

# Inspection report for The Tree House Children's Centre

---

<b>Local authority</b>	Essex
<b>Inspection number</b>	367807
<b>Inspection dates</b>	30-31 March 2011
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Jon Bowman HMI

<b>Centre governance</b>	Harlow District Council
<b>Centre leader</b>	Stacey Randall
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Centre address</b>	Parnall Road Harlow CM18 7NG
<b>Telephone number</b>	01279 436284
<b>Fax number</b>	01279 772626
<b>Email address</b>	stacy.randall@hccn.org.uk

<b>Linked school if applicable</b>	Not applicable
<b>Linked early years and childcare, if applicable</b>	The Gateway 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.

---

**Published:** April 2011



The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/), write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

This publication is available at [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/100080](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/100080).

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Royal Exchange Buildings  
St Ann's Square  
Manchester  
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

No.100080

© Crown copyright 2010



## 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 centre staff, its leadership team, centre users, members of the advisory board and partner agencies. They also held meetings with a childminder, the chair of the locality forum, the manager of the linked nursery and a representative of human resources. '

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including key policies and procedures, the centre's self evaluation, action plan, evaluation of services and data about users of the centre.

## Information about the centre

The Tree House Children's Centre is part of a network of six children's centres across the town delivered by Harlow Council and commissioned by Essex County Council. The centres are independent of each other but share some operational policies and support services, such as finance. A network manager oversees all six centres and the centre is managed by an operations manager who also manages one other centre. There is a single partnership advisory board covering all centres. The centre opened in 2001. A new building became operational in 2005. The centre is a phase one centre. A qualified teacher is based on the site, supporting the linked nursery and the centre.

Harlow is laid out as a series of neighbourhoods circling the town centre that are separated by areas of green open space. Each neighbourhood has its own public amenities including shops, health centres, schools and council neighbourhood offices. According to the indices of multiple deprivation Harlow is ranked 121 out of 354 districts in England where 1 represents the most deprived. It is believed that the ethnic profile of Harlow is changing more rapidly than in Essex as a whole and that, currently; approximately 10% of the population are from minority ethnic groups. Unemployment is high compared to the rest of Essex. Approximately 8.9% of the

area's residents are unemployed which is above the national average. Relative to the size of population, Harlow has more jobs but lower earnings than the national average. Harlow has low breastfeeding rates, but the highest rates in Essex of measles, mumps and rubella vaccination. Childhood obesity is the second highest in Essex in the Reception year. At the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, 38% of children achieve at least 78 points across the Foundation Stage Profile which is below average.

## 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 is a good children's centre. Parents and children receive good support from staff and take part in a good range of programmes. Many attend over a number of years and they gain much and develop skills and knowledge that help them in their day-to-day lives. Many parents and carers meet new people and develop long-standing friendships and relationships with each other and with staff. They speak highly of the centre and its staff.

Children develop good personal and social skills. They learn to play cooperatively and interact with others respectfully. Many children learn to listen carefully and express themselves effectively. Older children are supported well in making a smooth transition to school. Parents and carers gain good insight into their children's development that helps them offer effective support to them at home. They gain advice and guidance on a wide range of issues such as debt management, breastfeeding and on welfare and benefits. They develop their skills as parents and carers, and are supported well to make positive changes for themselves in their personal lives and achieve their goals.

The centre is well established in the community and has good numbers of families attending the activities provided. They take part in a variety of activities in a safe environment. Safety is promoted well on a day-to-day basis. Staff are vigilant and the centre provides a welcoming and safe environment for all. Managers ensure that all staff working at the centre are checked appropriately for their suitability before they commence work.

The leadership and management of the centre are good. Managers have been successful in improving the provision and in increasing the number of those with whom it works. They know the community well and tailor services successfully. The capacity to make further improvements is good. The centre evaluates the success of individual programmes and seeks the views of users regularly. These evaluations lead to programmes being adapted and changed. Information and data are not sufficiently collated to help inform the overall development of the centre. The partnership advisory board provides satisfactory oversight and accountability of the centre. It receives regular reports from the centre and network manager but its role in challenging performance is not established fully.

Partners make a good contribution to support the good outcomes that users achieve. There are good examples of where partnership working enriches the programme and the good support that users receive. Some health partners, however, do not communicate effectively with the centre and this makes planning difficult for managers.

Staff and managers at the children's centre value all users equally. They are sensitive to the needs of individuals and respond effectively to ensure that these are met. They promote well a culture of tolerance and understanding and this is reflected in the programmes delivered, the wide range of backgrounds of users and the very positive atmosphere that prevails around the centre.

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

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Strengthen the role of the partnership advisory board so that it provides greater challenge to managers.
- Collate and use data and information more effectively at the strategic level to increase the understanding of performance and aid strategic planning.
- Improve communication with health partners at the senior level to enable more effective planning of provision.

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

<b>2</b>
----------

The outcomes for users are good. Parents and carers value the centre highly and the important role it plays in their lives and those of their children. They appreciate the good support they receive from staff whom they trust. One parent said, 'There is always someone to talk to for advice - it is invaluable.' Many users have attended the centre over a number of years and have benefited from being able to attend a wide range of sessions and programmes.

Users benefit from the centre's warm, welcoming environment. For parents and

carers who are new to the area and new parents, the centre helps reduce feelings of isolation and helps them build important social networks. As one said: 'The centre motivates me to get out of the house and mix with other people in the same position as me. Being a new mum can be isolating and lonely but the centre is a bright and happy environment.'

Parents develop a broad range of knowledge and skills well so that they are better able to support their children as they grow. They increase their understanding of the importance of healthy eating and of making healthy choices for themselves and their children. One said, 'My baby never eats veg but she loves them all today!' Many report that their children are more active and spend less time in front of a computer or television screen. Users develop their understanding of different cultures through the well attended 'All around the world' group. They help staff plan the programme and, through games and activities using multi-cultural resources, parents and carers learn about people who are different from themselves. Breastfeeding is being promoted effectively. The breastfeeding peer support group trains local volunteers to promote breastfeeding in the area. Breastfeeding rates across the area have been low in the past but more recent data show a recent and improving upward trend.

Children behave well at the centre, cooperate with each other and develop their communication and social skills. The centre prepares them well for when they start school. One parent commented, 'I put the advanced education of my two young girls mainly down to bringing them here from four weeks old.' However, the most recent data from the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile show that attainment has declined. Nevertheless, young children learn to play independently. Parents and carers develop their parenting skills well and develop strategies to manage their children's behaviour and support their development effectively. Parents and carers are supported effectively in moving towards their life and career goals through developing their basic skills in English and mathematics. They become more confident in supporting their children's learning and use the skills they develop in their daily lives.

A good range of programmes and events promote safety. Staff are vigilant and active in maintaining a safe environment for users. One said: 'I have been using this centre for five years. This is a place where I feel safe because my child is safe and happy. It has made him a confident little boy.'

<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>2</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</b>	<b>2</b>

<b>positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre</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 and employment</b>	<b>2</b>

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

<b>2</b>
----------

Users' individual needs are assessed and met well. Outreach work effectively supports parents and carers to access a range of service that meet their needs and circumstances. They report increased confidence and self-esteem as a result. Users feel valued by staff. Many users develop high aspirations through attending the centre and some take on volunteering roles. The centre is committed to further developing high quality volunteering opportunities.

The needs of the local community are well known and provision is flexible and tailored effectively to respond to these. The range of services delivered meets local needs well. Partnerships extend the breadth of provision. They enable users to access different services. Universal provision has acted as an effective gateway for parents and carers to get more specialist help and support; for example, on domestic violence and relationships. The needs of some groups are met through district-wide programmes such as those of teenage parents.

Despite a reduction in the budget, core services have been retained. Health visitors effectively promote the services on offer by providing information to parents and carers, and gaining their consent for the centre to contact them. The centre is reaching a good and increasing proportion of parents and carers from within the area. Baby health-check clinics and work with the outreach team have enabled better identification of, and work with, families who are vulnerable due to their circumstances.

There is a good focus on learning and development and this is embedded in the centre's ethos. Bright displays enliven the environment and comments boxes enable users to let their views be known. They reflect on and evaluate the programmes on offer regularly. The centre responds well to the views and questions of parents and carers through the regular 'You said – We did' display. Users are involved in shaping programmes such as the 'Maths through Cookery' course which resulted from parents and carers requesting cooking activities. This led to some parents and carers progressing to take part in an accredited level 1 course in mathematics.

<b>The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users</b>	<b>2</b>

<b>The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>

## **How effective are the leadership and management?**

<b>2</b>
----------

Leadership and management are good. Managers have high ambitions for users and ensure that, with staff, they secure good outcomes. Annual priorities to develop the centre have been achieved well, and day-to-day management is good. Staff receive regular and appropriate supervision and appraisal. There has been a good focus on building the capacity of staff to better support and advise parents and carers. For example, staff offer support for breastfeeding and the development of children's communication skills. Resources are of good quality, and there is a good focus on achieving value for money. A useful audit tool has brought greater rigour to programme planning and helped staff to reshape provision so that a wider range of needs are met.

Self assessment is largely accurate. The centre routinely collects a range of data, information on the programme and the community, evaluations and the views of users. These are used well to shape new initiatives and refine existing programmes. However, the centre does not use data and information at the strategic level effectively enough to inform the partnership advisory board and strategic planning. Staff have not been trained fully to utilise the potential of the management information system in use.

The centre has clear governance structures. The partnership advisory board has a clear vision to provide challenge and impetus to service development. The board receives regular management reports. However, its role in providing challenge is not yet sufficiently developed. A locality forum for the centre is made up of a good variety of agencies that serve the reach area and service users. Information is shared well so that local partners are aware of each others services. The meetings consider community issues and needs and this has successfully led to new initiatives being undertaken.

The partnership advisory board and managers have reorganised provision in light of reductions in the budget. They have ensured that the focus of the centre is on core services. Consideration has been given as to how services operate in a changing climate and users' needs continue to be met. There are good partnerships at the operational level and staff from different agencies are proactive in working together and in the local community. At the strategic level, the engagement of health partners is not as consistent. Poor communication by some health partners has led to a lack of clarity as to the status of some services that have been delivered and the rationale for withdrawing others. This makes planning difficult for local managers.

Users are generally consulted effectively and their views help shape the local programme. Parents and carers express high levels of satisfaction with the services



they receive. However, some expressed dissatisfaction with the closure of the café and the extent to which they were consulted about it.

Safeguarding is given a high priority by the centre. Safe recruitment and selection procedures ensure that offers of employment are not confirmed until references are obtained and criminal record bureau (CRB) checks are completed satisfactorily. Risk assessments are undertaken on all activities. All staff have undertaken safeguarding training and know what action to take should they have any concerns about the welfare and safety of users.

Inclusion is actively promoted and discrimination tackled effectively. Community needs are identified and met well. Opening hours are being revised so that a wider range of needs can be met. A high proportion of users are from minority ethnic backgrounds and the centre has been extremely active in reaching out to the local traveller community. Programmes have been developed to broaden users' understanding of diverse communities and develop tolerant attitudes. A group for families from a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds meets at the centre and helps families to access the centre's programmes. The centre has a single equalities scheme and evaluations of the centre have led to a range of appropriate actions being undertaken.

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<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>2</b>
<b>The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities</b>	<b>3</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>3</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**

The inspectors considered the findings of the last inspection of the link nursery 'The Gateway' when the provision was judged to be good in meeting the needs of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

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 Tree House Children's Centre on 30-31 March 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you for your help and contribution to the inspection and our findings. When we were on-site we spoke to you and read your comments at the front desk, on the tree and in the reviews of programmes. You were very positive about the centre, its staff, the work it does and the ways in which you and your children have been helped by the centre. We found it to be a good centre and it serves the local community well. There is a good range of activities and plenty of help on offer from the staff so that you and your children benefit from attending. Many of you have attended a number of different programmes and the centre has played an important part in your children's development.

Leadership and management of the centre are good. Managers work well to make sure that the activities on offer and the help and support you receive are of good quality. They review the work regularly and ask you for your views on the centre. These reviews are good but are not gathered together to inform the partnership advisory board, who oversee the centre, of the strengths of the centre and areas for improvement. The partnership advisory board is not sufficiently active in challenging the centre to improve further. A number of other organisations help in delivering services at the centre, but some health partners do not let managers know about their plans. The centre is a safe environment for you and your children. Managers and the staff value all who use the centre equally and we are confident that they will make further improvements. We have asked the centre to strengthen the role of the partnership advisory board so that it provides greater challenge to managers. We have also asked the centre to collate and use data and information more effectively and to improve communication between its partners.

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

