

NH10 Barleyfields Children's Centre

Woolmer Green Village Hall, Hall Lane, Knebworth, SG3 6FD

Inspection dates

11–12 November 2014

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

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is an outstanding centre.

- Exceptionally effective sharing of information between the centre and its partners results in almost all families living in the area the centre serves being known. Challenging targets help the centre's work to sustain contact with most children and families.
- The excellent early years network attended by all providers works actively to reduce inequalities. Most eligible children access their free education place. Children who use the centre's services enjoy their experiences and achieve more positively than their peers nationally by the age of five.
- Leaders purposeful actions result in the large majority of unemployed workless parents accessing opportunities that increase their chances of finding work. Systems for tracking the progress that children make when they attend activities, or outcomes when adults access courses, are developing. However, these systems are not yet robust enough to track the small steps being taken towards end goals or demonstrate all achievements.
- Parenting is promoted successfully by specific programmes or one-to-one support in the home. Evaluations clearly show the excellent impact on improving parents' confidence and skills.
- Safeguarding is central to the centre's culture and practice. Exceptionally good multi-agency working informs the carefully-targeted provision. Parents are sensitively helped to understand their responsibilities for their children's well-being. The excellent health outcomes reflect this effective action.
- All staff are highly committed to doing the very best they can for all children and families, and especially those in greatest need. Parents told inspectors how staff go out of their way to value everyone for who they are and not where they are from. The centre manager leads by example; she is much respected by parents, partners and colleagues. Her high aspirations show in all aspects of the centre's work and are critical to the drive for greater effectiveness.
- Self-evaluation processes are rigorous and inclusive. They involve everyone at the centre taking a hard look at what is working and what needs development. They inform the highly effective, focused action planning. Governance is outstanding; the advisory group comprising parents and partners keeps a very close eye on the centre's performance, and the local authority's checks are supportive and challenging. Resources are managed efficiently, and there is strong capacity to ensure the centre continues to develop.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Enhance the systems for tracking the progress that children make when they attend activities, and the outcomes when adults access courses. Make sure that findings are used consistently to identify the next steps in children's and adults' development.

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.

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, the county manager for the Pre-school Learning Alliance (PsLA), staff, local authority officers, partners, volunteers, parents and members of the advisory group.

The inspectors visited activities held in the centre, including infant massage, 'Big Chef-Little Chef' and 'Rhyme Time'. They undertook a joint observation of 'Tots of Fun' with the centre manager and paired sampling of case files with the family outreach worker.

Inspectors took into account parents' views as expressed directly to them during the inspection, as well as through their responses to the county survey and recorded evaluations about the centre's work.

Inspectors also looked at a wide range of documentation.

Inspection team

Christine Field, Lead inspector

Additional inspector

Peter Towner

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about the centre

Barleyfields Children's Centre opened in 2009 and is based in Woolmer Green Village Hall. It provides support for children and families living in Knebworth, Old Knebworth, Woolmer Green and Oaklands. A range of services to meet local needs is delivered from the centre and community venues across the area the centre serves. There is no on-site registered childcare.

Barleyfields is a stand-alone centre managed on behalf of the local authority by PsLA, which is the lead agency for nine children's centres in Hertfordshire. There is very close cooperation between children's centres in the PsLA group and across the locality, supported by partnership agreements. An advisory group comprising partners and parents supports governance.

There are 522 children under five years of age living in the area served by the centre, which covers six main communities. Two of these – Knebworth and Woolmer Green – are less advantaged than the others. The area is generally affluent, with pockets of deprivation. At 7%, the proportion of children assessed as living in poverty is below the county average of 17%. Most families are White British. A Traveller site, on which a very small number of young children live, is located a short distance from the centre. Children enter early years provision at levels typically expected for their age.

Barleyfields Children's Centre underwent a restructure at the beginning of 2014. The centre staff now comprise a manager, family outreach worker, play coordinator, play assistant and administrator.

The centre has identified its main priority groups as: children under the age of one, children living with lone parents, children living in Knebworth, those from low income or workless households, and those from Traveller families.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families

Outstanding

- Outstanding partnership work, actively nurtured by the centre manager, involves the regular exchange of information about children and families, including those in priority groups. Parents-to-be are identified by health colleagues from Welwyn and Stevenage; centre staff attend antenatal clinics to make early contact. As a result, a very large majority of all newborn children are registered with the centre.
- The 'Focused Action Plan' includes very precise improvement targets linked to increasing access. These targets are kept under close review. Challenging targets are key drivers of the centre's highly successful practice in increasing children's and families' access to services over time. Currently, registrations stand at 98% and over three quarters of families use the centre's services regularly.
- The large majority of families from Knebworth, families who are on low incomes or who are unemployed, children of Traveller heritage and those living with lone parents sustain their contact with the centre until their needs are met. The centre has worked particularly effectively to identify and assess the needs of unemployed parents, and to engage them in appropriate services. The centre plans to reinforce the links with Jobcentre Plus to further strengthen this priority area of its work.
- The centre maintains contact with all children who are most in need or at risk. Highly effective services are supported by the close cooperation of different agencies. As a result, children and families receive timely help that significantly improves their well-being.

- Regular 'Early Years Network' meetings, organised and chaired by the centre manager, keep a sharp focus on the children who are accessing free education. Regular visits by the centre manager to all settings involve detailed information sharing that assists the shared approach to meeting the needs of children and their wider families.
- Most two-, three- and four-year-olds take up their free education entitlement. Data show that children who have accessed the centre's services achieve equally as well as their peers by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. The proportion reaching a good level of development is above the North Hertfordshire, county and national averages.
- Currently, 76% of children under one year of age have attended a centre activity at least three times during the past three months. The centre is keen to reach 85% by the end of the next quarter, and is pursuing this target with clear strategies and strong determination.

The quality of practice and services

Outstanding

- Parents described the centre to inspectors as being the 'heartbeat of the village'. They value highly the range and quality of services provided by the small staff team, who work tenaciously to ensure that services meet families' needs and help to improve life choices. As a result, parents feel empowered to take responsibility for their children's well-being, and better understand the importance of positive routines and the tangible benefits they bring to family life.
- Incredibly strong partnerships with childminders, pre-schools, schools and parents ensure that children are prepared extremely well for school. Children from Traveller families engage in the centre's services; for example, two families have recently been helped to take up their child's 15 hours of free nursery education. Children attend a range of sessions, such as 'Play and Learn', that are planned to promote achievement in the prime areas. Children with additional needs are particularly well supported and often make better than expected progress.
- Courses, such as 'About Boys' and 'Parenting Puzzle', help to improve confidence and parenting skills. Various events, including specific parenting programmes run by the centre help build parents' knowledge, skills and understanding about their children's learning and development. Parents seeking to improve their economic well-being engage with a wide range of volunteering, education and training opportunities that provide a clear pathway to paid work. However, the systems for tracking the progress that children make when they attend activities, or the progress of adults when they access courses, are not yet robust enough to track the small steps being taken towards end goals.
- The support and guidance provided by staff are cornerstones of the centre's excellent family outreach work. Case files are maintained to a high standard. They record clearly the 'distance travelled' by a family in resolving their difficulties. Staff carry out regular 'impact assessments' that take stock of successes and carefully plan the next steps to take.
- Parents appreciate the quality and positive impact of the support they receive. Comments such as 'incredible', 'life-changing', and 'kept me on track' are typical.
- There is very high take-up of first-aid courses, e-safety learning and home-safety checks. These enhance parents' understanding of their responsibilities for their children's well-being. Childhood obesity levels are low, and this positive situation is being reinforced by courses such as 'Big Chef-Little Chef' that involve families cooking low-cost, nutritious meals together. Breastfeeding is promoted very well by the centre; the effectiveness of this work is reflected in an exceptionally high level of breastfeeding being sustained. Immunisation rates are exceptional, and the number of parents taking up health checks for two-year-olds is high.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management**Outstanding**

- Highly effective leadership and strong, well-integrated partnerships have led to ongoing improvements in registration and access levels, the quality of services, children's school readiness and better health outcomes. The centre manager sets high expectations for the staff team, who feel very valued and supported in developing their professional expertise and practice. A strong and purposeful focus is placed on reducing inequalities and helping children and families, particularly those in greatest need, to succeed.
- Self-evaluation processes involve staff, PsLA managers, advisory group members and parents in a detailed assessment of what is going well and what requires more work. Excellent use is made of a wide range of data to identify needs and to ensure that the centre's budget is spent in the most productive ways. Very robust performance management arrangements, linked to ongoing professional development, support all staff in improving their practice. As a result of this the centre is able to drive continuous improvement.
- Priorities are identified accurately and displayed prominently, so that centre users can keep an eye on developments. The focused action plan provides a very effective tool for managers and those responsible for governance to use during their regular checks on the centre's performance. The centre attracts additional resources, such as the funding secured to help mothers experiencing domestic abuse, to access a tailor-made programme. The close working with other children's centres adds extra value to resources and aids efficiencies.
- The advisory group, chaired by a parent, has a wide membership of representatives from the community, PsLA and the local authority. Meetings are well attended by the core group who, between them, have excellent local knowledge that they use to help shape services. They are very well informed and able to challenge the centre to move forward.
- Everyone linked to the centre places high value on ensuring social equality, which they see as being particularly important in such an economically mixed community. Parents told inspectors how well staff put them at their ease, nurture trusting relationships and promote community cohesion. The delivery of services in partnership with other providers and at different community venues extends the reach of the centre and helps reduce the barriers to access that some families face.
- Parents have a strong voice in the life and development of the centre. The parents' forum is active and well attended, and has influenced change. For example, first-aid sessions are delivered on a Saturday to enable fathers to attend too.
- Safeguarding is central to the centre's culture and practice. Strong multi-agency working informs the carefully-targeted provision. Staff vetting procedures are robust. Families assessed under the Common Assessment Framework, including children subject to child protection plans, children in need and children looked after by the local authority, are well protected.

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 wellbeing 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.

Centre details

Unique reference number	22141
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	452805
Managed by	The Pre-school Learning Alliance on behalf of the local authority

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	522
Centre leader	Susan Smith
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01438 814104
Email address	susan.smith@pre-school.org.uk

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