

# Inspection report for Thorntree Children's Centre

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Local authority	Middlesbrough
Inspection number	404491
Inspection dates	25–26 September 2012
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Not Applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Bright Stars EY448837
	Middlesbrough Creche Service @ Thorntree Children's Centre EY296176

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:** October 2012

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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 one additional inspector and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre and cluster manager, the senior project worker, specialist project workers, health and education professionals, representatives of the local authority and other partners. They spoke with users of the centre. A minority of the partnership panel took up the opportunity to meet with inspectors.

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

## Information about the centre

Thorntree Children's Centre is a phase one centre which was designated in September 2004. The centre is located in an urban area of east Middlesbrough and is currently one of a cluster of four centres at which children and their families are able to access services. The centre offers a range of health, education and family support services as well as support for families who may be vulnerable due to their individual circumstances. The centre provides childcare through 'Bright Stars'. This provision was previously based at Thorntree Primary School site and has now relocated to Thorntree Community Centre. It was re-registered with Ofsted in July 2012 and has yet to be inspected. The local authority is responsible for the centre. The centre has a partnership board which acts as an advisory board to the centre. The centre has four members of staff including the centre manager. Some staff are shared with other centres in the cluster. The cluster coordinator is new to her post but not to the role. There is currently extensive building work in the centre as alterations are made in order to accommodate a greater range of local services within the community hub, including the local library.

The majority of families within the reach area are of White British heritage and live in social housing. The area served by the centre is one of the poorest in the country. Many families face multiple issues on a daily basis, including significant financial disadvantage. The

number of lone parents and teenage parents registered at the centre is high as is the number of children in the area that are subject to child protection plans. Across the reach area, 51% of children live in workless households. Where parents are working, their jobs are often low paid and insecure. The majority of children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills that are exceptionally low.

## 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

Thorntree Children's Centre provides a good service for the young children, parents and families who live within its reach area. It provides a welcoming environment where families can mix and have fun while having the opportunity to access exceptionally good support in times of crisis. A good number of adults volunteer in the centre or are involved in the parents' network. They are keen to point out how this has improved their levels of confidence. They also speak eagerly about the skills they have acquired while attending the many courses that are delivered in the centre. As one parent said, reflecting the views of many, 'It gives you an identity'. However, the centre has had less success at encouraging mothers to breastfeed; attitudes in the neighbourhood remain largely negative. Although improvements are planned and a new infant feeding coordinator has been appointed by health partners, currently there is no breastfeeding support group in the centre and the centre has not yet trained and deployed peer supporters.

There is a good range of services, and regular attendance at sessions leads to good outcomes as families expand their understanding of how to live healthy lifestyles and to keep themselves safe. Careful assessment of families' needs using the Common Assessment Framework, and a valuable partnership with social services when necessary, means that support can be given as soon as it is needed. This includes helping to improve parenting skills and ultimately outcomes for young children. Consequently, the number of children on the child protection register is reducing. The centre has contact with all of the families with children who are currently on the child protection register. It has very good systems to ensure that support is carefully targeted at those families where there is the most need. However, 23.4% of local families with children under five years are not registered with the

centre and the centre cannot be sure of the level of need within these particular families. The centre is aware that some families are reluctant to register because they find it difficult to deal with what they perceive to be 'authority' figures. Staff know that the first contact with some families requires a very sensitive approach if they are to gain these families' confidence. Additionally, the use of innovative methods to attract new families has diminished and the use of new technologies to aid communication is limited. Work with partners, including local schools, is of variable quality.

All staff have a cheerful resilience. They know that sustaining their efforts is the key to realising their ambition to transform families' lives in the local community. The centre meets safeguarding requirements and promotes equality and diversity well. Local managers clearly understand the centre's strengths and weaknesses. They have managed to keep the centre moving forward while subject to significant financial restraints and changes within many of their partner organisations. Parents make a good contribution to shaping the development of the centre, but the partnership board provides less effective challenge. The centre has continued to develop its provision and has continued to move forward in uncertain times, illustrating its good capacity to improve and build on its successes.

## **What does the centre need to do to improve further?**

### **Recommendations for further improvement**

- Improve the proportion of families from the reach area who register with, and regularly use, the centre by:
  - working with health partners to ensure that early contact with families helps families to overcome their reluctance to engage with services
  - reconsidering innovative marketing strategies and making better use of modern technologies to enhance communication
  - strengthen the working with partner primary schools to promote contact with a wider range of families.
- Improve the percentage of mothers who initiate and sustain breastfeeding by:
  - providing prospective mothers with sufficient information to make an informed decision about breastfeeding by working closely with midwives, health visitors and the infant-feeding coordinator
  - addressing the negative attitudes towards breastfeeding that are prevalent in the local area
  - developing an effective support system including training and deploying peer supporters.
- Improve the strategic direction provided by the partnership board by:
  - reviewing the membership
  - improving attendance
  - developing the board's ability to challenge.

## How good are outcomes for families?

The centre has made a good effort to address high obesity rates in the area. Activities such as 'Little Diggers' and 'Tiny Tumbles' are well attended and highly appreciated by parents, as are the swimming sessions. These good efforts to encourage children and parents to be active are complemented by sessions such as 'Little Chefs' which encourage healthy eating. Parents are delighted that their children are so enthusiastic about trying a greater range of foods and report that their own ability to choose and cook healthy foods has improved. Consequently, obesity rates at the end of the Reception Year have recently fallen from 15.6% to 11.3%. Although breastfeeding mothers are currently able to gain support from the local health visiting team and the recently appointed infant feeding coordinator, rates for initiating breastfeeding are exceptionally low with only 22.8% of local mothers breastfeeding at delivery and 15.9% continuing at discharge. Very few local mothers sustain breastfeeding beyond six to eight weeks, although there are some early signs of improvement. The very small number of mothers who do continue to breastfeed say that they have been well supported by individual staff in the centre. Some mothers say that if they had been given more information and support during pregnancy and just after their children were born then they would have breastfed their children. However, the centre has identified that ingrained negative views towards breastfeeding are still prevalent in the area especially among older family members who are very influential. Although plans are in place to improve the situation, the centre currently does not have a breastfeeding support group and plans to develop a team of peer supporters in the local community have not yet come to fruition. However, the centre has trained staff in readiness for the development of a support group.

Many parents say that staff in the centre have provided important emotional support at times when they were potentially vulnerable. They find the baby massage sessions particularly useful because these encourage a bond to develop between mother and child. During home visits and the delivery of activities, there is a good emphasis on helping children and parents to be aware of how to keep themselves safe. Safety equipment is provided when necessary, and some parents have completed a useful first-aid course. Parents say that they 'feel very safe and secure in the centre'. Relationships between staff and users of the centre are warm and supportive. As a result, parents feel able to talk about their problems, and are helped to access expert advice including accessing the 'Freedom' programme when there are issues concerning domestic violence. The provision of individual support followed by nurture and parenting courses has helped to reduce the incidence of neglect. The number of children on the child protection register has reduced, although numbers are still high in national terms. Relationships within the centre are very good and children behave well when they attend sessions. Parents have good opportunities to contribute to governance through attending the parents' forum and being part of the partnership board.

Children make good progress in their learning when they attend the centre's provision. Enjoyment levels are high and children grow quickly in confidence. The proportion of children who attend the centre and go on to reach national expectations in their personal, social and emotional development and in communication, language and literacy at the end

of the Early Years Foundation Stage has improved from a very low base. The gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the Early Years Foundation Stage and the rest of the children is reducing in the local primary schools. However, many children are still entering Year 1 with skills that are significantly below average. There has been a successful rolling programme of 'Ready for Nursery' to support transition to school which parents appreciate. Parents have easy access to expert advice on obtaining welfare and benefits. Recently, there has been an improved emphasis on returning to work through the location of a worker from the 'Wise' group on-site. Adults have successfully developed their skills via literacy courses, numeracy courses, family learning and volunteering. The centre then helps parents to access college courses that further enhance their employability.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families:

<b>The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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.</b>	<b>2</b>

## How good is the provision?

**2**

Registration rates have improved because health visitors now help parents to register when they first visit new mothers. However, not all families are willing to register. This is sometimes because of previous difficulties with relationships with external agencies and sometimes because of preconceived perceptions. Consequently, the centre is not able to reach all the families in the area. Previously innovative ways of improving registration rates and seeking out families, who would gain the most from using the centre have waned and the use of new technologies to promote the centre has not yet been fully explored. Additionally, the centre continues to explore ways of working with partner primary schools in order to reach more families. The needs of families who are registered are assessed sensitively and appropriately, and the centre offers a good quality and range of services, including outreach. These are well matched to local requirements.

The activities provided by the centre are varied, of good quality and are usually well attended. They promote purposeful learning, enjoyment and development for children because activities are carefully linked to the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. Many activities also successfully focus on improving adults' skills and their

levels of confidence as well as developing parents' understanding of how their children can learn through play. Consequently, parents now realise that their children are learning from a very young age and acknowledge the importance of clear speech. The centre always assesses the impact of sessions and takes careful note of parents' responses.

Families with circumstances that make them potentially vulnerable are rapidly identified. They receive high-quality individual support that sometimes involves eliciting the support of other agencies and outreach services. Additionally, parents report that they are offered excellent support in times of crisis. Good support and advice overall have helped families to manage their money and achieve greater economic stability. Timely guidance about health-related matters is also offered. For example, during the summer holidays an advice centre for teenagers helped them to protect their sexual health and to prevent unplanned pregnancies.

These are the grades for the quality of provision:

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

## **How effective are the leadership and management?**

**2**

Local leaders, including the centre head and cluster coordinator, are clearly focused on providing good services that are well matched to the needs of the area and provide good value for money. Their ambition is shared as staff respond well to their high expectations and to the centre's well-established routines. There is a good sense of teamwork and mutual support that enable staff to be resilient and to sustain their efforts even when they are working in the most difficult circumstances.

Local management systems are used effectively to monitor the work of the centre, and there are clear lines of accountability. Regular professional supervision ensures that case files are particularly well kept. The centre seeks regular feedback from parents about the quality of its services and makes good use of this information in its self-evaluation to continuously enhance what it offers. Although the parents' forum offers the centre a good level of challenge, the partnership board is less successful in drawing up an agenda for development. There are about 30 members of the board but many do not attend on a regular basis. The board has become a forum to share information rather than providing a sharp focus on long-term developments and a good level of challenge. The local authority has recently changed the arrangements for monitoring the work of the centre and now involves a greater range of partners. While some partners are developing a better understanding of the work of the centre, partnerships are uneven in quality and this is



reflected in their impact on the centre's work. For instance, the partnership with social services is particularly strong, whereas communication with primary schools is uneven. There are missed opportunities to contact more parents in the reach area through insightful work with partners.

The centre has a rigorous approach to safeguarding. All staff have their backgrounds and identities checked carefully. Staff are continually developing their knowledge of the issues that face local families such as emotional issues, addiction and domestic violence and how to address these. They are sensitive to safeguarding issues. The centre successfully promotes equality and diversity. It is an inclusive place and fulfils its statutory duties. All parents and children are valued, irrespective of their background, and the centre makes a good contribution to improving the quality of life for everyone in the local community, including disabled children. Its place at the centre of the local community is enhanced by the inclusion of more community services within the building, such as the community library.

These are the grades for leadership and management:

<b>The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secures improvement in outcomes</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>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</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>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.</b>	<b>2</b>

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

None

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## **Summary for centre users**

We inspected Thorntree Children's Centre on 25 and 26 September 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank all the parents who spoke to us when we visited the centre. You told us what you thought about the centre and its activities and how it could be improved. Your views were very useful. It is clear that you are pleased with what the centre has to offer. This is because the children's centre provides a good range of services that are helping children and families in the area to improve their quality of life. The centre is particularly good at helping families in times of crisis. However, 23.4% of families in the area with children under five are not registered with the centre and do not have the same opportunities to access this good quality provision. We have asked the centre to improve this by looking carefully at the quality of contact during first visits, by exploring more innovative ways to draw parents in, and by making better use of modern technology to share information about the centre.

A number of you are volunteers at the centre and you are making a valuable contribution to the smooth running of the centre, for example, through helping out at the 'Bright Beginnings' sessions. We were very impressed by the parents' forum and the good start that has been made on fund-raising activities. We hope you are able to fund your Christmas party. We admired the way you have developed your confidence through attending activities at the centre. We were also impressed by the improvements that many of you have made to your academic qualifications and were pleased to hear that you have joined college courses with the help and support of centre staff. We thought you have good access to expert advice on welfare and benefits and good support for getting back to work.

You told us that the activities provided by the centre are having a good impact on your children's development and well-being and we agree. You told us that the difference between children who attend sessions and those that do not is very obvious in their speech, confidence, and knowledge and understanding. Children's skills at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are improving well but their skills are still often below those that are expected for their age. Your children are helped to settle quickly when they start primary school by the 'Ready for Nursery' programme. We noticed that the centre is good at helping you to have a healthy diet and keep active. It was good to hear that you enjoy the 'Little Chefs' sessions and that your children are now willing to try a greater range of healthy foods. There are many opportunities that encourage your children to be active including the popular 'Tiny Tumbles' sessions and swimming sessions arranged through 'Little Adventures'.

It is clear that the centre is good at promoting emotional well-being. Activities such as baby massage encourage bonding between mother and child. It was good to hear that

opportunities to socialise have helped to reduce incidences of depression. Very few mothers in the area breastfeed their babies. You linked this with lack of support and lack of information during pregnancy and just after delivery but the centre is also aware that there are ingrained negative views towards breastfeeding that exist in the area that still need to be challenged. Currently, there is an absence of a breastfeeding group or peer supporters. Therefore, we have asked the centre to improve this situation. Staff work hard to ensure that children are kept safe, particularly in times of crisis. We judged the care, guidance and support that the centre provides to be good. Parenting and nurture courses have a particularly positive effect on families' well-being.

The centre is managed well by an experienced leader who is supported by a hardworking team of staff who work well together. They have sustained a good service for parents in particularly challenging times when local services are changing and financial constraints are a frequent consideration. They listen carefully to the feedback given by those who go to activities and use that information to improve the quality of provision when required. Parents have ample opportunities to contribute to the strategic direction of the centre through the parents' forum and are not afraid to challenge. The partnership board has numerous members but they do not all attend regularly. Additionally, it has become a forum for sharing information rather than providing a firm steer towards improvement. We have asked the leadership to address these issues.

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