

Inspection report for Priory Children's Centre

Local authority	Dudley
Inspection number	383798
Inspection dates	3–4 July 2012
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Centre leader	Jane Noke (Acting centre leader)
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Priory Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Priory Children's Centre Childcare EY334020

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 co-located/partner primary school and the registered early years/childcare provision managed by the governing body of the partner primary 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 additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the acting centre manager, staff, parents, and representatives from the local authority, the governing body of the partner primary school, the management committee and partner organisations.

Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Priory Children's Centre is a phase one children's centre which opened in October 2006. It is located on the site of Priory Primary School and incorporates registered childcare provision for up to 105 children.

The local authority has delegated responsibility for governance of the children's centre and the registered childcare provision to the governing body of Priory Primary School but still maintains regular contact with and provides support for the centre. A management committee, comprising representatives from various partner organisations, parents and school governors, oversees the work of the centre and reports to the governing body of the primary school. A centre manager is responsible for the day-to-day management of the centre under the overall leadership of the headteacher of the primary school. At the time of the inspection, the headteacher of the primary school had just taken leave of absence, the centre manager had been

absent on long-term sick leave for six months, and the centre's office manager and one part-time member of staff were absent on maternity leave. The family support coordinator was filling the role of acting centre manager and an administrative officer was filling the role of office manager. The centre had been receiving additional support from a senior officer from the local authority for the last six months.

The centre fulfils its core purpose by offering a range of services for families, by working with other partner organisations and by referring parents and children to other specialist providers. The centre's services include full day-care provision for children up to the age of five, nursery education for two-year-olds, groups to support new parents and children under five, a range of courses and specialist programmes for parents, and support for individual families through the centre's family support workers. The centre previously housed a maintained nursery, part of which moved across to the school's Early Years Foundation Stage unit in September 2011, the remainder in January 2012.

The centre's reach area encompasses Dudley town centre and the Priory estate. There are three primary schools and a secondary school in the area, in which an estimated 560 children under the age of five live. Most of the families living in close proximity to the centre are White British, but those living on the outer edges of the reach area are predominantly from minority ethnic backgrounds. The centre is in one of the most deprived areas of the local authority, and a significant proportion of families live in areas which are among the 10% most deprived in the country. Much of the housing close to the centre is social housing. Levels of unemployment and the proportion of families dependent on benefits are well above the national average.

Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are well below those expected nationally for their age.

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

Priory Children's Centre has a satisfactory impact on outcomes for families within its area. For those families who access the centre, its impact can be profound, but not enough families who could benefit from the centre's support are accessing its services.

Difficulties within the leadership of the primary school which oversees the work of the centre and the six-month absence of the centre manager have adversely affected the leadership and governance of the centre. Financial cutbacks in other sectors have affected the contribution of partner organisations to the centre. Health visitors, for example, no longer offer consultations for parents at the centre. During this period, a senior officer of the local authority has provided good additional support, and the acting centre manager has worked extremely hard to maintain the quality of the centre's services. Indeed, staff say that morale has improved and they are now working together much more effectively as a team. The centre is well aware of the main areas of need within the area, but has lacked strategic direction and the support of important partners to tackle these needs in the most efficient and effective way.

The care, guidance and support provided for families who attend the centre are good, as are the quality of the activities which the centre provides and its safeguarding procedures. Case studies show that staff are highly effective in helping families who are referred to them or who seek their help to improve the quality of their lives and to develop better parenting skills. Childcare is of good quality. Parents are unanimous in their praise for the centre and the way they are treated by the staff.

However, the level of need within the area is high. Most of the indicators for health, education and employment are well below national averages and the centre is not yet reaching enough families in its target groups. With the local authority's support, the centre has started to make effective use of available data. It now has a detailed

picture of how many families in each of the super output areas are registered with the centre and how many actively engage with its services. It has yet to identify new ways of engaging families in those areas where there is least engagement with the centre. Evaluations of the centre's activities are almost universally positive. However, the collection of data from these activities is not yet sophisticated enough to show the real impact of the centre's work and whether it is providing the best range of services to meet the identified needs within the area.

Despite the leadership difficulties, the support from the local authority, the hard work of the acting centre manager, the quality of the services provided and the positive impact on those families who attend indicate that the centre has the capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The local authority should urgently resolve the uncertainties and difficulties with regard to the leadership and governance of the centre and improve the procedures for providing strategic direction and holding the centre to account.
- The local authority and the centre should improve the partnership with the health authorities and seek ways in which they could work in greater collaboration to improve health outcomes for families.
- With the support of the local authority and the management committee, the leadership team should draw up and implement plans to engage many more families from the areas of greatest need in the activities of the centre.
- In collaboration with those responsible for managing data within the local authority, the centre should devise ways of collecting information and data which show what impact the centre's services are having on outcomes for families and allow it to evaluate the effectiveness of these services.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Discussions with parents, case studies and evaluations of the centre's activities indicate conclusively that the centre has a positive impact on the outcomes of those families who attend its activities or who receive individual support from staff. Expectant mothers attending 'Storks Café' feel well prepared for childbirth. A parent said after attending a cookery course, 'It has helped us to realise how much bad food we are having and I am trying to change this.' The reassurance provided by staff improves users' emotional well-being. Courses such as 'Family Links' have brought about improvement in children's behaviour and parents' abilities to provide a safe environment within the home. A few parents contribute to the work of the centre as volunteers or serve on the management committee. The input from Citizens Advice has helped individual families to improve their financial understanding and develop greater economic stability. One parent said that the support and encouragement of the staff was instrumental in helping her to complete her studies as a result of which she is now employed, her family's circumstances have improved and she feels more fulfilled as a person. Children who attend the day-care facilities make good progress in all areas of learning. Parents say that attendance at the centre has helped their children to socialise with others and that they are well prepared for starting school as a result. Children who are assessed under the Common Assessment Framework and those subject to child protection plans have their needs identified carefully, and there is well-documented evidence of improvements to their health, safety and educational development as a result of the involvement of specialist services engaged following the assessment process.

However, data for both the local authority and the centre's reach area show that outcomes are well below those in many parts of the country. Few mothers choose to breastfeed their babies, although an above average proportion of those who do continue breastfeeding through to six or eight weeks. There is a high prevalence of childhood obesity. Immunisation rates for children are below the national average. Dental decay is evident in too many young children. The response of parents when first attending the centre shows that many have a poor awareness of safety issues or of how to maintain safe relationships and behaviour within the family. Despite the progress made by those who attend day care, their attainment on entry to and exit from early years provision is below average and that of other children is well below average. A large proportion of parents living in the area are out of work or dependent on benefits; the centre refers adults to adult learning courses, but not enough avail themselves of these opportunities.

Outcomes within the area would undoubtedly be even lower without the centre's input. However, the centre's sphere of influence and engagement of families is not yet sufficiently high and the data on improvement not yet sufficiently conclusive to show a marked and sustained impact on outcomes for the area as a whole.

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

3

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

All of the services, activities and opportunities which the centre provides are relevant to needs which have been identified within the area. The reason they are not having a greater impact is because not enough families engage with them. In the super output area in which the centre is located, 69% of children engage with the centre. In another area, only 16% engage. Attendance at universally accessible services can be high. Almost a quarter of families have attended 'Pandas Stay and Play' over the year. The number of families invited to or attending some of the more specialised services is, however, low and such services are not always promoted sufficiently. Very few new mothers, for example, receive any support to encourage them to breastfeed. The centre is actively considering how best it might attract families. Staff have started to conduct antenatal visits to get to know expectant mothers and to inform them of the centre's services. Assessments carried out for families applying for their two-year-olds to attend nursery have proved a useful vehicle for encouraging parents to attend other activities. Once inside, parents are eager to participate in any new initiative. As one said, 'I don't know what we would have done without the centre.' However, the needs of too many families, particularly the most vulnerable and those who are hard to reach, are not being met because they are either unaware of the centre, or the methods used to engage them are not effective enough.

For children who attend the centre, opportunities for learning and development are good. The children's centre provides access to free education provision for two-year-olds who meet the required criteria. The local authority is looking at ways of increasing the number of places available for these children. There are a few good opportunities for adults to learn, such as the 'Family Links' course, but the range of courses is not as wide as in some children's centres, and attendance on some courses falls as the course progresses. A few adults are referred to adult learning courses, but their progress is not tracked and the centre has no information to show how effective these are.

The contribution of the centre to improving families' lives is at its strongest in the personal interaction between staff and families. All of the parents spoken to during the inspection were unanimous in their praise for the staff, from the friendly welcome they receive at reception, to the individual care they receive from staff who convey real concern and a desire to help. One parent said, 'Staff are fantastic and brilliant with the children.' Another said, 'Family support workers are very friendly and supportive.' They say that the staff are non-judgemental and will always find ways of helping where they can. If they do not know the answer to a question, they will find out. Meetings are conducted with sensitivity, and the advice of other professionals is sought whenever needed.

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 day-to-day management of the centre and professional supervision of staff are good. Staff feel they are supported well by the acting centre manager and empowered to carry out their responsibilities. The local authority maintains a close overview of what is happening at the centre. Governance through the primary school and arrangements to evaluate the centre's performance, however, are not as strong as they ought to be. While the centre's action plan outlines appropriate priorities for development, evaluation of the action plan lacks rigour. The centre's self-evaluation focuses too much on what the centre does and not enough on the impact of its actions on improving outcomes or how effective it is in reaching those who are in most need. Some members of the management committee feel they have not received enough training to help them to understand their responsibilities and carry out their roles.

There is a strong commitment from staff to use resources effectively and to provide equality in meeting the needs of families within the area. Parents praised staff for the way in which they treat everyone equally, regardless of background and including those with disabilities. Assessments are carried out rigorously to identify the best ways of helping those who are in need. However, the fact that there are still many families who are yet to access the centre means that value for money, the promotion of equality and the engagement of families cannot be judged better than satisfactory.

Procedures to safeguard parents and children when using the centre are good.

Background checks on staff are carried out before they are employed. Risk assessments are carried out for each activity, and safety procedures are clearly displayed throughout the centre. Particular attention is paid to safety aspects when carrying out home visits or when assessing families' needs. Parents feel the centre provides a very safe environment for them and their children.

The centre has good working relationships with a number of partners and professionals to whom families and children are referred when they need specialist help and advice. Relationships with the health services are no longer as strong or as effective as they used to be. Parents commented on how helpful it was to have their children weighed or to consult with the health visitor at the weekly sessions which were held at the centre where activities were provided for their children. Important two-way communication between health visitors is much more difficult now that health visitors no longer have consultations at the children's centre.

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 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	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

Inspectors took into account the preliminary findings of the team which was inspecting Priory Primary School and the linked childcare provision concurrently with the children's centre's inspection.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Priory Children's Centre on 3–4 July 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We enjoyed visiting your children's centre and would like to thank those of you who gave your time to speak to us and tell us how the children's centre has helped you. Your views helped to show us how well the centre is doing. In addition to talking to as many of you as possible, we spent time talking with the acting centre manager, the staff at the centre, representatives from the local authority and some of those who work in partnership with the centre. We observed the activities which took place at the centre while we were there.

It is very clear that the centre is having a positive impact on the lives of those of you who attend the centre's activities or use its services and on the development of your children who make use of the centre's childcare facilities. Some of you are delighted with the way your children have developed and how they have learnt to socialise with other children. You feel this prepares them well for when they start school. One parent said, 'The "Time for Twos" group has helped my child to come on in leaps and bounds.' We could see for ourselves that the provision for your children is good and that they make good progress in their learning while they are at the centre.

Some of you attend many activities at the centre and have nothing but praise for the way it has helped you personally. You said that the 'Stay and Play' sessions have helped you to learn how to interact with your children and to know what sort of activities to provide for them when you are at home. You have learnt a lot from attending courses such as 'Family Links'. One parent said, 'I feel a better person and mother for coming and completing the course.' The centre has also been instrumental in helping some of you to improve your family circumstances, for example, by attending meetings with Citizens Advice. Those who have received home visits from the centre's family support workers really appreciate the way staff treat you, deal with your needs and provide the right level of care, guidance and support.

Unfortunately, not everyone in the area is aware of what the centre has to offer or chooses not to engage in the centre's activities. This is a shame because there is a

lot of need within the area. The proportion of mothers who breastfeed their babies is very low and too many young children are overweight. The skills, knowledge and understanding of children when they start school are well below those found in other areas. Adults in many families are out of work and a high proportion of families are dependent on benefits. Those of you who attend courses or activities facilitated by the centre know how much you have learnt and improved your parenting skills. Some of you have gained qualifications or experience by acting as volunteers, and have then gained employment and improved your circumstances. We have asked the centre, therefore, to double its efforts to make more people within the area aware of its services and to help them to benefit from what it has on offer. You could help with this by encouraging other families to engage with the centre.

You are probably aware that the centre has been going through a difficult time which has not been helped by the centre manager's absence and difficulties in the leadership of the primary school which oversees the work of the centre. The acting centre manager has been doing a good job in making sure the centre staff work effectively as a team and that the centre's services continue to run smoothly. However, we have asked the local authority to make sure that the uncertainties surrounding the leadership and governance of the centre are sorted out as quickly as possible. We have also asked them to establish a more productive partnership with the health authorities. The withdrawal of the health visitor's consultations at the children's centre was a major inconvenience to many of you and has weakened the centre's ability to improve health outcomes within the area. Finally, we have asked the centre to look at the ways it collects information to evaluate how effective it is in helping you to improve the lives of your families so that it can be sure that it is providing you with the most effective and relevant support.

The staff at the centre have shown that they are more than capable of providing you with a good level of service. Some of you have already made very good use of the services on offer. We trust that many more of you will engage with the centre and find that this has a positive benefit on your families.

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