

Inspection report for Neston Children's Centre

Local authority	Cheshire West and Chester
Inspection number	365703
Inspection dates	9–10 February 2011
Reporting inspector	Linda McLarty HMI

Centre governance	The local authority.
Centre leader	Claire Edwards
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	N/a
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	EY308226 Little Acorns 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:

- 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 representatives from the advisory board, the children's centre manager, staff, parents and users and representatives of partner organisations.

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

Information about the centre

Neston Children's Centre is a phase 1 children's centre which was designated in 2005 and has been delivering the full core offer since January 2006, under the governance of Cheshire West and Chester local authority. Service delivery is through a range of providers on and off-site, for example the on-site early years consultant supports settings including the adjacent Little Acorns Day Nursery, schools, private and voluntary providers across the reach area. The centre works closely with health partners from two local hospital trusts as well as with Western Cheshire Primary Care Trust, the Childminder Network Coordinator, family support workers and a range of adult learning providers. The centre provides space for the local childminding network to meet for peer support and guidance on the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The Centre is a stand-alone building and forms part of the Neston High School and Recreation Centre campus.

There are 910 children in the rural catchment area, of whom 710 live in some of the 70% most disadvantaged areas and 200 in some of the 30% most deprived areas in the country. The centre has 606 children registered, representing 66% of the total number in the reach area. Service provision is specifically targeted at the most

disadvantaged families and there are 79% of the 200 children registered at the Centre, 47% of whom accessed services during the last year. The reach area is geographically large and contains areas of great affluence as well as areas of deprivation. Of its 12 super output areas one is in the top 30% of deprivation and is on an improving trajectory.

The vast majority of families are of White British heritage, with less than 1% of families representing a range of minority ethnic backgrounds. Approximately 19% of families claim benefits with 8.1% of children under 16 living in workless households.

The centre supports children in a variety of private and voluntary sector settings in its footprint and also uses the privately-owned integrated day-care provision on site. This offers care and education for up to 67 children from birth to five years including no more than 15 children aged from birth to two years. Across the reach area, children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with broadly average levels of development compared to those expected for their age nationally.

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

Neston Children's Centre is improving all outcomes for the families in its reach area well. Leadership and management are dispersed and strong at every level. The manager is responsible for two centres and has built a secure team at Neston, where capacity to improve is vested in the team rather than in individuals. This, and the centre's track record of improvement demonstrates a good capacity to improve outcomes even further.

The leadership and management are challenged and supported well by its advisory board, which represents many community and professional partners. The management use the local knowledge of their partners well to target their work where it is most needed and will have most effect. Durable and productive partnerships work together effectively to support local families.

It is not yet possible to assess the centre's progress towards the national indicators, or fully evidence the impact of the centre's work in its reach area because the local

authority has not given the centre any targets. This restricts the management's ability to evaluate its success in promoting outcomes and limits the advisory board's ability to hold the centre to account for its progress towards local targets. The local authority systems for information gathering and dissemination are still developing, and are not yet at a sufficiently sophisticated level to provide the centre with timely, detailed information about its reach area.

However, the well-established leadership and management team use their good local knowledge, and that of their partners, to compensate for this effectively. They know the profile and the needs of the area well. The delivery plan lacks measurable targets or clear success criteria, but because of the determination of the centre and its partners to continually improve provision in all areas, all of the Every Child Matters outcomes are improving. The services are fully integrated and the extent to which partnerships cooperate in delivering the services is good. The centre targets its resources at supporting the most vulnerable and swiftly reshapes service delivery to respond to emerging needs and to maximise take-up of services. For example baby massage sessions in the centre were duplicated in the health clinic, to enable more parents to participate. This raised participation levels and met the increased demand arising from recent increases in the birth rate, while simultaneously improving parents' access to health support such as baby weigh-ins and the on-site advice and guidance from health visitors.

Case study evidence and discussions with users show that the centre is making a significant difference to the lives of users, some of whom state that 'Without the support of the centre and of the staff, I would not have survived.' In times of crisis, such as bereavement, people turn to the centre for comfort and support as a first port of call.

Safeguarding of children and users is good and the early intervention work is successfully pre-empting higher-level involvement. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used well to ensure effective identification of services required and the review process is used very effectively to monitor children's progress and ensure support remains focused where most needed. Parents are authentically involved in this process at every level.

The centre consults with parents regularly, their views are respected and where possible, often acted upon, for example in the recent refurbishments. The extent to which users contribute to the decision making and governance of the centre is good but there are insufficient numbers of parents involved in the decision making at advisory board level. Some of the information shared through the website is misleading and out of date.

The centre promotes equality of opportunity well. The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores for children supported in various private and voluntary sector provision across the reach area indicate that the gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and their peers is narrowing year-on-year, reducing from 33.43% in 2009 to 26% in 2010. In 2010, the centre attained the Inclusion Quality Mark (IQM) award

for the second time.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Work with the local authority to improve the quality and timeliness of data received by the centre to:
 - enable the leadership and management to set specific, measurable improvement targets based on improving outcomes for centre users
 - enable the advisory board to offer even more challenge and to hold the centre to account for progress against these targets
 - enable the leadership and management to ensure that self-evaluation is supported by more evidence of impact.
- Increase the participation of parents, carers and users in the decision-making process.
- Ensure that information shared with users is up to date and accurate, for example on the website.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Where the centre has received data from the local authority and its partners, these indicate that health outcomes are measurably improving. Immunisation levels are high compared to the national figures, obesity in the Reception Year is average, as is the rate of emergency hospital admissions in the birth to 16 age range. Once the centre staff identified that teenage conception rates were much higher than expected in the Little Neston area, they liaised with local primary schools to provide training for school staff to deliver sexual health and relationships education through specific courses. Schools report these courses to be a useful tool in raising awareness.

Breastfeeding initiation rates are 73.6% and the percentage of infants being breastfed at six to eight weeks after birth is 42%. These figures compare favourably to national averages of 73.4% and 44.4% respectively. Healthy eating, exercise and balanced lifestyles are encouraged with parents able to access the adjacent school pool for free sessions and to gain Food Hygiene qualifications. Sessions such as baby massage help mothers share breastfeeding and child-raising advice, make friends, feel less isolated and are invaluable stress-relievers.

Attendees are quick to praise the support they receive from the centre. The emotional and mental resilience of users is greatly improved by their engagement with the centre and those who are experiencing stress-related or post-natal

depression are particularly well cared for. Many users have powerful evidence of how the centre has improved their mental health by reducing stress. 'I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for them.' Some parents credit the centre with keeping their families together.

Users are kept safe when using the premises and during activities through careful risk assessment. Resources are safe and of high quality. The centre encourages parents to attend First Aid courses and to access safety equipment in their homes, which reduces the incidence of accidents, which in this area is in line with national averages. Early intervention is very effectively pre-empting higher-level intervention including those linked to child protection concerns. The CAF process is used well to identify and coordinate early support for families in need, with children's progress monitored meticulously, which often obviates the need for crisis intervention. The family support workers currently support 100% of the small numbers of children in care, or on Children in Need or on child protection plans.

Children are well prepared for school in the early years settings used by the centre, with an admirable rise of 17.6% in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores for 2010 from 58.45% in 2009 to 76% in 2010. This can be attributed to the input of the centre's early years consultant cross-sector in raising standards of settings across the footprint. The progress of children from the centre is tracked through to their receiver schools and these results reflect the achievement of the first generation of children to have been supported by the centre from birth through to primary school age.

Children receive well-planned activities in 'stay and play' sessions such as 'Little Rascals' using extremely exciting resources which encourage parents to actively engage in their children's learning through play, with many stimulating ideas for using low-cost but imaginative materials.

Parenting courses are improving parents' ability to understand and modify their children's behaviour and offer valuable opportunities to make friends and reduce isolation. The 'Parents Matter' group is used informally to consult with parents and the chair of the group represents parents' views on the advisory board. The children's centre partners attribute the increase in both community cohesion and better youth behaviour in the area to the centre's emphasis on positive parenting.

Users' ability to gain economic independence is enhanced by attendance on courses that improve their employability, such as computer skills, literacy and numeracy, or which improve their confidence and life skills, such as parenting courses. Parents gain confidence in a well-supported volunteer course and some go on to paid employment as a direct result of the centre's input. The centre and the local Neston Community and Youth Centre (NCYC) work well together to provide a Job Cafe offering information, advice and guidance to prepare applicants for work.

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

Effective partnerships with local professionals mean that the assessment of individual cases is robust. The CAF process is implemented well, ensuring teams can be gathered quickly to support the children and families identified as being in need. The centre knows the profile of the reach area well, from the local knowledge of the management and staff, supplemented well by high levels of local knowledge from their partners.

The centre uses what information it receives from the local authority and partner agencies effectively, supplemented by its evaluation of participation rates to target its services appropriately. For example, the very popular universal service 'Tumbling 2–3s' was not repeated as the obesity figures do not indicate that this is a pressing problem in this area, and the family service workers' outreach time was needed for more targeted support for the hardest-to-reach and most vulnerable.

The range of services and activities meet the needs of users as shown by the good participation rates and 100% satisfaction levels expressed by participants. Service delivery is flexible and the staff respond swiftly to emerging needs, to ensure that their provision remains focused on those who need it most. Strong relationships enable families to approach the centre with confidence, particularly during times of crisis. 'This centre has stopped me having a breakdown', 'This centre is like a lifeline to me', and, 'Without it, we'd be stuck in the house', are typical comments made by centre users.

Users receive quality care, guidance and support, both in-house, through the centre directly and through the strong partnerships, and also through sensitive outreach and family support. The centre distributes information and guidance well, including through the careful placement of sensitive signposting to sources of support for substance abuse and for those experiencing domestic violence or abuse. However,

some information available on the website is no longer relevant or useful.

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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

There are effective lines of accountability between the local authority, the advisory board and the centre. The local authority provides robust challenge through the annual conversations. The advisory board is kept well informed about provision in the manager's quarterly report, although these reports currently lack sufficient evidence of impact. This limits how well the advisory board is able to hold the centre to account for outcomes as there are currently no targets to measure impact against. The board is very supportive and also consistently challenges the centre's direction. For example, it initially questioned the centre's data about teenage conception rates in Little Neston, checking this against their own professional information. Once they verified the management's conclusions, they were highly supportive of the centre's actions to address this problem.

Performance management is hampered by the lack of targets from the local authority, but the centre has already identified weaknesses in this area and is currently revising its systems in order to align performance management more closely to the delivery plan.

The leadership and management at every level are aspirational for the service users and committed to providing a flexible range of services which is responsive to the needs of the area. This drives their commitment to productive partnership working. Despite the information exchange between the local authority and health partners being in its infancy, the leadership and management drive improvement of provision so successfully that as a result, all outcomes are improving. Partnership working also avoids duplication of services well and enhances the good use of resources. The good outcomes which result from the well-targeted provision demonstrate that the centre is providing good value for money.

Equality of opportunity is promoted effectively, demonstrated by the way the centre

is narrowing the achievement gap well between the lowest 20% of children and their peers. The centre management is aware that as it provides a service in a predominantly White British area, it needs to work harder to ensure it is fostering awareness of the wider community outside Neston. The centre knows its reach area well and targets support to the most vulnerable, but welcomes and supports all users irrespective of their background and this is also contributing to a strong sense of community cohesion.

Safeguarding arrangements met all legal requirements at the time of the inspection. Staff are trained to the correct levels to support their roles and responsibilities and safeguarding is a key priority underpinning all of the centre's work. Case studies offer powerful evidence of good quality support for the more vulnerable service users. One user said, 'Because the centre offers a place where pressure on a parent can be released, this has an important effect on the children from a child protection point of view'. Although these numbers are small, support for these highly vulnerable groups is integrated and cohesive, and is building resilience in the community.

Evaluation is less effective in driving improvement because it is not yet based on sufficient evidence of impact. The centre's delivery plan demonstrates a good understanding of the target groups within the reach area and what needs to be achieved. However, the targets and success criteria are not sharp enough so that it is difficult for the centre to evaluate the success of its activities.

Partnership working is one of the strengths of this centre and a major key to its success. Partnership representatives are unanimous in praise and support for the leadership and management and how they have utilised partnerships to offer a responsive integrated service.

The centre successfully gauges user satisfaction and seeks, and often acts on users' views, including those of children. Those using the centre are insufficiently involved in strategic decision making. However, the centre provided compelling evidence of the strong links between the 'Parent matters' group and the two representatives on the advisory board. The highly successful 'Dad's den' initiative, which attracts a large majority of local dads to work on exciting activities with their children on Saturdays, demonstrates how the centre encourages and supports enterprising ideas from its users.

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	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
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

None

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 Neston Children's Centre on 9 and 10 February 2011. We judged the centre to be good overall.

Thank you for giving up your time to share your views about your experiences as parents, carers and volunteers in the centre, they were most helpful in giving inspectors a picture of the difference the centre is making to local families.

Inspectors agree with you, your centre is a good source of support, help and guidance and is helping to improve your families' opportunities to live healthy, safe, happy and productive lives. You told inspectors of incidences of life-changing support by centre staff and management, which for some of you, has given you back your confidence to love and care for your children and given you hope for your family's future. You describe the centre as, 'A lifeline which gets us out of the house and helps us to make friends', and for some of you, 'This centre has helped keep my family together.'

The high-quality activities such as 'Little Rascals' are helping you give your children a good start in life, while giving you opportunities to come somewhere welcoming, learn new skills and meet new friends. The centre is beginning to track the achievements of children it supports, checking up on their assessments when they go to school. This year's results are the best ever, and show the positive impact that the centre is having on your children's Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores.

The centre uses its partners well to help some of you gain qualifications such as First Aid and Food Hygiene, literacy, numeracy and computer skills. These increase your confidence and ability to provide for your families. The Job cafe helps you with all of the stages of preparing for and applying for work and has helped some of you to become volunteers or to gain paid work.

The centre takes your views seriously, for example, your concerns about safety of the entrance area were addressed and there is now a much more secure system in place. However, much more could be done to encourage parents to be involved in making important decisions about the centre and we have asked the centre to ensure that this happens. Those of you who told inspectors you would like to be involved – this is your opportunity!

Although most of the information, advice and guidance are very helpful, inspectors noticed that some of the information on the website is misleading and out of date. We have asked the centre to make sure users always receive relevant and up-to-date information.

Up until now, the centre has not received enough information from the local authority about the area it serves and the local authority has not given them clear targets to meet. This makes it very difficult for the leadership and management to evaluate how well they are doing, as they have nothing to measure themselves against. We have asked the local authority to give the centre more information about people who live in the area served by the centre and clear expectations of the outcomes they wish to see. This will help the leadership focus its services where they are needed most. This will also help the leadership and management measure the success of its work in improving outcomes for families. Having clear targets will also help the advisory board to be able to check the centre's progress and offer even more challenge and support than they do already.

The centre has been able to improve continually because of the dedication, hard work and high levels of professionalism of the management, who have built a committed team which is strongly focused on helping families in the area. The leadership and management have built on the effective professional partnerships in Neston. Many partners are on the advisory board, which is highly supportive of the good management and leadership. The management uses its partners well to get you the help you need.

We wish you the very best for your future and thank you again for giving up your time to meet with us.

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