

Inspection report for Green Ark Children's Centre

Local authority	Plymouth
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Noah's Ark Childcare Centre

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 parents and carers, centre managers and frontline staff. They also met with a number of partners and representatives from the local authority. The inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Green Ark is a phase two children's centre serving the Devonport and Stoke areas of the city. It is located in accommodation that was partly refurbished and partly purpose built. This also houses childcare offered by a private provider. Most of the centre's provision takes place on this site, although some opportunities are offered at other locations in the reach area.

The centre was first designated in 2007. Until 30 June 2011, it was managed on behalf of the local authority by Action for Children. Following a commissioning process, held by Plymouth City Council, The Children's Society assumed responsibility for Green Ark from 1 July 2011. Green Ark offers child and family health services, childcare through commissioning the Noah's Ark Childcare Centre, advice on parenting and access to specialist services, healthy eating advice, advice with managing money and help in finding work or training opportunities. It has secured the engagement of about three quarters of families in the reach. The centre serves one of the most disadvantaged areas of Plymouth where the proportion of children in workless households is above average. The population is mainly White British, although the number of families from other backgrounds is increasing. When children join the Early Years Foundation Stage, their skills are generally below the levels 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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Green Ark is a good children's centre. The attractive, welcoming, and safe environment is highly valued by parents and provides much useful information to help them in promoting the safety and healthy development of their children. The commitment of the staff to the well-being of families is strong and the support and guidance provided are much appreciated by users of the centre. The wide range of provision is of good quality and, as a result, outcomes are good overall.

The centre has successfully secured a very good understanding among parents of how to ensure their family's safety. They are well supported in developing their parenting skills by the good services provided in the centre, through home visits and help with safety equipment in the home where necessary. The centre's arrangements for safeguarding children are outstanding and all staff have received appropriate and recent training.

Green Ark listens to its families. Parents make a good contribution to its development through the well-established Green Ark Family Alliance and staff frequently seek their views, both formally and informally. The progress made by children in the Early Years Foundation Stage has improved significantly. It is now good and children reach standards expected nationally by the end of the Reception Year. There are many successful opportunities for parents and their children to play and learn together, for example through 'Step by Step' and 'Talk and Tots'. Outstanding partnerships have been established with a very wide range of agencies and organisations and these make a strong contribution to identifying the needs of target groups, for example teenage parents and those in need of extra support with parenting skills, and to the good outcomes achieved by the centre. Good examples of partnership include activities with the Peninsula Dental School, the strong links with health visitors and midwives, and joint working with other local children's centres. These have contributed well to the centre's success in developing the understanding of children and families of how to keep themselves healthy.

Activities held in the centre are well planned and all those observed were of good

quality. Staff take considerable trouble to identify the needs of group members and to adjust the activities provided in response. Participants' views on the strengths and areas for improvement of different courses and activities are gathered carefully. However, the procedures and materials used do not consistently seek information that can be analysed, for example to compare responses to different activities or to the same course provided at different points in time. Managers have correctly identified that the impact of provision on the well-being and development of participants is not currently being effectively evaluated at suitably identified points in the months after an event, and plans are being developed to address this in the drive to lift the capacity to improve from being satisfactory to good in the future.

There has been some success in promoting the learning and development of parents so that they can obtain skills and qualifications that could help them to access further training and opportunities for employment. However, the centre is still working to address the needs, particularly for the centre's target groups, such as teenage parents and families dependent on benefits, as numbers involved recently have been small. New opportunities are to start shortly in partnership with the city council.

There was disruption to leadership and management due to the commissioning process last summer that resulted in a change in the organisation operating the centre on the city's behalf. This involved the risk of redundancies and the departure of some staff. It is testimony to the commitment and hard work of staff that families and partner organisations report that services continued without disruption. However, as centre staff recognise, strategic development was affected. As a result, some desirable developments, for example further opportunities to support target groups such as those dependent on benefits, in moving into training and the world of work, were delayed. The quality of self-evaluation is satisfactory, but leaders acknowledge that they are not yet using data as effectively as possible to track the impact of activities on children and families and to set targets to guide future action. The centre leader and the staff have a clear view of the provision's strengths and the areas for improvement and detailed plans for the future. However, the capacity for sustained improvement, although improving well, is currently satisfactory as a result of these exceptional circumstances.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Evaluate the impact of the centre's activities on the well-being and development of users more effectively in order to inform future development by:
 - recording and using data more rigorously to track the impact of activities on the outcomes for target groups
 - collating and analysing evaluation data from particular events and activities
 - establishing the impact of activities on children and families at suitable points in the medium and longer term.
- Further develop the opportunities, support and guidance for those not currently

in work in engaging with education and training prior to moving into the world of employment.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Families benefit from a range of activities to promote a healthy lifestyle. These focus on healthy eating, for example 'Food is Fun', and include the publication of the recent 'Green Ark Cookery Book', where a wide range of families contributed. The fruit and vegetable garden, developed in partnership with 'Dig 4 Devonport', helps raise awareness of the range of produce available. 'Baby Weigh' sessions are well attended with good opportunities to access other services and the level of obesity among children of Reception age is below average. Understanding of dental health is very well developed and families benefited from the recent fluoride varnish application project in partnership with the nearby dental school. Antenatal clinics are well attended and the centre has been particularly successful in improving the proportion of mothers breastfeeding, which is above average.

Families trust staff and are confident in sharing their personal concerns and circumstances. For example, provision for women affected by domestic violence is sensitively managed and well received by participants. The Common Assessment Framework is used well to establish levels of need and the centre works closely with a range of agencies to ensure appropriate provision is made. The most vulnerable families, including those where children are on the child protection register, are extremely well supported by the centre through home visits and one-to-one help, as well as through very effective partnerships with other agencies. One parent described the centre and its staff as 'a lifeline' in enabling her to manage her child's challenging behaviour. Another family was helped to find improved accommodation, with additional support for the mother in tackling mental health issues and funding for the father to attend courses in basic skills.

Families enjoy the varied opportunities provided by the centre. Groups are often popular, for example 'Stay and Play with Rhymetime'. 'Stay, Play and Talk' sessions improved parents' confidence in their parenting skills, which include increasing their understanding about how children learn and develop. One carer at 'Talk and Tots' described staff as 'spot on' in going out of their way to assist and point families towards appropriate opportunities. Children's ability to get on with others, including their development of communication skills, shows a marked improvement. In this respect, the work of the centre is reaching the needs of the target groups well.

Green Ark is a hub of the community and frequently involved in events for the community within and beyond the building. Social development is strong and this helps parents to talk about their worries and ease their concerns. Parents have frequent opportunities to give their views on the events they attend and are also represented on the advisory board. The involvement of Jobcentre Plus in the centre is well established, with weekly sessions with good attendance, and jobs available locally are advertised in the centre. The centre provides individuals with guidance on where to obtain helps with benefits and other financial matters and it is intended that

this will be enhanced through the drop-in sessions for financial advice that have just started and a similar event providing guidance on housing that is about to begin. Some parents volunteering at the centre have found this a solid foundation for securing a job subsequently, such as in a local brewing business, or for moving into training, for example leading to a career in social care.

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	2
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
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	2
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

The centre building provides very good accommodation with rooms of varying size and nature that support a wide range of activities. It has a large reception area where parents informally drop in as well as a laundry room that contributes to the centre's work in supporting families facing a crisis.

Green Ark knows its families well. Health visitors and midwives are based in the centre which supports good collaborative working. Centre staff also work closely with other partner agencies, for example Children's Social Care. Together with knowledge gleaned from home visits and from working with families in particular events and activities, such close cooperation results in a good knowledge of the needs of target groups. The centre's considerable efforts to consult users also contribute strongly. For example, recent consultation indicates that young parents, including teenage parents, would like to have activities targeted at them specifically rather than participate in wider groups as they indicated previously.

The centre uses information well to establish what provision may be necessary and this results in a good range of opportunities for centre users, including target groups. For example, the 'Incredible Years' course is tailored to the needs of young parents and families. Staff also work well to respond to the needs that emerge during activities. Although one person is based in Green Ark, outreach activities are managed across the three The Children's Society centres in the city and this results

in flexible use of staffing according to need.

The centre celebrates the achievements of its families appropriately, with photographic displays of adults receiving certificates as well as the celebration of the achievement of children who have accessed various aspects of provision.

Green Ark is particularly good at building opportunities to meet outside agencies into courses provided so that those in need of particular help are able to take advantage of additional support and guidance. This is particularly effective in promoting the health and safety of children and families, for example in highlighting the risks of smoking. New approaches to planning activities, now being piloted, are designed to ensure that all activities are planned and evaluated using a consistent format where individual sessions are evaluated against the intended outcomes.

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	2
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?

2

The new leadership of the centre is now established with enthusiastic and skilled staff who are keen to develop the centre further to meet the needs of families in the reach. Day-to-day management is effective. The action plan for the centre's development sets out suitable actions, although the plan does not distinguish key priorities clearly enough from other activities.

The advisory board is well established with a wide ranging and appropriate membership. It is provided with good information to allow it to monitor the work of the centre. Quarterly reviews provide a suitable means for the centre to be held accountable by the local authority. Outcomes for families are good and the centre is successful in ensuring a high proportion of families engage in its services from the reach area. Green Ark thus provides good value for money.

Green Ark's outstanding partnership working includes collaborative working with other centres in the 'South West Locality' of the city. Each centre promotes each other's activities where appropriate and centres work together to meet the needs of the area as effectively as possible. Staff may suggest families join activities in a nearby reach where this best meets their needs. A notable feature of the centre is the keenness of leaders to secure additional resource for the benefit of its target groups by seeking engagement with higher education establishments, for example

the University of Plymouth, in research and outreach activities.

Safeguarding arrangements are outstanding with all necessary policies and procedures thoroughly considered, rigorously implemented and understood well by parents. Staff work very well with other agencies to protect children's welfare and levels of care are high. All activities are carefully risk assessed, as well as the building and the grounds, for any possible dangers to users. The centre places a high priority on including all families, and staff routinely provide additional support that helps target groups to engage with the work of the centre to meet their needs. This includes parents with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities who receive good assistance in gaining any extra support needed.

Provision of crèche facilities and funding for nursery places also support target groups, such as teenage parents. Families from minority ethnic communities are included and supported well, for example through the 'International Families Group'.

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	2
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	2
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	1
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	1
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	2

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

Noah's Ark Childcare Centre (Devonport) was inspected in November 2008 and its overall provision was judged good. Children's individual needs were being met very well and children were found to be making good progress.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Green Ark Children's Centre on 10 and 11 January 2012. We judged the centre as good overall. Those of you who were available to meet us told us how friendly, helpful and welcoming Green Ark is. Our evidence indicates that you are right.

The centre does most things well and some outstandingly well. Activities are well planned to meet your varying needs and we saw much enjoyment in the sessions we visited. You are very well supported in keeping your family safe and the centre's arrangements for protecting children's welfare are outstanding. Staff work very well to ensure the centre is a safe place and that children have the services they need. You are provided with valuable advice, sometimes through home visits and one-to-one support, through different groups and activities and through suggesting you visit other organisations for advice. There is much advice for you on keeping your family healthy. Green Ark also often gives you opportunities to say what you think of what the centre does and make suggestions for improvement. It has outstanding partnerships, for example with other agencies, local children's centres, and with educational bodies such as the Peninsula Dental School.

Green Ark provides you with regular opportunities to meet Jobcentre Plus staff and advertises local job vacancies. There have been opportunities for some of you to take part in training and other courses to help you to prepare to enter, or re-enter, the world of work. But there have been few such opportunities recently and we are encouraging the centre to press ahead with its plans for a wider range of courses to help those of you for whom this is relevant.

The arrangements for the leadership and management of Green Ark changed in July 2011 when a new provider, The Children's Society, was commissioned by the city. This process did not affect the provision of services and activities but it did involve a time of uncertainty for the staff when it proved difficult to plan and carry out new developments. This is now in the past but it did result in some delays. Some of the actions they have planned are about to be taken, for example evaluating more effectively how helpful activities and courses have been for you. Some others have not had enough time to have their full impact yet, such as using data better to see how effectively the centre is working. However, all the staff are keen to make the centre even better. We have asked them to press ahead with these developments and we are confident that they are doing the right things.

We would like to thank those of you who were available to talk to us about the ways Green Ark has helped you. It is clear that you value the opportunities and care that

the centre provides. We would like to wish you every success in the future.

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