

# Inspection report for The Willows Children's Centre

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<b>Local authority</b>	Suffolk
<b>Inspection number</b>	384174
<b>Inspection dates</b>	25–26 January 2012
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<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
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<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	The Willows Primary School
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	The Willows Day care Limited EY337463

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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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, representatives of centre users, parents and carers, and members of the partnership advisory board. They met with representatives of the local authority, the head teacher of The Willows Primary School, The Willows Early years childcare and childminders.

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

## Information about the centre

The Willows Children's Centre is a phase one centre designated in September in 2006 and occupying premises which link to The Willows Primary School. It was originally managed by the school but is now governed and managed directly by the local authority.

The centre manager also has responsibility for the two other children's centres Hillside and Hawthorn serving the south Ipswich cluster area. The centres are in close proximity to each other and work in cooperation to provide services that complement each other and to share resources and staff. Each centre has its own partnership advisory board.

There are currently 436 children aged under five years living in the centre's reach area. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage are well below those expected for their age, particularly in their communication, language and literacy development.

The reach area has high levels of unemployment, incidences of domestic violence and lone parents. Cases of child poverty and the proportions of families on benefits are high. The area has the highest level in Suffolk of children subject to protection plans and looked after children. Housing in the area is mainly social housing with a large amount being flats.

The local population is mostly White British with a growing percentage of other minority ethnic groups including Eastern European. The percentage of families who speak English as an additional language is increasing.

## 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
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### Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1
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## Main findings

The Willows Children's Centre is an effective children's centre which has improved in the past year and is meeting the needs of the community which it serves increasingly well. The welcoming atmosphere and support from staff are highly valued by centre users and the centre is placed at the heart of the community. As one parent explained 'I love this centre, staff are welcoming to everyone'.

The centre has a good success rate in improving the health of adults and children in its reach area. The centre provides a very safe environment, and staff are alert to the welfare issues of users. The centre promotes a very inclusive ethos and works hard to engage all groups from the community. As a result the centre has successfully attracted the vast majority of families in its reach area to register and most families, including the most vulnerable, are using the services the centre provides.

Families using the centre truly value the outstanding care, guidance and support they receive. 'The centre has been my life line' and 'finally someone saw something positive in me' are typical comments made by parents. This is due to the commitment of the staff who are totally dedicated to all the families they reach. They work effectively with other professionals to provide targeted support for families which have complex problems or which are in crisis.

Safeguarding arrangements are excellent, well understood and modelled by all staff and underpinned by appropriate policies, regular staff training and thorough record keeping. Systems for the assessment of community needs and those of individual families have been very well thought through and are highly effective.

Parenting courses and a range of provision to enhance family relationships and children's play and communication skills are effective and often take place within the home environment. Whilst the centre has quite rightly focused on developing parents' confidences and self-esteem it is aware that it currently does not have an effective strategy in place to provide a clear route of progression into training to improve employability skills. Many users receive effective support to improve their economic well-being such as benefit and debt advice.

The centre's capacity to improve is outstanding. In little over a year since a new centre manager took up post much has been achieved. She has introduced many important initiatives that have led to rapid improvement in the centre. Day-to-day management of the centre has improved significantly and is now outstanding. Through this period she has been extremely well supported by the integrated service manager who also is highly driven, passionate about the work of the centre and has a clear vision of the centre's purpose. This partnership has resulted in a very strong and dynamic leadership and management team which has empowered an already passionate and committed staff team to strive for the highest standards of provision and thoroughly evaluate and review all areas of provision to continually raise standards further.

The partnership advisory board is chaired by the chair of governors of the local primary school and the vice chair is a parent. It has an appropriate representation from professionals working in the area; however attendance has been very low at recent meetings. They are developing a good understanding of the centre's strengths and areas for development and have identified that they need to provide more challenge to the centre manager.

The centre uses its resources extremely well to support the most vulnerable users, and especially to react quickly in times of urgent need. It effectively reaches families in its target groups and provides excellent value for money.

## What does the centre need to do to improve further?

### Recommendations for further improvement

- Review training and development opportunities for parents, to ensure a clear route of progression to continue to raise aspirations.
- Strengthen governance arrangements by securing regular attendance of a range of relevant professionals who work in the area on the partnership advisory board and ensure they provide more challenge to the centre manager.

## How good are outcomes for families?

<b>2</b>
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A very good focus is placed on ensuring emotional well-being of both parents and their children. Access to counselling services and baby massage have made a

significant contribution to ensuring secure bonding and attachment. The centre actively promotes healthy eating by offering healthy snacks and children and parents are actively involved in planting and cultivating vegetables, which increases their interest in healthy food. The centre has an attractive outdoor area which is used effectively to promote physical activity. There is good partnership with health professionals. Analysis of data indicates that the centre is starting to have an impact on increasing the number of new mothers starting breastfeeding and continuing breastfeeding after six weeks.

Adults say they feel very safe when they are at the centre. As a result of the very good relationships between centre staff, children, parents, users have the confidence to speak out about any issues that concern them at home, in the centre or the local community. Those with child protection plans and children in need receive excellent support from family support workers and 'First Step to Play' workers. Many are engaged over-time with the centre and benefit from both the specialist support available and through taking part in the centre's broader programme. Case studies demonstrate the effectiveness of the centre's intervention and the highly positive impact it has had upon the lives of parents and children. Home safety visits are carried out by health visitors and contribute to parents' understanding of how to keep the home a safe place for children.

The fun activities offered at sessions enable parents to become more closely involved in their children's learning and recognise the value of play in supporting development. The First Steps to Play workers offer very effective one-to-one support to parents in their home. This comprehensive course encourages parents to engage in play with their children and give them ideas on how to use everyday, affordable items as valuable play resources. As a result, children are given more opportunity to play and develop skills to promote school readiness in the home environment. Activities for children, such as 'Tiny Tunes', are well planned to help children develop their communication skills. Some children are referred for speech and language therapy as a result of the recently introduced Speech and Language drop-in session.

Data show that the attainment gap between the lowest attaining children and the rest is closing. An increasing number are achieving on the national average by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. However, these results remain below the Suffolk and national averages.

Programmes, such as those to develop parenting skills, are showing a positive impact. As a result, parents say that they have a better understanding of why their children behave in certain ways and are better equipped to manage their children's behaviour. The centre values the views of users and there are some examples of where services have been offered due to the suggestions made, such as organising a First Aid course for dads. Staff work well to promote cohesion within the community. As a result, families show each other high levels of respect.

Those families on low incomes and those who are vulnerable are supported well in accessing free formal day care for their two-year-olds. Many parents confirm that

their contact with the centre has significantly enhanced their confidence and self-esteem. However, the centre has been less successful in building upon this new found confidence and to further inspire them to move onto further education programmes and employment. Despite this, some who attend the centre are supported well to develop the skills needed to gain employment through access to training and volunteering opportunities.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

<b>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How good is the provision?**

<b>2</b>
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A good range of services and activities are delivered by the centre or on their behalf, to ensure there is a good balance of universal and targeted services provided to meet the needs of the community. In their feedback to the inspectors, parents are clear that provision is making a real difference to their lives. Under the new manager staff constantly seek ways to improve the services they provide and form strong partnership working. A good example is the work it is undertaking with schools in the area to develop common strategies to raise children's communication skills.

Working with families in their home is an established strategy which is used appropriately and effectively by many of the staff linked to the centre. The centre carries out the highest volume of home visits throughout children's centres in Suffolk. Case studies demonstrate the positive effect of outreach services on improving the outcomes for the families who access them. Families have easy access to extremely good-quality advice and guidance.

All centre staff have a very good understanding of the needs of the local community. This is due to rigorous analysis of data as well as knowledge obtained by liaising with other agencies and consulting with families. The team around the child and Common Assessment Framework processes are used very effectively to ensure excellent multi-agency working between centre staff and a wide range of other professional partners.

Through their engagement in services, families recognise that they can improve outcomes and are becoming increasingly inspired to do so. The centre is currently reviewing its work with the local education provider in order to provide more opportunities for users to develop their basic skills particularly in literacy and numeracy. Staff regularly celebrate the success of families. They award certificates at the end of courses and value the work undertaken by children and their parents which is attractively displayed throughout the centre. A 'WOW' board catches important moments and achievements in adults and children's lives; however, this is not frequently updated to insure maximum impact.

The Willows of Ipswich Supportive Parents Association (WISPA) group provides a range of activities and fundraising events. This not only enhances the provision provided by the centre but is greatly appreciated and valued by the centre users.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>1</b>

### **How effective are the leadership and management?**

<b>1</b>
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The centre manager previously to her appointment managed the other two centres in the cluster area. She therefore had a good understanding of the needs of the area and was already highly respected by professionals and parents in the area. Her appointment followed a period of instability in the management of the centre and she quite rightly concentrated on stabilising the situation. In a relatively short period of time her inspirational leadership has created a determination among all centre workers to provide only the best for the community. There is an excellent sense of teamwork, ambition and drive.

The centre manager evaluates provision and recent trends, and bases the next steps in the children's centre development on identified need. This approach has resulted in a continuous process of questioning what the centre provides and how well it is meeting the needs of the community. As a result, recent developments have included a total review of the healthy eating programme to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the community, securing with Job Centre Plus a monthly drop-in session to better support centre users back into work, reviewing the centre activities for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and working with health colleagues to offer antenatal clinics as part of the Healthy Child Collaborative.

Good professional supervision and management arrangements are now in place to



monitor the performance of staff and ensure ongoing professional development. Staff are gainfully deployed across the cluster of centres so that the best possible use is made of individual skills and areas of interest and expertise. Levels of accountability ensure the centre's operations are highly effective. The partnership advisory board has experienced some membership difficulties and no longer attracts representation from a range of professionals working in the area. Consequently it does not provide sufficient challenge to the centre. They have identified both these issues and are considering strategies to boost attendance and make the board more effective in its role.

Safeguarding is outstanding. This aspect is given a very high priority. Protocols and practice for making referrals and sharing information between agencies are very comprehensive. Intervention happens at the earliest stage and the multi-professional team work very effectively together to prevent families slipping into even greater needs. There are effective procedures within the centre to ensure all staff and volunteers have appropriate safeguarding checks and these are kept up to date.

The centre celebrates diversity and values all cultures represented in the reach area equally. There is no discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or ability and all have equality of opportunity to engage in services to improve their lives. The centre is continually busy, well used and welcoming. It uses its resources exceptionally well to ensure outstanding value for money.

These are the grades for leadership and management

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>1</b>

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

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## **Summary for centre users**

We inspected the The Willows Children's Centre on 25–26 January 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you to all of you who took the time to talk to us when we visited The Willows Children's Centre recently. Special thanks go out to those parents who agreed to have us visit some of your group sessions and for making us feel welcome, especially when discussing some confidential issues. Your cooperation was important in helping us form our views and make accurate judgements about your children's centre. There have been some major changes to both the organisation of the centre and its leadership. There is a new manager, and as a result of her leadership the centre is a much better source of help and support for your community.

Staff and management are very committed to improving the lives of you all and they work extremely well together. We found that staff provide you with outstanding care, guidance and support. We agree with you that they always make themselves available to help you and that staff provide you with very good advice and guidance. They work well with other professionals and agencies to make sure that you are provided with as many services as possible. When they are unable to help you themselves, they know where to direct you and offer you as much help as possible. It is clear that for many of you, being able to come to the centre has been vital in supporting your very good emotional health and it provides you with opportunities to make friends and socialise.

We could see that children and parents enjoy many of the activities and that those of you who attend are wiser in terms of being better parents. The centre management is particularly effective at ensuring that its staff have a good understanding of procedures for protecting children. Services also work together well to help families who come to the centre during particularly difficult times.

Some of you are actively involved in volunteering within the centre. These experiences and the other activities provided by the centre help you to develop confidence. You help to make decisions through the partnership advisory board. Although this board has an appropriate representation from professionals working in the area, attendance has been very low at recent meetings. We have asked the centre to strengthen governance arrangements by securing regular attendance of a

range of relevant professionals who work in the area on the partnership advisory board and ensure they provide more challenge to the centre manager.

You are given regular opportunities to present your views and thoughts, and staff take account of these when they develop the services they provide. You told us that you feel valued by staff.

Many of you have received effective support to improve your economic well-being such as benefit and debt advice. You told us how your attendance on courses had developed your confidences, self-esteem and parenting skills. We have asked the centre to look at building upon your confidence to offer you a clear route of progression into further training opportunities to improve your employability skills.

Staff make very good use of information to help them to plan services which meet the needs of your community. Leaders and managers of the centre have a good understanding of how they can improve their services even further and it is clear that they are determined to make your lives the best they can be. They have already developed some very good plans to develop the centre further.

We are very grateful for your help and we wish each of you every success for the future.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).