

Inspection report for Tree Tops Children's Centre

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| Local authority | Hampshire |
| Inspection number | 384191 |
| Inspection dates | 13–14 September 2011 |
| Reporting inspector | Helen Barter |

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| Centre leader | Marina Stafford |
| Date of previous inspection | This is the centre's first inspection |
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| Linked school if applicable | None |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | None |

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.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with parents, staff and managers. They also met, or spoke via telephone, with representatives of partner organisations, the local authority and the Partnership Board.

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

Information about the centre

Tree Tops Children's Centre was designated in 2008. It is a phase 2 centre which serves a rural area. It is part of a cluster of three centres (Heath, Hillside and Tree Tops), managed by the centre manager of Heath Children's Centre. The local authority oversees the running of the children's centre. The centre's Partnership Board contributes to the governance of all centres in the cluster. Tree Tops is a virtual children's centre without a building in its catchment area. Staff are based at a gateway building in Petersfield and have an office base in a local library in Liphook, which is open for families to seek advice and information. The centre shares the use of a unique mobile unit called DAISY (Delivering All Integrated Services to You) with the other centres in the cluster. The centre is currently subject to reorganisation from April 2012 with a proposed merger with Hillside Children's Centre and the management of Hampshire Children's Centres being passed from the local authority to an external organisation.

The reach area of the centre is mixed in terms of social and economic need, and has pockets of both affluence and deprivation within it. Limited transport links make it difficult for some families to travel around the local area. Most families living in the area are of White British heritage, with a few families from Eastern European and other minority ethnic backgrounds. There is a Traveller site in the reach area and some Traveller families who are housed. The number of families living in workless

households is above the national average. There are no major employers in the area. There are three hostels for homeless families, many of whom are lone parents. The skills and abilities of children entering the Early Years Foundation Stage vary widely across the reach area. However, in the areas of deprivation, many enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with a narrower range of skills and abilities than those typically expected for their age. By the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, 2010 data indicate about 48% of children gain 78 points or more across the six areas of learning, which is below the national average.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Tree Tops Children's Centre provides a good service. Despite logistical challenges, staff use the lack of a permanent building as an opportunity rather than a significant disadvantage. They deliver all the centre services from DAISY, the mobile unit, and from community venues, providing the large majority of families with good access to activities within a short distance from their homes. The centre's key strength is the role it plays in getting right to the heart of the community, focusing its efforts in supporting the most vulnerable families and making effective use of other services to make sure that no stone is left unturned in finding the necessary support for its families. Excellent benefits are gained from the partnership with Heath and Hillside, with staff sharing expertise and supporting each others' activities, such as providing a crèche in DAISY while a Tree Tops parenting programme runs in a community centre. As a result, the large majority of families in the reach area access services directly or through accurate and effective signposting.

The centre gives safeguarding high priority, especially given the mobile facility and the wide range of venues and partners involved in the services it offers. Staff have extensive knowledge of the area and the particular problems faced by the young and/or lone parents. Front-line staff are highly skilled in the art of gentle persuasion, encouraging the hard-to-reach families to gradually increase their engagement with the services on offer. These factors, plus the good range of partners that are included in the centre's work, mean that staff target their care, guidance and support

well. Families are full of praise for the centre, the welcoming staff and the accessible and helpful approach of the Family Support Outreach Worker in particular. Parents say that they do not feel 'judged' because support and advice are discreet. One said, 'The centre gave me confidence to be able to tackle the issues positively and with fantastic results. It made me feel I wasn't alone and reassured me I wasn't a failure.'

There has been a strong three-year trend of improvement in the efforts to close the gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and the rest, enabling children to make good progress from their starting points. The centre is rightly prioritising the development of children's social, communication and language skills. Systematic planning is in place to ensure that all areas of learning are covered at each outreach activity, but staff do not always use evaluations of sessions consistently well to help them plan for the next steps in children's learning and development. Parents enjoy and make good gains in their personal development through parenting courses and take-up rates are good. However, the relatively narrow range of opportunities currently available to improve their educational development limits their future economic well-being.

All staff are highly committed to Tree Tops, working well together to meet families' needs, striving to develop new services and developing effective partnerships with existing provision, such as pre-schools. Leaders and managers are highly reflective in everything they do and are not afraid to make changes if families' needs are not being met. They understand and analyse the centre's data but are not always able to provide explicit evidence of improved outcomes, particularly where families also use other services. The detailed service delivery plan accurately identifies the key objectives for the future, but targets for monitoring the success of developments lack precision. Nevertheless, leaders and managers evaluate the effectiveness of the service accurately and have high aspirations for its further improvement. They have made great strides in developing this unique service and can demonstrate well that the service is having an increasingly effective impact on the lives of the large majority of the families that it serves. The centre has good capacity for further improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Refine the system of evaluation so that leaders and managers more explicitly account for the improvement in outcomes for all users and set precise, measurable targets for monitoring future success.
- Develop greater opportunities for families to engage in training, adult learning or relevant activities and to support them to find employment, if required.
- Develop further the systems for observing and assessing children in order to identify their learning priorities and to inform future planning.

How good are outcomes for families?

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The large majority of families engage well with the centre, resulting in good and improving outcomes. Through the National Health Service 'Change4Life' programme, parents learn to provide healthy snacks and nutritious meals and reduce obesity by supporting their children's physical development through 'Active Tots'. There is strong support to improve families' emotional and mental health. Parents appreciate 'good practical advice' to improve their children's sleeping and behaviour, which benefits the whole family. As one enthused, 'I've just had the best week ever – the children have been great, all it took was having rules they understood.' Although breastfeeding rates are low in some area, parents are signposted to available support. Families improve their oral health well through very good take up of the toothbrush exchange programme.

The centre does all it can to help vulnerable families stay safe, while working effectively in partnership with social and health care services to safeguard children through child protection plans and 'Team Around the Child' (TAC) meetings. Risk assessments are thorough, including the safe location of DAISY and the suitability of outdoor play areas. Children learn to behave well and play safely together because staff are excellent role models. There is good take-up of free paediatric first-aid courses and parents improve safety at home with free items such as socket covers.

Families say they really enjoy the centre with '...warm, friendly staff who clearly love working with children'. DAISY is a wonderful attraction for the children to come and play, for mothers to receive ante-natal care and for supporting young parents caring for new babies. Families who have been previously hard to reach engage well in this welcoming environment and say how they feel less isolated. A good range of activities, such as baby massage, 'First Babies' and 'Stay and Play', promotes the benefits of practical play and helps parents to improve their children's personal, social and emotional development. These activities also support children's speaking and listening skills well when staff model acting out stories and rhymes. Staff encourage families to borrow toys from DAISY's library and make resources, for example play dough, to continue children's learning at home.

Staff are excellent role models for developing strong, respectful relationships. The centre has made a significant difference in making communities more welcoming and less isolating, for example parents at a hostel have made firm friendships through meeting each other aboard DAISY. Families comment that staff '...bend over backwards' to help them or to find others who can. Parents are represented well on the Partnership Board and through participation in the Parents' Forum but, due to the nature of the mobile service, it is more difficult to engage them in volunteering their help.

Jobcentre Plus services are very limited in the centre, but families are given sound support in accessing some employment advice, for example the up-to-date job vacancy file, and have good housing and benefits advice from other providers. In response to parents' requests and to improve families' economic well-being, the

centre is starting courses for completing curricula vitae and job applications and in computing at Liphook Library. Case studies show that increasing confidence amongst parents helps them to apply successfully for jobs. Children's preparation for school is good. Links with most local pre-schools are well established and new 'learning journals' are helping staff and parents to share more readily children's learning and development with other early years settings. Although it is too early to evaluate the impact fully with the participating school, parents greatly appreciate the new Transition Programme as they feel that children are much more confident at the thought of starting infant school.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

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| The extent to which children, including those from target 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 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 | 2 |
| 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?

2

In establishing the centre, the staff thoroughly researched the area and used their knowledge to extremely good effect to assess the needs of the hardest-to-reach families and to target services with precision. Through the activities aboard DAISY, in community venues, and through the network of partnerships developed to plug the gap in specific services it cannot cover, the centre has made demonstrable improvement for the large majority of the families it serves. It is quick to respond to need and plans carefully before putting new services in place to ensure that they do not fall at the first fence.

These good outcomes are also as a consequence of the consistently good-quality care, guidance and support. The staff's proactive approach to identifying where problems lie, and rapid reaction at times of crisis, mean that staff have built a high level of trust and respect with families. For example, one person stated that the staff's '...gentle and approachable nature had made it easy for them to talk about parenting issues'. This approach has led to good improvements in the way families understand how to care for their children, and to well-targeted support for specific groups such as teenage mothers and Traveller families. Families appreciate the

centre's flexibility in the way it works and how members of staff respond to their particular needs. A key strength is the centre's work with vulnerable families to ensure that children are kept safe.

The promotion of learning and development is at the heart of the centre's work. Staff are quick to praise achievements, such as for a young mother managing her baby's routines independently. Good support is provided for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities by the area inclusion coordinator. Photographs show the families' delight when children receive 'Starting School' certificates at the end of the Transition Programme. In all sessions observed, families showed excitement and pride in their achievements, such as when making imprints of their babies' hands and feet. Planning is shared well so that staff and parents can understand how the activities ensure progress across the areas of learning. Staff observe and record children's learning and progress, but do not always evaluate these effectively to ensure that next steps in their development are planned for with precision. The centre's focus on promoting children's language and literacy skills is well judged. Story-making sessions have met with success with parents reporting how they are sharing books with children at home and bonding with them in the process. Signposting to 'Chatterchums' at Heath is also effective, with the centre looking to introduce this for themselves shortly.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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| The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups | 2 |
| The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups | 2 |
| 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 leader and staff share a passion and commitment to Tree Tops' development. Parents are positive about the way the centre is run and the parental satisfaction survey shows a 100% positive return each year. Staff have clear lines of responsibility and roles which ensure that the centre is led and managed successfully on a day-to-day basis. A good range of partnerships effectively supports the delivery of the service. Partners speak well of the centre and the services offered. This has largely been as a result of the tenacious attitude of the centre leader whose passion for integrating services for the benefit of families shines through.

Safeguarding has high priority. Well-trained staff ensure that concerns are dealt with immediately. There is good cooperation between various agencies to ensure that vulnerable families, including those subject to domestic violence, are supported and protected. The centre's open and honest approach enables it to continue to engage

with families despite the need to refer safeguarding concerns. The centre engages well in the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process when necessary. Care is taken to ensure that adults working in the centre, in whatever capacity, have been suitably checked and vetted. Information for parents about how to report concerns is carefully documented in files, but not easily accessible in DAISY and in the different venues. Equality and diversity are key to the centre's rationale and there has been a strong impact on the lives of some groups. The centre worked effectively to break down prejudices about Travellers living in the community and now families attend the centre side by side. The centre ensures that venues and DAISY are fully accessible to any disabled families.

Self-evaluation is accurate and supported by evidence on the impact on outcomes for local families. The local authority challenges leaders and managers to improve. The service delivery plan sets relevant challenging targets in respect of local priorities, but these are not yet fully complemented with the precision of targets set by the centre. The Partnership Board is careful to monitor the centre's progress. Members make good use of their local and professional knowledge to question and challenge leaders and managers to improve. Overall, the centre serves the large majority of its families well and makes effective use of a wide range of resources, including other providers and partners, to ensure good value for money.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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| 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 | 2 |
| 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 | 2 |
| 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 | 2 |

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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Tree Tops Children's Centre on 13 and 14 September 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

First of all, we would like to thank those of you who took the time to speak with us during the inspection. It was very helpful to hear your views and how much you value the services offered by Tree Tops. These views have helped us to make our judgements about how well the centre is meeting your needs. During our visit, we looked at your centre's documents and spoke to a number of people working with the centre, as well as all the staff and representatives from the local authority. We also visited several activities, including those taking place on DAISY, your wonderful bus! This is a great facility because it means that services can be brought to you rather than you having to travel long distances or miss out on getting the help you need. We know that some of you wish that you could see DAISY in your community even more often, but I am sure you know that the mobile unit is shared with other centres.

Those of you we spoke to were full of praise for all the centre has done for you and your children. Many of you told us how the centre has changed your lives because of the support you had been given directly by staff who '...are always there for you'. The centre listens very well to your views and puts on activities to meet your needs, such as caring for your children through first-aid courses and helping you to manage your children's behaviour through the parenting programme. The centre works very hard at linking you to all the services it can to make sure that your needs are met, even when it cannot provide things directly itself, such as English and maths courses. We think that the centre could do more to find some other courses for you to do if you are interested and some of you said this to us as well. These will help you in your job as parents and carers and you may also learn skills which will help you to find a job in the future.

We have seen the impact of the centre's super care, support and guidance in the way Tree Tops helps families to bring up their children safely, and develops groups so that those of you who live in hostels or who are alone at home have somewhere to go for advice, to meet other parents and carers and to see a familiar, friendly face from the staff. It is good to see that Tree Tops works well with the pre-schools in your area and is developing a Transition Programme to help your children settle into

school. The work that Tree Tops is doing to support your children's social skills is really good and we have suggested that it now looks even more carefully at how well your children are learning and developing. This way staff can make sure that they plan activities which are just right for your children's ages and stages of development and this will help improve their achievements when they go to school.

The staff at Tree Tops have worked very hard to get this service off the ground. It isn't as easy when there isn't a building at the heart of the centre, but they have made the most of every opportunity to give you the services you need through DAISY and through the different groups. In many ways, this has been much better for you. Now staff need to look carefully at all the information they have about what they provide to see whether it is having the best possible impact. The staff know just what the next priorities are but they also need to keep checking how well they are doing in reaching their goals. All of this is to make Tree Tops the very best possible children's centre for you and your children and we think the staff have a good chance of making this happen.

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