

Oak Tree Children's Centre

Newcastle Street, Crewe, Cheshire, CW1 3LF

Inspection dates	24–26 September 2014
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good	2
	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
Access to services by young children and families		Outstanding	1
The quality of practice and services		Good	2
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is a good centre.

- Staff's concerted efforts over recent years, to increase the numbers of families with young children that benefit from the centre's services, have proved highly successful. This means that a very large majority of local families, including those living in the most disadvantaged circumstances and those expecting children, are known to the centre and regularly engage in its activities.
- The centre provides a welcoming, purposeful environment which has been thoughtfully created to inspire adults and children to want to learn. Activities are of good quality and cater very well for families' varying needs so that they build their confidence and skills. This is because their views, including those of their children, are taken into good account. It is also because staff plan sessions carefully, based on their observations of previous activities.
- Most eligible local children now benefit from access to free early education. They are increasingly well prepared for transition into school and their attainment at the end of Reception year is rising.
- Strong partnership working with a wide range of professionals enhances the centre's work to support families. This includes close working relationships between the managers and staff of the different centres within the collaboration, which provides flexibility to the use of resources.
- The local authority provides good access to useful data about the centre's work, which managers at all levels use well to evaluate successes and identify those areas in need of improvement. This means that any actions taken are well founded on local need and have a positive impact on families.
- Good-quality leadership, governance and management ensure that the centre runs efficiently and effectively. This means that it continually improves, and successfully improves the well-being and life chances of local families. The centre manager provides exceptional leadership, which creates an ethos in which those who use, and work at, the centre feel valued, nurtured and able to succeed.

It is not outstanding because:

- Too few mothers continue to breastfeed their babies at six to eight weeks at least.
- Too few users develop their skills and enhance the centre's provision through volunteering.
- The advisory board does not yet provide the centre with sufficient challenge about its effectiveness.
- Case files do not always record in the same way each aspect of staff's intensive work with families most in need of help.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of mothers who continue to breastfeed their babies for at least six-to-eight weeks, in order to make the best contribution to their child's health.
- Increase the numbers of volunteers and, through this, enhance adults' opportunities to gain skills leading towards employment and the centre's ability to strengthen what it offers families.
- Improve the quality of leadership, governance and management by:
 - strengthening the rigour with which the advisory board holds the centre to account for its effectiveness
 - ensuring that all case files are completed consistently to the quality of the best.

Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. It was carried out at the same time as other children's centres, which were The Brooks Children's Centre and Nantwich and Rural Children's Centre.

This inspection, and those of the other two centres, was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings or conducted telephone discussions with: the centre manager and staff; the locality manager; local authority senior leaders and members of the early years team; representatives of the advisory board; health and social care professionals; headteachers of local primary schools; the area manager of the privately run on-site nurseries; an educational psychologist; a speech and language therapist; adult education and the skills and employment team; volunteers; the manager of Wishing Well healthy living project and the senior coordinator of the local branch of Homestart family support charity. Throughout the inspection, they also took the opportunity to talk with adult and child users of the centre.

The inspectors visited both the Underwood West and Mablins Lane centres. They observed a range of services offered including: 'Stay and Play', 'Full Circle' and 'Sticky Bobs' sessions; 'You Make the Difference' and breastfeeding groups; and adult learning provision.

The inspectors observed the centre's work and conducted joint observations with centre managers. They also looked at a range of relevant documentation including that relating to leadership and management, the planning of activities and safeguarding.

Inspection team

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Full report

Information about the centre

Oak Tree Children's Centre was formed in April 2011 from the merger of two centres, following the reshaping of children's centres in the Cheshire East area. The Underwood West site acts as the centre 'hub' and is open daily, while the Mablins Lane site only runs activities on Mondays. The centre is part of a collaboration of four children's centres in the Crewe and Nantwich locality, all of which have shared governance and one advisory board. Two of these centres, The Brooks and Nantwich Rural, were inspected at the same time as Oak Tree; the fourth centre, Monks Coppenhall, has already been inspected. Oak Tree shares its sites with Underwood West and Mablins Lane Primary Schools, and Safe Hands Greenstart Nursery. These provisions did not form part of this inspection. All published reports can be found on the Ofsted website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

There are approximately 2,049 children aged under five years living within the local area. Approximately 1,346 of these live in areas identified as among the most disadvantaged in the country. Of these, approximately 955 (47% of the total number) live in areas identified as among the 10% most deprived nationally. Levels of worklessness are not high but much local work is low paid. Most families are of White British heritage. There is an established local Polish community and increasing numbers of new families from Eastern Europe. Most children's skills on entry to early years provision are below, or well below, those that are typical for their age.

In partnership with other professionals and through collaboration with its partner centres, the centre provides a range of activities including: health care and information; sessions to help parents support their children's learning and development; adult learning; individual advice and guidance. The centre has identified the most significant local groups in need of its support as: children 'on the edge of care'; families living in the most disadvantaged areas; two-year-olds eligible for funded childcare places; and those belonging to minority ethnic groups.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Outstanding

- The centre has an exceptionally well-organised approach to making contact with local families in order to ensure that they are aware of its services. This includes weekly 'door-knocking' and monthly 'telethons', each with a carefully constructed script designed to personalise the contact and provide the centre with relevant information. This has led to significant increases in registrations and engagement, especially over the past two years.
- A very large majority of all families and of those who live in the most disadvantaged areas have regular, meaningful contact with the centre through attending activities or through targeted support at home. This includes those who are expecting children, and those children who are looked after, identified as a child-in-need or subject to a child protection plan. Almost all families who belong to minority ethnic groups are engaged. Such regular contact helps to promote children's safety, increase their readiness for school and enhance whole families' well-being.
- Close partnership working with other professionals adds to centre staff's own work to engage families. On-site antenatal and well-baby clinics are run alongside high-quality 'Stay and Play' sessions. This provides excellent opportunities to encourage new families to register as members of the children's centre, and those with children to access support relating to health matters, as well as early learning.
- Weekly allocation meetings between centre and health staff ensure that support for families is well focused, with a team approach. Through this, those identified as needing extra support gain swift access to effective help.
- Most eligible two-, three- and four-year-old children access funded early education. The numbers of two-year-olds doing so have greatly increased. Local headteachers confirm that those children who

have benefited from funded early education, and the centre's own activities, are increasingly ready to settle and make rapid progress at school.

The quality of practice and services

Good

- Good-quality provision, combined with the centre's positive response to families' requests and its tracking of children's and adults' progress, means that families enjoy, and keep on attending, activities of all types. This means that the centre is having a positive impact on improving families' well-being and equality of opportunity. A typical comment of families is, 'The group has a cheerful atmosphere and we still get work done.'
- The centre's sharing of useful information about children's progress with schools, and the emphasis placed on preparing children personally, socially and emotionally for school, are having a very positive impact. Children's attainment at the end of Reception year, while below the national average, is rising, significantly so for the large numbers of disadvantaged children.
- All activities place a strong focus on developing users' language skills. For example, at the end of 'Sticky Bobs' sessions, parents receive handy credit card-size reminders of the day's 'Talking Tips', such as 'Use simple language' or 'Offer choices'. The 'Book Alley' entices users to enjoy a story. Family support workers skilfully model language and questioning to support children's, and parents', vocabulary and understanding. One mother commented, 'I am taking lots of new ideas home.'
- From the recently developed allotment, which has provided vegetables for experimental cookery, to weaning sessions and interesting snacks, the centre effectively promotes healthy living. Recent work has helped to increase the numbers of mothers who initiate breastfeeding but the proportion who continue to do so at six-to-eight weeks is well below the national figure.
- The centre provides a good range of adult courses, including basic English and mathematics. Its imaginative approach has led to partnership working with the lifelong learning service to develop the 'story sack' making programme, requested by parents, into an accredited course. This means that participants are building their confidence and developing skills to support job applications. However, despite a good induction programme, the centre has only four volunteers developing skills that could lead to employment while enhancing the centre's work.
- The centre successfully promotes children's and adults' safety. Staff use their good knowledge of individuals' circumstances and needs to provide focused one-to-one work. They also respond to local accidents by, for example, providing a graphic display of the dangers hot drinks pose to a baby.
- A pilot programme is being developed with the educational psychology service to support those experiencing low emotional well-being. This has already helped participants, in their own words, 'to start making plans for the future' and 'given me the confidence to get off drugs'.
- The centre responds swiftly and effectively to families in crisis. It is supported in this by flexible working of staff across the collaboration, which enables the provision of an 'out-of-hours' service.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Good

- Through regular meetings with the centre manager, the timely provision of good-quality data, and effective actions to improve early years settings, the local authority is highly supportive of the centre's work. Through its robust annual conversation process, it also provides the centre with good levels of challenge to achieve an even greater impact on families' well-being.
- The newly configured advisory board provides strong support for the centre and a useful channel for sharing information. Members receive detailed information about the quality of practice and services, and data on the centre's performance. They also know about the use of performance management, what is being done to drive improvement and how effectively the centre is helping to reduce inequalities and close the achievement gap for children and families. However, its members are still developing their role and do not yet hold the centre sufficiently rigorously to account for its effectiveness.
- Frequent meetings between centre managers across the collaboration plus regular 'whole-staff'

opportunities for joint training ensure that actions are concerted across the area and that resources are used to best effect to support families' needs.

- The centre manager provides high-quality leadership through her skilful balancing of rigour, humanity and encouragement. She uses data to excellent effect when prioritising the centre's actions. She also regularly monitors and supports staff's performance; she displays high levels of empathy with families and a determination to help them improve their life-chances. She leads the centre's innovative approach to enhancing its provision, for example, the development of outdoor learning in the wooded area, the tracking of children's progress, and the work to support adults' emotional well-being.
- Resources are of good quality and the accommodation at both sites provides an attractive, flexible environment which encourages adults and children to relax and learn. Staff take good account of adults' and children's views when developing services.
- There are good policies, procedures and practices to ensure the safeguarding of children, including use of the Common Assessment Framework. Case files confirm staff's persistent support for families in greatest need, with effective partnership work between different professionals. Staff mostly record these with good levels of accuracy but the recording is not entirely consistent in providing all relevant detail. There is no evidence that this has posed a risk to children.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and, as a result, inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.
Grade 2	Good	Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children's well-being and achieve the stated outcomes for families.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.
Grade 4	Inadequate	The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services.

Children's centre details

Unique reference number	23379
Local authority	Cheshire East
Inspection number	447558
Managed by	The local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	2,049
Centre manager	Lysa Randle
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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