

Inspection report for WH4 Oak Tree Children's Centre

Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	362622
Inspection dates	22–23 September 2010
Reporting inspector	Jackie Cousins AI

Centre governance	Hertfordshire Local Authority
Centre leader	Mrs Ria Longhurst
Date of previous inspection	n/a
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Linked school if applicable	Ludwick Nursery School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Squirrels Day 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:

- how effectively do leaders track children's progress in key areas of learning
- how well does the children's centre encourage parents/carers to develop their basic skills
- how successfully are risk assessments used to safeguard children, parents and carers
- how rigorously are targets set to improve the children's centre support for the local and wider community.

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/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Sections 49 and 50 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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 two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the children's centre manager, day care manager, headteacher of the nursery school, family support worker, qualified teacher, outreach worker, health visitor, toy library coordinator, a group of parents and carers and a few members of the advisory board and local authority. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Oak Tree Children's Centre is situated in one of most deprived areas in the country and in the lowest 30% for the county. The large majority of families surrounding the children's centre are White British. The remainder are from Black African and Caribbean or eastern European and Asian groups. The area is characterised by terraced housing, low-rise flats and maisonettes, high unemployment and social deprivation. Most children enter childcare and early education with skills that are significantly lower than those expected for their age. The centre provides the full

core offer. It has its own advisory board which is made up of representatives from the local authority, parent governors, the Primary Care Trust, neighbourhood partners, health providers and centre staff. The centre has evolved from a partnership between the day care and the nursery school, and opened as a purpose-built children’s centre in 2007. It operates as an integrated centre led by the centre manager supported by the day care manager and the nursery school headteacher. The centre operates in one main building, and other activities take place at various community venues within the reach area.

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

2

Main findings

Oak Tree Children’s Centre offers good support for children and families. The quality of care, guidance and support given to users is an excellent feature of the centre’s work. Parents and other users appreciate the very warm and friendly welcome they receive when they visit the centre. For example, one parent typically commented, ‘The centre is brilliant and staff go above and beyond the call of duty.’ In a recent survey, 100% of parents were satisfied with the support they receive from the centre. Case study evidence indicates that families have received extremely well integrated and sensitive support in times of crisis. This high quality care and support means that many mothers who attend the centre continue to breastfeed their babies for more than six weeks.

The centre manager and all staff ensure the building is a safe and secure environment for all users. They have good procedures in place for ensuring the safeguarding and welfare of everyone who uses the centre. Healthy outcomes for centre users and their families are good. Children and parents take part in exciting activities as they walk to the centre because of a project called ‘Buggy Buddies’ which encourage users to enjoy exercising. In addition, national indicators show that the proportion of five-year-olds who are overweight is below average.

Children from the reach area who attend the Early Years Foundation Stage provision make good gains in their learning and in their personal, social and emotional

development. The smiles on their faces as they arrive show how very much they enjoy coming to the centre. Learning journeys which hold assessment records of children's stage of development indicate that outcomes are improving across the reach area at a good rate. Children's progress at the centre is not always tracked rigorously from the time that they start attending sessions. Although parents have access to a range of services to support them back into employment, the centre does not currently provide Job Centre Plus advice effectively and few accredited courses are on offer in for example, literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT).

The centre meets its statutory responsibilities for the promotion of equality and diversity. It has been particularly successful in engaging specific groups of ethnic minority parents. For example, providing a crèche at the centre enabled some parents who are at an early stage of learning English to take a course in English because partnerships with a local college and Hertfordshire Adult and Family Learning Services are excellent.

The centre's self-evaluation is accurate and is based on secure monitoring and evaluation procedures. Senior leaders and the advisory board have a clear view of the strengths and areas for development across the centre and this is reflected in the thorough improvement plan. Although the centre is starting to evaluate its work in relation to national and local indicators, the systems to monitor the longer-term impact are at an early stage of development. A significant improvement in the work of the centre means that local childminders are extremely effectively supported by a qualified teacher. As a result, their use of assessment and recording of next steps for children has developed well. Good provision and outcomes, coupled with effective self-evaluation demonstrates the centres good capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Track the progress of all children in key areas of learning in more detail from the time they start at the centre.
- Improve provision for parents to develop their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills and access resources which would allow them to find out about job opportunities.
- Develop systems to evaluate rigorously the longer term impact of the centre's work.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The centre takes every opportunity to promote healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. This includes the provision of freshly cooked meals and water during group activities and really well-integrated services. Parents typically comment that they now think carefully about how to improve their families' health, 'After the cookery course I tried

out more healthy recipes at home.' Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage have good opportunities for physical exercise and access to specialist services such as speech development workers due to the effective range of resources at the centre.

The safety of all the centre's users, including those who are most vulnerable, is a high priority for the senior leadership team. Risk assessments are used effectively; for instance, parents were made well aware of a wide range of hazards before they went on a trip together to the seaside. Users' welfare inside and outside the centre is supported successfully. For example, 26 families have undertaken successfully a course to learn about food hygiene, and parents reported a high level of satisfaction with what they learnt. External agencies also report that the centre uses the Common Assessment Framework judiciously. Case study evidence indicates that vulnerable or looked after children and their families are experiencing positive outcomes as a result of the centre's work. The centre knows the families it works with very well. Consequently, early identification and prevention play a key role in the centre's work to reduce harm to children.

Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are enthusiastic and thoroughly enjoy their time at the centre. This contributes positively to their learning. As a result children make good progress in their learning. Transition arrangements to local schools are effective and children are well prepared, particularly in their social skills. Observations of sessions demonstrate that children learn to concentrate for considerable periods of time because staff have high expectations of them. Evidence gathered by the inspectors, show that projects use book characters successfully such as imaginary creatures to develop children's reading skills. Occasionally, systems do not show effectively whether satisfactory progress has been made by children in the key skills during their time at the centre.

Centre users regularly contribute their views about the effectiveness of the centre and a parent forum has been set up. In addition, users are invited to evaluate sessions they have attended and the centre takes positive action to improve its services. For example, parents requested and have set up a borrowers group which means that children and parents have greater access to books. The centre is well established and has a good reputation in the local community. It is particularly successful at integrating parents from different backgrounds, faiths and cultures. The centre is promoting community cohesion well.

Parents are encouraged to improve their parenting skills; for example, through Positive Parenting courses, Stay and Play sessions, and Family Links Nurturing Programme. They have a good range of information, advice and guidance regarding childcare options at the centre and in the local area. Financial advice sessions are used well by parents but assistance in writing job applications is not effectively established.

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	2
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?

2

Rigorous assessment procedures are in place and, as a result, the centre knows its users well. Partnership working across all the services based at the centre is extremely strong. Consequently, support for the most vulnerable families is effective. The senior leadership team, representing a range of service providers, meets regularly to ensure services are meeting users' needs. Staff in the Early Years Foundation Stage have received training in observation and assessment skills. This means that all children who attended the crèche had a rigorous learning programme set up for them which outlined thoughtfully the next steps they need to take to improve.

Achievement is celebrated through positive displays and individual encouragement given to families. The proportion of centre users from ethnic minority groups is above the local authority average. The centre engages these users well but is aware that it has not completed a full survey of its reach area and so a few inaccessible families within the reach may not currently use the centre's facilities as regularly as others.

The centre provides a wide range of services and activities that meet the needs of the reach area well. It is particularly successful in engaging teenage mothers and fathers and working families. Saturday morning activities are popular and enable the centre to make contact with a wide group of users such as fathers in the 'Saturdays' club. The centre keeps suitable records of local participation rates in different activities offered.

All parents who spoke to the inspectors were positive about the centre and the impact different services have had on their families. They were particularly

complimentary about the care, guidance and support they received from all staff. For example, a pampering session where parents relaxed and enjoyed each others' company, as well as having their hair cut, was highly valued by all who spoke to the inspectors. Vulnerable families in particular reported that the centre is making a positive difference to their lives and the future lives of their children.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
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	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Governance arrangements are secure and there are clear lines of accountability in place. Members of the advisory board are fully committed to improving outcomes for children and their families in the reach area. The centre manager creates very thorough reports which keep the advisory board well informed about the services offered. Improvement planning is secure and sets challenging targets which are successfully encouraging all to enhance the provision. All relevant partners are rigorously involved in development planning due to high expectations of the leadership. As a result of effective management and outcomes for users, value for money is good.

Dedicated and sensitive leadership is provided by the centre manager and her senior team. As a result, staff are enthusiastic and relationships are strong. The centre runs very smoothly on a day-to-day basis, and the well-being of all users is a key priority. The centre manager has developed robust systems and procedures to ensure that provision is fully integrated. The centre knows itself well and self-evaluation is rigorous. Users' views are regularly sought and influence services provided by the centre but longer term records are not effectively developed and so staff can not fully evaluate trends over time.

Resources are well managed and carefully targeted towards users with the greatest needs. The accommodation for the Early Years Foundation Stage is generous in size and includes a secure outdoor area. The centre is well-maintained and users comment positively on the friendly, safe environment. The centre keeps detailed records that indicate all staff working at the centre have been subject to an

enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check.

Collaborative working is a strength of the centre's work. Centre staff are pro-active in sharing information. Inter-agency working is exceptionally well established and is successful in identifying those families and children who are at greatest risk. The centre's child protection policy and guidelines are robust and all staff have been fully trained at the appropriate level in child protection procedures. Protocols and practices for referrals are well known and are high priorities for everyone at the centre.

The centre meets all the requirements with regard to promoting equality and diversity and tackling discrimination. Staff are committed to promoting the inclusion of all families within the reach area. The centre gathers valuable information about the different user groups and evaluates their engagement. For example, case study evidence indicates the centre has been effective in working with children and parents who are new to the area and from ethnic minority groups. Children with disabilities are well provided for both in the physical accessibility of the building and by access to appropriate professional support such as a qualified teacher.

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 extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	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	2
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	2
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	2

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

Inspection report for early years provision EY276945 Squirrels Day Care.

Inspection report for early years provisions 117079 Ludwick Nursery School.

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 *WH4 Oak Tree Children's Centre* on *22–23 September 2010*. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you for helping us to find out about your children's centre. We enjoyed talking to some of you.

We judged the centre to be good. It makes a positive difference to the lives of children and families.

Your children behave well and they make good progress in their learning. You receive good quality information about your children's stages of development. The centre helps to prepare your children successfully for the next stage of education.

You and your children really enjoy and value the centre and the support it provides. We heard a good deal about how much you enjoy sessions such as 'Saturdays' and the 'pamper' evenings. The toy library is also a popular resource.

Through the work that the staff do, you and your children are well supported in keeping safe. Several of you told us how well the staff care for you, and you appreciate the way that they listen to you thoughtfully and sensitively. The staff work closely with other agencies to make sure that you are put in touch with others who can give you the right help and support.

The centre welcomes people from all backgrounds really well and treats everyone equally. The manager and senior staff have good ideas about ways to improve the centre, and they are always looking for ways of making things better for you. They ask for your views informally and also through regular surveys. They respond to what you have to say and, as a result, have provided extra sessions at times that suit you best.

You and your children are encouraged effectively to lead healthy lives.

We have asked the centre manager and senior staff to look at how they can make things even better. There are three main things that the managers have agreed to do.

- They will make sure that staff check on your children's progress in key areas of learning even more carefully.
- Staff will provide more opportunities for you to participate in courses and find out about jobs in the local area.
- Managers are going to develop a system to check how well the centre is doing over longer periods of time.

It was a real pleasure to meet you and your children. I hope you continue to flourish and enjoy your time at WH4 Oak Tree Children's Centre.

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