

Inspection report for Lavender Children's Centre

Local authority	Worcestershire
Inspection number	367829
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Warndon Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre leaders, the chair and members of the advisory board, front-line staff, representatives of partner organisations including health, education and social care, and families and volunteers who use the centre.

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

Information about the centre

The Lavender Children's Centre is a phase three designated centre that gained full core offer status on 23 September 2010. The centre is managed by, and accountable to, Worcestershire County Council. Located in a purpose-built annexe adjoining Warndon Primary School, the centre shares an entrance and reception area with the school. Although it supports parents and carers in accessing funding for two-year olds for nursery placements, the centre does not commission any nursery services. The centre manager and senior family support worker work across two centres, and are managed by a cluster manager, who oversees five children's centres in the vicinity. There are a number of primary schools and other children's centres located within walking distance, and Lavender delivers some activities jointly with other agencies and within the community, facilitating access for families at a range of locations.

The reach area covers approximately 1.9 square miles and the number of children under five in the area is 1131. In economic terms, the area is diverse. It covers seven super output areas, one of which is one of the 10% most deprived in the country; approximately 8% of children within the reach area live here in social housing. The other six areas are relatively affluent and many of the homes are privately owned. The population is primarily White British and only 5% are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Around 10% of children live in workless households.

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

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Lavender Children’s Centre provides satisfactory services to meet the needs of its children and families. Children and adults feel safe and secure at the centre, and the environment is warm and welcoming. The centre provides good care, guidance and support for those who use it and has meaningful contact with the majority of children in the reach area who are under five, either through the centre itself, or through services delivered elsewhere in the community. However, the centre recognises that it has more to do to engage the most vulnerable in the reach area. The views of service users are collected but are not yet analysed in such a way as to plan and target future services, and the views of those who do not yet use the service are not recorded. Work with partners to ensure that those who are most in need are supported, and that this support has an impact on improving the lives of the most vulnerable children, is in progress but is not yet fully realised.

The centre provides both individual family support work and universal services. This work demonstrates a commitment to equality of opportunity, with a range of resources such as toys and books which reflect ethnicities other than White British. Some information and materials are provided in languages other than English, including books, which will help children learn about other ethnicities and cultures. The ability of centre staff to tailor their support to the individual needs of children and families is evident, through learning journals for example. The centre focuses effectively on supporting disabled children and their carers. A speech and language therapist works closely with the centre, offering a fortnightly ‘drop in’ for one-to-one consultation or group work, and where appropriate, home visiting is offered to support speech and language development.

Evaluations show that centre users experience high levels of satisfaction with services. The centre is well resourced, with indoor and outdoor play areas and a good selection of toys and equipment. Centre staff are sensitive to the needs of

individual users and groups of users. This is reflected by parents, who say using the centre has made a positive difference to themselves and their families.

A wide range of activities and services is delivered both by centre staff and by other agencies. Many aspects of the services provided within the centre and in outreach settings are of good quality, and centre leaders and managers collect relevant data to help them plan activities to meet the needs of children in the reach area. Staff work effectively in promoting the children's learning and development, and children who use the centre are well supported and make good educational progress.

Lavender has good local and informal links with partner agencies, some of whom deliver services directly from the centre or in local venues, while the centre signposts families to others.

The centre leader is supported well by capable staff who are keen to improve the services. Staff are well trained and well supervised. They ensure that behaviour support, parenting advice, and work with other agencies is effective. Safeguarding concerns are recognised and the staff have been instrumental in engaging children's social care when necessary to ensure risks are assessed. Assessment in individual work with families is not always fully formalised and the centre is currently developing systems to formalise assessments to ensure children's needs and the potential risk to their health and well-being are accurately identified and addressed.

The local authority provides a comprehensive range of annual and quarterly data to support planning and development activity. Senior managers and the local authority provide regular oversight of the centre's functioning through supervision with the centre leader, regular reports to the advisory board and quarterly monitoring. The centre has a delivery plan which sets out current priorities, although managers accept that activity to meet objectives and measures of success are not identified clearly enough. At present, the centre does not use the data to full effect to design and deliver services which meet the needs of the most vulnerable. The advisory board, though in place for some time, has been configured within the last year to provide oversight of six children's centres within the area, and is not yet sufficiently proactive in setting targets and providing challenge. There are no parent representatives of Lavender Children's Centre on the advisory board, and few parents spoken to knew about the role or function of the board. The planning infrastructure, expertise and commitment are in place to enable the centre to develop these areas in the future.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The local authority in conjunction with senior leaders should review priorities and establish more specific, measurable and ambitious targets which enable the centre and its partners to demonstrate their impact on families most in need of support.

- Centre leaders should ensure individual assessments and attendance data are used effectively to evaluate, review and deliver services that engage, meet the needs of and improve outcomes for the most vulnerable children in the reach area.
- The advisory board and centre leaders should identify ways of engaging parents from the most vulnerable groups in the decision-making and governance activities of the centre in order to provide them with opportunities to develop skills and confidence, and to help ensure that services fully reflect their needs.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

The centre has been successful in improving parents' understanding of the importance of developing healthy eating and in achieving a healthy lifestyle. Programmes such as the 'MEND' (mind, exercise, nutrition, do it) sessions, aimed at reducing childhood obesity through healthy eating and exercise, are well received. Although attendance is low, there are some examples of good impact. One parent commented that her child had been more willing to try new foods as a result of attendance at these sessions. Children are encouraged to be active through the 'Soccer Stars' group which is run weekly at the centre, through subsidised swimming lessons and outdoor activities. There is little information available as to the outcomes of these initiatives, particularly for those most in need of support. Obesity levels in reception year appear to be lower than for the city as a whole, but there are no recent data. Breastfeeding rates are slightly above the Worcestershire average.

Midwives and health visitors use the centre to undertake antenatal work and support new parents to feel more confident in continuing breastfeeding and using strategies to support weaning. Fathers are encouraged to attend sessions, and are also to signpost to a Saturday group held at a nearby children's centre. Staff are trained to deliver recognised parenting programmes run in conjunction either with other children's centres or with other agencies, to enable the attendance of as many families as possible.

Staff are effective in highlighting the need for parents to be vigilant in keeping children safe. Children who are subject to a child protection plan and those who benefit from a 'team around the child' approach are known to staff. The centre is a safe environment and parents are supported to develop their awareness of possible dangers at home. Lavender gives home-safety kits to families who are assessed as needing them and safety is built into individual work sessions as well as parenting programmes. The centre also provides a venue for first-aid courses which some parents attend. Individual work with children and families is effective in improving the safety of families, particularly for those who are in crisis, those suffering domestic abuse and those who have mental health and substance use issues. The centre also provides support for parents and children who are disabled or have special needs including support to attend a specialist group for parents with disabled children and assistance in accessing relevant services.

Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results for the area show that since 2008 there has been a marked improvement in children’s achievement, particularly in emotional development and communication, literacy and language. In 2008 only 35% of children were achieving 78 points or more at the end of the Reception Year. This had increased to 65% in 2011. Improving skills in writing is a target area for all schools locally and a strategy is in place for this. The centre offers numerous opportunities through stay-and plays, music sessions, messy play and outdoor activities for children to develop their early exploration, physical and pre-writing skills. The local authority has undertaken a recent review of children who had contact with Lavender Children’s Centre and a comparable control group who did not. This demonstrates an improved score in five out of the six areas of learning for those who attended the children’s centre.

Opportunities are available for parents to share their views and make suggestions either face to face or through post-it notes available at all groups. A suggestion board and a comments book are well used and there are specific comments, compliment and complaints leaflets for parents to fill in should they wish. Evaluations are given out regularly and these are used to make further improvements in the service. There is a parents’ forum across two centres and some Lavender parents do attend, although their awareness and understanding of how this links with decision making is low.

Parents and carers are encouraged to attend programmes and courses run by the centre and in conjunction with other agencies. They are also signposted to adult learning activities. Parents welcome the opportunity to meet with the Department for Work and Pensions at a neighbouring centre and employment opportunities are regularly posted on a noticeboard within the centre. However, at present there are no data to demonstrate how many have been supported into employment or full-time education. The option for parents to volunteer is available and some teenage parent volunteers were keen to express how much the centre has helped them.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy 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	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

2

Activities and services provided at or by the centre are good and satisfactorily meet the needs of families. Parents evaluate the activities, one-to-one work, and learning sessions such as baby massage very positively. Achievements are celebrated and learning acquired at the centre is embedded in home life. Learning opportunities vary from 'books together, enjoy together' for families to have fun reading with children, to swimming lessons, parenting programmes and activities with a health and safety focus. These are all universal services to encourage all families to find something they enjoy.

The quality of the care, guidance and support offered by Lavender for those who use the centre is good. The emotional well-being of families is prioritised and the Citizens Advice Bureau and Relate both deliver services from the centre. There is a recent development to provide specialist advice to those in situations where domestic abuse is a concern. Individual staff are effective in supporting parents who ask for help or support, whether attending universal programmes or in individual casework. Partnership working has helped to raise the profile of the children's centre and centre staff are proactive in offering support to new parents.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Leadership and management are satisfactory overall. Professional supervision within the centre is of a high quality and offers good opportunities for reflection. The local authority provides the centre with a comprehensive range of data and there are systems in place for performance objectives to be identified and to support service planning. However, these are not used effectively at present to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. The advisory board has been reconfigured during the last year and is well attended by professional agencies. There is a quarterly reporting system, and the centre provides details of its activities. The board is still developing and does not yet provide a challenging role to the centre's leaders, but recognises the need to do so where necessary. At present, the advisory board's relationship with parents is immature, but the chair is keen to ensure more parents play a role either as representatives or as part of a larger parents' forum.

The centre leader has been effective in broadening the range of services offered by

the two children’s centres she manages, delivering activities in a range of venues, such as Lyppard Grange community centre, in order to meet the needs of families living across the reach. Overall attendance has improved as a result. Staff are appropriately qualified to deliver the children’s centre services that are particularly focused on universal activities, many of which support educational achievement. Antenatal clinics, held by midwives in the centre, encourage attendance from fathers as well as mothers to be and are accessed by families from across the whole reach. Staff undertaking individual work are skilled and proactive in seeking the right interventions for the small number of families they are working with. As the centre has been operational for less than two years, it is still working towards meeting targets for the most vulnerable within the reach area. For registered users, the provision is often good but, because it does not yet meet the needs of the most vulnerable, the centre offers no better than satisfactory value for money.

All staff have received safeguarding training and have a good understanding of the centre’s processes and arrangements in this respect. Staff have also undertaken training in the use of the Common Assessment Framework and understand their role in implementing a ‘team around the child’ approach thereby ensuring greater safety and well-being for children and their families. Safeguarding arrangements are good. There are effective processes for the recruitment of staff, casual workers and volunteers, as well as for ensuring that other agencies accessing the centre have been appropriately vetted.

Partnerships are good locally, with a wide range of services being delivered in or in conjunction with the children’s centre. Many partners help the children’s centre to raise its profile and encourage attendance. Midwives and health visitors ensure that information packs, which include information about the children’s centre, are given to all families at first home visits. However, children’s centre data show that objectives are not fully embedded in partnerships in order to ensure that those who are most vulnerable are supported in accessing children’s centre services.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre’s policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2

The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Lavender Children's Centre on 10–11 May 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you for taking the time to talk to us about your children's centre. Your views have been very helpful to the inspection. Many of you told us that you find the centre to be a warm, happy and safe environment where you and your children feel well supported and valued. We agree.

The main role of a children's centre is to encourage all the services for children and families to work together to meet your needs. Lavender Children's Centre does this satisfactorily. Many services provided for the families who access the centre are good, but the staff are not yet successfully engaging with many families in the wider community who need more support.

You told us about the different ways the centre helps to promote healthy lifestyles and how much the healthy snacks provided encourage your child to eat a wider range of foods at home. The 'Stay and Play' sessions provide lots of different activities for fun and learning. Some of you also made suggestions of things that could be done differently, and told us that staff are keen to hear your ideas, even if they cannot always make this happen, such as having a soft play area for older children. We also very much enjoyed seeing your children's learning journals, which help you to see how they are progressing.

We have identified some things we would like the centre work on, in particular encouraging more people in the local community to benefit from the friendly and welcoming atmosphere of the centre, and the good advice and guidance the centre offers. Many of you have found the parenting programmes helpful. You have said that these improve your confidence as parents and help you to understand better

how to keep your children safe and healthy. We would be very keen to see more children benefiting from this work in future.

We would also like to see more parents involved in the decisions the centre makes about its services and have asked leaders and managers to see how this can be achieved. Hopefully you will want to be part of this.

We would like to wish you, and all children and families in the area, all the best for the future.

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