

Inspection report for Green Croft Children's Centre

Local authority	Herefordshire
Inspection number	382894
Inspection dates	15–16 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Nick Gadfield HMI

Centre governance	Local Authority
Centre leader	Viv Kendell
Date of previous inspection	N/A
Centre address	Green Croft
	Hereford
	HR2 7NT
Telephone number	01432 383860
Fax number	01432 383860
Email address	vkendell@herefordshire.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	Marlbrook Primary School URN: 116684
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Merry-go-round@Green Croft, URN: 292585

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 maintained nursery 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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with parents and carers, the centre manager and deputy manager, centre staff and staff from partner agencies, and senior representatives from the local authority, the advisory board and partner agencies.

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

Information about the centre

Green Croft Children's Centre is a purpose-built phase one Early Years Centre, completed in September 2004 and funded by the local authority. Provision is offered in the centre and through outreach family support workers. The centre houses a registered nursery serving the local and wider communities. A maximum of 39 children may attend the setting at any one time. The nursery is open each weekday from 8am to 5pm all year round. All children share access to a secure enclosed outdoor play area. The centre is adjacent to a maintained primary school (Marlbrook School), and many of the children who attend the nursery progress to this school. Children with complex additional needs more often progress from provision in the centre to the nearby Blackmarston Special School.

The centre manager also currently manages the nearby Springfield Children's Centre, but arrangements for the governance and management of all Herefordshire's children's centres are due to change in the near future. The local authority has also recently formed a single advisory board for all five centres in the city of Hereford, replacing the separate advisory boards.

Green Croft is located in the South Wye area of the county, which is identified as having the highest concentration of single-parent families in the county and the highest level of childcare need. The reach area contains two of the three wards which fall within the 20% most disadvantaged wards nationally, with an estimated 666 children aged four and under, of whom around 68% accessed some centre services in the past 12 months. One of the wards, Belmont, has the highest level of child poverty in Herefordshire. Eight children accessing the centre in the most recent quarter for which figures are available were subject to a child protection plan and nine were looked after. The percentage of children under the age of 16 years living in income-deprived households is 25.1%. Children's levels of ability on entry to Marlbrook School have historically been well below levels in other Herefordshire schools. Almost all families in the reach area are from White British heritage.

The centre is open five days a week with occasional Saturday sessions. The range of activities offered by the centre and its partners includes a baby clinic, child development checks, midwife services, breastfeeding support, parenting support, baby massage sessions, activity sessions for parents, carers and toddlers, a specialist programme for children identified as having additional needs (the Herefordshire Activity Pre-school Partnership Initiative – or HAPPI kids), speech and language therapy, holiday fun days, children and fathers, and family learning. Following a recent extension, the centre now provides co-located facilities for the county educational psychology service, education welfare and children's social care.

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

Green Croft is a good centre. The impact the centre is having on the lives of children and their families is good in many areas, and satisfactory in the rest. Children feel very safe in the centre and benefit from the opportunities to mix with other children and adults in a safe environment.

Children who attend the centre begin to develop good skills that support them when they make the transition to nursery and then school. The improvement in their

starting point in school over the last two years is very marked and is helping to overcome the historically low levels. They enjoy being in the centre, which provides a calm and supportive atmosphere. Staff in the various sessions and activities set clear boundaries for children, and parents and carers benefit from the good model they set in managing children's behaviour.

While children are making good progress in developing the skills that will give them a good start in school and beyond, the centre is less successful in encouraging parents and carers to seek out opportunities to develop new skills and explore training opportunities that could support them in seeking work.

The centre assesses the needs of its individual children and families well, particularly through the sensitive and systematic work of the outreach workers. This approach helps to promote equality of access to services for the most vulnerable families.

The range of services and activities in the centre, provided through outreach locations or at partner venues, meets the needs of many of its reach community. The support provided for families with children with a disability is particularly effective and valued by the families.

The outreach workers provide sensitive, flexible and stable support for the children and families they work with. There are individual cases where the centre has transformed the lives of children and their families. Every parent and carer attending the centre made the same point about how it is a lifeline, how friendly and welcoming the staff are, how much their children enjoy coming, and how much they have learned about being a good parent or carer.

Parents' and carers' views are used well when they are invited to feed back on a particular course, activity or session they have attended. However, they are less involved in decisions about how and when provision will be run, and some are not sure how they can make their views known.

The centre draws on feedback from users and other professionals in assessing its work. However, its self-evaluation report is mainly descriptive rather than evaluative, and does not use what data are available to demonstrate sufficiently the good effect it is having on the lives of children and families. For example, the improvement in children's development at entry to school is marked but this is not celebrated in the report. Accurate and specific data on children's health in the local community are particularly difficult to obtain, forcing the centre to rely heavily on anecdotal information to determine priorities.

Safeguarding arrangements are good, underpinned by sound policies and procedures including appropriate recruitment checks for all staff working in the centre. All staff are regularly trained in child protection and wider safeguarding alongside professionals from other agencies. This culture of safeguarding is communicated well to parents and carers. The centre was a pioneer in the use of the Common Assessment Framework; staff are confident in its use and are successful in engaging

parents and carers in the process at an early stage. They understand very well their role in protecting children.

The assessment and provision for children with disabilities is well established and effective, beginning with the community-based portage workers, moving through the HAPPI kids weekly club, and leading to very effective transition support and arrangements when they start school.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Work with strategic partners to secure access to accurate, up-to-date and relevant information about health outcomes for children in the reach area to inform provision and aid quality improvement.
- Ensure that the centre's action plans accurately reflect identified needs for the reach area, that targets and milestones are measurable and that plans include an indication of how the targets will be met.
- Work with partners and users to find ways to enable them to continue to contribute to planning the work of the centre following the implementation of new arrangements for the advisory board and the centre's leadership.
- Continue to provide support and encouragement to parents and carers to further develop their own employability skills.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The centre provides good support for parents and carers to encourage healthy eating. This includes popular courses on cooking healthy meals, identifying the most nutritious foods and emphasising the benefits of eating fresh fruit. The busy well-baby clinic runs alongside a parent, carer and toddler drop-in activity session, which parents and carers value. One mother commented to inspectors that she would be reluctant to attend the clinic if she had to sit doing nothing until her appointment time just to have her baby weighed, but the drop-in session makes it more enjoyable for her and her baby. Breastfeeding support has been successfully rolled out from the centre into the community, through a joint programme to train and support some of the mothers as breastfeeding peer mentors. The centre recently organised a well-attended fun day to encourage parents and carers in the community to register with local dentists, in an attempt to deal with the high levels of poor dental health in the county, but it is too early to judge its success. Previous attempts to introduce support to give up smoking have not been successful. Health improvements for children are generally hard to demonstrate because of inadequate access to good-quality data at local level. However, figures indicate that breastfeeding rates across the county are above the national average and rising, and levels of obesity are lower than average and falling.

Children, parents and carers feel very safe when they attend the centre. Behaviour among the children is good and they enjoy being with other children and adults. Centre staff set good examples to parents and carers of how to set boundaries for the children so that they can explore their environment safely, including the particularly well-designed and attractive outdoor area. Parenting skills courses help parents and carers to learn how to manage children's behaviour, reduce family conflict and improve safety in the home environment. Parents and carers feel confident that they can share sensitive topics with centre staff. Child protection referral arrangements are fully understood by centre workers and used effectively. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is very well established in the centre, which was one of the first in the county to introduce it. All centre workers are confident users of the process, and are very successful at persuading parents and carers of the benefit of completing a CAF at the earliest possible stage. In the last 12 months, no families have refused to engage in the process, and centre staff, mainly outreach family support workers, have initiated nine new assessments.

Children clearly enjoy attending the centre and demonstrate good social development. They settle quickly into the nursery and the school when they make these transitions. Children, parents and carers who attend the HAPPI kids provision for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities benefit strongly from the caring transition arrangements developed with the nursery, primary school and special school. Educational achievements have improved dramatically at the Early Years Foundation Stage over the past two years, with the proportion achieving a good level of development rising from nearly 19 points below the county average in 2008 to over 13 points above in 2010. Improvements for those children whose scores are very low have been less dramatic across the whole county, but the attainment gap between the lowest and the average scores is now in line with national figures.

The centre responds well to feedback from parents and carers when they are invited to evaluate services. For example, the introduction of the drop-in session alongside the well-baby clinic and the extension of crèche facilities to parents and carers attending baby sessions but who have older children as well, were in response to feedback from parents and carers. However, there are less-well-understood arrangements for parents and carers to contribute to planning decisions about provision. Some parents and carers who have children in the centre and also in the primary school would like their views taken into account when the centre is planning the timing of sessions, but are not sure how to achieve this.

There are individual examples of success for parents and carers, particularly lone parents, who want to move into employment. In one case, this was achieved through volunteer working in the centre or the school, supported by training arranged with one of the strategic partners, culminating in employment in the school. However, the area served by the centre is characterised by low aspirations and long-term worklessness in many families.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups,	3
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are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	
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	3

How good is the provision?

2

The centre has a good understanding of the needs of its local community, which has recently begun to be informed by good-quality and reliable statistical information from the local authority, though not from health partners. At an individual level, support workers get to know their families very well and assess their changing needs as they become engaged with the centre and its services. Family support workers report their success in helping families to progress from a superficial assessment of their own needs to a more in-depth understanding of the underlying needs, which greatly helps in planning the most appropriate type of support. This one-to-one support, usually provided on an outreach basis, is particularly effective at building trust and engaging families with services to help them and their children. For example, intensive work by the family support workers helps families to overcome anxieties about contacting health professionals, resulting in increased attendance at appointments. Families with children born with additional needs may be initially reluctant to accept the situation, but often respond well to support workers who are very sensitive to the needs of the parents, carers and older siblings as well as those of the children. When children begin to access services in the centre, good use is made of learning journals and diaries to demonstrate progress to parents and carers and to ensure that assessments are kept up to date. The outdoor play area attached to the nursery is a good example of a response to an assessed need for children who have no opportunity for outdoor play at home, for example, because there is no garden.

The range of activities, clinics, workshops and training events in the centre is good, and planned to meet most needs well. Partnerships, including those with voluntary agencies, enable the centre to signpost families to housing support, bereavement counselling, benefits advice, wide-ranging health advice and services. Saturday sessions for children with additional needs are particularly sensitively planned, both to provide high-quality care and development for the children, but also to give the family some respite and the opportunity to devote their time and attention to other

siblings. Holiday fun days are coordinated across the five children's centres in the city so that they are all held on different days. The centre celebrates children's achievements at both these fun days and the regular activities in the centre, through detailed learning journals and diaries and attractive and motivating wall displays.

The range of services and activities offered in the centre is continually evolving, and some activities, such as the support for young mothers to be, are now located elsewhere in response to the views of the young people. However, the centre continues to signpost these wider services well. For example, a thriving Polish community accesses a neighbouring centre, and new Polish arrivals are encouraged to visit this centre to see if it would better meet their needs than Green Croft. Outreach services are effective and valued by the community, particularly the portage service, speech and language therapy and family support in general. Parents and carers particularly value the social benefits of attending the centre and seeing a range of services that they may not have thought about, as well as learning that other parents and carers often face the same challenges as they do. Some parents and carers would like to build on this with an opportunity to get to know other parents and carers in less formal sessions than the carefully structured parent-baby or parent-toddler sessions, where the focus is rightly on parents and carers interacting with their children rather than other adults. Support for families in times of crisis is effective and rapid.

Regularly updated information on wall displays and in leaflets and brochures is carefully chosen to avoid overloading parents and carers, many of whom would find too much information daunting or confusing. The information is located in appropriate places in 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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Safeguarding is promoted and understood well by staff, including those in partner agencies. All staff working at the centre are subject to Criminal Records Bureau checks before they take up their appointment, and the centre maintains a single central record of the checks. All staff have multiagency training in child protection and wider safeguarding, arranged through the local authority. Training is refreshed every two or three years, in line with local safeguarding children board recommendations. The Common Assessment Framework is used well to protect children and support families through early, multiagency interventions. The centre is currently piloting the support of supervised visits for parents and carers whose children are being looked after, and some of these visits are hosted in the centre itself. This joint project with children's social care has been very well received by all parties. In particular, the parents and carers and their children welcome the stability of seeing the same family support workers regularly.

Leaders and managers set clear direction and support centre staff well. Staff have regular supervision meetings and annual performance reviews which concentrate on professional development. Careful management of caseloads ensures that family support workers are able to respond quickly and effectively to families in times of crisis. They are encouraged to work outside their specific role and seek opportunities to expand their skills. All staff, including professionals in partner agencies, respect one another and trust in their expertise.

The centre workers, particularly the outreach family support workers, focus on the needs of the individual – child or adult. This helps to promote equal access to services for some of the most vulnerable in the community. Their work with families who have children with disabilities is particularly valued at times of transition, when parents and carers are enabled to make an informed choice about the best school provision for the child. Once the decision is made, the centre facilitates a carefully planned programme of visits and activities to meet school staff and help with settling in.

Governance arrangements are well understood by staff despite recent and continuing changes, and the local authority provides strong strategic direction. There are concerns among some of the partner agencies that the move to a city-wide advisory board will lead to more of a strategic focus, and reduce their opportunity to be involved in operational planning and decision making in the centre. This concern echoes those of parents and carers who are also unsure how their views can contribute to the running of the centre.

Value for money is satisfactory. The centre regularly engages just under 70% of the families in its reach area. Most group sessions are well attended. Children are showing clear signs of improving their skills on entry to 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	2
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	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 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	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

The inspection of the on-site nursery, which took place on the day before the children's centre inspection, and the most recent Section 5 inspections of Marlbrook Primary School in April 2009 and Blackmarston Special School in February 2011 helped to inform the findings in this report.

The early years inspection found the nursery to be outstanding, as did the inspection of Marlbrook School, while Blackmarston School was judged to be good. The primary school inspection found children's skills on entry to be below average, but current data from the school show a significant improvement.

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 the Green Croft Children's Centre on 15–16 June 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank those of you who spared the time to talk to us about the centre and the difference it is making to the lives of you and your children. Your comments were very important in helping us to form our views.

You told us that the centre is making a real difference to your lives, through the good support you receive from the family support workers and the opportunities in the centre to meet professionals and other families. We saw that you feel safe in the centre and that your children are happy and sociable in their activities. We know that the nursery in the centre is excellent, that many of you use it and that even more would like to. We know that the primary school next door is also excellent, and the staff in the centre, the nursery and the primary school work very well together to support you and your children in moving from one to another. Those of you who have worked with the portage workers feel that their support provides a real lifeline in helping understand and support the needs of your children. This is even more noticeable for those families whose children take part in the HAPPI kids programme on a Friday.

Many of you told us that, but for the centre, you would feel very isolated and your children would not have the chance to play with other children or make friends. We think the centre is very welcoming and provides regularly updated information about a wide range of services that you might need, but without overwhelming you with too much information. The staff organise a good range of activities and courses, although not all run in the centre itself. They have very good links to several other agencies and support workers whose support ranges from general advice about finances, housing, employment prospects or benefits to more specialist support, such as for those of you who are facing bereavement. However, we think that there is more they could do alongside health professionals to encourage the take-up of health services, particularly dental services and to support those of you who want to give up smoking.

We noticed a number of comments from some of you in learning diaries and questionnaires that show how the centre makes use of your suggestions to improve what they do. This makes an important contribution to the centre's self-assessment of its work. However, we think there is more staff can do to evaluate how well they meet the needs of the community, and the impact they are having in helping to improve children's lives. Some of this should come from making better use of statistics from the local authority and partner agencies. Some of you told us that you would like more opportunities to tell the centre what you would like it to offer, or be involved in planning when it is to be offered. We have suggested to the centre that this is something they should be working on with you. A few of you also told us that some of your friends have no idea what the centre offers, and that the centre's services should be better publicised. The centre is currently working with about two

thirds of the families that it thinks would benefit from its work, and we know that staff are keen to encourage more families to benefit from the good support and activities they offer.

We think that the impact of most aspects of the work of the centre is good, although the improvements in children's health and in adults' economic independence are satisfactory. We think that the way the centre assesses needs, provides care, guidance and support and plans courses and activities is good. The centre is led and managed well in most aspects of its work, however, it should do more to involve you in planning what it does and it needs to explain more clearly how it will achieve its ambitious plans for improvement. It can also do more to make more efficient use of some of its facilities, such as the crèche.

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