The centre staff have a clear sense of drive and passion and a good understanding of the difficulties they face in the reach area they serve. As a result, families are supported well. Partnerships with the local community and other agencies are effective. Regular partnership meetings are arranged, which ensure services are well integrated to deliver cohesive provision for users that impacts positively on their lives. The mobile toy library at 'Play and Learn' sessions across the area increases the accessibility of resources for families who have few facilities locally.

Families using the centre are improving their economic stability and independence and increasing numbers are engaged in training and adult learning. However, the numbers of adults developing their basic skills in literacy, numeracy and the use of computers is too low. The number of families accessing the centre's provision has increased during the last year. However, the centre needs to encourage more lone parents to use the centre's facilities.

Effective safeguarding arrangements are given high priority and embedded well into the centre's practice. Staff have a good awareness about child protection matters through regular training and updates provided. The centre promotes an inclusive approach to children and their parents. Partnerships are key strengths of the centre. The use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) exemplifies the strength in partnerships particularly well as there is complete integration of services to meet individual or family support needs.

The centre refines its programme continually. Parents contribute routinely to evaluation of the centre's work. The centre's self-evaluation is broadly accurate and it is used to inform the setting of ambitious targets. As a result, managers and the advisory board understand what they need to do to improve the centre and their development plans are well founded on the available information. Based on the good and improving outcomes secured and intensive involvement of partners at every level, the centre has good capacity to improve outcomes further.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase the centre's outreach work to engage more effectively with lone parents to encourage a higher proportion than currently seen to use the centre's services.
- Extend opportunities for more adults to develop their literacy, numeracy and computing skills so that they are enabled to achieve more and are better equipped for future work.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The centre promotes healthy lifestyles well using a range of effective initiatives,

including 'Aquababes', food demonstrations and the centre's calendar that gives tips on healthy eating and physical activities for children and families. Many of these health-related initiatives are developed in effective health partnerships. These include ante-natal and post-natal visits and a 'Bumps for lunch' group. Due to the centre's effective provision, the rates for child obesity are lower than the rest of the county and the rates for sustained breastfeeding at six to eight weeks are better than seen in the locality. The 'Fun, Young and Informative' group has led to improved health outcomes and active engagement for teenage parents and young mothers. A parent commented: 'Good to go, enjoyable and friendly. Gave good tips and ideas on healthy living.'

An increasing number of children living in the reach area are achieving 78 scale points or more on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. Recent data show a continuing trend in improvement with children making satisfactory progress in developing skills that will help them in the future. A range of activities offered in and through the centre has ensured that outcomes are increased for both parents and children, in particular those from the identified target groups. Take-up has improved for 0–3 year olds, notably in the 20% most disadvantaged group, with the centre contributing to a reduction in the achievement gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the Early Years Foundation Stage and the rest. Activities offered by the centre are popular. A parent attending the 'Play and Learn' sessions said, 'It gives my children a wonderful change of environment and there is always different activities to do.' Parents improve their parenting skills and develop their self-confidence and self-esteem through programmes offered at the centre.

Families feel safe and well supported in the centre. Parents develop a good understanding of how to keep themselves and their children safe from hazards through the positive role model offered by staff, direct teaching and one-to-one home support. Eighty five parents have successfully completed the home safety course. Well-established partnerships between the centre, health and social care professionals ensure that families receive timely help because they use the Common Assessment Framework and Team Around the Child processes effectively. Case studies show positive impact and improved well-being and welfare for children subject to child protection plans, including looked after children.

The centre plays an active role in its community, and brings together the strengths of partners to meet the needs of users in a coherent and effective way. The 'Volunteer Programme' is a key strength of the centre's philosophy of engagement, direction and support. Some 33 volunteers are active in the St Leonards area. Success rates are high, with a number of volunteers gaining employment or suitable placements in training or further education. A volunteer commented, 'It is great to be involved and give something back to the community.' Training and both formal and informal education programmes for parents have improved self-confidence and work-readiness. Advice to families on debt management and benefits has effectively improved their economic stability. A parent completing the English for speakers of other languages course said, 'Great course. I am able to join in with the storytelling groups and read books to my child.' However, not enough parents are involved in

training to develop their literacy, numeracy and computing skills.

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	2
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	2
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 meets the needs of its community well. A strong partnership approach ensures that most target groups' needs are met. Staff are experienced in their areas of specialism so assessments cover the whole range of needs, including those for vulnerable families, disabled children and those with special educational needs. Strategies have been developed successfully to meet the needs of the most hard-to-reach groups, including fathers and children in minority ethnic groups. For example, the centre has delivered a specific baby massage course for mothers who speak Mandarin, supported by a translator. However, more work remains to engage with all lone parents. Sessions regularly focus on helping parents gain a better understanding of how to interact with their children and effectively develop speech and language skills. Flexible evening childminder courses give opportunities for adults to talk with each other and to discuss issues with staff.

Provision for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage at the centre meets their needs appropriately. Children behave well and follow staff instructions. They are provided with a satisfactory range of learning opportunities from birth that aptly support their development. Good quality resources that are age-related and interesting encourage children's engagement and promote purposeful learning. For example, a parent said, 'My daughter loves the singing and is now recognising songs we can sing at home.' The centre has recently introduced a system to assess and measure children's progress against the developmental stages in the Early Years Foundation Stage. This means staff are now making use of children's achievements to plan the next steps in learning. The centre recognises families' personal development and achievements well through celebrations of their work.

Good quality, personalised support improves families' well-being effectively. A comprehensive and coordinated service is provided using the expertise of professionally qualified staff. The family outreach service offers good information to families around debt management and effectively supports families through times of crisis. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service offers individualised counselling and therapeutic support for parents and their young children who are suffering particular problems. A parent commented: 'Staff are always there for you. I don't know how I would have managed to cope without their help.' The centre funds the crèche so parents can benefit from learning, knowing their children are being well looked after. Information, advice and guidance on a range of health issues, including smoking cessation, alcohol and drug misuse, and more sensitive information regarding domestic abuse and sexual health are made available either by signposting or through specific activities for parents.

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	3
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 are clear and accountable. The advisory board effectively monitors performance, reviews progress and contributes to future planning. Formal service level agreements are in place for commissioned services and are carefully monitored at quarterly contract review meetings. A long-term impact evaluation into the 'Insight Women's Group' was undertaken and showed continued positive outcomes for families. Managers and staff are enthusiastic, motivated and committed to improvement.

All staff are involved in the self-evaluation process which results in a broadly accurate review which with strong local knowledge and robust target setting underpins the centre's good capacity for improvement. The Children's Centre Area Coordinator's and managers' work is well focused on a clearly-identified set of priorities to take the centre forward.

The centre promotes the inclusion of children and their families well. Good strategies have improved engagement and outcomes for some priority groups, such as disabled children and those with special educational needs. The centre, through carefully-planned strategies, can evidence the narrowing of the achievement gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the Early Years Foundation Stage and their peers.

The centre's arrangements for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults are good and staff are well trained. The highest priority is given to safeguarding and all policies and procedures are consistently implemented. Effective risk assessment procedures are followed and there are good recruitment and vetting procedures for staff. Criminal Records Bureau checks are recorded accurately and well maintained. The centre is proactive and collaborates effectively with other key agencies to reduce the risk of harm to children. Families experiencing crisis, including domestic violence, are provided with a place of safety and centre staff are instrumental in ensuring they access appropriate services swiftly.

Partnership working is a key strength of the centre. Statutory and voluntary organisations work closely together to ensure that a coherent, supportive and developmental programme serves the needs of the community. Families express high levels of satisfaction with the services the centre provides. Outreach services are improving and targeting identified needs in the wider community. Nevertheless, the engagement with lone parents is not fully developed to sufficiently involve them in the centre's activities. The centre's impact on the community results in consistently improving outcomes and its good-quality provision engages the majority of families. Resources are managed effectively and the centre provides good 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	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	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	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 St Leonards Children's Centre on 24–25 May 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We are very grateful to all the parents and representatives from the centre and the professional partners who took the trouble to come and tell us about the work they do. You gave us a positive picture of the centre, and what you said was very useful in making our final judgements.

At the core of the centre's success is the strong leadership provided by the Children's Centre Area Coordinator and the good teamwork of the staff. The centre also has effective relationships with professional partners. This means that the workers at the centre communicate well with each other and their feedback provides good knowledge and understanding of the community's needs.

The centre is an inclusive and welcoming place, which is run by dedicated adults who want to serve you well. You speak highly of the centre as being a place where you feel safe, secure, supported, included and listened to. You comment positively about the difference that the centre has made to your confidence and achievements as well as your children's progress, development and behaviour. Comments such as: 'Given me an opportunity to qualify for work whilst helping with the crèche,' and 'I look forward to every Monday, it makes us enjoy our lives and children better,' are typical of the views you expressed.

You and your children benefit from the good services provided by the centre. Children enjoy the physical activities as they take part in sessions such as the 'Aquababes' swimming sessions. Those of you who use the centre are much better now at staying safe and looking after your families. We know this because many of you told us of what you had learnt. Staff have worked hard to make it safe for you and your children. The centre works effectively with other agencies, such as the health service and social services, in particular to help vulnerable children and families.

Parents and children are benefiting from the good provision provided by the children's centre. Some of you are keen to attend classes to improve your skills. These must be enjoyable because we noticed that attendance on these courses is

high. Appropriate sessions are prepared for you to improve your parenting skills and for your children to develop their basic skills. This means that you gain more confidence and expertise and your children are prepared well when they start nursery school. You told us the centre makes a real difference to your lives. The opportunity to become a volunteer has made a real difference to a number of you and given you that first step into employment or into further or higher education.

Good-quality displays and resources promote children's learning. The centre provides a broad range of activities, which are linked to children's interests and support their social and emotional development, and communication skills. 'Play and Learn' sessions are well attended and appreciated by you and your children. Comments such as: 'Being involved with the centre has helped my children interact with others,' and 'I used to just eat pot noodles but now I buy and eat fresh foods,' confirm some of the benefits you gain from attending the centre.

We have found a few areas for improvement and the centre's leaders are already aware of these. We are recommending that they increase opportunities to help you develop your basic skills in literacy, numeracy and use of computers. We have also asked the centre to increase the number of lone parents who access its services.

We wish you every success for the future.

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