

Inspection report for Thameside Children's Centre

Local authority	Thurrock
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Thameside Infant 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.

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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 centre staff, representatives of the local authority, partner agencies, parents and carers, the headteacher of Thameside Infant School, members of the governance and advisory boards. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Thameside Children's Centre is a phase two children's centre, designated in September 2009, which serves the Grays Riverside Ward. The centre is based in purpose-built accommodation attached to Thameside Infant School with a shared reception area for children to access the school nursery. The building is small and comprises three average-sized rooms and a small office. There is a governance body which locally serves five children's centres including Thameside and an advisory board also supports Thameside Children's Centre.

There are 820 children in the reach area. The majority are from White British, Asian and Black African backgrounds with an increasing proportion of children from a range of other minority ethnic backgrounds including Polish and from other Eastern European countries. Children come from homes where 75% are lone mothers, 51% live in poverty and 44% of parents are unemployed. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities are below those expected for their age on entry to early years provision.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

3

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

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Thameside is a satisfactory children’s centre. It is an inclusive and welcoming centre run by dedicated staff who aspire to serve their community well. Families appreciate the good quality care, guidance and support the centre provides and the difference it makes to their lives. One mother expressed the view shared by many, saying, ‘I don’t know where I would be without the centre, especially the family outreach workers.’

Although anecdotal evidence of individual cases often shows improving outcomes, the centre’s use of data to demonstrate its wider impact is at an early stage. Information is not yet collected or collated in a format to show the full impact of the centre’s work and help leaders to set consistently challenging targets for improvement within planning.

The centre provides a sufficient range of targeted services but the more universal services are constrained by the low number and sheer size of rooms which limit numbers attending sessions to a maximum of twelve. Reduced staffing and resources also limit the opportunity for outreach programmes to be run in the community. As a consequence, there are waiting lists for courses that are oversubscribed. The centre recognises that although just over half of users engage with the centre, there are more potential users who are not able to use the centre as the programmes are full and the centre is working to capacity.

Outcomes for users are mainly satisfactory but some aspects are underdeveloped particularly when local data is not sufficiently used to target services. For instance, when 32% of children locally suffer from tooth decay, little was seen to promote children’s dental health. In contrast, children are making particular progress in their communication and language skills as a result of the excellent work of the speech and language team and well-qualified family outreach workers who follow up language clinics with the ‘Chatterbox’ programme. Those children in most need with language delay through disabilities such as hearing impairment are identified early, support is effectively given and their outcomes are good. There is satisfactory provision and signposting to relevant employment, training and education for adults to help them improve their English language, basic literacy skills and seek work.

The centre places a high priority on safeguarding families. Staff work effectively with other agencies to reduce the risk of harm to children. Arrangements for safer recruitment, health and safety and for child protection are robust and meet statutory requirements well.

The centre works hard to develop and maintain links with all relevant partners. These

include close working relationships with local pre-schools, nurseries and Thameside Infant School, but despite good efforts to arrange learning activities like 'Numbers are Fun' these are often met with disappointing attendance levels. Formal ways of channelling parents' and other stakeholder views and using these to shape future planning are underdeveloped.

The governance of the centre is sound. The centre staff team work well together to ensure the smooth running of the centre from day-to-day. The local authority has provided adequate support to the centre but confusion about some aspects of supplying and using data has not always been helpful. Centre leaders have a broadly accurate view of the centre's strengths, though without enough evidence of impact, their self-evaluation and improvement planning lack rigour. Leaders are realistic about what is required to improve the satisfactory overall effectiveness of the centre and the satisfactory provision and outcomes. Staff are motivated to build on what has already been achieved and this, with proven commitment to continuous development, indicates that the centre has satisfactory capacity for sustained further improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Sharpen the approach to collecting, collating, and analysing data to show the impact of provision, especially for improving children's enjoyment and achievement.
- Improve self-evaluation processes to ensure that the action plan contains sharp, measurable targets for improvement.
- Increase the level of user engagement to the wider reach community.
- Extend the ways that families' and stakeholder's views are used to shape future planning.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Outcomes for users are satisfactory. The centre has limited statistical evidence to demonstrate precisely the impact of the services offered. Practitioners at the centre work effectively together to promote positive outcomes for users. Families benefit from sessions that promote healthy living such the MEND programme and REASON drop-ins for minority ethnic families where a successful recent key focus has been on reducing obesity. Universal health services, such as midwife antenatal checks and health visitor clinics, operate out of the centre so that mothers-to-be and mothers of young babies are introduced to the children's centre at a very early stage in family life. Data show there are a good proportion of mothers breastfeeding babies up to eight weeks old which is well above local levels. Other health aspects, such as supporting smoking cessation, sexual health issues and tackling the local high levels of child tooth decay, are underdeveloped.

Outcomes for staying safe are good. Users say that they feel safe at the centre and the staff give parents good advice on health and safety in the home. Safety packs are given to parents on their first home visit to good effect and many parents pass the first aid course. Good use is made of the Common Assessment Framework processes for recording and coordinating support programmes. Staff effectively build trust with families. The family outreach workers' case files illustrate how effective the support is in helping parents to become more confident and successful in managing their family lives. The centre is effectively supporting families with children on the child protection register and children in need where domestic violence is prevalent.

Children behave well and all at the centre show a respect for one another. Those parents who find their children's behaviour management difficult benefit from one-to-one advice and an effective programme called PATCH. Parents and carers say that their children enjoy all of the activities. 'It's the best two hours of the week', said a group of mothers. Drop-in sessions give children and mothers opportunities to socialise and feel less isolated. The centre has good arrangements for transitions to the private nursery for two year olds and to school to ensure that children are well prepared for their move to the next phase. Users say they enjoy the early education programmes they have attended. They say they have helped them to understand why it is important to interact and play with their children. The agency crèche staff are not contracted to assess activities and other session assessments are not mindful of the early years learning and development age expected levels. As a result, the progress and outcomes the children are making are not able to be measured sufficiently to judge the impact of the programmes as any better than satisfactory. The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores show that children who access services at the centre still have low starting points when they transfer to school but achieve better than those who do not, particularly in their personal, social and emotional development, and communication, language and literacy. These scores are above the local authority average as the centre is helping to narrow the achievement gap between different groups of children and is helping to promote good behaviour and positive attitudes to learning.

Some limited numbers of adult users benefit from opportunities to gain qualifications in a range of courses, for example, in first aid and literacy skills. The centre recognises that there remains scope to increase adult involvement in training and education and has confirmed plans to extend training to include numeracy shortly. Individual parents are signposted to the Thurrock Adult Community College for further education, Jobcentre Plus services for employment and to the Citizens Advice Bureau for help with accommodation, benefit entitlement and debt management.

Users express a good level of satisfaction with the centre through the annual survey. A parents' forum has been re-launched in the last few months and has yet to be fully established. In addition, parent representatives on the advisory body have yet to undergo training to fulfil roles adequately. Although some parents told inspectors they were not aware of the parents' forum and its role, they stated they were happy to speak to any staff member directly about any issues relating to the

centre and were confident that their opinions would be valued and acted upon.

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	3
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 provision of services is satisfactory overall. Most of the activities, services and opportunities are targeted to the families in greatest need, leaving little capacity or resources for more universal services for the wider reach users. Outreach services are conducted through home visits and the range of groups of users helped and supported is impressive. The centre, in collaboration with partner agencies, is effective in identifying and responding to the needs of vulnerable children and their families. Assessment is used adequately when activities are evaluated but this information is not used sufficiently to plan and set targets to improve further. Many of the activities offered by the centre promote purposeful learning for all children who attend. The crèche gives parents valuable time for themselves but the numbers using it are often low. The centre provides many drop-in sessions and activities which promote learning. For example, 'Wonder Ones' is a session which provides messy play with a sensory and tactile approach and other resources for pre-school children. Parents find this extremely helpful because the children can experience lots of creative activities like messy play, which are not easy to implement in the home. The 'Movers and Shakers' and 'Mucky Pups' feature music, dance, singing and fun with puppets and the 'Signalong' successfully promotes improving communication with babies.

The quality of care, guidance and support offered to young children, parents and other users of the centre is good. The initial assessment of need for families referred to the centre for support ensures that resources are used effectively. Good relationships have been established with a wide range of key partners, including health services and children's social care. These ensure that families receive a coordinated approach to meeting their needs. The speech and language drop-in sessions are an example of best practice language support in the local Thurrock area

with up to 20 children seen at the monthly clinic. This consultation is often followed up by well-trained centre staff who help and support families further.

Centre staff are sensitive to the needs of families, and users state that the family outreach workers often 'go the extra mile' to support them effectively in times of crisis. A range of information leaflets is available to parents and covers a variety of topics. These help parents and carers meet the physical, emotional and nutritional needs of their children. However, limited information is available on where to get support for dental health issues. Staff know its users well through local knowledge and day-to-day contact rather than through information supported by data and analysis. The inclusive approach and welcoming environment ensure that once users attend the centre, they go on to engage with many of the different services.

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?

3

The centre has seen changes to the management and staffing structure in recent months as a result of budget reductions. Individuals are now embedding their new roles and responsibilities and leadership and management are satisfactory. There is a committed and enthusiastic staff team whose expertise and skills are being used to improve services further. Professional supervision and performance management are regularly undertaken and valued where staff are under pressure with reduced resources. A newly formed advisory board is in the early stages of development. The governance board has a good representation of partners and is starting to hold the centre to account. It is clear from the testimonies of partners that the centre plays a pivotal role in bringing services together to improve the life chances of children.

Equality and diversity are satisfactorily promoted. Children with disabilities are well catered for and outcomes are good for this group. Staff try hard to remove barriers for all users to the activities and services on offer within tight resource constraints. The management team is aware that, currently, user engagement could be increased significantly if more universal outreach services were provided locally. In addition, they recognise that without more robust use of data, the centre cannot be certain it is fully meeting the needs of all reach groups. The centre offers satisfactory value for money.

Safeguarding arrangements are good. Child protection processes and recruitment checks are thorough. Health and safety checks and risk assessments are

appropriately carried out. Access to the centre and to rooms is controlled and risk assessments are carried out as appropriate providing a safe and secure environment. Outreach services are becoming increasingly effective at engaging those users who are hard to reach; this ensures that some families who are particularly vulnerable access relevant services.

Parents told inspectors how much they value the centre and are appreciative of the benefits it has given their families. Parents' views are heard informally but their voice is not yet channelled formally through the parents' forum. The centre is currently seeking to increase parent representation on the advisory and governance boards.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
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	3
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

The inspection took account of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores and attainment on entry data from Thameside Infant School when judging aspects of children's achievement.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Thameside Children's Centre on 23–24 May 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall with some good features.

During this time, we talked with parents, staff, partners and members of the local authority linked to the children's centre. We also observed the centre's work and looked at a range of documents.

Those of you we spoke to told us that you enjoy using the centre and that it has made a positive difference to your lives. You also told us that you find staff at the centre very friendly and helpful. All centre staff are good at guiding you and referring you and your children to other activities and services they think you would also benefit from and enjoy. Many of you shared with inspectors how you value the relationships you have built with the family outreach workers and the difference they have helped you make to your lives and the lives of your children.

The centre currently offers a sufficient range of services and activities for families in the area, which are led by skilled and dedicated professionals. In order to develop the centre further, we have asked the staff to look more closely at what you and your children are achieving and measure the impact the centre's work is making on your lives and your children's learning and development. Collecting this information will help ensure that the centre develops an action plan to improve the centre more effectively.

You told us that you think that the centre is a safe place for parents and carers and their children. Inspectors agree with this view and found that staff work hard to ensure the health and safety of all who use the centre. Safeguarding is given appropriate attention and all the arrangements are good.

The staff help you to support your children's learning and development at home by providing services which encourage you to engage in play with your children from a very early age at sessions such as 'Signalong' and 'Wonder Ones.' Many of you shared with the inspectors how staff support you through the early education programme but you would like even more information to help you to understand how to interact and play with your children to promote their learning and development further.

Some of you are involved in the recently re-launched parents' forum and have made some suggestions on activities you want. Some of you are members of the revised advisory board so that you can be directly involved in decision-making, governance and evaluating the work of the centre. This will help you channel your views more effectively to influence future planning.

The new management structure has been embedded and we have asked that the centre's action plan contains sharp and measurable targets based upon the identified needs within the centre reach area, the take-up of services and the impact of those

services on outcomes for children and their families. We want the advisory body to provide challenge to the centre to ensure that it is offering sound quality and an effective service to a wider range of families in its reach area.

We would like to thank everyone who came to speak with us. It was a privilege to be able to talk with you. Your honesty and openness helped us immensely during the inspection. We are very grateful for your help and we wish each of you every success for the future.

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