

EH8 Ash Valley Children's Centre

The Mobile, Tower Primary School, Ware, SG12 7LP

Inspection date 29–30 January 2014

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good	2
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Good	2
The quality of practice and services		Good	2
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is a good centre.

- The centre's manager and staff are very well qualified; they carry out accurate self-evaluation and well-focused action planning enables the centre to develop, adapt and refine well its services.
- As a result of very effective leadership and management, the centre is improving strongly; this is because all centre staff work exceptionally well as a team.
- The centre is good at listening to families and their children; their views and ideas are used to help shape services and in developing further its work across the local community.
- Most families, including those with the highest levels of need, are registered and the large majority is enabled to access the full range of the centre's good quality services.
- Families comment positively on the strength of working relationships which are built between themselves and the centre's staff who they say 'welcome everyone and are non-judgemental'.
- Individuals and families identify the wide range of help and guidance they receive at the centre, and the many ways that this raises their self-confidence and self-esteem.
- The centre works very closely in partnership with other organisations to make sure that families are protected well and have access to the services and training which improve their lives.
- The local authority, the centre's management and its advisory board check the work of the centre effectively; they provide good support and advice which helps the centre to move forward.

It is not outstanding because:

- The centre is building its partnership with local schools and early years settings to enable the sharing of assessments of the progress and development of young children, particularly boys.
- Not enough Indian and Asian heritage families are regularly accessing the centre's services.
- Information provided by health and adult education partners is not detailed enough to enable the centre to assess the impact of its work to improve the health and education of priority families.

Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children’s centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

This inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, officers from the local authority and a representative of the Children’s Society which runs the centre on behalf of the local authority. Inspectors also held discussions with family support workers and representatives of health services, education and early years practitioners, the police, parents, volunteers and members of the advisory board, including its chair, and the manager of a partner children’s centre in the town.

The inspectors undertook paired work with the leader and other staff. Visits to see the centre’s work at other venues in the local area, including Amwell View School, Bowling Road Health Clinic and All Nations Christian College, were undertaken jointly with the centre’s staff. The centre manager and a representative of the Children’s Society attended the main team meetings.

Inspectors looked at the centre’s self-evaluation, action planning, delivery plan, a sample of case studies, safeguarding policy, practice and procedures, advisory board minutes, various surveys of users’ views, data about the centre and its area provided both by the centre and the local authority, and a range of other relevant documentation.

Inspection team

Michael Miller, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Anthony Mundy	Additional inspector
Catherine Hairsine	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Ash Valley Children's Centre is a stand-alone centre that serves the south area of the town of Ware in Hertfordshire and the surrounding rural villages of Wareside, Stanstead Abbots, Widford and Hunsdon. It is one of two centres in the town of Ware, the other being the Silver Birches Children's Centre (URN 21675) which was inspected separately during the same week, and will receive its own report.

The centre operates from a demountable building within the grounds of the Tower Primary School (URN 117275). The school was the subject of a separate inspection in June 2013. A separate, private pre-school setting, the PALS Pre-School (EY339269), also operates from the same site; this was inspected in November 2008. The latest reports for both the school and the pre-school setting can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

The centre's manager is full time and has been leading the centre since it was first set up in 2007. It is a phase 2 centre, which opened to its community in 2008 and received its full designation in June 2010. Since 2009, the centre has been operated and managed by The Children's Society on behalf of Hertfordshire County Council. Services are delivered mainly at the centre and there are a range of partners, including health services and volunteers, which provide other services at various locations for families including Wodson Park, Stanstead Abbots, the Sacred Heart Church, Amwell View School, Bowling Road Health Clinic, All Nations Christian College, and Tower Primary School. This enables the centre to meet its core purpose. There are some Saturday morning activities held in partnership with the Silver Birches Children's Centre. Children's centres across the local authority's area have been part of the government's payment by results trial.

There are 1,166 children under the age of five years living in the centre's reach area. This area includes pockets of high deprivation; barriers for families include limited access to shops, health services and public transport. The centre is open all year and, except for bank holidays, is open for five days a week.

Families in the area are of predominantly White British. An increasing number are from Indian and Asian minority ethnic groups, including those who speak English as an additional language. Levels of unemployment and the proportion of families dependent on benefits in the centre's reach area are above the county average. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are below those expected nationally for their age.

The centre's target groups are: families living in its most deprived neighbourhoods, vulnerable children, lone parents and workless households.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Enhance its partnership with the local authority and local schools in its support for early years settings by:
 - sharing information, helping to moderate the new assessments being undertaken and closely tracking children's progress year-on-year, particularly as part of the checks on two-year-old children
 - working with the parents and carers of the centre's target children to create more individual 'learning journey' records of their progress
 - using the wide range of information available to help increase the achievement of boys by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- Increase further the centre's engagement with families of Indian and Asian heritage by:
 - completing its fact finding and consultations to find out why more of these groups are not yet accessing its services
 - refining the existing improvement plan and developing its programme further in the light of these findings to ensure their wider access to services.
- Work with the local authority to ensure all partners, particularly health and adult education, provide the regular, required information and data so centre leaders can assess, regularly throughout the year, the impact of their on-going work improve the outcomes for families.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Good

- Ever since it first opened, the centre has been increasingly successful, year-on-year, in reaching out to its local community. It has ensured that most families expecting children or with children under the age of five are registered at the centre, and the large majority from target groups use its services regularly.
- The centre staff listen to and respond well to the views of its community and feedback from its families. This ensures its services meet community's needs well. Families and individuals are enthusiastic about the centre and value highly the services they receive.
- Staff have an in depth knowledge of the local area, and of the range of services available for families. If the centre itself is unable to meet families' needs, staff ensure they are directed to services offered nearby either at the other local centre or to relevant partner services.
- There are good partnership agreements between the Ash Valley and its partner local centre in the town as well as with other centres in the East Hertfordshire area. These are mutually beneficial, for example in providing the popular Saturday morning 'Saturdads' activities for fathers, where bacon and sausage sandwiches are proving a real incentive. The two Ware centres are successful in supporting their joint breastfeeding and weaning groups for mothers; data from Ash Valley shows 90% of mothers joining this group sustain breastfeeding, to the longer-term benefit of their children.
- Outreach work is developing well and this is valued by families in the centre's more rural areas. The use in the afternoons of the Nursery facilities at a local missionary college, for example, is becoming increasingly popular. Activities such as 'Wednesday Wiggles' are not only planned well but typical of the ways the centre's staff support the acquisition of parenting skills as well as having a firm focus on child development.
- The centre is particularly effective in ensuring families most at need gain access to the 'Free Twos' scheme; this provides 15 hours of free childcare for eligible two-year-olds during term time. The centre is now looking to enhance its well-established partnerships with local schools and pre-school settings by playing its part in helping to ensure a common, agreed approach to assessing children's learning and development up to the age of five, particularly through the new two-year-old checks.
- Families most in need of support are identified and prioritised. Home visits are effective in supporting families in target groups. The centre works closely with its partners to improve access for parents to relevant training and in providing support for them to gain employment. This includes exploring and matching funding for progression training, hosting Jobcentre Plus organised events locally, and providing transport to training events.
- The centre has correctly identified that there are growing minority ethnic groups in its area, particularly those of Indian and Asian heritage. It is in the process of completing its fact finding and consultations with these groups to help tailor its services more specifically and encourage increased numbers of families to access its services. Good progress is being made in this and related initiatives form a key part of the centre's development planning.

The quality of practice and services

Good

- There is a good balance of services provided so that all families, including those who may need additional support, receive the early help they require. Families are supported well in gaining access to services and, where appropriate, specialist support is integrated effectively into centre activities. Families receive the right service at the right time based upon strong local knowledge and a thorough

assessment of their specific needs.

- Case studies show that the staff have a very good record of support and intervention for children and their families, whose circumstances make them most at risk, including those living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhood. Staff have proved themselves to be determined and effective in pursuing and identifying the most appropriate support for each family or individual. This includes families who may be experiencing domestic violence or find themselves in financial difficulties. The centre has a holistic approach to its support for families including those who are workless, which is focused well on reducing inequalities and enhancing families' quality of life.
- Families are cared for well because the centre also places a high priority on making sure they are safe at all times. Lone parents and other families have received valuable advice and training not only in first aid but also as to how to reduce risks to their children at home. Cookery sessions allow families to explore how to eat more healthily and on a budget. In recent years, the proportion of Reception-age children living locally who are obese has been reduced and is now below the national average.
- The centre provides good opportunities and courses to improve parenting knowledge and skills through very effectively planned activities. Discussions covering three generations of one family showed, for example, that the centre's approach to promoting healthy lifestyles had resulted in the father learning to cook not only for his child but also for the wider family. New parents value the peer support and friendliness they experience at the centre; this also encourages the creation of friendship and mutual support groups, the impact of which spreads well into the community.
- Great fun was had by all during an excellent outreach 'Tumble Time'; session where bouncy castle type equipment enabled freewheeling activities which helped children to develop physical control and coordination. As one father said, 'We attend whenever we can, it's great!'
- Data from the main partner school shows that children attending the centre outperform their peers overall once they start school, and by the age of five are better prepared for the start of the National Curriculum in Year 1. Boys and girls in the centre's area are now achieving better than seen nationally by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. However, a higher proportion of girls than boys achieve a good level of development, and the centre has rightly identified it needs to share assessment information more and focus on closing the gender this gap.
- In keeping with local authority policy, the centre maintains helpful 'Learning Journey' records of its group activities. However, it is now looking to develop further the ways it may work with families to develop more individual 'Learning Journeys' to monitor more closely the progress of target children.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Good

- The centre benefits well not only from a professional and dedicated staff but also from the good support provided by The Children's Society and the local authority. The centre's performance is monitored effectively by both bodies. The manager and her staff understand well the centre's strengths and areas for development; this is reflected in accurate and thoughtful self-evaluation. Through the collection and analysis of their own, local data, leaders have an excellent appreciation of the impact of their services on improving families' lives.
- However, in some instances the centre is not receiving sufficient data to assess fully the impact of its services. Some important information, for example from health on breastfeeding and adult education providers on course retention and success rates, is not consistently provided. The local authority is currently in the process of re-negotiating county wide agreements to help resolve this issue.

- The working partnerships developed with education, health, employment, social services and local police are generally of high quality. There is good representation by longer standing users and volunteers on the advisory board. Both family and professional partner members of the advisory board play a positive and supportive role in challenging and questioning the centre's leadership.
- There is a strong focus on listening to families' views and ideas and raising the aspirations, self-confidence and self-esteem of all families in the area. The centre has comprehensive policies and well considered practices to ensure that children and their families are safe. The centre gives high priority to children who are subject to a child protection plan or identified as in need, and staff play a valued part when a multi-agency approach is required.
- Many families have benefitted well from the centre's use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). Staff time as well as physical resources, are used efficiently to provide effective support for those using the centre. Some users told inspectors that simply being able to call by for a cup of tea and a chat enabled them to place personal or family emergencies in context.
- The centre makes excellent use of its limited accommodation, and ensures that resources are of a high quality. This was seen to work effectively for families during a well-attended 'Stay and Play' session. Social interaction was promoted well and the children enabled to interact very well with each other in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. In an email to the inspection team, one parent summed up users' views simply when writing that, 'The centre is a treasure to all mums in the community.'

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and as a result inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.
Grade 2	Good	Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children's wellbeing and achieve the stated outcomes for families.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.
Grade 4	Inadequate	The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services.

Children's Centre details

Unique reference number	21076
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	430195
Managed by	The Children's Society on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1,166
Centre leader	Emma Baker
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01920 468263
Email address	emma.baker@childrenssociety.org.uk

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