

Inspection report for Beech Hill Children's Centre

Local authority	Luton
Inspection number	367746
Inspection dates	12–13 July 2011
Reporting inspector	Graham Sims

Centre governance	Governing Body of Beech Hill Primary School
Centre leader	Debbie Boshier
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
Centre address	Dunstable Road
	Luton
	LU4 8BW
Telephone number	01582 393440
Fax number	01582 487680
Email address	dcase@beechhillprimary.com

Linked school if applicable	Beech Hill Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Beech Hill Children's Centre 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 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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with: the centre's manager, manager designate and staff; representatives from the management board and the local authority; partners who provide services at the centre; and a group of parents and carers who use the centre. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Beech Hill Children's Centre was designated as a phase one children's centre in May 2008 to provide the full core offer. It is located in a self-contained suite of rooms at the end of Beech Hill Primary School. The local authority has delegated the responsibility for governance of the children's centre to the governing body of Beech Hill Primary School. The governing body receives advice and guidance from a management board, which comprises of two governors, a representative from the local authority, the manager and deputy manager of the nursery, the children's centre manager and coordinator, and two parent representatives. The headteacher of the primary school is also the manager of the children's centre and acts as chair of the management board. She delegates some aspects of the day-to-day management to the centre coordinator. A full-time centre manager has been appointed and will take up her post in September.

The children's centre and Beech Hill Primary School operate as a tightly integrated unit. A number of staff, such as the family support workers, are employed by the school, but spend much of their time working for the children's centre, visiting

families and running activities, such as 'Stay and Play' sessions. An outreach worker from the neighbourhood social care team spends one day a week making home visits on behalf of the centre. Day-care provision for children aged two to four is provided by a privately run nursery located within the children's centre. Those requiring day-care provision for younger children are referred to other providers. The centre works with many different partners who provide a wide range of services at the centre, such as training courses for adults and various health-related activities.

The centre serves a geographically small, but densely populated area on the borders of Dallow and Biscot wards in South Luton. The area is one of significant deprivation where unemployment and the proportion of families who are dependent on workless benefits are well above the national average. Much of the housing is used for temporary accommodation and is often overcrowded. Almost all families living within the reach area are from minority ethnic backgrounds, with the great majority being of Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage. Most families speak English as an additional language. The skills and knowledge with which children enter Early Years Foundation Stage settings are well below those expected nationally for their age.

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

Beech Hill Children's Centre is undoubtedly having a big impact on the lives of the many adults and children who use its services. As one of the many users who spoke to the inspection team said, 'I feel that the children's centre has made a big difference to the community.' Despite operating with a very small team of staff, the centre offers a wide range of activities which are improving health outcomes for families. It also provides good learning opportunities for parents, carers and their children, and helps adults to gain qualifications and become better-integrated members of the local community. The centre works well with many partners to provide these services. The overall level of care, guidance and support is outstanding. Staff know the families who use the centre very well and are extremely responsive to their needs, often adapting services and frequently signposting users to other services to meet these needs.

Under the determined leadership of the centre manager, the centre has improved markedly over the last three years, indicating good capacity for sustained improvement. Because of the input of the centre manager and the children's centre teacher, staff have a much clearer understanding than before of how to plan activities to meet specific needs and of the importance of measuring the impact of the activities which they provide. While still being tightly integrated with, and sharing staff who are employed by, the primary school, the centre now has its own self-contained suite of rooms where most of the activities take place. Access to the centre and from the centre to the school is controlled well, reflecting good safeguarding practice for all users and for pupils in the school. All of the necessary checks are carried out to ensure all who work in the centre are suitable people for working with young children and vulnerable adults, and meticulous records are kept for all employees. One parent, reflecting the views of others, said, 'The children's centre feels a safe place to be.' There is a strong commitment to equality of opportunity, and the centre works hard to integrate users from many different nationalities into the local community. Many language courses are offered to help the large number of parents and carers who speak very little English to improve their communication skills. The centre's activities foster friendships across different racial groups, helping to break barriers and combat discrimination.

The centre's evaluation of its own performance is accurate and points the way forward. Despite uncertainties over funding, the governing body has taken the decision to strengthen the leadership of the centre by appointing a full-time centre manager and has secured a highly skilled and knowledgeable person to fulfil this role. Monitoring of the centre's performance by the local authority is rigorous, but there is the possibility of conflict of interest on the management board as this is chaired by the centre manager. The membership of the board does not yet reflect the wide range of partners who currently work with the centre.

Given the small number of staff employed by the centre and the large number of users who access the centre's services, the value for money provided by the centre is outstanding. Staff are, nevertheless, stretched to the limit and do not always have the time or the necessary information to ensure that the centre is having maximum impact by reaching all of those who could benefit from the centre's services. The local authority's long-promised data and information management system has yet to materialise. In the meantime, spearheaded by the centre's highly dedicated administrative officer, the centre collates and shares whatever data and information it can. However, the range of incoming information, such as data concerning live births within the reach area, is insufficient to be absolutely certain that the centre is identifying all of the most pressing needs within the area.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Work with the local authority and the health authorities to implement a more effective system for collating information and data to enable the centre to evaluate more thoroughly the impact it is having within the reach area and to

identify hard-to-reach families who are not yet using the centre's services.

- In collaboration with the local authority, explore ways of increasing the staffing levels within the centre in order to broaden the scope of the centre's activities and its impact on families within the reach area.
- Strengthen the governance of the centre by ensuring that the management board is chaired by someone who is not an employee of the centre and its membership includes representation from a broader range of external partners.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The systems for collecting and analysing data are not yet sophisticated enough for the centre to show precisely what impact it is having on outcomes for users. Nevertheless, evaluations of activities, discussions with users and notes from case studies show that all of the centre's activities and the individual support and counselling of the centre's staff are, indeed, having a positive impact. The centre works closely with various partners from the health authorities to improve the physical, mental and emotional health of families. It provides activities, such as aerobic sessions for parents and carers, and the 'Grow, Cook and Eat' project for families, to help adults and children to develop healthy lifestyles. Statistics show that there are high levels of diabetes in adults and of dental decay in children. As a result, the centre helps families to register with local dentists and facilitates glucose tolerance testing clinics for expectant mothers, where mothers are also informed of the importance of breastfeeding. Over the past 18 months, there has been a 10% increase in infants being breastfed at six to eight weeks from birth and a reduction in the obesity levels of Reception-age children.

Comprehensive safeguarding policies, risk assessments for all activities and welcome packs which require new users to sign a safeguarding commitment all help to ensure the safety of users within the centre. Family support workers carry out home visits to provide support and information. As a result of these visits, they make referrals to partner agencies, especially where there are concerns about any aspect of safety. Staff are trained in the use of the Common Assessment Framework and use this effectively with other partners to improve outcomes for the most vulnerable. Good collaboration with health visitors and staff from the school ensure that the 'Safe at Home' scheme has been highly successful in raising parents' awareness of home-safety issues and improving their ability to keep children safe from accidents in the home. Almost 50 vulnerable families have accessed equipment to reduce the risk of injury over the last year.

Historically, the levels of skills and knowledge of children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage in Beech Hill has been low. The appointment of a children's centre teacher has strengthened provision and children's skills, knowledge and ability have improved markedly over the last two years, as shown by the levels reached by children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The centre works hard to ensure as many children as possible access funded pre-school places, and children who attend the nursery make good progress in acquiring skills, knowledge and

abilities. 'Stay and Play' sessions help parents and carers to understand how best to support their children's development, and the number attending these sessions and using the toy library has increased markedly over the last two years. Children who are slow in developing speaking skills have shown dramatic improvement after participating in 'Every Child a Talker' sessions. The centre has been instrumental in helping many adults to gain formal qualifications or to take part in courses which develop their skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology. One parent said, 'The centre has given me the chance to get qualifications that I did not think was possible.'

The centre has been instrumental in developing community relationships and helping people from different backgrounds to get on well together and is becoming a hub around which the lives of many people revolve. One parent said, 'The children's centre has become a big part of our lives.' Adults and children treat each other with respect. Mutually supportive attitudes are very much in evidence as those with greater fluency in English are seen to help and encourage those who are developing their English speaking skills. A number of parents and carers volunteer to help, for example, in the nursery and this, in turn, develops further interest in gaining qualifications. The centre takes every possible opportunity to gather users' views of the centre and the activities provided, and uses these views to shape future activities. The parents' forum is developing well, although the concept of expressing views openly is foreign to many. The centre works hard to facilitate the exchange of views by providing translation at the parents' forum. Two parents represent the views of others on the management board.

Children are making good progress in developing skills which will provide them with a secure start to their primary education. A very large group of parents and carers met with inspectors to tell them how much the centre had helped them to improve their skills and, in a number of cases, to gain qualifications and employment. Weekly coffee afternoons and an 'Internet Café' provide opportunities for users to access assistance in translating or completing application forms. The family support workers also provide help with the completion of housing bids and accessing job vacancies on-line. The take-up of childcare is low, but reflects cultural tradition within the area where extended families look after children to enable parents to go out to work.

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	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?

2

Although there are gaps in the information and data which the centre receives from the local authority and health services, staff at the centre work hard to build as comprehensive a picture as they can of the needs of adults and children within their reach area. For example, the centre does not receive information about new births, but ensures that health visitors distribute information about the centre and consent forms for parents to complete when they visit expectant mothers. All consent forms which are returned to the centre and any referrals from other services are followed up by the family support workers and the outreach worker. They gather as much information as they can to help shape the centre's services and ensure that the centre is meeting the most pressing needs within the community. Door-to-door outreach and home visits ensure that the centre contacts as many hard-to-reach and vulnerable families as possible. Families' needs are reviewed at weekly team meetings and the centre is particularly good at referring families on to the most appropriate services to help meet their needs. Surveys, carried out through questionnaires and consultations with stakeholders, also help to shape the services based on the needs of the community. Children's progress is monitored well through progress trackers, and children who may require additional support are identified through activities at 'Stay and Play' sessions. Verbal feedback from parents and carers and evaluation forms completed at the end of each course help the centre to measure the impact of its services.

The centre provides a wide variety of services, ranging from henna and beauty classes, sewing and English tuition, through parenting, childcare and first-aid courses to health services, such as baby massage, a glucose tolerance testing clinic and smoking cessation classes. The centre seeks to provide services which address the key priorities which have been identified within the reach area, such as worklessness, temporary housing, domestic abuse and poor health and nutrition. Although there are plans to do so in September, the centre does not yet provide its own antenatal classes, but expectant mothers are referred to a nearby centre where these take place. However, the delay in the local authority introducing its new software system means that it is difficult to share information between children's centres in the Luton area where adults access services outside of their area. Users evaluate the courses highly. One parent, representing the views of many, said, 'We are very happy with the classes which the centre provides.' Participation rates are generally high, although attendance varies and is often adversely affected by wet weather.

Provision for children's learning has improved since the appointment of a children's centre teacher who has spent a great deal of time working with the nursery this year. She also plans 'Stay and Play' sessions to promote individualised, purposeful learning and engage parents in their children's development. Adults make good use

of the training opportunities and other support which are available for them at the centre. One parent said, 'We get lots of advice and support about other issues, such as housing.'

The quality of care, guidance and support provided by the centre is excellent. This starts as soon as users receive a friendly greeting when they enter the centre. The support is particularly good for the most vulnerable families. All users speak very highly of the support they have received from the centre. 'They are always there when you need them,' said one. Another said, 'We feel that they listen to us and they always act on our feedback.' Staff are very aware of cultural issues and treat users with consideration and sensitivity. Staff work hard to identify those who are hard to reach and to ensure that no groups within the reach area are overlooked. Although the quality of care provided is excellent, and the centre reaches a high proportion of families within its area, the centre's ability to provide further services and to have an even greater impact is limited by the small number of staff employed by the centre.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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 centre has undoubtedly improved greatly over the last three years as a result of the centre manager's drive and the support of the staff, the local authority and the management board. The day-to-day management of the centre is efficient and effective. Governance arrangements are good and, although the local authority delegates responsibility for the centre to the governing body of the primary school, officers maintain good oversight of what is happening at the centre and provide a good level of challenge and support. The centre's self-evaluation is thorough and accurate, and there is a good understanding of what could be improved. The centre provides extremely good value for money as it makes very good use of its available resources and analyses its costs and expenditure carefully. Staff would like to do even more to help meet the considerable needs within the community, but are unable to extend their high-quality support without more staff. The drive and ambition to improve further are seen in the appointment of a new full-time centre manager.

There is a strong commitment to safeguarding, as seen in the reorganisation of the centre's accommodation. The consequent improvements ensure that no unauthorised person can access the centre and adults in the centre cannot wander into the school.

The centre prioritises its time to ensure the safety of the most vulnerable members of the community through providing one-to-one support or involving other partners. The commitment to promoting equality is also strong, as seen in the many opportunities for adults to improve their language and communication skills to help them to become better-integrated members of the community. The time at which child health clinics are held has been changed to coincide with attendance at the mosque. This provides further opportunities for fathers to participate and has led to a rapid growth in attendance. Diversity is celebrated well as the centre recognises and promotes different cultural traditions. One parent said, 'They also do different cultural activities and those help people to understand about each other.'

Partnerships with other agencies are strong and enable the centre to provide a wide range of additional support for families and children at many different levels. Almost 50 staff employed by partnership agencies work with the centre, including: a baby signing specialist; midwives; health visitors; dieticians; college tutors; speech therapists; and representatives from Jobcentre Plus, the school library service, and the oral health team. The local authority's support is challenging, yet helpful. Partners find staff at the centre to be helpful and cooperative and, at an individual level, there is a strong desire to work together. Bureaucracy and financial constraints provide the main obstacles to these partnerships being even stronger through, for example, more-open sharing of information, more-speedy implementation of improvements to systems or the allocation of further resources to fund additional workers.

Within the limitations imposed by its available resources, the centre works hard to support and encourage the wider community to engage with its services. It has been conspicuously successful in engaging such a large proportion of the local community. That over 30 parents and carers should make a special visit to the centre to let the inspection team know how much they value the centre's input into their lives and the support they receive, is testimony to the centre's growing impact on this ever-changing, challenging area of South Luton.

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	2

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

Inspectors met with the lead inspectors carrying out the concurrent inspections of Beech Hill Primary School and Beech Hill Children's Centre Nursery to discuss the impact that provision in these two settings is having on outcomes for the children's centre. The leadership and management, provision and outcomes in both settings were judged to be good, thus mirroring the judgements made about the children's centre.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Beech Hill Children's Centre on 12–13 July 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

We really appreciated the fact that so many of you came to meet us during the inspection to tell us how much the centre means to you and how much it has helped you to improve your lives. We were very moved by many of your stories. Your views helped to confirm our conclusions about the centre which are set out below.

The centre is led and managed well. The centre manager, in particular, and all the staff show a strong determination to make the centre work. Although there is only a small number of staff, they work effectively together. The safeguarding of children and your families is a high priority for the staff, as can be seen with the measures taken not so long ago to improve the centre and to ensure that no unauthorised people have access to you or your children while in the centre. There is a strong commitment to ensuring equality of opportunity. This is seen in the way the centre arranges opportunities for you to learn English or assists you with the completion of application forms. The centre is also very sensitive to your different cultural traditions and has been instrumental in helping many of you from different cultural backgrounds to get to know each other better. The centre works well with a wide range of other agencies who run courses at the centre or to whom they can refer you for specialist services.

The staff at the centre work very hard to get to know as many of you as they possibly can and to understand your needs and concerns. They collect as much information as they can in order to identify which services would be of most help to the community. The centre provides a good range of services, activities and opportunities which meet your needs well. These help you and your children to learn new skills in an enjoyable way. As a result of the centre's work, many of you have seen improvements in your lives and those of your children and families. For example, there are many activities at the centre which help you to develop healthy lifestyles. Many people appreciate the opportunity to receive health advice at the centre. The centre also works hard to keep you and your children safe, for example, through arranging home visits under the 'Safe at Home' scheme which has provided some of you with safety equipment. There are many good opportunities for you and your children to learn new skills, and many of you told us how the centre has helped you to gain new qualifications. Your children learn well in the nursery, and the opportunities provided at 'Stay and Play' sessions provide you with new ideas to help develop your children's learning at home. As a result of the centre's input, some of you have gone on to find employment. The centre encourages you to contribute your thoughts and ideas, either through feedback on the sessions you attend or through the parents' forum. Some of you find it hard to do this, but it is worth persevering as the centre welcomes your views and uses them to ensure the services which it provides are the services which you want and need.

The centre is always keen to improve and has appointed a new full-time centre manager who takes up her post in September. Staff would like to do even more to help you, but their ability to do this is restricted by the availability of staff and, to a certain extent, by a lack of information about who is living in the area and when new babies are born. We have asked the centre to work with the local authority and the health authorities to explore ways of providing more staff and an even better flow of information. We have also asked the local authority to speed up the implementation of a new information system to make the sharing of information easier for staff, especially in cases where people do not attend the children's centre which is closest to them. The centre is managed well by the local authority, the governing body of Beech Hill Primary School and the management board. To strengthen the work of the centre, we feel it would be helpful to extend the membership of the management board to include more partners and to ensure that somebody other than the centre manager chairs this board in order to preserve impartiality.

We hope that your children's centre will continue to provide you with good, or even better, service in the future.

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