

Inspection report for The Family Tree (Leaves) Children's Centre

Local authority	Gloucestershire
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Date of previous inspection	None
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Linked school if applicable	St John's Church of England Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	St John's Playgroup Forest of Dean Children's Opportunity Centre

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.

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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 co-located partner primary school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. 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. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant details. The inspectors held meetings with representatives of the centre's partnership board, Barnardos, parents and carers, and with the senior leaders. Other partnership agencies linking with the centre and members of staff and users of the centre were also consulted.

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

Information about the centre

The Family Tree Centre (Leaves) is sited in the small county town of Coleford, which is in the heart of the Forest of Dean. It is run from a site in the grounds of St John's Primary School and is a designated phase 2, 70% centre which opened in 2008. It is one of three centres running under the same name, the other two being in Newent (Twigs) and Mitcheldean (Branches). Barnardos has been contracted by the local authority to manage the centre and its governance. The area has poor transport links and a lack of work opportunities. Within the very wide reach area, there are pockets of high deprivation in the highest 10% of areas in the county with respect to benefit claimants. There is an above average percentage of lone parents, and this has been steadily rising since 2008. The area is predominantly White British, with a much lower than county average of Black and Minority Ethnic families.

Across the reach area there are five day nurseries, five pre-school playgroups, 10 primary schools one secondary school, one pupil referral unit and 10 childminders. There are also four holiday schemes in place, with six breakfast clubs and four after-school clubs.

Because of the wide range of social and economic factors within the reach area, there is a wide ability range among the children. Although more children are now accessing the facilities within the reach area, children’s skills when they start school are often below the levels typically expected for their age.

The Centre itself makes no on-site nursery or pre-school provision, but St John’s Playgroup with whom it runs a joint drop-in toddler group is based in the centre. The centre also works closely with the Children’s Opportunity Centre based on the same site. The centre itself is small, with one large hall and a small meeting room. The centre has consequently developed a number of outreach opportunities within the community and has joined with other providers in running joint services. It signposts users to a variety of services held in other centres and venues.

The last year has been one of great change, with a new centre manager taking up post in June and a completely new team being recruited in the last few months. Two project workers have not yet taken up post but will do so on 1st October.

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 families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

The Family Tree Centre makes satisfactory provision for the children and their families within the reach area. It has many good features and the whole team are constantly seeking ways in which the centre might improve its work. The last year has been a year of uncertainty and turbulence as the centre went through the period of transition. However, there is a great feeling of teamwork and enthusiasm amongst staff, and those using the centre are pleased with the services it offers. The new manager has taken the opportunity to carry out a rigorous audit of the services provided and make decisions, with her team, as to what needs to be introduced or adapted in order to best serve the needs of the users in the reach area. Project workers have made a real effort to make contact with potential users and, because they consider alternative venues and strategies for involving families, they are having a positive impact and reaching those that might otherwise be reluctant to take advantage of the services on offer.

The centre has established close links with a number of partner organisations, notably the playgroup on site and the Children's Opportunity group. The way in which it works closely with these two settings is a particular strength, with project workers taking an active role in providing support and information for the families which access these activities. Staff provide support for many vulnerable families within the reach area and a recently reviewed and revised referral system means that the right support is able to be provided more quickly and efficiently than previously.

Outcomes for users are satisfactory, but are improving rapidly with the introduction of more robust monitoring and evaluation systems. The services provided or planned for arise from the careful analysis of relevant data and the local knowledge of the local professionals. The centre evaluates the impact of its one-to-one provision and outreach work rigorously. Data is collected and analysed and provision amended to take account of findings. However, the systems have yet to be extended to the monitoring of all group activities. A number of groups and activities have been provided, but targets and success criteria have not been sufficiently well recorded and consequently it has been difficult to judge how successful the provision has been. From conversations with users, the outcomes were clearly positive, but formal recording is not always precise enough. A breastfeeding group and a drive to reduce childhood obesity are about to get under way because these are two key areas where needs are highest. The centre recognises this area for development and is in the process of setting more appropriate success criteria in order to judge how well the activities help to increase the percentage of sustained breastfeeders or reduce the instance of childhood obesity.

Users are sometimes asked for their views and changes are made as a result. For example, the 'Young Mums' group was suffering from falling numbers because the children were getting older and their needs were changing. As a result, and after consultation with the users, it was decided to set up the drop-in group for parents and toddlers in conjunction with the play group, which is proving to be a great success. However, this is an isolated example. Users currently do not have sufficient regular opportunities to contribute to the evaluation and development of the centre's services.

The partnership board meets regularly and are extremely supportive of the work carried out by the centre. Its members are keen and enthusiastic to help drive this forward. However, not all members understand how they can challenge the work of the centre and they do not all fully contribute to its self-evaluation or strategic development. The centre has a well thought through business plan. However, success criteria are not yet sufficiently precise, being reliant on the words 'increase' or 'decrease' rather than percentage based targets to judge the impact of its activities.

The centre's self-evaluation is detailed and extremely accurate. The new senior leadership team have worked hard to establish effective supervision procedures, which means that monitoring is improving rapidly and that of outreach and one to

one work is extremely robust. The use of a software program to collect and analyse data means that the centre is able to evaluate the effectiveness of its work rigorously and it is already beginning to do this. It knows well the areas it needs to further improve and how to bring these improvements about. Consequently the centre has good capacity to improve further.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure success criteria are set for all group activities in order to judge their impact more accurately.
- Strengthen training and guidance for members of the partnership board in order for all to take a full part in the evaluation and strategic development of the centre.
- Establish a means for all families and users to become more involved in the evaluation and development of the centre's services.
- Ensure that targets in the business plan are more specific and easily measurable.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Users have a satisfactory understanding of how to keep themselves and their families healthy and are supported appropriately by the centre in order to achieve this. A range of activities has been provided or planned for in order to meet users' needs. Healthy snacks and access to water is always available at the drop-in sessions and the toddlers have plenty of opportunities to get physical exercise through the wide range of activities provided both inside and out. Together with another provider, the centre ran a group which included baby massage and baby yoga. Local health professionals, together with the children's centre staff, ran a programme that included breastfeeding, smoking cessation, diet, nutrition, immunisation and oral health. The sessions were well attended by targeted groups and many sessions have had a decisive impact, although the full impact of all the sessions has not been fully recorded.

Safety of users is of high priority at the centre. The premises themselves are very safe and secure, with all visitors being carefully monitored in and out. There are posters and information throughout the centre to promote safety and minimise harm to children. Risk assessments are comprehensive and regular. Potential risks are identified and all actions taken signed and dated. All appropriate policies and procedures are in place to promote a safe environment for both staff and users. There are effective arrangements to work with children on the child protection register. Those children subject to Common Assessment Framework and Child Protection plans are effectively monitored. Through its outreach work, families are signposted to a wide range of services and family support. It works with many on a one-to-one basis to improve parenting skills and reduce the risk of harm to children. It works very successfully with other agencies to identify crisis situations and act to ameliorate them. It is currently working effectively with other local children's centres

to offer the Freedom programme to victims of domestic abuse.

Children attending the drop-in sessions really enjoy themselves. The large room and easily accessible outdoor area, together with a wide range of exciting and age appropriate resources means the environment is warm and welcoming for children and parents alike. Children behave well; they learn to share and take turns. Centre staff circulate amongst the parents and carers, giving support and advice where requested and taking the opportunity to distribute literature and guidance about activities they can pursue with their children at home, with stickers to encourage participation. The collaborative partnership between the Playgroup and the centre and the decision to run drop-in sessions for toddlers and pre-school children promote and ease the transition to school well. The centre works closely with other settings to establish support for children and an 'Every Child a Talker' opportunity group contributed much to raise the standard of speech and language. Data shows that the achievement gap in the percentage of children gaining 78 points by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is gradually narrowing.

In order that parents might better support their children's learning, a 'Time out for Parents' parenting course has been run twice in the last two years; both were successful and six parents attended and completed the 2011 course. In addition, the centre has provided literacy and numeracy classes, with some success. Ten parents attended a literacy course and all achieved the qualification at the end. The classes run have been valued by the users and five parents have progressed to further courses thus improving their employment opportunities. Although staff ask parents and carers to evaluate some activities, users have few opportunities to contribute to decision-making or the self-evaluation of the centre's services. Those spoken to were really pleased with the support received. One parent living in an isolated location told inspectors that the drop-in group was fantastic and provided great opportunities for both her children to learn through play; others said that the ideas and information passed on by project workers was really useful to them.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	3
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 children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

3

The centre staff know the families and understands the needs very well. Assessment is used appropriately to identify needs within the reach area and all relevant data is taken into account when planning future activities. The views of users and the partnership board are also used when planning the programme of activities. In addition, methods of delivery and venues are considered carefully in order to encourage attendance. As yet, few groups are in place because not all staff have taken up post. The centre, however, has advanced plans to meet the specific needs of the area. A breastfeeding group is planned to get underway next month because the rates of sustained breastfeeding are low; this will be run by one of the project workers who is due to begin in October. In addition, the centre has identified the need for a drive to prevent childhood obesity, as local figures shows that this is higher than the county average. Again, this is ready to start but awaits the arrival of the project worker. There are also plans in place to provide a group for fathers. The centre has established links with the local college to run more literacy and numeracy classes in the immediate areas, with taster classes to be held this term in order to find out what exactly is needed to meet the needs of users, particularly those seeking employment.

There are many activities for families run by different providers. The centre is anxious not to duplicate or replicate these, but is taking an active role in supporting and providing information for activities already in place. The drop-in group for mothers and toddlers in collaboration with the playground is just one example. The groups provide very good opportunities for project workers to meet with young and lone parents in a relaxed atmosphere. The group provides good opportunities for the young mothers to meet and socialise with others, which is something some said they have very little chance to do as the area is so rural and many of them live in isolated locations. In addition, the sessions help their children's learning as the activities provided offer experiences across all learning areas and develop their social and emotional development well.

Project workers promote the engagement of more users through home visits, leaflet distribution and good one-to-one contact. Care and guidance shown to users and individuals is good. Project workers support families whose circumstances have made them more vulnerable particularly well and, in times of crisis, families feel well supported by the centre. The centre has reviewed its referral system effectively so that practical assistance and support is tailor-made and provided more quickly and efficiently and often brings about closure sooner.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre has been through a considerable period of change and uncertainty in the last six months during the transfer of responsibility from the local authority to Barnardos. A team in place under a new manager is initiating a range of new activities. It has become a vibrant cohesive unit in a short space of time and already many new procedures have been put in place to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the centre. Systems have been put in place to ensure data collection is more effective in order to judge performance, although this has not yet been extended to group activities. There are very robust systems of supervision and regular monthly meetings for staff, with line management ensuring that the workload is regularly reviewed and progress evaluated. The partnership board has been of great support during the change period and there is a strong commitment of all leaders and managers to provide a range of services based on needs. However, the partnership board does not hold the centre to account sufficiently rigorously.

The staff are committed to promoting the equality and inclusion of all users and, to this end, are committed to an approach that takes more account of the views of users and the partnership board. Training in equality and diversity is a strong and mandatory part of the induction programme for all staff and no discrimination is tolerated. The centre's work with the Children's Opportunity centre is of good quality and helps ensure that these children with disabilities have the best chances they can. The centre's arrangements for safeguarding meet requirements well. Appropriate checks have been made on all adults who work at the centre and there is robust training for all staff in safeguarding and child protection. Policies and protocols are all very clear and all records are kept very securely. Procedures to ensure the safety of centre users, such as risk assessments, are good.

The centre has established good partnerships with other site users and is developing a wide range of partnerships with other providers, although these are not yet fully developed. All outcomes are satisfactory or better, even though the impact is not always measured sufficiently well as yet. Because of this, the centre currently offers satisfactory value for money.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	2
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	3
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision	3

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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Family Tree children's Centre on 21 and 22 September 2011. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you for making us feel so welcome and contributing to this inspection by sharing your experiences of the children's centre with us. Many of you told us how friendly and welcoming everyone is. Although not a great many activities are running at the moment, we can see how much children and parents and carers enjoy, for example, the drop-in sessions. We could see that that centre staff make sure you have plenty of support if you need it and that children seem to be making good progress in their learning and development. We have asked the centre to make sure

it really looks hard at how well the group activities meet your needs so that if necessary it can adapt them or provide new ones.

You told us how much you appreciate the sessions and we have asked the centre to find out more about how well you think they make provision for you and your families and to find out what kind of activities you would like at your centre. Maybe you would like your own user group and to tell the partnership board what you think.

Your partnership board works hard to support the centre and make suggestions as to how it can develop further. However, we think it needs some training to help it ask the manager and her team the right questions so that it can monitor the work they all do more effectively.

The centre has a very good business plan. It has all the activities planned for the next year and it shows how well the leaders and manager know what needs to be done. The plan has targets it wants to reach by the end of the year, but these are not really sharp enough and we have asked the centre to improve these and make them more specific so that everyone will know if they have met them.

We would like to wish you, your children and families who live in the Family Tree area the very best for the future.

Yours sincerely
Chris Huard
Lead Inspector

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