

Inspection report for Chestnut Tree Children's Centre

Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	365822
Inspection dates	8–9 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Georgina Beasley

Centre governance	Pre-school Learning Alliance
Centre leader	Kathy Burgess
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Radburn Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Little Stars Pre-School
	North Herts Opportunity Class

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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre's staff, the county leader of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, health partners, members of the partnership group, parents and carers, two local authority representatives and pre-school partners.

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

Information about the centre

Chestnut Tree is a phase two children's centre situated on the site of Radburn Primary School. It has been open for just over three years and in that time it has moved premises and changed leadership. The current manager started in September 2010. The centre offers the full core offer and provides a base for a wide range of health, social and educational services that take place on site, in the home and in other local venues. Seven hundred and seven children aged nought to four and 366 families live in the reach area. Around 35% of children are registered at the centre and 206 attend one of five private pre-schools in the reach area. The linked private pre-school, 'Little Stars Pre-School', provides 24 day-care places during school term-time. The North Herts Opportunity Class, managed by the local authority, provides 10 places for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities on a sessional basis. Children's skills and knowledge on entry to pre-school and nursery are well below expected levels.

The centre serves an urban community which is in one of the 70% most deprived wards in the country. The social and economic position of families is mixed but, for about a fifth of families, it is low. Around 20% of children live in families that receive workless benefits and 24% in families that receive benefits of some kind. Of the 220 lone-parent families who live in the reach area, 160 receive workless benefits. An above-average proportion of children have a parent with a disability. About 75% of families are from White British and 25% from minority ethnic backgrounds. The local

authority contracts out the leadership and management of services to the Pre-school Learning Alliance.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Chestnut Tree Children's Centre is satisfactory. There is good evidence of strong improvement this year, especially in the learning and progress of children and adults who use the centre's services. Children and their parents and carers who attend the centre enjoy learning and achieve well. The centre manager works closely with the senior coordinator, outreach workers and partners to provide a safe and welcoming environment where everyone is respectful and supportive of each other's needs. One parent was keen to tell inspectors how, 'After only one visit, both my child and I were welcomed by name the next time we came. This made me feel very welcome.'

The quality of leadership and management and the centre's capacity to improve are good. There has been strong improvement this year. The number of families from minority ethnic backgrounds registering and regularly using the centre and linked services has doubled this year, and more closely reflects the reach area's cultural context. Communication with partners has improved and, as a result, there is greater sharing of information to evaluate whether services are matched closely to need. The quality of the activities and services the centre provides for children, young people, adults and families has improved and attendance at groups is good and is growing at training events. As one parent said, 'Once people come through the door, they tend to come again.'

Outcomes are satisfactory and improving. They are good for children who attend pre-school and Nursery and Reception classes and those who attend the centre's activities with their parents and carers. Children and adult users who access the centre feel and know how to stay safe and choose healthy snacks and enjoy taking part in physical activity. The centre has not been open long enough for its good-quality promotion of healthy lifestyles to make a more positive impact on reducing the higher than average levels of childhood obesity in the reach area. The contribution users make to the centre's work is improving, but there are still a

number of workless families that are not currently registered with the centre. Users are developing satisfactory skills for their future economic well-being through attendance at numerous vocational courses and back-to-work meetings. Adults' take-up of literacy and numeracy courses is low.

The centre promotes a positive climate where everyone is welcomed and tackles discrimination decisively. Safeguarding procedures are good. All visitors and attendees sign into the building and their identity is checked before being allowed into the meeting rooms. The accommodation is secure. The centre promotes equal opportunities well. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities or who live with a disabled parent are enabled to attend all centre activities. The weekly young carers group run by extended schools services gives those children a place to relax, to enjoy the company of their peers and to talk about common concerns.

As data have become available, the centre has been able to focus on the aspects of its work most in need of improvement. This has led to a more concerted approach to improvement planning. All stakeholders have been involved in setting relevant and challenging targets for improvement. The availability of up-to-date data is recent and so the centre's evaluation systems to measure the long-term effectiveness of its work against precise user outcomes are not established. Neither has it been able to identify, until very recently, the areas and groups within the reach with lower registration and attendance. The centre now has detailed plans for reaching the wider community to ensure more parents and carers and their children benefit from its services and activities.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Work with the local authority to analyse data about user outcomes and enable the centre to target its most vulnerable groups more effectively, including children who live in workless families.
- Increase the number of people from the wider community who use the centre's services and activities.
- Establish systems for evaluating the long-term effectiveness of services and activities against user outcomes.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The centre promotes healthy lifestyles in all of its groups and events and sets high expectations for staff and users to model these to children, young people and adult users. Healthy snacks are always provided in group activities, and numerous cooking courses have resulted in those parents and carers who have attended saying that they cook healthy and nutritious meals for their families. Parents and carers who attend enjoy getting fit with their children at the weekly 'Hop, Skip and Jump' session. They value in particular how it encourages their children to move around independently and imaginatively for at least 45 minutes. Despite obvious benefits to

those who attend the centre's activities, levels of obese and overweight children in Reception Class are above average. The centre has not been open long enough for its good work to promote healthy lifestyles to make a more positive long-term impact.

There has been a good increase in the proportion of mothers breastfeeding their babies up to and beyond six weeks; the proportion is now average. The proportion of mothers who smoke at the point of delivery has fallen slightly, but the number of mothers who continue to smoke beyond delivery is in line with the Hertfordshire average. Satisfactory guidance is given on dental hygiene and to promote the importance of getting children immunised, and outcomes are satisfactory.

Children show that they feel safe by the confident way that they get involved in the centre's activities. They go to their parent or carer first if able, but ask for help from any adult in attendance if their parent or carer cannot be found immediately. Users all say they feel safe at the centre both physically and emotionally. They feel they can talk to staff and each other, confident that they will get valuable support and advice. Good support for families whose circumstances have made them vulnerable has resulted in improved mental health for those who participate and an increased number of child protection plans being withdrawn because family circumstances have improved. Popular courses for first aid and safe practices have built the ability and confidence of parents and carers to keep their families safe.

Children who attend the centre's activities, local playgroups, pre-schools and Early Years Foundation Stage provision achieve well and make good progress, especially in their personal, social and emotional development. Providers continue to focus on accelerating the children's early speaking and communication skills as these remain an issue for many, especially boys. In comparison to similar socio-economic areas, an above average proportion reaches 78 points on the Early Years Foundation Stage profile. The gap between the lowest 20% and the rest is closing at around the national rate. A good number of adults have enjoyed taking part in numerous training courses in the last two years which has built their personal confidence well and resulted in many volunteering in the centre and in their children's pre-school settings. There are telling examples of parents and carers going onto further education and work this year. The centre has not received data to show how many adults have attended and passed accredited courses. Back-to-work training has been offered but take-up so far has been low.

Children behave well while at the centre and when they attend pre-school settings. They are becoming inquisitive learners as a result of their engagement in practical and exploratory play. 'Learning journeys', new at the centre this term, include children's comments about their play which gives them a voice and enables them to offer ideas for future planning. Parents make a good contribution to the centre's decision-making through giving regular feedback after all courses and activities, attending the regular parent forum meetings, completing surveys and adding comments to the 'thoughts wall' for ideas for future activities. The two parent representatives on the partnership group are clear about the centre's strengths and

improvement needs. Systems for collecting the views of the wider community are in their infancy and so only those who access the centre are able to make a positive contribution to its development.

Children quickly become inquisitive and independent learners due to the way activities are organised and run. About 20% of families who live in the reach area returned to work last year as a result of the centre's positive partnership with Jobcentre Plus. Lone parents receive good advice about benefits which have improved the economic position of their families. However, the centre is still not reaching all children who live in workless families in the wider reach community.

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	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 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	3
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?

3

Through regular feedback and discussions, the centre knows the needs of users who access its services and groups well and so staff are able to plan activities and courses that match these users' learning needs well. Outreach workers value the opportunity to take responsibility for particular aspects of their work so that they can concentrate on a smaller range of activities and support. As a result, planning is clearly focused on learners' progress and responds well to an assessment of needs. Learning in 'Tiddlers Plus', a group for early walkers, builds on 'Tiddlers', a group for babies and non-walkers. 'Jackz Tots' builds on this learning and is further extended through the imaginative activities in the 'Messy Mondays' group. Adult learning courses have boosted parents' and carers' confidence in supporting their own and their children's learning and development. First-aid and parenting courses are particular favourites. Parents and carers enjoy sharing their skills such as jewellery making, and value the numerous friendships they have made as a result of coming to the centre. Crèche facilities are provided for all training courses. However, the centre is still not reaching about half of the potential users who live in the reach area and so is unable to assess whether its range of services and activities fully meets the needs of the wider

community.

The centre manager has introduced the use of 'learning journeys' to track the progress of all users closely so that the centre can target services to meet children's needs more effectively. Their completion has led to the identification that it has little information about how many adults have completed accredited courses for improving their literacy and numeracy skills.

Care, guidance and support ensure the needs of families whose circumstances make them most vulnerable are met well. Families who are referred to the centre are called immediately so that a programme of support and services can be put into place quickly. Families with children subject to a child protection plan and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities receive particularly effective support, especially when there is a particular need or crisis. This includes providing free transport to the centre's activities, borrowing toys at no charge and providing intense individual support in the home. The needs of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers are particularly well met with their own designated midwife and antenatal support. A good number have a plan in place for returning to education once their babies are born.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
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	3
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 recently appointed centre manager has been quick to introduce initiatives that have resulted in particularly strong improvement since September. An analysis of the data that became available towards the end of last academic year resulted in changes to the improvement planning process. The number of key actions has reduced to five so that staff can concentrate on the most important areas in need of improvement. There has already been significant success in two of the five since September. Systems to evaluate the quality of the centre's work are in place because sufficient data is now available. Comprehensive case study evidence enables the centre to evaluate and measure outcomes in individual cases and to start to build a picture of the effectiveness of its support and services. Following an evaluation of learning, 'Messy Mondays' have been introduced to broaden the children's experience

of the world around them, and lunch club enables parents from different cultural backgrounds to share recipes with children and their families. The centre has not been open long enough and data have not been available to establish systems for evaluating the long-term impact of its services and activities against user outcomes.

There is a productive partnership between the centre managers, the Pre-school Learning Alliance and local authority staff because everyone is clear about their own and each other's roles and each holds the other to account. Good governance has ensured systems have been established since opening for ensuring the safety and well-being of staff, partners, children, visitors and users. Partner agreements and commissioned services are comprehensively set up and monitored closely to ensure strict procedures are adhered to.

Safeguarding policies and procedures are comprehensive and followed assiduously. Procedures ensure the identity and suitability of all staff and volunteers are checked. Pro formas for risk assessment, health and safety and child protection logs ensure a detailed record and systematic checks. A certain number of entries expressing concerns about any child's safety and well-being trigger a meeting to decide whether to instigate the Common Assessment Framework procedures. Training in implementing the Common Assessment Framework ensures all partners, pre-school settings and childminders give due diligence to the process. On those occasions when a child is no longer subject to a child protection plan and is not recommended for continued monitoring, the centre instigates its own Common Assessment Framework process to ensure ongoing support.

Partners say, 'We value the improved communication between the centre and partners that enable us to be clear about our roles and improvement needs of the reach area.' The five key actions for improvement are discussed at every partnership group meeting and at the parents' forum so that everyone can strive towards improving the identified outcomes. Partnership with its two partner children's centres, local pre-school settings, childminders and schools enable the sharing of expertise, accommodation and resources, including the toy library.

There is a strong commitment to ensuring equal opportunities for all users. The centre is accessible for users with a physical disability. The North Herts Opportunity Class uses the outdoor area which enables children with special educational needs and/or disabilities to mix with and join in with the play of children attending the centre's activities. Procedures for tackling discrimination are precise and there has been a positive drive to increase the number of users from minority ethnic backgrounds to register with the centre.

The centre gives satisfactory value for money because outcomes are currently satisfactory. It uses its accommodation efficiently. Space is at a premium, and rooms double up as training venues, play space and accommodation for health and advice meetings. Cost analysis is discussed at every partnership group meeting to ensure value for money. The centre compares costs carefully before commissioning services, purchasing resources or improving the outdoor accommodation. The new sensory

garden and growing areas reflect the commitment to sustainability. Plants, trees and natural materials are used to create the different areas, borders and pathways.

While users who engage with the centre receive good-quality support and services, the centre currently reaches about half of the children who live in the area through pre-school provision and the centre's activities. Staff know that there are still a significant number of children living in workless families who are not using the centre's services. The centre is starting to tackle this by getting involved in the Jackman's estate improvement group and by sending surveys to seek community views and ideas about their needs. It has implemented a concerted campaign to advertise the numerous services and groups it offers.

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	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 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	3

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

Little Stars Pre-school and the Early Years Foundation Stage at Radburn Primary School were judged good in their inspections in March 2011. The Early Years Foundation Stage at Hillshott Infant and Nursery School was judged good in its inspection in November 2010. All inspection outcomes contributed to the children's centre report and judgements.

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 Chestnut Tree Children's Centre on 8–9 March 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you for talking to us about your own and your children's experiences at the centre. Some aspects of the children's centre are good. The leadership and management are good and result in strong improvement in the learning and enjoyment of children and adult users and in user involvement in shaping the range and quality of services and activities offered. Attendance at activity groups is good and improving at adult learning events. You told us how the crèche facilities help you to focus more on your enjoyment and learning, confident that your children will be well looked after. Courses and training and the good support you receive from the centre's staff and each other have helped many of you to understand and manage your children's changing behaviour as they grow up. You also have a good understanding of helping your children and families to stay safe and to follow healthy lifestyles. You receive good advice about benefits and returning to work, and this has helped many of you to think about a return-to-work plan. While attendance at vocational courses is good and growing, especially the parenting and first-aid courses, take-up of accredited courses including literacy and numeracy is low.

Children who attend the centre's activities with you and those who go to pre-school, Nursery and Reception classes make good progress. The number reaching expected levels by the end of Reception Year is improving, especially in the children's personal, social and emotional development. There are still significant numbers of people who live in the reach area who are not using the centre regularly and so are not benefiting from the same good-quality care and support you receive. As a result, the centre is not helping them improve their own and their families' well-being. For this reason, while outcomes for you and your children are good, outcomes overall are satisfactory. There are still a number of workless families not accessing the centre's services. The centre has a clear picture of where these families live and a strategy for reaching out to them in order to meet their needs fully. You can help by telling people of the positive benefits you and your families have received.

Care, guidance and support are good, especially for those families that need an extra hand at any particular time. Teenage and young mothers receive good support and many are intent on returning to education. The centre ensures your safety and that of your children, whether you attend one of the groups at the centre or in other community venues. Strong partnership with health professionals, the local authority and the Pre-school Learning Alliance has resulted in a concerted effort to improve the centre's work further. Everyone, including those of you who attend regularly, is

involved in identifying ways to make services and groups even better. The centre has systems for monitoring the impact of its work against users' attendance. It has started to measure how well it is doing with regard to the learning, development and achievements of yourselves and your children.

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