

# Inspection report for Abacus Children's Centre

Local authority	Stockport
Inspection number	366917
Inspection dates	9-10 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Jeremy Spencer HMI

Centre governance	Stockport Primary Care Trust
Centre leader	Alex Bennett
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	120 Garners Lane, Adswold, Stockport, Cheshire, SK3 8QJ
Telephone number	0161 426 5170
Fax number	0161 426 5195
Email address	alex.bennett@stockport.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Bright Beginnings Community 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 covers 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 the centre's leader and senior leadership team, project workers, health visitors, parents and carers, local authority and Primary Care Trust representatives and users of services. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

Abacus Children's Centre is a phase 1 centre, providing all elements of the core offer. It is situated in a purpose-built building, adjoining a local primary school, in the second most disadvantaged area of Stockport. The centre also operates from two satellite sites. Most families in the reach area come from White British backgrounds. However, the centre's reach area has been expanded in recent years and now includes a community with a more diverse range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There are high levels of unemployment and teenage pregnancies in the centre's reach area and a higher than average level of benefit claimants, including incapacity and lone parent claimants.

The centre has been overseen by the Primary Care Trust but is currently undergoing a transition to local authority control. A number of health professionals and services are co-located in the centre, including the local health visitors' team, the local midwives' team, the speech and language team and 'stop smoking' services. There is also a health clinic located on the site. A teacher is a member of the centre's senior leadership team and is involved in a broad range of outreach work.

'Bright Beginnings,' a community nursery, provides day care on the site for young children. A nursery class also operates on the site, under the governance of the adjoining primary school. Children in the centre's reach area demonstrate skills below those normally expected upon entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage.

## Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

### Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for 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

This centre ensures good provision for its users and meets the needs of the community it serves well. As a consequence, outcomes for users are good. Users speak with passion about how the centre has changed their lives. For example, one young parent explained that she '...would simply not have coped' if it not been for the support of the centre. Another parent explained that when she first arrived in the area, she did not have the confidence to leave her house. She went on to explain that the 'wonderful people' at the centre encouraged her to come into the building, and through their activities enabled her to meet friends, become a better parent and gain qualifications. Other users presented similar stories.

The children's centre is the base for a large multi-professional team, which includes two children and family workers employed through the parenting team, with good links to the social care team. Outstanding partnerships between agencies have generated cohesive and well-targeted systems and plans which ensure that both children and adults in the centre's reach area are kept very safe. For example, partner agencies identify issues in the local community through monthly community engagement group meetings. Recently the group planned and delivered a 'confidence week,' which showcased local services available to the community. Underpinning the strong partnerships are frequent communications between agencies and good relationships, which are clearly facilitated by the shared working environment. Safeguarding procedures are very well developed and are enhanced by excellent risk assessment procedures and up-to-date training, which is carefully monitored by leaders.

The centre is developing an increased understanding of the impact of its provision. However, systems to track the achievement and engagement of users are not sufficiently developed to enable leaders and managers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of their work upon different groups of users. Provision, although well-targeted, could be further adapted to meet the needs of different

groups of users once a better understanding of the impact is established. Children, parents and carers make good progress through accessing the services and training offered. Within the reach area, children's achievements in the Early Years Foundation Stage have improved, particularly within the area of communication, language and literacy. The attainment gap between the lowest-performing children and the median-performing children has reduced considerably. The centre's teacher has worked skilfully across different settings within the reach area in order to ensure improved consistency in practice. There is good provision and signposting to relevant training and education for adults which supports the ability of users to seek employment and improve their basic skills. Conversion rates for adults accessing basic literacy and numeracy courses are high, with the large majority of users who start courses gaining qualifications. There are some examples of users who have taken up further training and education and made significant differences to their lives. Parents and carers have also been on the interview panels for prospective employees at the centre and have valued taking ownership in the centre's appointments, whilst also developing their knowledge and understanding of interview skills.

Leaders and managers are committed to delivering a high-quality service and communicate their expectations to staff well. Systems to support self-evaluation are well-developed. The centre operates in an environment of respect for others and ensures good equality of opportunity for all users and staff. Staff are motivated and demonstrate noticeable enthusiasm for their work, as a result of the centre's good leadership. Transition plans to move the centre from Primary Care Trust to local authority control have been well-managed, and despite significant cuts in funding, the centre has maintained, on a reduced scale, the majority of services that can be offered to users. Together with the good outcomes secured by the centre, these factors indicate a good capacity for sustained improvement.

## **What does the centre need to do to improve further?**

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Improve monitoring and evaluation systems by focusing in more depth upon tracking the involvement and achievement of different groups of centre users.
- Review provision by using the information gained from improved monitoring and evaluation to more accurately meet the needs of all centre users and secure a better understanding of the impact.

## **How good are outcomes for users?**

<b>2</b>
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The good impact of the centre's health related programmes are reflected in, for example, a falling trend in the level of childhood obesity in the reach area. Parents and carers spoke fondly about the 'Being Active' programme, during which their

children were encouraged to undertake physical play and exercise sessions, led by sports leaders. The centre has maintained a strong focus upon the promotion of healthy diets and this has made a noticeable impact upon centre users. One parent commented, 'I have learned a lot about healthy eating and my attitude towards food has changed. I am confident that my son will grow up with better eating habits than I have had.' The centre has hosted a number of healthy eating and healthy cooking sessions for users, with a good level of take-up, including the 'Improving Diet, Improving Health' programme. During the inspection, users were invited to purchase attractively displayed 'Soup-in-a-bag' kits from the main reception area.

The centre works in close partnership with health visitors and a nutritionist to provide breastfeeding support to new mothers in the reach area and educate them through the weaning process. Consequently, the percentage of mothers opting to breastfeed their children beyond four months of age has risen slightly during recent years. There has also been a rise in the percentage of immunisations administered in the reach area. The percentage of smokers living in the reach area remains above local and national averages, and the cessation rate remains below local averages. However, the number of smokers attending courses and sessions has risen significantly, indicating an increased desire amongst centre users to want to stop smoking. A number of parents and carers talked about the positive impact the centre's activities have made upon their mental and emotional health. One parent said, 'I always feel so welcome here. I moved into the area and didn't know anybody, but as soon as I came in through the doors, it was like a new world opening up to me.'

Parents are rapidly developing a very good knowledge about how to keep their children safe, for example, through attendance at first aid courses. The centre also promotes 'home safety checks,' in association with other agencies. There have been no significant changes in the number of teenage pregnancies in the reach area in recent years but the percentage of terminations has increased significantly.

Parents and carers state that they feel very safe and secure in the setting. Children move confidently within their environment and do not seem distressed when their parents leave them, demonstrating that they feel particularly safe. Those subject to the Common Assessment Framework processes are very well supported and provision is regularly revisited.

Children make good progress from their starting points in developing skills for the future. Children enjoy using the centre facilities and outreach services, are very well-behaved and are well-prepared for the next stage of their learning. This is because adults working in the centre and in outreach venues are approachable and provide good levels of care. Activities are frequently supported by the centre's teacher across a broad range of settings in the reach area, ensuring that expectations between settings are of equally high standards. Transition into the next setting is also smooth because of the close links which have developed.

Some parents have acquired new skills and this has enabled them to go back into the

workplace. They are more knowledgeable about managing budgets through the centre's activities and this has spurred them on to seek employment. Parents and carers say they feel more confident to support their children's learning after attending numeracy, literacy and family learning sessions in the centre. Caring staff contribute well to developing the self-esteem of both children and their parents and carers. A 'Dad's Group' appreciated the support of staff and have worked hard to forge a 'service-level agreement' with the centre, in order to ensure sustainability of provision. This demonstrates increasing confidence levels amongst centre users in developing ownership of provision, in order to meet their needs.

Some parents think that the centre could work harder to promote and advertise events running within the reach area. Concerns were expressed by other parents that the centre is running fewer events than previously, due to reduced budgets. However, all parents and carers spoken to believe that the centre provides an invaluable service to the community.

*These are the grades for the outcomes for users*

<b>The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How good is the provision?**

<b>2</b>
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The centre provides good quality care for young children and their families. Parents and carers and children are happy within the environment and demonstrate that they enjoy the experiences available to them.

The centre ensures that appropriate assessment of need is given high priority. Individual needs are identified early through first ports of call, for example first appointments with midwives and health visitors. These opportunities are utilised well to ensure other services are signposted clearly, especially for the most vulnerable users. Staff ensure that referrals are initiated for children, so that the appropriate professionals are in place to serve the child's needs. The Common Assessment Framework procedures are followed carefully and engage a variety of professionals

through frequent meetings, and reviews effectively plot the progress of individual cases. There is good evidence of effective inter-agency working through individual case studies, which show that a number of services work effectively together to improve outcomes for families and their children. The effective inter-agency working is underpinned by using an 'Outcomes-Based Accountability' model to review the impact of services and determine future priorities.

Well-organised and resourced learning environments operate within the centre, enabling purposeful learning to take place. The day care provision provided by 'Bright Beginnings Community Nursery' is of a good standard. Activities for adults at the centre are supported by the nursery through the provision of a crèche facility, which enables an increased number of parents and carers to take part. One parent commented, 'I would not be able to do anything here without the support of the day care, I know that my child will be happy there and I can concentrate on what I'm supposed to be doing.'

The range of services, activities and opportunities offered through the centre and outreach services meets the needs of users and the wider community well. For example, the 'Funky Fridays' group for young parents is extremely popular and provides good support to the higher than average level of young families and lone parents in the area. Jobcentre Plus operates from the site on a fortnightly basis, in order to support centre users in finding employment. Pamper days, held in satellite sites also promote users' development of confidence, self-worth and health awareness. Targeted provision to meet more specific needs is firmly in place. However, the full impact of these activities over time, and between different groups is not sufficiently monitored. The centre provides good provision for families of differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds, ensuring an environment of mutual respect. No racist incidents have been reported at the centre in recent times.

The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre is of a good standard. Strong mutual respect and trust are evident between users and the centre staff.

*These are the grades for the quality of provision*

<b>The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users</b>	2
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users</b>	2
<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	2
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community</b>	2

## How effective are the leadership and management?

2
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The centre runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis and staff have full confidence in the leadership team. The governance of the centre, through the advisory board, is good and there are clear lines of accountability. The advisory board members come from a broad range of partner agencies and the board is chaired by centre users. This contributes well to the good leadership of the centre. A well-structured business plan enables well-identified local and centre specific targets to be shared with stakeholders. The advisory board's use of data in analysing the performance of the centre requires further development. However, the local authority has firm plans in place to provide training to develop the skills of advisory board members, to enable them to better hold the centre's leadership and management team to account. The board is passionate in their support of the centre and eager to continue to improve the centre's work.

The centre leader and her deputy have facilitated outstanding teamwork and partnership working. Staff are creative, empathetic to the needs of centre users and highly professional. They always want nothing short of the best for children, parents and carers and other centre users. Self-evaluation is accurate because the centre knows its strengths and areas for improvement well. These are incorporated fully into the business plan, which, along with strategic partnership plans, shape priorities and set challenging targets. A good start has been made to using data to improve planning but the current system does not facilitate clear analysis. Good management of resources, combined with good outcomes for centre users, ensures that the centre provides good value for money.

The effectiveness of the centre's safeguarding arrangements is outstanding with all agencies working together cohesively, in partnership and adhering to the highest standards. Record-keeping systems and risk assessments are exemplary and the centre's vetting and recruitment procedures for staff are rigorous. Discrete and highly effective support is provided to all centre users to keep them safe, including those who have been subjected to domestic violence. Outstanding partnership arrangements ensure that early intervention arrangements are strong, and this contributes significantly to keeping users safe. Staff are well-trained and safeguarding is an integral part of induction for new staff. All necessary policies are in place and equality and disability legislation is fully implemented.

*These are the grades for leadership and management*

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	2
<b>The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community</b>	2



<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>

### **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](http://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](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

### **Summary for centre users**

We inspected the Abacus Children's Centre on 9-10 March 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you for helping us to find out about your children's centre. We enjoyed talking to those of you we were able to meet.

Your children make good progress in their learning and behave well at the centre. The activities at the centre help to prepare your children successfully for the next stage of their education. You and your children are encouraged effectively to lead healthy lives.

You really enjoy and value the centre and the support it provides. We were particularly pleased to see how you developed your skills and gained confidence through attending activities at all of the centre's sites.

You explained to us how much you like and trust the staff working at the centre. Through the work that the staff perform, you and your children are guided, cared for and supported well. The way staff work in partnership with other professionals, like the health visitors, social services and the speech and language team is extremely effective. Their work together means that everybody 'goes the extra mile' to ensure that you and your families are kept extremely safe.

The centre welcomes people from all backgrounds and treats everyone equally fairly. Your centre leader and her senior staff team have good ideas about ways to improve the centre. They also enable you to make decisions and have a say in how activities are organised. The centre responds well to your requests and has continued to run some sessions, like the 'dad's group' with your support.

We have asked the centre leader and her staff to look at how they can make things even better. The most important things are to:

- Develop more detailed systems to check how well everybody who uses the centre is doing over longer periods of time.
- Use this information to plan future activities which more closely meet everybody's needs.

It was a real pleasure to meet you and your children. We hope you continue to enjoy and benefit from your time at Abacus Children's Centre.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).