

Inspection report for Children's Centre at the Mall

Local authority	Luton
Inspection number	367777
Inspection dates	28–29 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Maureen York HMI

Centre governance	The trustees of the Children's Centre at The Mall (Luton)
Centre leader	Annamarie Finn
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Children's Centre at the Mall (Luton) URN 105261

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.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 3 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector

The inspectors held meetings with governors and managers, users and a range of partners.

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

Information about the centre

The centre is in the middle of Luton and based in a large open-plan unit within an indoor shopping centre. It is in an area of high deprivation. Nearly 18% of adults claim benefits and this is higher than the Luton average. The population is transient with a high number of families temporarily housed before being moved out of the area. Many are in high rise flats. Most children start early years provision with knowledge and skills below those expected for their age. Over a third of those attending the centre on a regular basis are lone parents. There is an outdoor play area which is a roof garden on top of the multi-storey car park. The local population is ethnically diverse with a third from Eastern Europe.

This phase one centre was designated in 2007 and the reach area has recently been extended as part of a phase three development. The centre provides the full core offer. The local authority has a service-level agreement with the Pre-school Learning Alliance (PSLA) who has appointed trustees to oversee the governance of the centre. There is a management committee which acts as an advisory board and has

representation from the local authority, the shopping centre management, parents and the PSLA. The local authority is currently consulting on a proposed reorganisation of all children's centres in the borough.

The centre has registered full day care and a shoppers' crèche. The centre manager is in a temporary position and has been in post for two months following the resignation of the previous centre leader.

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

The Children's Centre at the Mall provides a good service for young children and their families and some aspects of their work are outstanding. Good outcomes are underpinned by good provision and effective partnerships that help to ensure that the most vulnerable families receive outstanding support when they most need it. The staff know and understand the needs of the community and families very well and provide a welcoming and stimulating environment in which children and parents learn and have fun. Users speak of the centre as, 'A good place to be' where the support is 'second to none'.

The centre's approach to safeguarding is outstanding, especially for families who experience major difficulties, and it makes a real difference to their lives. This is supported by an effective partnership with social care services. The centre also works effectively with a range of partners to deliver services which are targeted to meet the needs of this transient community where parents and carers can feel socially isolated.

Good-quality support and advice is helping families to make healthy food choices, and support for those with additional needs is good. Children make good progress in their learning and are well prepared for the next stages of their development. The provision of good adult courses is also developing parents' and carers' confidence in helping their children to learn while courses on early years are providing them with good-quality information. Such support is helping to combat the negative experiences which some parents and carers have had and is helping them to learn

and have fun with their children.

Good use is made of users' views in developing the provision. There are good opportunities for parents and carers to express their views and they feel that they are listened to. Self evaluation is accurate but the evaluation of individual services is not used systematically. As a result, planning for improvement does not set clear and measurable targets by which staff can judge whether or not they have been successful across the centre.

Good work with partners is helping to improve the preparedness for work and users have opportunities to develop their interview skills and to re-engage with education. Value for money is good and accommodation is very well used. Leadership and management is good, staff work well together and they feel well supported. Managers know and understand how the centre can improve further and communication has improved since the recent restructure; all staff feel more involved with decision making. For these reasons the capacity to improve is good.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Link the development plan to strategic priorities and provide measurable targets.
- Improve evaluation by linking it to outcomes and using it to plan for improvement.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Effective partnerships and well-planned provision are leading to good outcomes. Courses such as 'Fun with Food' together with individual support from a dietician are helping families to make healthier food choices. As a result, more families bring healthier snacks and packed lunches into the centre. Initiatives such as a toothbrush amnesty and participation in National Smile Week are also helping families to engage with the wider health agenda and more are now registering with local dentists and doctors. Challenges do remain; for example, to reduce obesity levels and to further improve dental health.

Early support provided through 'Bumps to Babies' courses helps to develop healthy attitudes in pregnancy and over half of the participants continue to breastfeed six weeks after the birth. Nearly all expectant mothers stop smoking during pregnancy. This provision also helps to engage families and maintain their attendance at the centre; over three quarters of those who come to health-related courses continue to attend the centre after the course has finished. Staff are trained to identify children who have additional needs early and this helps to ensure that effective support is provided for them. The centre plans effectively so that these children can have a smooth transition into the next phase of their education.

The support provided to families and children to keep them safe and to meet their welfare concerns is outstanding. There is a significant strength in the quality of support for vulnerable families and those in crisis, which results in some children being removed from the child protection register. This is achieved through good links with social care services, an emphasis on improving parenting skills and the effective targeting of support to meet individual needs. Parents also feel safe to share sensitive information because they know that they will be listened to with respect. One parent reflected that the centre is, '...a lifeline; sometimes I was here all day when things were really bad.'

The displays in the centre reflect the level of importance which the centre attaches to safety. It is clear who to contact if a problem occurs and daily procedures when families come into the centre are clear and understood by staff and users. The centre leader and family worker are trained to use the Common Assessment Framework, although by the time some vulnerable families arrive their needs are often much greater and they are already receiving extra support. Good collaboration with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) means that home-safety checks are made regularly and, as much local accommodation is temporary, checks are made each time families are moved. Children feel safe in the centre and parents have confidence in the staff to look after them.

Most children make good progress in their learning from their starting points and the tracking of individual progress is good. The centre and the nursery work closely together to ensure that children are well prepared for school and the centre has received national recognition for its delivery of 'Every Child a Talker' courses. Parents and carers who attended the course on early years feel better informed and are more confident in being able to help their children. They speak of learning more about how their children learn and that they themselves enjoyed acquiring new play skills. Some users have poor experiences of education and the centre is providing them with opportunities to develop their own skills. There is an emphasis on enjoyment and staff are inventive in their approaches. The inspectors observed parents, carers and children having fun with shaving foam in the messy play area and a parent told us, 'I have learned to play again.'

Users are actively involved in the life of the centre. There is strong parent representation on the management committee and, as one parent commented, 'I love being part of it. They get everyone involved. There is so much respect for everyone.' Regular meetings are held to gather parents' and carers' views and staff are responsive and willing to make changes. A recent course for fathers was not well attended and feedback showed that it was too formal. As a result, the general approach was changed and a circus visit was included. Take-up has now increased.

The centre hosts regular sessions provided by Jobcentre Plus, together with support from the centre staff. This is helping to improve users' readiness for employment. A jobs board is displayed and users get help with writing their curriculum vitae (CV's). In some cases, they are also helped to improve their interview skills. While staff are trained to help some users with appropriate benefits advice, including support for

form-filling and benefits interviews, other parents have gone on to further education and one has enrolled in the Open University. The centre supports adults in developing their own skills and some parents who attended the centre with their own children are now working in the drop-in provision.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

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

How good is the provision?

2

Provision is good. Service provision is based on an accurate analysis of need which is achieved through effective use of data supplemented by very effective outreach work and family support. This results in an outstanding and sensitive understanding of the community and means that the services at the centre meet users' needs well. Alienation and loneliness are identified as key features of the local area and many users have negative experiences of authority. As a result, they respond well to the flexibility of the services offered and the informality of the staff. 'We realise that we are not alone and that others have similar experiences.' Many people in the community move in and out of the area and it is difficult for them to attend structured courses over a period of weeks so this flexible approach is welcomed. As a result there is a good take-up of services.

The daily 'drop-in' provision couples advice and support for parents with a daily 'Stay and Play' activity for the children. Users can arrive at any time and learn from the good modelling of play activities and from the emphasis placed on positive relationships. Staff are good at creating a climate where families can have fun and which also promotes language and literacy well. This leads to good outcomes for users. One parent commented about the centre, 'I have used it so much that it feels like another part of my family.'

Provision is adapted as a result of reflection and review. Both the timing and delivery of courses have been changed to reflect issues raised by the parents and carers. In a recent feedback meeting, participants on the 'Pram to Parent' course said that they

now look at things differently and as a consequence are more successful in coping with difficult behaviour. Although individual courses are evaluated, there is no overall evaluation of the centre. Consequently, evaluation is not always used to inform development planning.

The centre provides outstanding support to the most vulnerable families. They plan effectively to meet the needs of those with a special educational need and provide speedy support to those going through periods of crisis. After a consultation with young parents, the centre realised that formal groups did not meet their needs as they simply stopped attending. The centre adapted its services and good quality support is now targeted through the drop-in sessions and there is improved contact with this group of young parents.

The centre responds well to new challenges. The reach area was recently extended and the centre quickly established a mother and toddlers group there. Work with communities from Eastern Europe is also good and the centre makes sure that native speakers are available to support these families when they attend. The centre is also effective in signposting users to other services and centres if they cannot meet particular needs. Partners say that the role of the centre is vital in enabling them to do a good job. Course evaluations indicate that users enjoy what the centre has to offer. 'Anything the centre puts on... I am willing to take part'.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Outcomes are good as a result of effective leadership and governance. Services from the centre are well integrated and there is good collaborative planning with a range of partners. This is supported by a good understanding of strengths and areas for development. Strategic priorities translate into effective partnerships on the ground which leads to improved outcomes for families. However, the centre's development plan does not reflect these links; it is too descriptive and has no timescales. The management committee which acts as an advisory board has good representation from the local authority, the shopping centre management and parents.

The centre leader has been in post for two months following the sudden resignation

of the previous manager. The position is temporary as the centre is part of a local authority review but, despite this uncertainty, staff morale is high. Day-to-day management is good with regular performance reviews and good professional supervision. Communication is strong with regular senior leadership meetings and effective delegation of responsibilities. The team approach ensures that there is a shared responsibility for delivering good outcomes. Monitoring is effective and the PSLA provides good-quality support for staff who can face difficult situations when dealing with the complexity of need presented by some families.

Safeguarding is outstanding. Very good policies and procedures are implemented by knowledgeable staff who take exceedingly good care of parents, carers and children while they are in the centre. This is especially so when children use the garden. Risk assessments are made daily to ensure users safety in the rooms and respect for others is actively promoted. As one parent commented, 'I can see that everyone is treated fairly'.

Financial management is outstanding and activity planning sheets ensure that budgetary considerations are built into service development from the beginning. Effective needs analysis supports good value for money. When new staff were recently recruited, managers were quick to spot an appropriate skills match with a Polish speaker. As a result there is now no need to use the interpreters' service.

The centre makes excellent use of the available accommodation and provides a warm and welcoming environment for families. Resources reflect a variety of languages and cultures which supports the users' understanding of diversity. There is a buzz of lively activity and parents and carers say that they feel comfortable and safe. The centre is also creative in meeting the challenges posed by being in such an urban environment. A roof garden has been developed on top of the multi-storey car park which provides outdoor experiences for children, many of whom live in high-rise flats. For some, it provides their only experience of seeing and exploring growing things.

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	1
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	1

adults	
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	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	2

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

Information was used from the inspection of the registered day care which took place at the same time as the inspection of the children's centre. This was judged overall as good and safeguarding was outstanding

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Children's Centre at the Mall (Luton) on the 28th and 29th June 2011. We judged the centre as good and some of what they do is outstanding.

During the inspection we held meetings with the centre's staff and some of the other people who work from the centre. We were very pleased to speak with some of you about the centre and the activities it provides for you. I would like to thank all of those who came specially to talk to us. We took account of all the people we met when we made our judgements about the centre and we also looked at some of the evaluations you had completed.

Staff at the centre know the community very well indeed. All of you told us how much you appreciate the support that the centre provides to you, especially in times of difficulty. You value the flexibility of the drop-in sessions and welcome the friendly and warm atmosphere there. As one parent put it, 'I could not have coped without them; they always found out the information I needed'. You enjoy learning and playing with your children in 'Stay and Play' sessions and you say how much you

have learnt from attending other courses at the centre. In particular, many of you told us how the staff give you confidence that you are not alone and that help and advice is available. Indeed, many of you commented on the pleasure of being able to learn alongside your children. The centre staff know you very well and they make sure that all members of the community are welcome.

There is a good partnership with the health service and advice on healthy eating and cooking is enjoyable and informative. We also saw how much you enjoy the range of activities and how much you appreciate the support you receive to achieve more educational qualifications. In particular, many of you commented on the help you get with writing CVs. The centre listens carefully to what you say about the courses it provides and will make changes as a result of listening to you. We have asked the centre to make more use of these evaluations to plan for the future.

The centre is outstanding in providing a safe environment for you and your children. They work closely with other partners to make sure you get the help you need at times of crisis. The safety checks provided in the home are also effective in helping children to stay safe at home. The centre makes very good use of space and has made a garden on the car park roof which provides your children with exciting opportunities to play outside.

We think that the centre makes a real difference to the lives of families in the community. We wish the centre and you and your families all the very best for the future.

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