

Inspection report for Applecroft Children's Centre

Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	384215
Inspection dates	25–26 April 2012
Reporting inspector	Jean-Marie Blakeley

Centre leader	Sian Gardiner
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
Centre address	Applecroft Primary School Applecroft Road Hertfordshire AL8 6JZ
Telephone number	01707 384865
Fax number	01707 393188
Email address	centre.manager@applecroft.herts.sch.uk

Linked school if applicable	Applecroft Primary School
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.

Report published: May 2012



The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/100080.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

No.100080

© Crown copyright 2011



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 one additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, members of staff and partner professionals from other agencies. Discussions were held with parents and representatives from the local authority.

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

Information about the centre

Applecroft Children's Centre is a phase two centre. It is situated within Applecroft Primary School in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire. The school's governing body is contracted by the local authority to govern the centre. The centre has an advisory board made up of school governors, representatives from the local community, professional partners and parents. The headteacher of the school is the line manager of the centre manager. A range of partners work with the centre to deliver services for families. They form a 'Partnership Group' and support the development of the centre's strategy.

Welwyn Garden City is a 'new town' with many green open spaces, good road and rail links and a busy town centre which lies within the centre's remit. The centre meets its core purpose and serves a community, which is socio-economically privileged but has some small pockets of deprivation. The centre provides services from its premises at Applecroft School and at other venues in target areas. The majority of local families are of White British heritage. The proportion of children who live in households without paid employment is low at 10.7%, as is the percentage of children living in families in receipt of the childcare element of working tax credit at 14.3%. Children enter Early Years Foundation Stage provision with skills and abilities that are at or slightly below those typically found for their age.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

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

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Applecroft Children's Centre provides a good quality of service for children and families. Good leadership, management and teamwork are leading to cohesive provision and good outcomes for families. Particularly strong partnerships with health professionals are having a positive impact across the five outcome areas.

Care, guidance and support are good for a steadily increasing number of families from target groups. There is a strong focus on supporting parents to develop good parenting skills. Families improve their health and well-being, and health outcomes are good. Obesity rates of children in Reception Year are low and below national averages at 6.9%. Breastfeeding rates are high and above the national average at 64%.

The centre manager's expertise in the Early Years Foundation Stage is a strength of the centre. As a result, sessions are of a high quality and there is a good impact on children's enjoyment and achievement. The results from the Early Years Foundation Profile for schools in the area indicate that results have improved over the last four years from 58.8% to 63.2% of children in Reception Year achieving at least 78+ points and six points in communication, language and literacy. Data indicate that the overall achievement gap between the highest- and lowest-achieving children is narrowing.

The inclusion of all families and children is central to the vision of the centre and is fully promoted in all aspects of its work. The centre has a good understanding of its key target groups and engages well with the majority of families living in deprived areas.

Case studies and anecdotal evidence demonstrate that some families are improving their economic well-being. However, the range of adult education courses is limited and not particularly targeted at workless or low-income families.

The centre gives safeguarding a high priority; clear policies, procedures and staff training contribute to the safety and protection of families and children. As a result,

the safety and progress of those children known to the centre as being subject to a child protection plan or those assessed under the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) are good. The centre reports any concerns promptly to other agencies and provides good support to identified families. However, children's services do not always communicate with the centre regarding children identified as in need. Therefore, the centre is unable to target engagement with these families in order to contribute to early intervention and support.

The centre demonstrates a good capacity for sustained improvement. Outcomes are good and improving because the centre constantly monitors the quality and impact of services and identifies how it can improve them. Families' views are highly valued and help to shape the range of services and activities offered. However, the centre recognises that some data lack sufficient detail and accuracy. Therefore, it is difficult for leaders, managers and the advisory board to analyse the full impact of the centre's work on the most vulnerable families in order to set precise targets.

The centre provides good value for money. It uses its resources effectively and provides good quality of provision leading to good outcomes for families.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The local authority should ensure that children's services improve communication with the centre so that the centre can contribute effectively to early intervention and support for all children in need.
- Increase the collection of data in order to measure the full impact of the centre's services on outcomes for families and set precise improvement targets.
- Increase learning and development and training opportunities, particularly for workless and low income families, in order to improve their economic well-being

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The centre promotes health and well-being well through its range of activities and effective partnerships with health services. This relationship is particularly strong because the part-time family support worker also works as a community nursery nurse for the health service. Families using the centre are developing a good knowledge of healthy lifestyles because of advice and support which promote healthy living.

The enjoyment of families attending the centre results in their good overall progress. Through a wide range of play and development opportunities, parents are learning how to support their children's learning. The use of targeted activities, such as 'Story Sacks' in order to raise achievement, particularly of boys, has had a positive impact on children's learning and progress. One parent told inspectors: 'My children started

here because of the clinic. We attended many groups which helped them become familiar with the building and the staff, so they started school without any problems.

Adult learning courses and referral for employment advice are helping improve the economic well-being of some families. Case studies indicate some good individual support and training leading to employment. However, a minority of adults gain qualifications or progress to training, education or employment.

Volunteers make a good contribution to the centre and the community by supporting activities and running sessions. This helps the sustainability of the centre. Parents and children of different social, economic and minority ethnic backgrounds treat each other with respect. They make a positive contribution to the development of the centre. Centre staff routinely listen to and use the feedback of families to shape and develop its services. As members of the advisory board, parents make a good contribution to the strategic decisions for the centre. One parent said, 'The centre encouraged and supported me to become a volunteer and gain qualifications. I now volunteer in school as well.'

The centre is a safe and secure environment. Families increase their understanding of how to keep safe and reduce the risk of injury. One childminder said: 'I accessed the first-aid course here, which is invaluable when you are looking after other people's children. It was in the evening so that people who can't attend during the day, such as working dads, can attend.' However, because of limited communication from children's services, the centre is unable to contribute effectively to improving staying safe outcomes for some children in need.

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	2
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 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	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre's good knowledge and understanding of the community it serves lead to the delivery of good-quality provision. The building is well equipped to provide

activities for families. The centre makes good use of partners' venues to extend its capacity to deliver services and reach target groups. The majority of families with children under four-years-old living in areas of most need engage well with services at the centre. Services specifically provided for disabled children have a good impact on their outcomes. However, the lack of complete and accurate data makes it difficult for the centre to measure the full impact of its services on target groups.

The centre promotes and celebrates learning effectively for children and adults. Sessions are well prepared and are of a high quality. Parents are encouraged to support their children through enjoyable activities such as 'Stay and Play' and 'Baby Rhyme Time'. One parent said: 'The centre saved my sanity. After the first two weeks at home with my baby I knew I had to get out. The health visitor told me about the centre. We used to come about three times a week. When my child went to school I became a volunteer – I wanted to give something back.' Staff model good parenting in activities and use every opportunity to promote children's and adults' learning.

Strong partnerships result in effective care, guidance and support for families. The centre is successful in supporting families with circumstances that make them vulnerable. Parents particularly value home visits and individually tailored support and say that the centre has made a big difference to their lives. Parents have adequate access to information, advice and guidance on training, benefits and work.

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	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 manager's operational leadership is good. She sets high expectations and clear direction for the centre's development. Teamwork is a significant strength. The headteacher of the school provides effective support to the manager, which helps improve performance and drive up standards. The local authority's quarterly monitoring of the centre contributes well to the improving provision. Governance and accountability arrangements are clear and understood. The support and challenge from both the advisory board and the partnership group play a significant role in the continuous improvement of the centre.

The centre's staff team demonstrate a clear vision of inclusion and commitment to the success of the centre. Staff and partners share high expectations and ambitions, and their drive has improved services for families. Professionals from a range of

agencies make an effective commitment to partnership working and to improving the life chances of children and families, which results in good and improving outcomes. The centre seeks and welcomes the views of all families and uses them well to develop the provision.

The centre promotes the inclusion of all families and children in all aspects of its provision. Staff ensure that their diverse needs are well supported and barriers to access are removed. Volunteers provide good support for children with Down's syndrome and their parents through a weekly group at the centre. One parent said: 'The centre has always made us very welcome. Even in this day and age this isn't always the case when you have a disabled child.'

The centre gives the safeguarding of children a high priority. It is effective in ensuring children and families stay safe through close attention to child protection processes and robust vetting and recruitment procedures. Strong partnerships with health professional are minimising duplication and enhancing safeguarding. However, high turnover in children's services staff limits communication from children's services and the utilisation of the centre as a resource.

Outcomes for families are good because the centre constantly monitors the quality and impact of services and identifies how it can improve them. Key priorities set in the development plan are the basis for the improving outcomes. However, some data are imprecise and are, therefore, not analysed effectively in order to monitor the full impact of the centre's work with the most vulnerable families.

The resources at the centre are managed efficiently to meet the needs of families, leading to good outcomes. Families using the centre express high satisfaction and state that provision and support are good and make a strong contribution to their families' well-being.

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	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

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 Applecroft Children's Centre on 25–26 April 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you very much for talking to us and letting us come into your sessions. The information you gave us helped us to make our judgements. You talked about how the centre has helped you and your children and has supported you to improve your lives. You told us that you now have more confidence as parents.

You told us how it has become easier to ask for help and support because of the friendly welcome and the relationships that you develop with centre staff. You also told us about the friends you have met and the things you have learnt because of your involvement in the centre's activities.

The centre is successful at engaging with the majority of local families that need support. We found that because the health service works very closely with the centre, families really benefit from accessing services at the centre. You appreciate that you can access the midwife at the centre. Families are particularly improving their health, education and parenting skills. The number of babies that are breastfed at six to eight weeks and the impact on childhood obesity are good.

You enjoy the sessions with your children such as 'Stay and Play' and 'Baby Rhyme Time'. Your children behave well and all the groups are welcoming to families regardless of their backgrounds. Everyone seems to get on well together at the centre and there are good opportunities to volunteer. We found out you have learnt new things and developed new skills. However, only some adults gain qualifications, go on to further training or find work. We have asked the centre to increase these opportunities, particularly for workless and low-income families.

You told us how your involvement with the centre and courses such as 'First Aid' are improving your ability to keep your children safe. Staff have a good understanding of child protection procedures, are well trained and give good support for families who may be vulnerable due to their circumstances. However, we found that children's services do not always communicate with the centre regarding children identified as in need. Therefore, the centre cannot offer support to these families. We have asked the local authority to improve this communication.

The centre listens to you and asks you what you think of the services and activities they offer. They change how and when they do some things because of what you say. Parents make a good contribution to strategic decisions about the centre through being members of the advisory board.

We found that all the staff are keen to promote equality and diversity. Many of the families with the greatest needs are enjoying sessions to help them and their children. Families treat each other with respect. The centre works well for everyone in the community, irrespective of their background or disability. Families value the sessions, run by volunteers, for children with Down's syndrome and their parents.

The centre manager sets high expectations and clear direction for the centre's development. Day-to-day management is good and teamwork is strong. The centre has been continually improving and knows what it needs to do to improve further. However, some of the available data are incomplete. We have asked the centre to improve this to help monitor the full impact of their services on the families with greatest need and set precise targets for improvement.

We thoroughly enjoyed spending time at your centre, meeting you and your children, and we wish you and your families all the best for the future.

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