

Inspection report for The Willow Centre

Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	365545
Inspection dates	4–5 November 2010
Reporting inspector	Joanne Caswell HMI

Centre governance	Local Authority
Centre leader	Karen Roberts
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	The Willow Centre, Halstow Way, Off Brookfield Road, Ashford TN23 4EY
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Linked school if applicable	
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Kiddie Kapers Nursery

The inspection of this Sure Start Children’s Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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 registered early years provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Early Years Inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the senior leadership team, the Network Manager, a representative from the local authority, representatives from the Steering Group, health professionals, the Safeguarding Champion, the District Manager – Children's Social Services, Ashford, a focus group of users and frontline workers, and parents and carers and other users of the centre.

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

Information about the centre

The Willow Centre developed from a Sure Start Local Programme and gained full designation in 2005. It is situated in South Ashford and serves a community ranked within the top 30% of the most deprived areas in the country. The reach area covers approximately one square mile, consisting of a number of small communities arranged across housing estates with fairly high housing density. There is a high level of social housing. Ashford Children's Centres operate a locality model and staff are directed by the needs of the communities across all eight centres. Due to the close proximity of the Willow Centre and the Ray Allen Centre, and the background of some families from the Ray Allen Centre area accessing Willow Centre services, there is a particularly close partnership between these two centres. The Willow Centre reach area has a higher than average number of lone parents and children in workless households.

The Governance model for Ashford Children’s Centres is continuing to evolve. The Rural and Urban Local Children’s Services Partnerships are supporting a district approach to the delivery of children’s centres in the area, led by the Ashford Children’s Centres Locality Coordinator, who directly line manages the Network Manager for the Centre.

The Willow Centre operates an on-site partnership with the Beaver Community Trust who manage the early years nursery, Kiddie Kapers, which is open five days a week, throughout the year. The group offers Early Years Foundation Stage provision for children from birth to five years. The setting supports children with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

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 users and the wider community

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

The overall effectiveness of The Willow Centre is good leading to good outcomes for users. This is due to the excellent partnerships which have been, and are being, developed with a range of other services, such as health, education and social services. Protocols for making referrals and information sharing between all agencies are exceptional and this is having a major impact on the centre’s ability to improve outcomes for children and families. Professional relationships between key staff from all agencies are based on a shared commitment to quickly identify need and implement appropriate support services. As a result, the centre is able to refer families to other agencies promptly and without delay. Case study evidence indicates families have received excellent integrated support, particularly for those who are vulnerable and at a time of crisis.

The Network Manager and her staff work tirelessly to welcome all families into the centre and to consistently reach new families. The reception staff offer a friendly environment and the relaxed atmosphere of the on-site Light Bites Café creates a positive area for families to socialise. Parents, carers and other users appreciate the welcoming environment with many users describing the centre as a ‘lifesaver’ and a ‘lifeline’ to them. For example, one first-time mum-to-be described the centre as ‘definitely making this pregnancy easier’. An overwhelming number of

centre users reported that staff listen to them, acknowledge their concerns and make them feel valued. For example, one parent has approached the Network Manager to discuss opening the centre at weekends to offer a safe environment for contact visits, this has been agreed.

Safeguarding arrangements are a high priority for all staff and there is evidence to show the centre's proactive work with other key agencies has increased children's well-being. The centre has clear and consistent procedures for using a common assessment framework and this is currently being developed further. Recruitment procedures within the local authority are robust and all relevant staff checks are completed. Although necessary checks are completed by partner agencies to ensure the safety and welfare of children, the centre has not yet fully established protocols with partner agencies to ensure their vetting procedures meet the high standards set by the local authority.

Children who attend the Early Years Foundation Stage provision make good progress in their learning and in their personal, social and emotional development. Tracking data indicate outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are improving across the reach area at a good rate.

The centre's approach to self-evaluation is exceptional and is based on rigorous, scrupulous evaluation and monitoring. Senior leaders have a clear view of the strengths of the provision and there are comprehensive action plans and monitoring programmes in place in order to secure further, and continued, improvements. Highly effective evaluation and reflection is a key priority for all staff and has led to some significant improvements in the centre's programme. For example, staff recognised the coffee morning held in the local church hall was not fully effective in supporting the needs of parents and carers and children, so arrangements were made to review this programme and run it directly from the centre where families could benefit from the extensive play facilities, both inside and outside, and the on-site professional agencies. As a result of this change, an increased number of users are attending this provision and children and their families are benefiting from more purposeful play and learning opportunities.

Health provision within the centre is good and parents and carers develop a clear understanding of how to improve their lifestyles and lead a healthier life. Support for breastfeeding is particularly good and this is due, in part, to the Breast Mates programme, where volunteers support new mums in helping to promote and sustain breastfeeding. Ante-natal and post-natal care is readily accessible within the centre and mums-to-be and new mums comment on the easy accessibility of these services in helping to support them in the health promotion of their babies. Programmes to support children's healthy development are effective. Parents and carers are supported to understand the importance of childhood immunisations and the take-up of this is improving. However, as data relating to the childhood immunisation programme was not made readily accessible to the centre, the programme was not as targeted as it could have been and, therefore, some

national targets were not always met fully. However, the number of children accessing the programme has improved since the data became available.

The centre meets its statutory responsibilities for the promotion of equality and diversity well. It has been particularly successful in engaging vulnerable groups and is using its strong partnerships with other agencies to work to support the harder-to-reach groups. As the centre staff know its community so well, there are clear action plans in place to address this, and evidence shows many groups have already been successfully integrated into the centre's services.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure all partner agencies commissioned to provide services within the centre adhere to the robust and stringent vetting procedures implemented by the centre's directly-employed staff.
- Deliver services in relation to health, particularly those relating to the childhood immunisation programme, at a rate which ensures targets set nationally are consistently met.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The centre utilises every opportunity to promote healthy eating and the importance of implementing a healthy lifestyle. This includes the provision of free fruit, healthy eating programmes and a healthy menu provided in the Light Bites café. Parents and carers benefit from programmes run by health trainers who provide advice and support on weight loss and smoking cessation. There is particularly good support for young parents with designated teenage midwifery services and the Young Adolescent Parents (YAPs) group, which offer extensive health and emotional support to young parents. Although provision for health generally is a strength of the centre, staff have not always been able to target provision because of a lack of information from data. As a result, some aspects of provision have not always been targeted as quickly as others.

The safety and well-being of centre users, including those who are most vulnerable, is a high priority for all senior leaders. Good attention is given to monitoring access to the centre and ensuring parents and carers and children are safe when using its facilities. First-aid training for parents and carers increases their skills in responding to accidents and emergencies. One parent told inspectors she felt more confident in weaning her baby onto solids, having completed a paediatric first-aid course and understanding how to cope with choking incidents. Centre users comment they feel safer within the community as they know the local police well as they see them each

week in the on-site Police Surgery held in the Light Bites Café and feel comfortable to share any concerns they may have. The excellent links with other agencies help signpost centre users to specialist information, such as advice on car seat safety and links to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. Centre users have a greater understanding of safety issues within the home, due to the services provided by the health visitors and Family Club. For example, safety issues such as the links between smoking and cot death are discussed effectively.

Children within the centre's Early Years Foundation Stage provision benefit from a rich, stimulating environment which helps to promote their learning and development. There are smooth transitions into school due to the existing strong links with local schools and the organised, multi-agency approach. Highly effective intervention strategies by the Speech and Language team based within the centre help identify and manage any language and communication difficulties, ensuring all children make secure progress towards the early learning goals. Parents with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive intensive support from the centre and its partner agencies and this has a significant impact on children's learning and development.

Parents and carers are fully involved in decision making and their evaluations of services and activities are highly valued and help to inform future planning. For example, young parents too old to attend the YAPs group identified they wished to continue with a support programme at the centre and benefit from staff support. In partnership with the centre staff, they formed the Stepping Out group, for parents aged 20–25. The Steering Group has representatives from parents and carers and one parent commented positively on her involvement with this by saying: 'It's a great way to feel like you're a part of what's going on and I have met lots of new people.' There are many other ways in which parents and carers can share feedback, such as through the suggestion box, 'Have your Say' leaflets, annual surveys and through participation in the Parent Forum. Children are actively involved in providing their own views and opinions of the centre. For example, children attending the crèche use photographs to identify their favourite things and suggest ideas for improvement. As a result, all children, parents and carers feel empowered by the centre and contribute ideas confidently.

There is a wide range of information provided for parents and carers regarding training, employment, housing, benefits advice and health services. The appointment of an Employment Officer ensures all parents and carers access information and guidance easily and with support. Adult education programmes and job seeking advice help centre users develop their skills and achieve full-time employment. The volunteer programme successfully helps centre users gain full-time employment within the centre. For example, the current Volunteer Coordinator worked as a volunteer for seven years before applying for the role and being successful in her appointment. As a direct result of the confidence built by their roles within the centre, a number of users have gone on to set up other facilities which support the community and feed back into the outreach work of the centre. These include taking

up positions as parent governors in schools and setting up toddler groups.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	2
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	1
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

1

The quality of care for young children, parents and carers and other users is a strength of the setting. Staff know the community extremely well and are responsive towards the changing needs of the local area. Outreach services are very effective in meeting the needs of the wider community and in targeting harder-to-reach areas. Sessions and activities observed by inspectors during the inspection were of good quality, with good attendance, and offered purposeful learning. For example, the Meet and Play group helped parents and carers understand the value and benefits of quality play experiences for children. The ante-natal clinics were well attended and parents commented how much they preferred visiting the centre for appointments as opposed to a health centre. The Sign and Rhyme sessions offered a fun and lively activity facilitated by the Speech and Language team with many children observed racing into the centre full of enthusiasm to get started.

Centre users talk positively about the quality of the adult learning courses available to them and the volunteering programme, both of which help support parents in gaining access back into employment. Case studies contain many success stories with several parents being inspired by the services provided by the centre to undertake training to become midwives.

Excellent partnership arrangements and clear channels of communication provide the basis of a strong network of support for all centre users. There is good provision for adults facing challenging circumstances and outreach workers and community involvement workers meet regularly with other professional agencies, such as child and adolescent mental health services, to devise a coordinated approach. Support for

centre users' well-being is at least good in all outcomes and families report their lives have improved because of the centre's integrated work. Specialist midwifery and health support for teenage mothers and fathers has had a significantly positive impact on the care of mums-to-be and their unborn babies. Post-natal care is strong within the centre and services are easily accessible. Signposting to additional support services is excellent throughout the centre due to the exceptional integration of all services working to support the individual needs of each child and family.

The centre's initial assessment of need is rigorous and its commitment towards analysing data is thorough. Although data are not always readily accessible from the local authority and health services, the centre undertakes its own assessment of statistics. This is largely effective, although the provision for some health services is sometimes delayed due to this.

Parents and carers who are experiencing change and challenging circumstances are very well supported. A high proportion of users, including those who have previously been hard to engage, report how much they enjoy coming to the centre and appreciate the welcoming environment and the support they receive from staff. For example, some centre users told us they were initially nervous about coming to the centre, so staff arranged to travel to the centre with them and support them in getting to know other people and staff. Health visitors, midwives and community involvement workers have made a significant impact on helping parents to feel better about themselves and supporting them in raising their children. For example, parents conclude the completion of the Incredible Years parenting course has raised their self-esteem as parents and this has had a positive impact on children's emotional development.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	1
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

1

Leaders and managers at all levels share a commitment to provide the highest standards of care and work consistently hard to identify areas for development and make constant improvements. As a result, improvements within the centre have been vast and swift, and this is leading to good, and sometimes outstanding, outcomes for children and centre users. Improvement plans are comprehensive with clear, measurable goals and success criteria, and there are stringent processes in place to consistently review and monitor practice.

Governance arrangements are robust and secure, and frequently hold the centre to account. Parents and carers are involved in the interviewing of new staff and the Advisory Board shares best practice across all settings. The close involvement of senior managers and budget holders ensures decisions at meetings are made at strategic level and have an immediate impact on provision.

The centre gives high priority to safeguarding and consistently reviews policies to protect users' safety and welfare. The Safeguarding Champion works tirelessly to ensure all staff are fully aware of their role and responsibilities and are competent in the referrals process. Good links with other agencies is resulting in the improving use of the common assessment framework and the targeting of outreach work. The centre maintains good records as evidence that all staff and volunteers have appropriate checks. Although checks are completed appropriately by other agencies, and the welfare of children is consistently promoted, the same rigour applied by the local authority is not yet evident in some partner agencies.

Equality and diversity are promoted successfully. This is because all services are designed to engage users from the range of backgrounds within the local area. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported well. The Special Buds group provides a strong network for parents and carers and the cohesive work of the centre staff, the specialist nurses and Home Start has improved the outcomes of many families. Many parents of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities have been empowered in their parenting skills.

The leaders have a reflective approach to continually looking for new ways to reach into the local community and include all groups of users effectively. Where it is identified that some community groups feel they do not need the services of the centre due to their own support networks, a special effort is made to include these groups in key events. For example, recently, the centre invited a group of Nepalese families to attend an organised event as special guests to demonstrate dance, food and customs particular to their culture. As a result, this group of families has participated in the local carnival and now regularly attends community events.

The centre monitors closely the take-up of activities and consistently evaluates all services to ensure value for money and identify how provision can be improved further to meet the needs of all families. For example, recent suggestions from parents and carers have requested a revision in centre opening times to support

working parents and more provision for fathers to attend the centre to enhance relationships with their children. Parents and carers really value the input the centre has on their own well-being and that of their children and families. One parent told inspectors she felt lucky to have the children's centre so near to her and completing courses at the centre had 'made a real difference' to her.

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	1
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
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 evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	1
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	1
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	1

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

None

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected The Willow Centre on 4–5 November 2010. We judged the centre as good overall. We would like to thank all parents and carers and centre users who were present during the inspection and contributed in many ways to it.

The children's centre provides a good range of services that are helping families to improve their lives. We were impressed by the close working relationships between staff at the centre and staff from a wider range of professional groups. They work together extremely well because they understand each other's roles and are willing to get the best possible advice and support for you.

The centre provides effective support for children to make a good start in life and adults are guided well so they can realise their own potential. Some adults now work as volunteers in the centre and attendance at courses is good. Some courses have enabled parents and carers to achieve formal qualifications and this has helped them access work and employment.

The Willow Centre is extremely well managed by the Network Manager and her team. The Steering Group and Parents' Forum provide excellent ways to seek the views of parents, carers and other partners in helping to shape the centre and bring about further improvements. The centre staff are supported and challenged by these groups to ensure they strive for improved outcomes for all children and families.

We found the centre makes you feel welcome and staff at the centre are committed to supporting you. They are prepared to text you and phone you when you have been unable to attend sessions and are dedicated to meeting your needs and help you overcome any difficulties. Many of you told us this has happened to you and how their support has helped you. Health visitors, midwives, community involvement workers, speech and language therapists, and other outreach workers were all praised for their friendly manner and the way in which they listened to what you had to say and responded quickly.

We found that a wide range of services help you to keep yourselves and your children safe. For example, you recognise the value of having weekly Police Surgeries in the Light Bites Café and the opportunities to undertake first-aid training. We found that many checks are completed on all the centre staff to ensure they are safe and suitable to work with children. We also found that, although other agencies using the centre carry out appropriate checks and ensure the safety of their staff, some of their checks are not as detailed as the centre's own checks and we have asked the centre's managers to look at this.

The centre is working well with other partners, such as health visitors and midwives, and some of you told us how you had benefited from the good support offered for breast feeding by the team of Breast Mates. Although the centre is good at supporting health provision overall, sometimes, due to a lack of information from the local authority, other health programmes are not always offered as quickly as they could be. We have asked the centre to address this.

Thank you to everyone who took time to come and speak to us. We are very grateful and wish you every success for the future.

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