

Inspection report for Little Vikings Children's Centre

Local authority	Somerset
Inspection number	383325
Inspection dates	27–28 June 2012
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Centre leader	Samantha Fahey
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Knights Templar Church of England and Methodist First School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Little Vikings Nursery

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.

An inspection of the linked school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with parents, the centre manager, the senior management team and frontline staff. They also met with a number of partners and a representative from the local authority. The inspectors observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Little Vikings Children's Centre serves the small harbour town of Watchet and the surrounding rural area. The children's centre shares a modern building with the Little Vikings Nursery which is subject to its own inspection; the report can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk. It is situated on a spacious site that is shared with Knights Templar Church of England and Methodist First School. Most of the centre's provision is delivered at the centre or at the nearby Williton Children's Centre, although some opportunities are offered at other locations in the reach area.

Little Vikings is managed by the local authority and was designated as a phase one centre in June 2005. Three of the six designated areas that make up the reach area are within the top 30% most deprived areas in the country. The proportion of families on benefit or children in workless households is above average. Most families are of White British heritage. There are currently 324 children under five living in the reach area. When children join Early Years provision, their skills are generally below the levels expected for their age. The centre leader also manages three other centres as part of a cluster serving West Somerset. In partnership with other agencies, Little Vikings offers a range of services, including child and family services, advice on

parenting and access to specialist services, for example counselling and antenatal groups.

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

Little Vikings Children’s Centre makes good provision for the large majority of children and families within its area. Outcomes are good and the overwhelming majority of parents are satisfied with the services they receive. Eight out of ten families living in the reach area have registered with the centre. All families that live in the areas of greatest need are accessing services. These figures are higher than most other centres. One parent’s comments reflected the views of many when she praised the ‘invaluable’ support she had received to make her family ‘happy and healthy’.

The centre has successfully secured a good understanding of a range of health issues among parents. Those attending the ‘Community Café’ learn cost-effective ways for healthy eating. Others learn to be more active and explore the local environment with their child. Several members of staff work closely with health visitors to provide health advice and support breastfeeding at the ‘Baby Café’ and ‘Bumps and Babes’ sessions.

Close partnership working with other providers has enabled a wide variety of services to be established within the reach area. While the centre promotes universal access to most services, it successfully directs families with more acute needs to specialist provision. Families receive high quality care and support at times of need. Occasionally, support is outstanding. The centre’s volunteer recruitment programme enables parents to take on roles of responsibility. For example, 80 volunteers provide assistance at an annual festival attended by some 700 children. Over a third of parents using the centre engage in adult learning or related training and activities. Strong links with further education establishments and Jobcentre Plus provide additional opportunities for parents to undertake accredited training and enter employment.

The centre demonstrates good capacity for further improvement. Members of the advisory board, senior leaders, staff and key partners have a good understanding of the needs of children and families in the reach area. Self-evaluation is accurate and informs the centre's delivery plan. The range of information and data available to leaders is limited. This makes it difficult for leaders to set measurable targets for improvement and assess the centre's success in reaching them.

The centre seeks feedback from users through a variety of means and adapts services as a result. For example, the weekly 'Bumps and Babes' sessions have been moved to another venue with better car parking facilities. While parents are members of the advisory board, there is no regular forum to discuss parents' experiences and formulate proposals for the future.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- With the local authority, improve the range of information collated about users' outcomes to set measurable targets for improvement and monitor the progress towards achieving them.
- Broaden the range of opportunities for users to be involved in shaping services including for example by re-establishing the regular forum for users.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Parents develop a good understanding of how to improve the health of their families. Their knowledge of healthy eating is increased by the use of the centre's onsite allotment and opportunities to purchase fresh vegetables through a bulk-buying co-operative. Recipe cards, provided by a member of the advisory board, suggest how to prepare healthy meals using the contents of the boxes. The centre promotes the health benefits of an active lifestyle particularly well. Opportunities for parents to improve their own health such as by mountain biking or attending the ladies' gym sessions are popular. These activities are making a difference and several users have stopped smoking. The onsite pool is well-utilised to develop children's water confidence. Parents know the importance of their child learning to swim, particularly because of the reach area's close proximity to the sea. Children enthusiastically develop their physical skills in the weekly 'fundamentals' gym sessions. Parents recognise the improvements in children's physical skills and their levels of confidence when using apparatus in the park. While rates of childhood obesity in the county have fallen, the packed lunches of children attending the nursery do not always reflect the principles of a balanced diet.

The centre works effectively with health professionals to promote breastfeeding through a weekly 'baby café'. While initiation rates in the reach area are lower than rates found elsewhere, the continuation rates at six to eight weeks are above national figures. This is because of the successful way in which mothers are

supported once they commence breastfeeding. The centre has recognised the difference in rates and has identified actions to increase the level of antenatal support so that initiation rates increase.

Families know the actions they can take to keep themselves safe in a range of situations because great emphasis is placed on promoting safety. Family support workers assist the health visitors in signposting to services at weekly clinics. These popular sessions provide regular opportunities for parents to hear important safety information on subjects such as fire safety, meningitis and car seat safety. Hospital admission rates for children in the wider locality are below those in other areas. Children in the nursery are very aware of how to keep safe when using the outdoor equipment. The centre's thorough procedures for identifying and monitoring families whose circumstances may make them vulnerable are a particular strength. Few children are subject to a protection plan, but good use of the Common Assessment Framework ensures that possible vulnerable children are identified and families supported to ensure their safety. Consequently, children are kept safe and parents express high levels of confidence in the 'supportive and knowledgeable' staff.

Children move smoothly from the nursery to the Reception class in the linked first school. This is because of the close working relationship and shared staffing that exists between the two settings. For example, the children's centre teacher has led training for all early years workers to improve session planning, the learning environment and the quality of information given to parents. Children's levels of development on leaving the nursery have risen and the proportion of children who achieve a good level of development at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has exceeded the national average for the last two years. Children with additional needs are supported particularly well when transferring to the first school. In 2011, the gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the rest was also lower than that found nationally. A number of young parents have improved their communication skills, and those of their child, by attending the 'Tiny Signers' sessions.

Parents make a strong contribution to the centre through volunteering and in other roles of responsibility. Lone parents participate in these opportunities because there are good access arrangements used to support the provision of childcare. One group of young parents undertook an accredited learning course and subsequently made a film about being a young parent. The film was distributed to services in the area and funds were raised for an international charity that supports young parents. A significant number of volunteers have gone on to gain qualifications or secured employment as a result.

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	2

target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	
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	2

How good is the provision?

2

Good quality and detailed assessments ensure that staff have a thorough understanding of the needs of families within the reach area. Registration rates are high and participation levels are monitored carefully so that families are encouraged to keep attending. As a result, particular groups such as lone and young parents, as well as families from minority ethnic groups, make good use of services available. Several young parents have completed courses to improve their self-esteem or develop their first aid and cookery skills. Outreach services are adapted to meet the needs of the rural locality. For example, the 'CLOWNS' mobile play bus enables families in more isolated communities to access activities, support and advice. While most services are open to all, home visits are used effectively to check individual families' needs, provide support in the home and, if appropriate, match families to specific services. Consequently, the more specialist services are directed to where they will make the greatest difference. One parent commended the skills she had learned from a parenting course, saying the programme was 'A massive change for me. It has done wonders.'

The centre regularly runs a variety of programmes to help parents support their children's early education. Purposeful play activities are promoted by family support staff within the home and through sessions such as Tiny Signers and, Stay and Play. Multi-sensory workshops provide a small-group alternative for children with additional needs and their parents. The centre's strong links with further education colleges provide parents with easy access to accredited learning. Programmes such as Skills for Life are raising aspirations. For example, one parent took over the running of a local playgroup after gaining experience of working with children within the nursery and gaining a childcare qualification.

The quality of care for families is consistently good and at times exceptional. Outreach services, such as Home Start, the Play Bus and Physical Family Fun, are delivered cohesively with the centre so that families gain timely access to appropriate support. In times of crisis, additional services, such as supported childcare, can be accessed quickly. Extensive care files enable staff to establish effective relationships and tailored support. Parents praise the accessibility of staff with comments such as, 'Staff always take time to see the whole picture.', and, 'It is great to meet with people who understand how I am feeling.'

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

Leaders have an astute understanding of the centre's strengths and the actions needed to improve its performance further. The centre manager and senior leadership team know the needs of children and families living in the reach area very well. They have begun to collate data and mapped the services available. The identification of target groups is now more refined and clearer priorities are set in the business plan. Nevertheless, the limited amount of secure data available makes it difficult to set measurable targets and evaluate progress towards them.

Governance and accountability arrangements are clearly understood. Ambition is high, for example the advisory board have doubled the improvement target set by the local authority to increase the already high proportion of families that register with the centre. Strong partnership working with other agencies ensures that services are well integrated into a cohesive plan. Professional supervision arrangements are good and are linked closely to improving staff performance through individual target setting. Staff training is given a high priority so that the best practise is shared and statutory requirements are met securely.

Good safeguarding practice is adopted across all aspects of the centre's work. Recruitment and vetting arrangements are robust and meet current government requirements. Staff have been well trained in recognising safety issues such as those associated with domestic violence. The centre site is secure and all necessary policies and procedures are in place. Case study records confirm that staff work very closely with other agencies. Concerns are raised promptly and communicated clearly so that families in challenging circumstances receive prompt and effective support.

The inclusion of all children and families is prioritised well. Staff provide additional support routinely, for example assistance with transport or crèche facilities, which helps families to overcome specific challenges and access services. Parents of children with additional needs or chronic illness praise the responsiveness of the centre's support. For example, the Mirage support group now meets more frequently by parental request.

The centre makes a concerted effort to seek the views of users through questionnaires, suggestion boxes and surgeries. Satisfaction rates are high and families' views are routinely used to shape service. As one volunteer commented, 'Every session ends with a healthy snack, someone to talk to and an evaluation.'

Parents' are represented well on the advisory board where they feel their views are valued. However, the lack of a regular forum limits parents' opportunities to provide more detailed feedback and shape services for the future.

Little Vikings provides good value for money because outcomes for families are good, and a very large majority of families from the reach area engage successfully in its 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	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	2

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

The inspection judgements were informed by the findings of the most recent inspections of Little Vikings Nursery and Knights Templar Church of England and Methodist School.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Little Vikings Children's Centre on 27 and 28 June 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We talked with some of you, staff and a wide range of partners. We also spoke with members of the local authority linked to the centre. Those of you that were available told us that you trust the centre workers and find them very approachable. We heard many examples of how the services provided have made a difference to your lives. Our inspection findings support these views.

Eight out of ten families living in the area have registered with the centre. This is higher than most other centres. We found that the centre makes good provision for the young children and families that use it. This helps you to keep healthy, be safe and enjoy the good range of activities available. Many activities help you and your children achieve both personally and academically and grow in confidence.

Those that lead the centre know the area very well. They make sure that staff are suitably trained and have a clear plan to improve things in the future. Leaders have checked the services on offer to see how well they meet your needs. We have asked them to consider more information on the difference that services make so that they can improve them even more.

We found that staff at the centre support you and your children very well. They think carefully about your needs and quickly help you when you face difficult times. There are a lot of opportunities for you to help out or take on new responsibilities. Many of you have gone on to take further training or secure employment. We know that many of you tell the centre what you think about the services and you have parents to represent you on the advisory board. We have asked that the centre for example re-establishes the 'parent circles' so that more of you can discuss your experiences and suggest improvements.

We would like to thank everyone who was willing to speak to us. We are grateful for your help and wish you every success in the future.

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