

Inspection report for Acacia Children's Centre

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| Local authority | London Borough of Waltham Forest |
| Inspection number | 367670 |
| Inspection dates | 9–10 March 2011 |
| Reporting inspector | Graham Lee |

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| Centre governance | The Governing Body on behalf of the local authority |
| Centre leaders | Rosemary Buckland (headteacher) Anna Rinaldi (centre coordinator) |
| Date of previous inspection | Not previously inspected |
| Centre address | 8 Cathall Road, Leytonstone, London E11 6LF |
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| Linked school if applicable | None |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | None |

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 two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, the centre coordinator, other members of staff, key partners, representatives of the local authority and groups of parents and carers. A telephone discussion was also held with the Chair of the Governing Body.

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

Information about the centre

Acacia Children's Centre opened in 2003 as a local Sure Start Programme before amalgamating with Acacia Nursery School. It provides the full core offer of services to its community. It has two main sites within easy reach of each other. On the Cecil Road site, the centre provides 120 free nursery places for children aged 3-5 for three hours a day during term time only. In addition, it provides 44 childcare places for children aged 2-5 for 10 hours each day for 48 weeks each year. Of these places, some are reserved for two-year-olds with particular needs who are provided with 15 hours per week of free childcare. The centre is also registered to provide a holiday club for up to 30 children with additional needs aged 4-11. On the Cathall Road site, it provides a wide range of services to families in conjunction with various partners. The centre has satellite provision at Harrow Green Library, Cann Hall Baptist Church and Langthorne Health Centre. The centre is managed by a governing body on behalf of the local authority. The headteacher leads the Nursery provision and has oversight of all the centre's work, while the centre coordinator leads the work on the community provision at Cathall Road and is also responsible for the childcare at Cecil Road.

The school serves an ethnically and culturally diverse community. The largest groups are of Black African, White British and a variety of other White European heritage. Many different languages are spoken in the centre. The centre serves an area of

high deprivation with 72% of families claiming housing benefits. Most live in rented accommodation and many are in inadequate or overcrowded housing. Many children live in workless households and 23% of adults in the area are unemployed. One in three children are entitled to free school meals, which is much higher than average. Children’s skills and understanding are often low on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage and many speak little or no English.

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

Acacia is a good children’s centre at the heart of its community. It is held in high regard by users and offers outstanding care, guidance and support to its children and families. The safeguarding of children and the protection of everybody who uses the centre is of the highest priority to leaders and staff. All are welcomed whatever their background or needs. For many, the centre and its staff have provided real support in times of difficulty. As one parent put it, ‘They don’t see you as a number and they become your family and friends.’

The promotion of equality and diversity is central to the centre’s values, enshrined in its policies and evident in its day-to-day life. Staff are from a wide range of backgrounds and are representative of the community they serve. While the centre can demonstrate that it is reaching out to ever-increasing numbers of families in its diverse community, its engagement with the large number of Black African families is not as high as it is with other groups.

Good provision in the Nursery enables children to enjoy and achieve well. They make good progress, often from low starting points, and close the achievement gap significantly by the time they move on to school. The centre provides a wide range of services for its families which are of high quality and enable parents and carers to meet others in similar circumstances, to develop confidence and self-esteem and to become better parents and carers. There are a number of striking examples of parents being helped into training and back into work and thus enhancing the economic stability of their families.

The centre works extremely effectively in partnership with a range of agencies to deliver high quality services to its users. Links with health agencies are strong and the centre uses the baby clinic, for example, to register new parents and carers and to signpost them to the range of services they offer. Centre leaders work creatively to forge links with voluntary agencies to address the needs of the community. For example, it commissioned the Community Action Team to set up the fathers' group, 'Aspire', which has become a powerful voice in addressing concerns in the area.

The centre knows its users well and takes good account of their views, through surveys and feedback, in tailoring services to their needs. As a result, they can point to many examples of improvements in outcomes for children and families. Centre staff are using data with increasing effect to demonstrate that their services are being used by an increasing number of families. In relation to speech and language therapy, data are used extremely well to show the considerable benefits to children and their families and that real changes were made as a result of the work. However, centre staff are not yet routinely using the data in this way to illustrate the impact of its work in other areas.

The headteacher and the coordinator of the centre lead their respective aspects of the provision successfully and are strongly focused on improving the lives of children and families in the area. This commitment is shared by staff at all levels and, consequently, morale is high. Leaders know the centre's strengths and weaknesses well. However, plans for the future, while ambitious, are not always rooted in rigorous self-evaluation and do not set out the mechanisms by which success will be measured. Nevertheless, the centre has grown and developed considerably over the years and has had a demonstrable impact on the lives of children and their families. It is not content to rest on its laurels and has ambitious plans to spread the impact of its work still further, thus demonstrating a good capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Extend the reach of the centre so that it engages with, and meets the needs of, all of its most vulnerable families, particularly those from Black African backgrounds.
- Develop the use of data to demonstrate the impact of its services on different groups of users.
- Ensure that strategic planning is based on rigorous self-evaluation and identifies clear targets to measure with measurable success criteria.

How good are outcomes for users?

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In the Early Years Foundation Stage, children behave well and generally play in ways that are safe for themselves and other children around them, for example, when using the sand pit and climbing frame. Good supervision and reinforcement ensure they are developing a strong awareness of situations that may be potentially dangerous. Children are effectively safeguarded and parents and carers are developing a good understanding of how to keep their children safe. They told inspectors that the provision of stair gates and smoke alarms, for example, and sessions on home and safety as part of the 'You and Your Baby' programme, had been invaluable in developing their awareness.

The centre can point to some notable examples of how parents and carers facing challenging circumstances have been helped to develop their confidence and self-esteem and to improve their parenting skills. This is confirmed by the parents and carers themselves. One commented that 'The family group really helped me to pick up the pieces' and another that 'I am able to cope better with the children because I am happier and more confident.' The school works closely with social services through its care panel and children subject to the Common Assessment Framework processes are supported well. This results in improved outcomes for children, although none is currently subject to child protection plans.

At the 'Over Ones Activities', there is a good emphasis on play and physical activities, which gives children the opportunity to run and climb, and aids their physical development. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are developing a good understanding of the importance of exercise and diet in developing a healthy lifestyle. Parents and carers are also engaging well with the range of services provided by the centre in conjunction with its partners, for example the breast-feeding support group and the community dentist. The family health sessions at the 'You and Your Baby' programme also develop parents' awareness of how to keep their children healthy. The borough has high incidence of obesity and smoking amongst adults. While the centre signposts users to seek support in these areas, it is unable to demonstrate the impact of this work as there are no data currently available.

Children, including those with special educational needs and or/disabilities make good progress from their low starting points although their attainment in aspects of language development remains below average by the time they move on to school. Nevertheless, the gaps in achievement are closed significantly and school data at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage shows the increasing impact of the children's centre in providing the foundations for learning. They develop good relationships and become enthusiastic learners. Consequently, they are well prepared for the next stage of the education. Parents develop their parenting skills well through the centre's activities and many are encouraged successfully into training and employment. Indeed, some of the centre's own staff have been through this route. The centre's own surveys and all the parents spoken to indicate that they really enjoy their engagement with the centre. This was summed up by one who said, 'They provide inspiration and support for all of us'.

The centre's role is central to the life of the community and makes a major contribution to developing community cohesion. Parents and carers from a wide

range of backgrounds treat each other with respect and bonds are formed across the community as a result. Parents and carers felt that they are really listened to and that their views are fully taken into account. The Parents Forum, for example, includes representation from a range of groups and helps to shape the activities and plans of the centre.

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| 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?

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The centre knows its community well and draws on the views of users well to design and tailor its services effectively. It is making good use of data to identify the most vulnerable users in its reach area. Through its feedback systems and case studies, the centre can demonstrate that it is having a significant impact on outcomes for children and their families. The work with fathers, through 'Aspire', is enabling fathers to spend quality time with their children engaging in a range of exciting activities. It also provides a powerful voice about community issues in South Leytonstone. The centre also promotes a very popular International Women's Day which highlights employment initiatives and helps women to have fun with their children and to make informed choices about the future of their families. The monthly 'Film Fix' club is very popular and allows parents and carers to enjoy films together with their children.

The centre adapts its services well to the needs of the community and works in close partnership with other agencies to deliver them. Initial contact is often established with parents prior to the birth of children and the outreach worker at the baby clinic signposts them successfully to the centre's other services such as baby massage, 'Baby Club', the 'You and Your Baby' sessions and the breast-feeding support service. These are well attended and have a very positive impact on the outcomes for children and their families. This support continues in the pre-school years through the very well attended and well run 'Over Ones Activities', which parents and carers enthused about, one commenting, 'It is great to have this facility. Where we used to

live, there was nothing like it.’ The services meet the needs of families of many different backgrounds, although they do not engage with as many users from the Black African community as from other groups.

The work of the centre is also introduced through the very successful open days every Friday when parents and carers are invited to bring their children to the nursery, to meet other parents and carers and to be introduced to the services offered by the centre. Considerable support is given to parents and carers who are experiencing difficult circumstances through links with the Homeless Resettlement Team, for example. There is also a very popular counselling service called ‘The Listening Room’, which many parents and carers have found invaluable in times of difficulty and where ‘they really listen to you’, as one parent put it. While the centre does not provide training for parents, many have found the informal ‘Job Fit’ consultation invaluable in providing them with the support and confidence to get back into training and employment.

Outreach services are timely and effective, and rely on good sharing of information with social services and other agencies to provide support for the most vulnerable families in the community. The Family Partnerships strategy, for example, empowers parents and enables them to make the important decisions that affect their families. Many of the centre’s staff have been trained to offer this kind of support. Staff also speak many languages and inspectors saw a number of examples when this was put to good effect. All of these factors contribute to the centre’s outstanding care of its children and users.

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| The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users | 2 |
| The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users | 2 |
| The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community | 2 |
| The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community | 1 |

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The headteacher and coordinator are strongly focused on promoting a good range of services and improving outcomes for children and families in the area. They galvanise the staff to ensure high quality in all that they do. Plans for the future take full account of the views of users and involve working in close partnership with statutory and voluntary partners. However, the nursery and the outreach elements of the centre tend to work independently and their self-evaluation and development

plans are not closely harmonised. The centre makes good and often creative use of its resources. Its services are well used and it is reaching more of its vulnerable families.

Governance and accountability arrangements are largely clear. There is a strong partnership with key partners, such as social services, health and speech and language, who understand their roles well and make an important contribution to integrated provision. The renewed governing body is more involved and offers strategic support and challenge to centre leaders. The Advisory Board is an influential group representative of a wide range of interests, which offers support and a cohesive approach to the provision of services. However, lines of accountability between the two aspects of provision are not entirely clear and the governing body has yet to ensure that arrangements are in place for the professional supervision of the centre coordinator.

The inclusion of all children and their families is central to the centre's vision. It supports children with special educational needs and/or disabilities effectively to enable them to make good progress. Everybody at the centre is committed to promoting equality and diversity so that all groups of users have full access to its services. Its activities are attended by a wide spectrum of the local population and are characterised by harmonious and respectful relationships. The centre has identified that more work needs to be done to engage the Black African population and is putting strategies in place to address this issue.

The safeguarding of children and the protection of everybody who uses the centre is of the highest priority to leaders and staff. Statutory requirements are met and there are rigorous procedures in place to ensure that all staff and volunteers are subject to the appropriate government checks. Leaders and governors, however, have yet to complete safer recruitment training. Staff are fully trained in all aspects of child protection and are highly attuned to signs that may lead to concern. There are good systems for sharing information with other agencies to ensure that families in crisis are identified and that intervention is early in order to reduce the risk of harm to children. Many parents and carers spoke of the support of the centre through its counselling service, 'The Listening Room', which has contributed to improvements to the emotional health and well-being of them and their families.

The centre's partnerships with statutory and voluntary agencies are a great strength of the centre. Relationships with these partners are well established and contribute to an integrated, cohesive provision of services which has a very positive impact on the lives of the users of the centre. These partnerships are very effective in meeting the wide range of needs in the community. For example, strong links with the South Leytonstone Area Development Association have been very beneficial in supporting families in hardship, and forging links with organisations such as the Police and local council.

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| The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood | 2 |
| The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community | 2 |
| The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community | 2 |
| The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties | 2 |
| The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults | 2 |
| The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities | 2 |
| The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide | 1 |
| The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision | 2 |

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

The maintained Nursery provision and the day care was not inspected at the same time as this inspection took place. Therefore, inspectors took account of the last inspection of the nursery which took place in June 2009. This found that good leadership and provision was leading to good achievement for children and positive outcomes in their personal development. The inspection identified improvements in governance as a priority for development.

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

I would like to thank all of you who took the time to talk to us and tell us your views about the centre. Everybody we spoke to was very proud of your centre and told us what a difference it had made to their lives. We found that the centre is at the heart of the community and that its work is highly respected. All the staff really care about you all and everybody is welcomed, whatever your background or needs. Some of you told us how much you value the fact that most of the staff are from the community themselves and really understand and appreciate your issues and concerns. Staff speak a number of languages, for example, and we found a number of occasions when they were able to use these skills to help you. The centre does a great deal to bring the community together. Many of you told us what a support it has been to you and your families at times of difficulties. Others told us how it had helped you to become more confident and better parents and carers as a result.

The centre staff make sure that you and your children are all very well looked after. All the staff and volunteers have been checked to make sure they are suitable to be working with children and all have been trained on child protection. There are good systems in place to make sure that the centre works with other agencies to help you in time of need and reduce the risk of harm to children. Centre leaders take your views and concerns very seriously through feedback on questionnaires and the Parents Forum to make their services fit your needs. It is reaching out to more and more families in the community from all ethnic backgrounds. However, fewer families from the large Black African population are involved and we have asked your centre leaders to try to improve this. All of you can help by spreading the word!

You told us how much you appreciate the child care and Nursery provision. We found that the childcare helps children to settle into the nursery and that it provides them with a range of interesting and exciting things to do. This continues into the Nursery where the children make good progress in developing their early reading and writing and number skills. They also enjoy playing and making choices for themselves. They learn to get on well together and are well prepared for the time they move on to school. The support of the centre has helped a number of you to get back into training and employment and there are a number of these success stories on the staff of the centre itself. Many of you told us how much you valued this support, particularly through the advice and positive reinforcement you get in the 'Job Fit' sessions.

We found that the centre does everything it can to welcome you and to make you aware of the services it offers. It works very well in partnerships with other agencies, such as health and organisations like the Community Action Team. Some of you told us how much you appreciate the open afternoon every Friday in the nursery which first introduced you to the centre. Others of you make first contact at the baby clinic and then go on to make good use of support services such as the 'Baby Club', and the 'You and Your Baby' sessions and the breast-feeding advice. Many of you told us

how these sessions have helped to you to meet other parents with similar concerns to yourselves. They have helped you to become more confident and better parents as a result. The fathers' group, 'Aspire', has also been very successful in enabling fathers to bond with their children and to be involved in fun and exciting activities. It also provides a powerful voice about issues in the local community. Similarly, you told us how the International Women's Day is thought-provoking as well as providing you with a lot of fun along the way!

The headteacher and the centre coordinator work well together and are both focused on improving the lives of parents and carers and children in the area. This drive is shared by a very enthusiastic and committed staff. Together, they are determined to make things even better for you. They know the strengths of the centre well and put in place ambitious plans to plug any gaps that they find. We have asked them to sharpen up this planning as it is not always clear how they will measure the success. The leaders are using data about the local area well to make sure that they are reaching out to all the groups in the community. Sometimes, this is used very effectively to show the difference that their support has made. For example, they have some good information that the work of the speech and language therapist has made a real impact on many of you. We have asked the centre to start using this data in this way in other parts of work so it can show the difference its work has made to people's lives.

You told us how much the centre has grown and developed over the years. It is reaching out to more and more people and its ambitious plans show that it is in a good position to get even better.

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