

Inspection report for Sunderland Children's Centre Thorney Close

Local authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	362584
Inspection dates	20-21 October 2010
Reporting inspector	Nora Waugh

Centre governance	Sunderland Local Authority
Centre leader	Tracy Hassan
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	Thorney Close Action and Enterprise Centre, Thorndale Road, Thorney Close, Sunderland, SR3 4JQ
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Linked school if applicable	
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Thorney Close Child Care 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.

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 additional inspector and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior managers from the centre plus representatives from childcare, parents and carers, volunteers, members of the advisory board, the local authority, and a number of professionals including health, education, family and community involvement workers.

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

Information about the centre

Thorney Close Children's Centre is located in a large social housing estate built in the late 1940s. It is housed in an extension to the Action and Enterprise Centre which was identified as the hub of the community when the Sure Start local programme was developed in 1999. In 2006, the local programme became a designated children's centre. It is one of four in the West Locality of Sunderland under the leadership of an extended area services coordinator. The centres share the same local advisory partnership board and the same senior leadership team.

Thorney Close Children's Centre meets the full core offer working closely with Thorney Close Child Care Centre which is in the same building. A core locality team of staff is employed and is located, together with commissioned workers, in the children's centre. Health visiting, midwifery, paediatric and early years mental health services are commissioned from three local health trusts, family support from children's services social care, and community involvement and essential services, toy library and home safety, from two local voluntary organisations.

The majority of the area served by the centre is one of disadvantage, including in its reach five communities among the 10% most disadvantaged in the country. There are high levels of dependency on benefits and low levels of adult qualifications compared to Sunderland as a whole. Other statistics such as children living in

poverty or the proportion of people living in social housing are similar to those for Sunderland as a whole but are significantly above the national average. Children enter childcare with skills and experiences more limited than those expected for their age. Nearly all families are of White British heritage.

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

Thorney Close Children's Centre knows its community and meets their needs very well, offering good support to children and families. The leadership team is exceptionally strong and is constantly trying to improve services to better meet the needs of local people. Everyone is passionate about children and families and determined to make a difference. There have been several significant improvements in the last eighteen months. Outcomes for users are mainly good but, as yet, it is too soon to see the full impact of some of the recent developments.

Support for breastfeeding mothers has been an unqualified success. In an area where five years ago few mothers were still breastfeeding after six weeks, the figure is now 29% and increasing. Local targets have all been exceeded. Bosom Buddies is a very effective peer mentoring scheme and has involved local mums in city wide campaigns to promote breastfeeding. This has increased their confidence and for some has led to further training and employment in the centre. Targeted work around strengthening families and improving parenting skills is also very successful. The nurturing and parenting courses are always oversubscribed and parents and carers who begin these usually complete them. The comments were glowing and very thoughtful, 'It looked so easy when I was little', and the confidence parents had when discussing this was a commendation for everyone involved. All activities are popular and thought has gone into adapting these to meet the needs of the families who access them. Messy Play has been incorporated into Play and Stay because on its own it was not suitable for the young babies many parents and carers brought with their older children. There is no direct outdoor play area from the centre and, although children and parents and carers can use the daycare outdoor area, promoting the benefits of outside play is a comparatively under-developed aspect of provision.

The centre is very inclusive and all activities are free. Recently there has been a drive to increase the use of the centre by more vulnerable families. Fathers, teen parents and families with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities were identified as groups to target. All are now visible in the children's centre. Some services are delivered as outreach to families who do not want to come in to the centre. For other activities, creches and taxis are provided if necessary and support workers will accompany and stay with parents and carers until they are confident to come on their own. Support for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their families is outstanding and the centre has contact with all of these children in their area. Data analysis has shown that use of services for babies and for children over three is very good but there is some tail off in between. This is now targeted and play workers come into the Baby Days clinic to encourage parents to come to a Rhyme Time session running at the same time. Parents and carers get regular personal invitations to groups and when they register children for school nursery, the children's centre is again signposted. An internet social networking page details current events. Adult courses are run by the children's centre and there is a reference system signposting users to Job Links and services in the Enterprise Centre. However, this is the least developed part of the core offer and has already been identified in the annual plan as in need of improvement.

Staff and volunteers have a good understanding of child protection procedures. Volunteers in particular were very enthusiastic about the quality of their child protection training and what they had learnt. Parents and carers all said that they felt very safe in the centre. Case studies show that when staff are aware of the needs of vulnerable families, children with special educational needs and/or disabilities or child protection issues, they provide high quality support. However, because Sunderland Children's Services Social Care does not currently share child protection information with children's centres, the centre cannot offer support to all such children in their locality.

Until recently the main thrust of children's centres in Sunderland was to offer similar provision across all centres. Recently data has been much more reliable at a locality level and a change in direction has allowed the management team to develop services more specifically matched to local need. There have been a lot of interesting and innovative initiatives as a result of this, but the data is only now beginning to confirm the success of this work. The leadership team and staff are absolutely committed to continuing with this approach to meeting the needs of the local area and this, together with their drive and enthusiasm, gives Thorney Close Children's Centre a good capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- develop further the links with Job Centre Plus
- extend opportunities across all activities to promote children's and families' understanding of the benefits of outdoor play

- work in partnership with the local authority to establish and maintain systems for sharing information between agencies about children who are on the child protection register.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The health coordinator leads the work carried out by health service personnel and has established a clear pathway from before birth to starting school. There is a high take up of universal baby services including the Baby Days clinic and immunisations. The centre offers a good range of initiatives to support healthy eating and physical activity indoors, including a Weaning Group and Busy Bodies. Staff are proud that children now come to groups with carrot sticks as a snack instead of sweets. However, little is done to encourage physical activity outdoors. Workers are trained in identifying families who need additional support from mental health services and this means those who need it can access support quickly. A similar approach identifies children needing support with speech and language development. Support for breastfeeding is excellent. Smoking cessation groups were not as successful as the team hoped, so this work is delivered to individuals in the home. Workers are optimistic that the recent introduction of carbon monitors in the home, showing how many chemicals babies are breathing in, will make an impact.

Physical safety in the children's centre, including risk assessments for all activities, is good. Since January, the Common Assessment Framework has been used to assess the support needed for all vulnerable children. This works through a weekly review meeting which is developing into a very effective process. Families receive additional support as needed and individual packages are in place for the most vulnerable through the commission with Social Care. The leadership team has identified the need to offer more support to the most vulnerable families in the area and so are improving links with Wearside Women in Need, who support the victims of domestic violence and with a nearby hostel for the homeless. A recent case study of a crisis situation shows this work is very effective. A high rate of admissions to the Accident and Emergency department of the local hospital has led to a drive to improve home safety. All new parents and carers are encouraged to access a home safety check by the fire service and receive a basic home safety pack. Targeted families then receive an enhanced pack when their child is nine months old. This made a difference immediately but the most recent data from the hospital has not yet been received so the full impact has not yet been evaluated.

Good quality partnership working between staff in the good nursery run by Social Care and the area Early Years coordinator is having a positive impact on children's enjoyment and achievement. The aim is to establish consistency of approach in all play and learning activities across the children's centre although this is not yet fully developed. Early Years Foundation Stage Profile outcomes in the area are good with the gap between the lowest achieving children and the rest smaller than the national figure. Work improving the transition into nursery been effective and is now being rolled out city wide. The reshaped toy library allows parents and childminders to

borrow toys used in group activities, leading to double the use in the last three months. Adult learning offers both accredited and non-accredited courses with crèches to enable parents and carers to access them. Parents and carers spoke enthusiastically about these courses and the opportunities they give them.

Behaviour seen across the centre was good. Parents and carers are supported in understanding why certain approaches are taken with children and were all very positive about how they feel valued and listened to by centre staff. A local voluntary organisation is commissioned to provide community involvement work and to engage with families. There is a good core of volunteers from a variety of ages and backgrounds who are passionate about what they do. A grandma agreed that she gave a lot but said that, 'The smiles are worth it'. All volunteers are trained and encouraged to follow the volunteer pathway into further training and work which many do. There is an active parents' forum from which parents and carers are coopted onto other groups.

Teenage parents receive individual support to encourage them to be involved in the centre and they do attend with their babies. There is a young parent group elsewhere in the locality but numbers are currently low. More positively, Connect now uses rooms twice a week for education and a crèche for young mums. Thorney Close was chosen for this at the request of the young parents and the team is hoping to build on this positive sign. There is signposting to Job Link in the Enterprise Centre, to Job Centre Plus and to advice on managing money and welfare benefits but little data available about take up or outcomes.

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	3

How good is the provision?

2

The very strong multi-agency team that provides the centre's services is passionate about the local area and works together well to meet its needs and to improve services. Although many of the services are commissioned from different providers,

everyone working in the centre shares the same ethos and high level of commitment. They have undertaken a detailed analysis of who uses the centre services and identified groups and parts of the area that need more support to become involved. Currently, data is being carefully monitored to evaluate the success of these actions. Fathers, one of the target groups, were asked which groups they would be most interested in attending. The response was around sport and physical activities so these were established. Fathers are then encouraged to access other activities in the centre and the ones spoken to were very positive about how welcome they felt. Support is excellent for families and children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. This is because, starting from home visiting at the ante-natal stage, it is so well tailored to their individual needs and designed to help families access services.

There is a good range of play and learning activities offered both from the centre and across the locality as a whole. When 0 to 7 Partnership funding became available it was identified that some children, mainly young three-year-olds, were struggling when they started nursery. The Getting Ready for Nursery project was designed to support these children's social and language development delivered mainly through home visiting. As it developed, potty training was identified as an issue by parents and carers so the project has been adapted to meet that need as well. Feedback from parents and carers is very good and all children made significant progress. Volunteers are well-established in the centre and their achievements celebrated. They are very proud of what they do. A variety of adult courses and training are provided, some in Thorney Close, some elsewhere in the locality and when necessary parents and carers are supported individually to access them.

Universal and an increasing number of targeted services are in place to meet the core offer. All services are evaluated by users and outcomes, plus those of consultations, are used with data to prove how well services meet local needs. Outreach services, personal invitations and telephone calls are used effectively to target those who do not come to the centre, letting them know what is available for them.

Sensitive and individualised support where needed, combined with a strong universal offer, leads to good care, guidance and support for all users. Universal services for babies have a very good take up rate and are used to promote immunisation, breastfeeding and healthy eating. The centre has good systems in place to advise users on issues around domestic violence, alcohol and drug misuse and to promote sexual health. The provision for childcare has developed since its most recent inspection, particularly in the support for children's early literacy development through the use of Letters and Sounds.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	1
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning,	2

development and enjoyment for all users	
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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre leader and leadership team provide a strong steer for the centre and have established clear pathways for service delivery. The annual plan, with its milestones, targets and intended outcomes, feeds smoothly into a quarterly review of performance. Secure structures for staff induction, management and appraisal effectively 'join up' commissioned and centre staff through attendance at meetings and shared professional development. The local advisory partnership board works well, offering challenge and support to the centre team and to each other. Transparency between partners enables the board to give a strong steer for future improvement and to monitor performance, including the varying costs of services across the locality. There is limited involvement of parents and carers at this level but the views expressed through Family focus, the parents' forum, are taken into account.

Self-evaluation is accurate and steers improvement across the centre being informed by both data analysis and user feedback. Data collection and analysis by different areas allows for services to be targeted accurately. Family work is evaluated through case studies. Staff and volunteers feed into self-evaluation formally through appraisal and team meetings, and are confident that their views are heard but are also able to approach leadership informally. All staff spoken with were totally involved in what they are doing and morale is very high. All activities and groups are formally evaluated but, again, users were confident that they can approach staff and leaders informally as well.

Centre accommodation is bright, well-cared for, welcoming and used highly efficiently. Cost analysis of all activities, undertaken by team coordinators, is used to reshape services like the toy library. Sustainability and maintaining services with reduced funding are considered when shaping groups and services and allow, for example, Getting Ready for Nursery to continue after the initial funding has ended. These rigorous processes enable the centre to provide extremely good value for money.

Inclusion seen throughout the centre including in the toy library and the Play and Stay is good. Toy library staff will order additional resources to ensure the needs of individual children are met. Disadvantaged and excluded groups are consulted closely to make sure their needs are being met. In a predominately White community, there was comparatively little evidence of developing an awareness of ethnic diversity but community involvement workers are actively engaging with city-wide initiatives in this area.

All procedures and policies to promote safeguarding are securely in place including Criminal Record Bureau checks and safe recruitment practices. Partner and commissioned services are required to meet the centre's own high standards. Volunteers were very reflective about their training, saying they had never previously thought about neglect as a safeguarding issue and that now they think twice about children who are desperate for love. Support for vulnerable children is good but difficulties in receiving information from Social Care about children on the child protection register make it hard to support fully all these children.

Partnerships across the centre are excellent and are crucial in enabling the outcomes for children and families to be as good as they are, and to continue improving. Having a significant number of health service staff based in the centre has allowed the development of very strong working relationships and a real understanding of what each other does. The 0 – 7 Partnership in particular, strengthened links between health, schools and the children's centre and this has benefited the local advisory board. There is a well-established route in for parents and carers who wish to be involved and some have been with the centre since the early days of the local programme. Local voluntary organisations that deliver the community and essential service strands of the centre work well together with the centre team, understanding each other's aims and ethos. Workers from commissioned organisations attend some staff meetings and professional development with the children's centre team, developing this understanding even further.

Parents and carers are very positive about support received and user feedback shows high levels of satisfaction with the services offered. Targeted support means families are supported individually when necessary. Consultation with children is at a relatively early stage. For parents and carers who do not want to approach staff directly, the Have Your Say box in the entrance allows parents and carers and users to comment and be sure their views are taken seriously. Volunteers are very active and feel valued.

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	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2

The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	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

The childcare setting linked to the Children's Centre, Thorney Close Child Care Centre was last inspected in 2007. This report has not been taken into account as part of the inspection.

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 Sunderland Children's Centre, Thorney Close on 20 and 21 October 2010. We judged the centre as good overall. We visited the activities that were on while we there, and talked to some of you and professionals who work in the centre. We also looked at plans and documents including photographs from various groups and activities.

Everyone we spoke to was very enthusiastic about the centre and the people who work there impressed both the inspectors with their passion for what they are doing. The leadership team members enjoy their work and are determined to make a difference. They are always trying to improve things for you and showed us several changes that have been made recently to try and make things better for you. It is too soon to know how well some of these changes have worked.

Your centre does some things exceptionally well. One of these is the support they give to mums who are breastfeeding their babies. In the Bosom Buddies group, mums are trained to help each other with any problems that come up about feeding. We saw posters and heard about how mums from Thorney Close join with others across the city to promote breastfeeding. As a result of this enthusiasm, more mums

are breastfeeding all the time and this is a real success story. Another thing your centre does very well is to provide classes about being a parent for those of you who feel you need more help with this. We were told by both mums and dads how lucky they had been to get a place on these courses and how although being a parent looks easy, it is a very hard thing to do. They very much enjoyed being able to share problems and help each other. Your centre is very good at listening to you and taking on board how to make the things they do better for you. They explained how you wanted to bring your older children to the Messy Play sessions but had to bring your babies along as well and found there was nothing for the babies to do. They combined the Messy Play with the Play and Stay sessions so that now all your children can come and enjoy themselves. We do think there is more that the centre could do to help you play outside with your children.

All the parents and carers we spoke to told us how welcoming the centre is and more than one of you explained how you had failed to get help elsewhere but found the centre marvellous. We found that staff think very hard about ways to make sure that you all use the centre and, although we met dads and young mums there, we know they are trying hard to encourage more of them to come into the centre. For the ones of you who need it, they will come and visit you at home first so that when you do go to the centre there will be a familiar face there. We talked to parents and carers who had really appreciated this. Courses and training are run from the centre and staff can tell you where to go for help in finding more training or work but we agree with them that this is something they can do better in the future.

You all agreed that you felt very safe in the centre. This is because the staff work hard to make it a safe place where you can trust everyone. Support is good for families and children at times in their lives when they need it urgently. Help and understanding for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are excellent. Staff are trying hard to help you make your homes as safe as possible for children. At the moment the centre does not get all the information from the local authority that staff need in order to support some children and we have asked for this to be sorted out.

The people in charge of running your centre are doing a really good job. Until recently all the children's centres in Sunderland offered similar activities but that has changed and now they are working very hard to give you exactly what you feel you need in the west of Sunderland. It is making for some very interesting and exciting groups and ways of working which you told us you really value.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to come and speak to us. We are very grateful and hope you will continue to value your centre as highly as you do now.

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