

Inspection report for The Low Hill Children's Centre

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| Local authority | Wolverhampton |
| Inspection number | 410966 |
| Inspection dates | 9–10 January 2013 |
| Reporting inspector | Christine Field |

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| Date of previous inspection | Not previously inspected |
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| Linked school if applicable | Low Hill Nursery School URN 104278 |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | Low Hill Nursery School and Children's Centre EY338170 |

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 the centre's senior managers, frontline staff, a range of partners, members of the advisory board and governing body, local authority officers and parents. They also observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the self-evaluation form and action plan.

Information about the centre

This phase one centre was designated in 2006 and delivers a range of services that meet its full core purpose. Separate provision is made for two-year-old children, known as 'Terrific for Twos', and this was inspected in the same week as this inspection. The centre shares a building with Low Hill Nursery School which was inspected in December 2012. The campus, on which the centre is located, also houses a community centre and library. Health partners have recently begun to provide some services, such as a baby-weighing clinic, from the centre.

The centre serves a large urban area with high levels of social and economic deprivation. For example, nearly a third of local families claim out-of-work benefits. There are 1,194 children under four years old living in the centre's reach area. The large majority of families are from White British backgrounds. The next largest group is from Travelling backgrounds, and a small but growing group are from other minority ethnic backgrounds including Black African and Eastern European. A recent relocation package has involved asylum-seeking families previously living in London being re-housed to private rented accommodation in the neighbourhood. The skills, knowledge and abilities of children on entry to early years provision are typically below the level expected for their age.

The local authority has strategic responsibility for the centre and the governing body of the co-located nursery school has delegated responsibility, through its advisory board, for day-to-day governance matters. There have been significant staff changes, and the centre has been without a substantive manager for nearly three years. The current interim manager, who also manages a local family centre, and the deputy manager have been in post since November 2012. The local authority is in the process of developing children and family support services across the city which include children centres.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The centre provides satisfactory services for an increasing number of local families that result in generally satisfactory outcomes with some good features. The quality and effectiveness of its outreach work to help those families most in need of support are particularly effective. The level of engagement is good with 75% of families from the most deprived neighbourhood in regular contact with the centre. Parental satisfaction is high and the words of one mother from a Travelling background sums up the views of others: ‘No one judges you here; they just do their best to help you and make sure that your family gets the very best support.’

Safeguarding is given top priority and families, including those with children subject to a child protection plan, are kept safe due to the centre’s thorough assessments and timely interventions. Good care, guidance and support ensure that families in contact with the centre are better equipped to deal with the many and complex challenges they face. However, more work remains to be done to help some live healthier lives; for example, at 25.3% the proportion of mothers who sustain breastfeeding their babies is much lower than the 40.1% city average.

The centre promotes equalities very effectively, and families from diverse backgrounds get on well together, make new friends and enjoy attending activities. The centre’s work to help narrow the achievement gap is proving successful; at 25.5%, the gap between the lowest achieving 20% of Reception-age children and the rest is much narrower than seen nationally. Parents play a developing role in

helping shape the centre's services, for example, through their survey responses and post-activity evaluations. However, parents have limited understanding about the role of the advisory board and none currently have direct involvement in decision-making or governance matters.

Staff are a united team which has maintained effective service delivery during a period of significant changes in leadership and the loss of impetus in the centre's performance. For example, there has been no action plan in place to guide improvement since March 2012. The new leaders have quickly and accurately audited the centre's strengths and shortcomings. They have re-introduced professional supervision and held one-to-one meetings with all staff to set out their vision for taking the centre forward. New procedures and working practices have been implemented rapidly to improve efficiency, for example, by prioritising caseloads and re-focusing family support work. The action plan that is near completion includes a sensible number of priorities that are focused on ensuring the centre's future good effectiveness.

Centre leaders have already moved things on and are working effectively to improve provision and the outcomes for families. Their drive and determination together with a clear agenda for improvement give satisfactory and improving capacity to succeed.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Press ahead with implementing the revised action plan including priority targets that can be measured for impact at key intervals over the life of the plan and re-adjusted in the light of robust monitoring and rigorous evaluation.
- With the local authority, develop governance arrangements by establishing terms of reference for the advisory board and setting out what role stakeholders and parents should play in both supporting and challenging the centre's decision-making.
- With health services in particular and other community partners, work to further improve health outcomes for local families by increasing the proportion of mothers who breastfeed their babies and targeting a significant reduction in the level of obesity in young children so that both fall at least in line with the city average.

How good are outcomes for families?

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Case studies and inspectors' discussions with parents demonstrate the positive impact the centre's effective outreach work has on improving the mental and emotional health of a high number of very vulnerable families. Parents involved in the 'Nurturing Programme', for example, identify how much family relationships improve as their confidence in managing children's behaviour grows. The recently introduced baby-weighing clinic alongside 'Stay and Play' sessions provides a

developing opportunity for professionals to tackle local issues more collaboratively. Support for breastfeeding and weaning has already been identified as an immediate shared priority. Immunisation rates are above the city average.

Activities such as 'Let's Get Cooking', which involves parents and children preparing and cooking nutritious meals on a budget, are beginning to make a difference to improving family health. As one mother recognised, 'Reducing sugar in our meals has definitely made my child's behaviour better.' Mini-gym sessions, 'Football for Dads' and belly dancing classes help promote the value of exercise. Nevertheless, obesity levels in young children at 13.9% are much above the city and national averages. In recognition of this, centre leaders are targeting weight and well-being interventions with specific groups.

The centre's good work to keep the most vulnerable families safe results in many living more positive lives. For example, to combat the high incidence of domestic abuse, strong cooperative work between children and family centre staff ensures that a rolling programme of support is deployed at the first sign of anyone disclosing a concern or when a referral is made. Approaches to safeguarding children are highly effective and result in a secure safety net of support for those most at risk, including the high number subject to a child protection plan. Any welfare concerns are addressed quickly through regular multi-agency early intervention meetings in which information is shared to ensure fully 'joined-up' working. The use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) typically involves centre staff taking the lead role in initiating, monitoring and following up cases. Currently there are 42 open cases and this reflects the high level of need in the area. Health and safety home visits and awareness-raising courses are positive features in extending parents' knowledge about safe practices in their homes.

Case studies provide compelling evidence that families are assisted effectively to secure the benefits for which they are eligible and, through debt counselling and credit union advice, are helped to manage their finances more efficiently. The volunteer programme assists adults in building new skills and some have enhanced their workplace experiences with accredited qualifications and subsequently moved into paid work. Currently, two new volunteers are in training. A weekly basic skills course runs for parents from Travelling families, and inspectors' observations showed this to be a purposeful and productive learning experience. Children behave well and make good progress from their below-average starting points in developing the skills they will need for the future. This is reflected in the 2012 achievement data which show the gap between the lowest achieving 20 per cent and the rest closing rapidly. An increasing number are being supported with good-quality early learning experiences through the offer of free places in the nursery for two-year-old children. However, at 50.6% the proportion achieving a good level of development is well below the national average of 64%.

Parents' contributions to the life and development of the centre and its decision-making processes rely heavily on informal means. A few take up the opportunity to provide written evaluations following activities but mainly it is through the trusting

relationships parents have built with staff that they make their views known and contribute ideas. For example, parents organised fundraising to provide a mobility trike for one of the children with cerebral palsy and some were involved in organising the 'Olympic Celebration Day' which involved 26 families with 44 children taking part in sporting activities. Currently, there is no forum for parents to contribute their ideas formally or parent representation on the advisory board.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

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| The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles | 3 |
| 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 | 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 | 2 |

How good is the provision?

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The centre provides a satisfactory range of services for local families. Good provision is made for families from target groups most in need of support. Care, guidance and support are good because centre staff know the families who use the centre very well and, through referrals from various partners and shared approaches, ensure specific needs are met through well-targeted outreach interventions. Well-forged partnerships with a range of services help families keep safe, especially in times of crisis. One parent's comment is typical: 'Anytime I need them the staff are there for me. They are the strong links in a chain of support and always make you feel wanted. I do not know what I would do without them.'

There is positive and generally sustained participation in activities by different target groups, although it is recognised that not everyone is aware of what is on offer, and that those families with English as an additional language moving into the area will require additional services. Centre leaders are in the process of reviewing the programme to ensure the right balance is achieved between bespoke and universal services and that learning opportunities and their impact on progress are recorded more thoroughly. Parents are being consulted about this. A useful start has been made in prioritising the support workers' heavy caseloads which were becoming unmanageable. Staff are already trained to deliver a wide range of parenting programmes and, where appropriate, group sessions are now being organised to address particular needs.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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| The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups | 3 |
| The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups | 3 |
| The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups | 2 |

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre is highly regarded by centre users who describe it as being 'at the heart of the community'. Parents are very clear that their engagement with the centre has improved their confidence and independence. Partnerships are well established and partners told inspectors that recent changes have been wholly positive and they welcome the new opportunities to work cooperatively in meeting local needs. Staff are upbeat and morale is good. They view the reintroduction of professional supervision as supportive and are fully on board with realising the vision articulated by the new leaders. The centre has weathered a period of significant instability and under the effective leadership of the interim manager and deputy is firmly on an improving course with accurate self-evaluation and the right set of core priorities guiding its rapid development.

Day-to-day management arrangements are clear, work well and ensure sound value for money. However, although specific governance arrangements have been established for some time and have worked effectively in the past, they have not working effectively over the last year. For example, few parents or partners know about the role or remit of the advisory board and they have limited involvement with its work. The board has not been fully quorate for the most recent meetings and there is a lack of clarity about its actual purpose. The chair of the advisory board and local authority, who have kept close checks on the centre's effectiveness during the staff changes, fully recognise the situation.

Close attention is paid to equality and including everyone in activities. Families show respect for one another and speak very highly of how well the centre has helped remove barriers to their well-being, such as social isolation, and are proud of how many new friends they have made. Families with children with disabilities rate the centre highly for its inclusive practice, good-quality resources and easy access. The volunteering programme has up-skilled some parents who had negative school experiences and helped equip them ready for work. Data show that the 20% of lowest-achieving Reception-age children are making up lost ground more quickly than their peers nationally. Cultural diversity is given prominence with some wonderful artefacts from the Gypsy Roma community on display for everyone to appreciate. Personal achievements are celebrated through the award of certificates, as for example, when a group of adults completed the home-safety course.

Safeguarding procedures fully meet requirements and result in families being well protected. Staff appointments are vetted carefully and the centre is rigorous in making health and safety checks. Staff are alert to child protection matters and regular training helps keep their knowledge up to date. Their work with health partners, social care and other partners results in timely, well-planned interventions and a secure safety net of support, especially for those most at risk.

Just over half of families from the reach area have contact with the centre, with nearly three quarters from the most deprived area regularly engaging with the centre's services. Parents play a developing role in helping shape the centre's services, for example through their survey responses and post-activity evaluations. However, it is recognised that more work is required to find out why some local families are not yet engaging with the centre. Plans are in hand to market and publicise the centre's offer more widely than previously to build on the good level of engagement.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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| 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 | 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 | 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

The findings from the December 2012 and January 2013 inspections of Low Hill Nursery School and Children's Centre (URN 104278 and EYR 338170) were taken into account to inform the judgements made during this inspection.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the The Low Hill Children's Centre on 9–10 January 2013. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

During the inspection, we held meetings with the centre's staff, some of the other people who work from the centre, and members of the local authority and advisory board. We were very pleased to be able to talk to some of you about the centre and what it offers local families.

The centre provides satisfactory services for an increasing number of families. You said that some families do not know about the centre and we know that leaders are already working with you to refresh the programme and make changes to the type of activities on offer in the future. We could see from your evaluations, for example about the 'Nurturing programme', that you have some good ideas that staff take on board when they plan future activities. However, none of you currently serve on the advisory board or play a direct role in supporting and challenging the centre's decision-making. We have asked the centre to look at this.

The centre has faced many challenges over the last year or so with changes in staffing and no permanent manager. It is good to see things getting rapidly back on track due to the new leadership's accurate self-evaluation and well-focused action planning. We judge that the centre is well placed to continue to improve and has good capacity to build for better effectiveness. We have asked leaders to press ahead with their plans and ensure that monitoring is timely and thorough in order that targets are realised.

We agree with you that staff provide a friendly welcome to everyone and promote an ethos of mutual trust and respect. A mother from a Travelling background told us, 'No one judges you here, they just do their best to help you and make sure that your family gets the very best support.' This sums up what many of you told us. It was great to find out about your fundraising activities and how much fun you had at the summer activities such as the Olympics celebration.

Safeguarding is given top priority, and you and your children are well protected due to the centre's good work. You told us that the centre helps you deal with the challenges you face, such as domestic abuse, and gives you confidence to take control. You feel that you receive good levels of care, guidance and support, especially when you need it the most and we agree. It was good to hear that you are cooking healthier meals after doing the 'Let's Get Cooking' course and that, following the health and safety awareness course, you now recognise potential dangers in the home. However, more work remains to be done to help some of you live healthier

lives as the level of obesity in young children is much higher than elsewhere in the city and breastfeeding rates are much lower. We have asked the centre to work with local families to improve them.

Thank you very much for your contributions to the inspection and good wishes for the future.

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