

Inspection report for Littlebury Children's Centre

Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	384197
Inspection dates	26–27 July 2011
Reporting inspector	Wendy Ratcliff HMI

Centre governance	Watford and District YMCA
Centre leader	Christine Smith-Read
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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 is the first inspection of the centre. This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, the director of operations and chief executive from the lead agency (YMCA), members of the advisory board, staff, local authority representatives and partner agencies, including representatives from the health service. They had informal discussions with parents, carers and children.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation, including key policies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its operational plan, action plan, evaluations and data about people who use the centre.

Information about the centre

Littlebury Children's Centre was designated in October 2007 as a phase two centre and is run by Watford and District YMCA on behalf of the local authority. It is based in a church hall and shares the premises with other community groups, who use the hall each evening and at weekends. This means centre staff have to set up and clear away equipment each day. The centre offers services for young children and their parents and carers. These include a weekly health clinic run from the centre, family support including outreach work. The centre has links to Jobcentre Plus. The very large majority of services are delivered from the centre but some are delivered from community venues.

The children's centre serves an area that is ethnically, socially and economically diverse. The centre is situated in one of the more deprived areas of the community it serves. Overall, the centre's catchment is one of the 70% most deprived areas nationally. There are 939 children under five in the reach area and around 13% have been identified as living in poverty. There are approximately 9% of families dependant on workless benefits. The largest ethnic groups within the reach area are White British and Asian. There are smaller percentages of other minority ethnic groups, including Black families and an increasing number of White European

families. Several languages other than English are represented among centre users, the most common of which are Urdu and Polish. The levels of skill shown by children when they start early years provision are below those expected for their age.

The centre has recently undergone a change in the management structure. The previous manager left in December 2010 and a new manager took up post at the end of February this year. A senior executive from the YMCA oversaw the management of the centre on a temporary basis during the interim period between managers. A board of trustees manages the centre and a newly formed advisory board, previously known as the partnership group, contributes to the management of the centre and includes representatives from a number of community and statutory partners as well as parent representatives. A parents' forum feeds into the advisory board.

The centre opens 51 weeks of the year on weekdays from 9.00am to 5.00pm.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

The centre's capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management

3

Main findings

Littlebury Children's Centre offers satisfactory provision for the children and their families in the local area. Friendly and approachable staff have built high levels of trust with users, who feel nurtured and well supported, particularly when they are experiencing difficulty. Users are happy and extremely positive about the services and support the centre provides and the way that it is helping to improve their lives. One parent reports, 'The centre has been a real life saver for me.' The range of services is designed to meet the needs of users and is accessed by a growing number of families. The centre is meeting the needs of these users, who include families from the Asian community and families of Polish heritage. This is because the centre accesses some data about the reach area and some staff know the community well. However, the centre recognises there is still work to do in order to target services to increase the numbers accessing the centre from the Black community, fathers, and families from the most deprived area of the community.

The centre has developed some effective partnerships with other professionals, such

as health visitors, who provide specific support through outreach work. The centre works well with the women's refuge to engage families in services such as 'Positive Beginnings'. These families are then accessing universal services such as 'Stay and Play' and engaging in some courses, which are helping them to gain confidence and self-esteem and to develop their parenting skills. Safeguarding procedures are in place and understood by staff. Daily risk assessments of the environment are carried out and any risks minimised, which is helping users to feel safe. The centre ensures the safeguarding of users through its partnership working. Where necessary, staff complete Common Assessment Framework (CAF) referrals so families, including those with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, receive the required support.

Outcomes for users are satisfactory. Users are responding well to courses and activities such as 'Pit-a-Pat Baby Massage', summer trips to the seaside and 'First Steps'. Parents and carers report how the 'First Steps' sessions provide opportunities for their children to develop an understanding of sharing and taking turns. The safety and well-being of children and users of the centre's services are promoted well. Staff ensure risks are minimised in order for users to feel safe. Health outcomes are improving. Parents and carers are developing a satisfactory understanding of healthy eating through courses such as 'Fussy Eaters'. One parent reports that such courses help them to develop good eating habits. Parents and carers whose children have speech delay receive good support sessions, such as, 'Chatterbox Tots'. They report an improvement in their children's communication skills.

The centre is inclusive and users benefit from positive relationships as they and the centre staff treat each other with respect and consideration. There is a commitment to provide equality of access to services for users. The centre takes steps to remove any barriers to services, for example, crèche places are provided enabling parents and carers to access courses such as first aid. When accessing the child health clinic, users who speak English as an additional language are supported by centre staff as they interpret for them. This ensures they receive important advice and guidance about weaning from health professionals.

The centre is not yet able to demonstrate that outcomes are better than satisfactory. It is beginning to devise systems to evaluate the effectiveness and quality of services in meeting the needs of target groups and to track the impact these are having on the outcomes for users. For example, staff have completed a detailed evaluation and analysis of the most recent 'Positive Beginnings' course identifying the impact for users and their next steps. However, the centre is not receiving sufficient information from some services provided by partners in order to measure impact.

Centre staff are adapting to the new management structure and their roles and responsibilities. They are motivated and aspire to the centre's vision, 'To provide children and their families with a supportive and nurturing environment where every child matters and where they will flourish and achieve a confident, happy, secure and healthy future.' The newly established advisory board is developing a satisfactory understanding of its role in providing challenge and direction for the centre. The

board of trustees adequately monitors the performance of the centre. The development plan shows appropriate priorities for development and links to the organisation's operational plan. Targets are in place but not all are sufficiently measurable to show if outcomes are improving and whether targets have been met. This makes it difficult for those in governance roles, such as directors, to challenge leaders and hold them to account for the centre's success. As a result, the centre's capacity to improve further is satisfactory.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Together with the local authority and partners, improve the quality of data available in order to:
 - more precisely assess the needs of the community to target services for specific groups, including those considered more vulnerable, fathers, and minority ethnic groups particularly the Black community
 - fully evaluate the effectiveness of services
 - track the impact the services are having on outcomes for users.

- Embed the new management structure to ensure professional supervision and day-to-day management responsibilities are fully understood.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

The centre is at an early stage of evaluating the impact of its work. The evidence available demonstrates the positive contribution the centre is making to improve the outcomes for its users. Users are developing a satisfactory understanding of how to keep themselves and their children healthy. The child health clinic is well attended and is providing parents and carers with a range of information from advice and support for breastfeeding to guidance on weaning. 'Lets Sing and Dance with Gymboree then Cook and Eat with Us' is helping parents and carers to understand the importance of physical exercise and how to provide healthy meals for their families. The emotional well-being of users is supported through sessions such as baby massage. These sessions help parents and carers to bond with their babies and provide them with opportunities to discuss their own well-being. Parents and carers are provided with a range of different information according to their circumstances, such as information on tax credits and details of exercise classes in the area. Such support and guidance increase parents' and carers' confidence and their awareness of the importance of keeping themselves healthy. As a result, some parents and carers sign up for keep fit classes in the community.

Children and families feel safe when accessing services at the centre. First-aid courses are helping parents and carers to gain confidence and skills when dealing with sick children and identifying when to seek medical help. One parent reported that she now understands what action to take if a child is choking and that gaining a

recognised qualification has helped to raise her self-esteem. Staff demonstrate safe practice and act as positive role models during activities. They provide valid reasons for actions, such as managing children’s behaviour in safe ways. This enables parents to incorporate this practice into their lives. The outreach worker is helping young parents and carers in their understanding of ‘Protective Behaviour’ through sessions held at the women’s refuge for those whose children have challenging behaviour. Effective partnership working is ensuring that those users who are experiencing crisis or are at risk of harm can access the necessary support. Outreach support is tailored to support a few families whose children have been identified as in need or who are subject to a child protection plan. Such support is helping parents and carers to develop their parenting skills and improve life chances. Families are helped to fill in forms in relation to housing, benefits and school places.

Children actively engage in and enjoy the activities at the centre. ‘Stay and Play’ and ‘First Steps’ are planned using the Early Years Foundation Stage areas of learning, with a particular focus on communication, language and personal, social and emotional development. Children behave well during sessions as they share and take turns. They are developing sound relationships. Parents and carers enjoy playing with their children, for example, as they explore a block of ice or use glue and a variety of materials to create pictures of ice creams. However, there are some missed opportunities to communicate and develop independent skills during snack time. The centre is working with the early years consultant in order to develop further the planning of sessions and ways to track the progress children make in their learning. The centre is not yet fully evaluating the impact such activities have on preparing children for school or the longer-term impact on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) scores for the area as a whole. Around 54% of children achieve a total of at least 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, which is below the local authority average. The local school informed inspectors that users of the centre recognise the importance of developing children’s social and self-help skills in preparation for school. The centre and the school have plans to work more closely together in order to support parents and carers in helping their children’s readiness for school.

The centre has offered some adult learning courses in the past, such as childcare, and signposts users to adult learning in the community. Some users have gone on to further education, become volunteers or taken up employment. Users are seen as important partners of the centre and have an active voice through the monthly parents’ forum. Some parents and carers are contributing to the governance of the centre as they are members of the advisory board. Parent and carer representatives are confident to express the views of users, such as a request for the centre to provide English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses so parents and carers gain a better understanding of English and can help their children as they start school.

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	3
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healthy lifestyles	
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	3
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	3

How good is the provision?

3

There is an appropriate range of services and activities, which are matched to the needs of the current users. Centre staff access some data about the reach area which are provided by the local authority and health partners. However, this is not always the most up-to-date information. The centre works in partnership with other agencies to ensure it assesses the needs of those with the greatest need, for example, those subject to a child protection plan. The improved partnership working with the health services has resulted in the centre receiving new-birth cards so it can now make initial contact with families. Each family is offered a home visit, which enables staff to assess its needs and identify those whose circumstances make them more vulnerable, to provide appropriate services and support. There is a strong sense of care and mutual respect between centre staff and users, ensuring an atmosphere of trust exists. Users value the support they receive from the friendly and approachable staff, particularly in times of crisis. One parent reports, 'The centre has helped me to have confidence to deal with different things in my life.'

Centre staff speak different languages, such as Urdu, so they can provide information and interpret for other professionals. However, little written information is available in other languages. The centre is committed to promoting learning and development for users. The achievement of users is celebrated helping to raise aspirations. The centre is looking to work with West Hertfordshire College in order to teach English to adults who speak other languages. The centre is reaching approximately 50% of users in the reach area, including families from the Asian community. The number of users is steadily increasing, but the centre is not yet reaching some users. The centre is looking at ways to reach these users, which include fathers, members of the Black community and more vulnerable families. It has already started some of this work by holding a 'Fathers Fun Day' at Chater Infant School and developing stronger links with the adjacent multicultural centre.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
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The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	3
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

The centre has seen changes to the management structure in recent months. Individuals are now adapting to their new roles and seeking clarification from the YMCA to be clear about their day-to-day management responsibilities. A temporary administrator has been in place to support the centre manager and staff with administrative tasks. This position has now come to an end and the YMCA will be providing those staff who have administrative responsibilities with the necessary support to become familiar with this element of their role. Systems for continued performance management are embedding. The newly formed advisory board is in the early stages of development. It has held a few meetings and defined the terms of reference. Members of the board are enthusiastic about their involvement in the governance of the centre. Representatives from the parents' forum provide an effective link between the board and users of the centre.

Leaders are monitoring the effectiveness of the centre's services adequately, although impact on outcomes is not yet explicitly clear and data are not used precisely enough to assess the needs of the wider community. The centre does not systematically involve partners in the monitoring of the centre's activities. Self-evaluation is realistic and in line with monitoring carried out by the local authority. Centre staff are beginning to evaluate and analyse services more effectively in order to measure impact and shape services further. The centre has accurately identified areas for development, which are set in line with the YMCA's operational plan. However, targets do not always contain measureable success criteria.

Watford and District YMCA has a range of policies and procedures to support the running of its service. The centre manager has begun to review policies to ensure they are specific to the work of the children's centre. Such changes are overseen by the board of trustees. The safeguarding children policy is clear and understood by all staff. Accurate recording in case files demonstrates staff's understanding to pass on concerns in order to safeguard children. All staff have completed child protection training and first-aid training to support the well-being of users. YMCA follows safer recruitment practices, and staff or volunteers do not start work until suitability checks are in place. The organisation also ensures partners and other professionals running commissioned services have appropriate checks in place in order to determine their suitability. These checks are kept up to date.

The centre has a commitment to providing an inclusive environment and removing barriers. The centre engages in community events, such as a multicultural day, in

order to promote community cohesion. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported through groups such as 'Chatterbox Tots'. Resources reflect the diverse community with story books in different languages and some posters promoting positive images and cultural diversity. Sponsored places are available for vulnerable families on courses such as baby massage and summer trips.

The centre makes effective use of resources and space within the church hall. Staff are adept at setting up equipment on a daily basis. Because of staff shortages over the last year, the centre had to reduce some services, such as outreach. However, they appropriately prioritised services for the vulnerable families, such those with children in need, to ensure they received the required support. A full programme of activities is now back in place for the summer. The summer programme includes a range of opportunities for users, such as a day trip to the seaside, a trip to Woburn Safari Park, 'Buggy Boot Camp' and 'Signing 4 Fathers'. It, therefore, gives satisfactory value for money.

The centre staff are motivated to seek further improvements and are focussing their efforts on key priorities. For example, The centre is establishing closer links with the local schools and working with the early years consultant to improve the planning of activity sessions in order to engage boys in learning, develop language and social skills to support children's readiness for school.

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	3
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	3
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	3

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 Littlebury Children's Centre on 26–27 July 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Your children's centre provides you with a warm and welcoming environment where you and your children feel well cared for and valued. Those of you we spoke to told us that you really enjoy the range of activities on offer from drop-in groups to courses such as 'Stay and Play', 'First Steps' and 'Parenting Puzzle'. These activities provide you with opportunities to play with your children, and develop confidence and parenting skills. You told us that children are learning to take turns and share, which you feel is helping them to get ready for pre-school.

From our observations, discussions and case studies we saw that the centre is having a positive impact on your lives. We found that staff are friendly and approachable, and build trusting relationships with you. As a result, you feel confident to approach staff for support when you experience change or a difficult circumstance. One of you told us, 'The centre has been a real life saver for me.' Staff are adapting to the changes in their roles and responsibilities since the recent change in the management structure. Staff are motivated and aspire to make a positive difference to the lives of children and their families.

The staff are working with you and your families to improve your health. You told us how you value the opportunities to develop good eating habits and an understanding of healthy options. The 'Pit-a-Pat Baby Massage' course is helping you bond with your babies and is promoting emotional well-being. These sessions provide opportunities to find out about different things such as information relating to tax credits, returning to work or exercise classes in the community. It was good to hear that, as a result of this course, some of you have signed up for an exercise class. The first-aid course has helped you gain confidence and skills to deal with sick children and identify when to seek medical help. One parent told us that she now understands what action to take if a child is choking and that gaining a recognised qualification has helped to raise her self-esteem. We heard how you are looking forward to the range of activities the centre has planned for the summer, such as a trip to the seaside, picnics in the park and 'Fitness Fun with Gymboree'.

Those in charge have set targets in order to improve the range of services they provide so they can help even more families in the community, particularly those who may be feeling more vulnerable, minority ethnic groups, particularly Black families, and fathers. They have developed some secure partnerships with other professionals and organisations, such as the health services and the women's refuge.

The centre is looking to develop other partnerships in order to further improve the lives of you all. For example, the centre is working with the local schools in order to help your children be better prepared for school. It is looking to establish partnerships with adult-learning organisations in order to provide more opportunities to access courses, such as English for users who speak other languages. Health professionals told us how important it is that centre workers are able to interpret for some of you. This results in some of you receiving important information about weaning and preparing appropriate foods.

Safeguarding procedures are in place and staff know what to do to ensure you and your children are safe. For example, staff are trained in how to safeguard children, and leaders make sure that all those working in the centre are suitable to do so. Staff carry out daily checks of the church hall to ensure it is safe and do the same when using community venues. The centre is providing opportunities to develop parenting skills through courses such as 'Positive Beginnings'. Staff have begun to look at such services more closely in order to monitor and evaluate the impact these are having on your lives. Partnerships with key agencies are in place so they can offer the correct support and guidance, for example to help those of you with children with additional needs to access the right services for them.

We know that the centre regularly seeks your views about the sessions you attend and what other activities you would like. We talked with some of you who are involved in the parents' forum and how you enthusiastically represent the views of users at the advisory board. The centre receives and has access to some useful information from the local authority and partners about the area it serves. They are also collecting some information from you and partners about activities. We have asked the centre to look at this range of information in order to target services more precisely for the wider community, to evaluate the effectiveness of the services they provide and to show the difference these services are having on your lives.

We would like to thank you for speaking to us and contributing to the inspection at Littlebury Children's Centre.

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