

Inspection report for North Cambridge Children's Centre

Local authority	Cambridgeshire
Inspection number	383461
Inspection dates	23–24 February 2012
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Colleges Nursery and Family Centre
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.

Report published: March 2012



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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.

An inspection of the maintained nursery was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the children's centre manager, deputy manager and other centre staff. They spoke with parents and carers, and representatives of the parents' forum and advisory board. Discussions were held with representatives from the local authority, health professionals, and other partner organisations and educational bodies who provide services for the centre's families. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

North Cambridge Children's Centre was designated as a phase one centre in June 2006; the programme to fulfil its full core purpose started in January 2007. It is a purpose-built centre added onto the existing and established Colleges Nursery and Family Centre. This accommodates the full day-care provision, the children's centre and Arbury Community Centre. It is located in a split-site consisting of two multi-use rooms; these are used by a range of professionals, children and families and as a permanent base for midwifery. The children's centre manager is answerable to the local authority and, since October 2011, the running of its two partner centres: the Chesterton Children's Centre, a phase two centre, and the Arbury Children's Centre, a phase three centre. An advisory board provides advice and guidance and oversees the work of the centre. There is a parents' forum which also provides advice and support for the running of the centre and its activities.

The centre serves some 950 children and their families living in the King's Hedges and Arbury areas of North Cambridge. Much of its reach area includes localities

which are in the 20% most deprived areas in the country, although these are surrounded by areas of affluence within Cambridge City. Most of the families in the area are White British, but there are growing proportions of the population of Asian or Asian British, and Eastern European heritage. The centre's reach area includes a high proportion of children living with lone parents, in workless households or with low-income families claiming benefits. Many of the centre's families face health, education skills and training deprivation, and living environment deprivation. The proportion of children known to be eligible for free school meals is above average. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities are generally well below those expected for their age when they enter the Early Years Foundation Stage.

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

2

Main findings

While the overall effectiveness of the centre is satisfactory, there are a number of important and growing strengths. These justify the very positive views families and the centre's partners have of the services it provides. In practice, the centre serves well those with whom it is in contact and is able to reach. The key issue lies in its inability to demonstrate clearly what impact it is having on outcomes for its wider community. This is because the local authority has not provided sufficient, reliable data about the area it serves. The centre is, therefore, unable to provide a precise enough evaluation of its effectiveness within its reach area. The local authority accepts the limitations of the information it provides, and has taken action by introducing, from February 2012, a new 'data toolkit' to all its children's centres. This is an important improvement, even though some of the data remain out of date; for example, those relating to workless families, or details concerning the growing proportion of Eastern European families. There remain some issues relating to the local authority's service agreements with county-wide partners. There has been a lack of feedback to the centre which has prevented it from assessing the impact of its signposting or referrals. Discussions with senior local authority and locality area managers confirm they are working hard to improve data provision in order to help the centre provide an evidence base to demonstrate the full impact of its work.

It is early days for the centre's manager regarding her practical use of the new data

for planning services and setting targets. However, the centre's good capacity for improvement is shown in the tenacity of the centre and locality managers in their pursuit of any information which will help them in their work. Good use is made of links with schools to gain information about different heritage groups, and synthesise provision for 'English for speakers of other languages' courses across the cluster. There are close working relationships with community workers for Bangladeshi families. This reflects the effective levels of partnerships established at the centre. All professional partners have praise for the staff and the ways they facilitate their work. Partnership working is a key strength; this underpins the centre's good approach to ensuring equality of opportunity and its capacity for improvement. Users' commented to inspectors, 'Staff know their community well, and it's never a token gesture with them.'

The safeguarding of children and their families is good. This aspect of the centre's work has a high priority, and the quality of the centre's partnerships with various support services and agencies are good. The care, guidance and support provided are also good. The positive working partnerships ensure the effective assessment of the needs of the families registered with the centre, including those whose circumstances make them more vulnerable. This enables them to benefit well from a range of good-quality services, designed to meet their individual needs. The centre's teacher ensures the clear planning of activities for children. However, although staff undertake group assessments of children's learning and development, the tracking of individual children's progress is less well defined.

The centre's staff have worked hard over the past four years to build the justified reputation it has within its community. Further challenges lie ahead, not least as the three centres in the new cluster develop the ways they work together and support each other. As a result, the advisory board, which includes a number of its members on all three centre boards, is considering how leadership and management may be enhanced by synthesising the strategic approach of the centres. Self-evaluation is accurate. Action planning is well-considered, and based on the team's understanding of the local community's needs. With more helpful data starting to be provided by the local authority, the staff are poised well to build on their successes to date.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Work with the local authority to ensure that:
 - the data provided help the centre to identify and target more effectively those who are not using the centre
 - data is relevant, up to date and more specific to the immediate reach area
 - agreements with professional partners ensure relevant and regular information is provided about the impact of the work they do with children and families in the centre's own reach area.

- Ensure the centre's processes for the assessment and monitoring of children's learning and development are focused more on measuring and recording

individual children's progress in addition to that of groups.

- Enhance the centre's leadership and management by ensuring that the advisory boards of the three centres, which are under the leadership of the centre's manager, work more closely together to enable the cluster to become increasingly effective in its strategic approach and the services it provides.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

The extent of improvement in outcomes over time is unclear as the centre lacks sufficiently up-to-date, reliable, localised data to show fully its impact. Where data are available, for example from the centre's partnership with local schools, it does show that the gap between the lowest-achieving children and others has narrowed. Children's levels of skills and abilities remain well below average when they start in the Early Years Foundation Stage. However, the partnership delivering the 'So-to-Speak Project', providing targeted speech, language and communication support for two- and three-year olds, provides a valuable service for children with specific needs.

Adults and children of all ages enjoy their learning and improving their personal skills and understanding. Social interaction is good; staff are good role models in helping adults and children develop positive relationships and behaviour. The centre is focused well on raising users' self-confidence and self-esteem. The emotional and social health of families is supported particularly well. In the popular 'Twinkling Twilight' session, new parents are supported well in helping develop their babies' sensory faculties and physical responses to light and sound stimuli. Such mutual experiences help significantly with bonding. In a calm, relaxed atmosphere, mothers share their experiences of babies' problems, such as colic. Good advice is given by staff. Breastfeeding is promoted well; the percentage of mothers sustaining this is in line with the national average. Parenting skills are promoted effectively through the 'Home Start' group. Adults attending these sessions confirm how they feel safe at the centre, and are complementary about the ways staff enable them to have their say and influence services. The parents' forum is active in promoting family welfare through, for example, the clothing swap bank. Users' views are sought regularly through surveys and course evaluations. These have resulted in the introduction of additional activities, such as the music and movement sessions.

Families and children benefit well from the coordinated support they receive when they require multi-agency assistance because of circumstances which make them more vulnerable. Their needs are assessed thoroughly through the Common Assessment Framework. Case studies for vulnerable families, including teenage mothers, show increasingly positive outcomes as a result of the centre's work and support. This relates not only to their health and that of their children, but also to their prospects for housing, training and gaining work. Parents and carers speak well of the ways the centre promotes their awareness of safety in the home, and are particularly complimentary about the paediatric first-aid courses. The use of a health trainer enables users to make lifestyle changes to support healthier eating and ways of life. This is important because, although improving, levels of childhood obesity in the locality remain above average. The centre's permanent base for midwifery,

coupled with the health visitors' well-child clinics, is playing an important part in improving the health of the children and families registered with the centre. The centre signposts routinely families to smoking cessation guidance, although it tends to receive only informal feedback from the midwives about success rates.

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	3
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?

3

The common reception and cafeteria area for the children's and community centres, enables the effective publicity and signposting of services. Touch-screen information services are used very well. The nursery school's 'Daisy Room' provides good childcare for children aged two to five. There are good links with local childminding services; a representative of the local childminding group is on the advisory board. The group meets regularly at the centre and benefits well from its resources.

Good quality of care, guidance and support is provided because of the efficient ways the centre's services are integrated. As one user said, 'I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them, I mean it, literally.' Staff go that extra mile and undertake willingly any additional training to ensure good levels of care are maintained. The centre is active in helping families to access good-quality information and advice. This enables them to make informed choices to improve their economic well-being and access pathways to work or additional education and training. However, feedback on outcomes from Jobcentre services are limited and do not help to gauge accurately the centre's success rates. This is an authority-wide, rather than a centre-specific issue. Where the centre receives regular feedback from its partners, such as with the young parents' project and the centre's work with the victims of domestic violence, success rates are good. The centre appreciates that, in its 'learning journey' assessments of children, it has been insufficiently focused on individual progress and development. It has concentrated more on the assessment of the wider groups of children using its activities. However, the practical planning of children's activities, taking into account their prior learning and achievements is good.

The overall lack of data from the local authority has meant the centre has been uncertain whether it is reaching out sufficiently effectively to engage all potential users and groups in its area. The impact of the new 'data toolkit' has still to be seen. Meanwhile, the centre continues its efforts to make the families in its reach area aware of its services through the distribution of leaflets, advertising in local surgeries and shops, through school publicity and by word of mouth.

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	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The lack of data has limited the effectiveness of the centre to target systematically the full range of families in the reach area, therefore, value for money is satisfactory. However, the centre uses and manages its resources well to meet the needs of those it does reach. The centre's manager and staff embrace any opportunity to review the impact of their work with families, and pursue strategies with their partner organisations in order to tackle child and family poverty. Consequently, good service and development plans are in place to take the centre forward. Staff use well their local knowledge, and that of their partners, to promote equality and diversity. Registrations are increasing and users say those they meet do reflect their community. People feel included and valued; this is one of the centre's important strengths. Its equality action plan is thorough and supports well the centre's culture and ethos. Users are full of praise for the welcome they receive and how the centre's approach has raised their self-confidence and self-esteem. In the words of one: 'I thought I was being a bad parent because of my disability, but the centre has shown me I am capable of looking after my child.'

Where the centre is able to identify more specifically its target groups, it has good success. Case studies and discussions show that the young parent project is supporting well young mothers and fathers from antenatal and parenting courses to life-skills programmes. The weekly 'Chill and Chat' drop-ins have proved particularly successful for new and prospective fathers. Through another established project, good progress has been made in identifying and supporting both women and men who may suffer domestic violence. The success with partnership projects supports the centre's good capacity to achieve in its new, recently started initiatives. These include a three-year programme focusing on workless households. This is aimed at helping the centre become more effective in targeting such families in its reach area. North Cambridge is a pilot centre for the support and safeguarding of children with

drug and alcohol misusing parents. This project commenced in January, but a number of families have already volunteered or been identified for support. This reflects the centre's quick action when it does obtain information about its area. Good safeguarding arrangements stem from a rigorous approach which is practised well by all staff. All necessary checks are undertaken on staff and other adults, concerning their suitability to work with families. Child protection and health and safety have a high profile; risk assessments are thorough. The importance of early intervention is understood well, and staff play an important role in multi-agency work.

Governance is satisfactory overall. Some aspects of the local authority's service level agreements regarding the feedback and provision of data to the centre are unclear or not working sufficiently effectively. However, the experience and professionalism of the centre's advisory board provide valuable input into both self-evaluation and development planning. A parents' forum also plays an active part and representatives sit on the advisory board. Systems for accountability are sound and embedded. This is providing a secure base for the centre manager to work with her advisory boards on the development of an increasingly streamlined approach to the management and governance of her cluster of children's centres.

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	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 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

The findings of the inspection of the Colleges Nursery and Family Centre in March 2009, when it was judged outstanding, were used to guide the inspection team's findings with regard to educational provision and outcomes for nursery-aged children. This nursery was re-inspected at the same time as the inspection of the children's centre. Inspectors shared the evidence for some of the common aspects of leadership, management and provision, which were found to be good.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the North Cambridge Children's Centre on 23–24 February 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We would like to thank all of you who took the time to talk with us during our recent visit. The discussions we had about your experiences and those of your children and families were very helpful. None of you had any criticisms of the centre's work, only praise for the ways it works with you and your families. You told us that you have confidence in the staff, and that this has led to important improvements for your families' lives and your children's development. We saw that staff work together well to help keep your children and families safe and healthy; safeguarding arrangements are good. There is good attention to your welfare; the centre helps you and your families to develop and promote your health and well-being. You told us, 'The staff are very supportive, the children really love them. That's what makes us keep coming back – they're so helpful and have time to talk.' Others of you said: 'Staff would never turn you away', and 'They inspire you into doing stuff for yourself.'

There are a number of good things about your centre. The most important is the fact that you feel confident you can walk through its doors and know that you will receive valuable help, support and a very warm welcome. The centre staff are particularly good in the ways they support you when you and your families find yourselves in a time of difficulty. We saw for ourselves the ways staff always have time for you. We were also pleased to see that, over the years, a number of you have also given your time to contribute through the parents' forum, or as members of the advisory board.

Your centre's leaders and their staff have a good understanding of your needs and put on the activities you want. However, until very recently they have experienced some difficulty in assessing how successful they have been in meeting the needs of your wider community. This is because the local authority has not been able to provide enough data about your local area to help the centre evaluate how well it is doing compared with other children's centres across the country. From the start of this month, the local authority is beginning to provide more of the information all their centre managers need to help them in their work. We have discussed this with people from the local authority and asked them to make sure that the centre has the

data it needs in a way which will be helpful and easy to use. We have also asked your centre manager and teacher to develop further their ways of recording their assessment of your children's learning and development through 'learning journey' records which you can then pass on to be continued by their nursery teachers.

Finally, as many of you will know, from October 2011 your centre manager took over the running of Chesterton and Arbury children's centres as well as your own. She is working hard, with your advisory board, to develop and extend the services all three centres can offer. A number of important new projects have already started. As a result, we trust that many more families from your communities and local area will be able to join you and benefit from the centres' growing services and activities. We thank you again for all your contributions to the inspection.

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