

Inspection report for Thetford Children's Centre

Local authority	Norfolk
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Reporting inspector	Rob McKeown HMI

Centre governance	Local authority
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Linked school if applicable	N/A
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Treetops Day Nursery

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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.

Inspection judgements

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

Information about the centre

Thetford Children's Centre offers co-located services at two sites. The main site is based at Kingsway. The centre's full day-care provision is delivered by Treetops Day Nursery which is incorporated into the main building. Treetops Day Nursery has separate inspection arrangements to the children's centre and was last inspected in November 2009. The centre premises at Kingsway are used to provide a range of activities including training, meetings, consultations and community activities. There is a satellite site attached to Bishop's Primary School about one and a half miles away on Canterbury Way. This satellite centre has an open plan nursery space, a family and sensory room and community play space. It provides 12 places of sessional care for vulnerable children.

The centre offers the full range of services, including, integrated childcare and learning, links to local health and employment services, family support and outreach, and support for the childminder network. There are proposals to relocate local family health services currently provided at the Healthy Living Centre in Thetford at the Kingsway site. The centre was opened in 2005.

Thetford is a small town with high levels of social disadvantage. The reach area has an increasing number of migrant worker families from Portugal and Eastern Europe. Outcomes for pupils leaving school are below the national average and children arrive at school with poor speech and language development. Recent staff turnover has resulted in vacancies in some key management positions, such as outreach

services. Membership of the advisory board known as the executive group is currently without parent representation.

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

This is a well-regarded and forward thinking children's centre that provides a range of good quality services for the families in its locality. Early years education and care are particularly strong; outcomes from the most recent inspection of the Kingsway centre nursery in November 2009 were outstanding. There are effective working arrangements with local health services and the referral system from health visitors to centre staff works very well. Despite having to manage services at two locations and operate with some temporary leadership arrangements, centre staff work successfully together to meet the needs of children and their parents and carers. This represents good capacity for sustained improvement.

Managers have a good knowledge and understanding of the needs of local families. There is a strong emphasis on promoting equality and diversity and staff engage well with all family groups, including those from the local Portuguese and Eastern European communities. The centre has its own associated social worker who leads a family support team, which is extremely effective at supporting families in times of crisis and difficulty. Inspectors met several parents who reported very positively on the support they had received. There are also very good links with the local portage service and this ensures that children who have special educational needs and disabilities receive good support.

The centre advertises the full range of services and most of these are coordinated well. Attractive leaflets are displayed at each locality building but the centre does not have its own website or access to the internet readily available to parents and users. Staff can point to several examples of how individual families had been supported across the full range of provision, although there is room for a more strategic approach to providing employability and adult education services and little evidence was seen of language courses for those who speak little or no English. Currently there is a limited speech and language service for children because of staff shortages in a neighbouring local authority.

Accommodation and resources are of good quality and well maintained. Safeguarding and security procedures are systematic and thorough. Rooms at both centre bases are used for parent and child groups, for staff training, for meetings with parents and

carers, for courses, and for sessions organised by outside groups. Leaders acknowledge that outdoor accommodation for children who attend the early years settings requires upgrading. There are clearly thought through plans for the centre's future development to ensure services remain viable and cost effective.

Leadership from the centre manager is exceptionally good. Drive and ambition are strong and teamwork and morale among staff are extremely positive. There are clear lines of responsibility and the senior management team meets regularly to discuss the centre's work and its plans for improvement. There are good systems in place for checking the performances of different teams and for gathering the views of users who are supported by professionals or who attend parenting sessions. The centre has yet to develop effective mechanisms for measuring precisely the impact its services have on outcomes for users, particularly for its key target groups or the difference made for children once they reach school. Governance of the centre is currently under review with a proposal to establish an advisory board to replace the current executive committee. Leaders acknowledge that parents and carers are currently not involved in governance and that they are under-represented in strategic decision making.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Strengthen the contribution made by, and links with, some associated services, such as those providing guidance on employability, adult education, English speaking classes for adults and speech therapy for children
- Sharpen the approach to collecting, collating and analysing impact data, so that the centre is able to prove that it is making a difference for all its users in meeting its national priority targets and with improving outcomes for children once they start school
- Increase the involvement of parents and carers in governance, service evaluation and decision making.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Outcomes for users are good but the centre has limited statistical evidence to demonstrate high levels of impact. There is a broad range of programmes offered to families to help improve their physical and emotional health. The health visitor network provides ante- and post-natal support including guidance on breastfeeding, although improvements in breastfeeding rates have plateaued. Parenting classes run by the family support team help parents and carers meet the physical, emotional and nutritional needs of their children. 'Wiggle and jiggle' and baby yoga classes are popular and well attended programmes. Parents attending the 'joy of food' course learnt about the importance of providing a healthy diet for their families and children who attend the setting nursery have healthy snacks and lunches prepared on site. Provision for children with special educational needs was an outstanding feature of the recent nursery setting inspection. Children with disabilities attend weekly play sessions organised through the local authority portage service, which has helped

train two family support workers to be portage home visitors.

Children and families are safe at the centre and the family support team gives parents good advice on health and safety in the home and outdoors. Staff provide excellent role models that effectively support children's positive behaviour. The centre in collaboration with partner agencies is very effective in identifying and responding to the needs of vulnerable children and their families, although the use of the common assessment framework for recording and coordinating support programmes is patchy. Early learning and development outcomes in the nursery setting are outstanding and many families attend 'fun start' and 'messy play' sessions, which help promote effective parenting and children's sensory development. Family support worker case files illustrate how effective their support is in helping parents to become more confident and successful in managing their family lives. Despite these positive features, outcomes for Reception children attending locality primary schools are variable. For example, key outcomes in personal and literacy developments are improving consistently in one school but remain very low and static in another.

The centre collects the views of parents through widely distributed questionnaires and satisfaction surveys at the end of courses and events. A parents' forum has been used in the past for face to face discussion and decision making but meetings and membership have lapsed since the departure of the centre's outreach leader. There are currently no formal mechanisms in which parents can be involved in strategic decision making and development planning. Sessional day-care, nursery education places and a childminding network ensure that childcare is available to support parents to engage in employment or training. Individual parents are signposted to the Job Centre Plus services for employment and to the Citizens Advice Bureau for help with accommodation and benefit entitlement. Evidence to prove the centres impact on reducing unemployment or increasing involvement in training and education for all families in the locality is thin.

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable 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	2
The extent to which all users 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 users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre knows its users well and a strong partnership with the health visitor team helps ensure effective assessments and referrals are made of the needs of children and parents, including those that are vulnerable. Assessment systems for recording children's early development are very good and used well by staff in the nursery to capture achievements and plan for the next steps in learning. The 'parents as first teachers' training programme delivered by the family worker team involves parents in developing a wide range of strategies to support their families; early reading and literacy skills are further supported through the 'book start' packs. Several targeted sessions are run at the centre locations to help parents and carers develop their skills in supporting the emotional, social and educational development of their children. Good quality resources and equipment are available at these events. Stay and play sessions are also provided for children with special educational needs and disabilities. The centre provides a meeting place for the childminding network at which support and training is available for childminders. A vacancy coordinator puts parents in touch with childminders with vacancies, which offers parents a choice in the type of childcare they wish to use. Support through the family nurse partnership is targeted and successful in helping teenage parents to manage their lives. There are also associated services organised at other venues, such as the toy library and 'baby bounce and rhyme time' at Thetford library.

Provision is adapted to the needs of users and in response to evaluations submitted following courses and events. Employment and training opportunities are advertised at the centre but provision for supporting adult education, employability and training is less systematic; protocols for working with Job Centre Plus are currently under review. The family worker team gives good support to the individual families they support to help them gain the appropriate advice about benefits, accommodation and employment. Other aspects of the centres work are being strengthened with family workers completing their smoking cessation training. The work of the social worker attached to the centre is highly regarded and has a significant impact on the lives of several vulnerable families. Representatives from these families who met inspectors spoke very positively about the support they had received, for example with parenting skills, child care, transition to school for their children, and access to benefits and accommodation. Support is precisely targeted and plays an important role in preventing families from falling into greater difficulty.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre is led and managed effectively. There are clear lines of accountability and day to day management is good. Leadership responsibilities are distributed well among the centre's key managers and each team contributes successfully to the overall quality of provision. Roles are shared well across the two centre locations with well organised induction programmes provided for new personnel. Staff are highly motivated and passionately committed to the work they do with young children and their families. The centre's development plan sets out the main priorities for action, reflecting leaders' thorough understanding of aspects which require improvement, although the plan does not define clearly enough how the actions taken will result in better outcomes for users. Professional supervision is strong with clear performance management structures and target setting with staff helping to ensure their work is effective.

The centre accommodation provides a welcoming and safe environment for all users. Staff are well trained and their skills and expertise are used effectively to promote good quality provision. Safeguarding arrangements are very good and receive a suitably high priority. All staff complete relevant child protection training and safer recruitment procedures are followed. Protocols and practice for making referrals and working with other agencies in support of families are good. An equalities and diversity policy is in place and all staff and volunteers have undertaken equality and diversity training. The centre evaluates its effectiveness by analysing case study reports completed by teams and collating the responses given by users after their attendance at courses and events. Leaders are able to measure the popularity of some services and can show that three quarters of the families in the reach area have been served by the centre in some capacity. However there are insufficient systems in place to enable leaders to evaluate the longer term impact on improving outcomes for children and adults.

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	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 evaluation is used to shape and improve services	3

and activities	
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community 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

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Thetford Children's Centre on the 7 and 8 July. As part of our work we visited a number of activities, looked at the centre's plans and documents and talked with a number of you, staff and others who work with you. We believe the centre provides good support for you and your families.

Leadership and management at the centre are exceptionally good. The extremely positive staff team have drive and ambition; they meet regularly to discuss the centre's work and plan for improvement. All staff place the utmost importance on you and your families and always provide a listening ear for you. They are passionate about creating an extremely warm and welcoming environment where you feel at home and able to talk freely about things that matter to you or are causing you concern. As a result, you value the centre, which means you have no hesitation in using the services regularly.

Health Visitors are extremely good at signposting and referring you and your children to other activities and services they think you would also benefit from and enjoy. Centre staff and professionals from different agencies are good at working closely with you to find out exactly what help and support you and your family need and making sure this is provided. You told us how you particularly value the service offered by the centres dedicated social worker and the family worker team.

The centre lets you know about other services in the locality through information leaflets which are displayed at each locality building. Currently the centre does not have its own website or access to the internet for you to use. A parents' forum has been active in the past when you were able to put forward any ideas you have about services in the locality. Unfortunately, this has recently stopped but we feel confident

that the centre will work with you to re-establish the forum as a matter of urgency. We have also asked the centre manager to increase your involvement in the governance of Thetford Children's Centre, so that you can give your views on the quality of the services and be involved more in making decisions about any new developments.

The centre offers a good range of services and activities for all families in the area, which are led by highly skilled and dedicated professionals. They are helping you to keep yourselves and your children healthy and safe. Your children have plenty of chances to play outdoors, which helps to keep them fit. The children's behaviour at the centre is good and you and your children are safe there. Staff provide you with access to safety equipment and advice on how you can prevent accidents in and around your home to keep your children safe. They are helping you to keep yourselves and your children healthy by encouraging mums to breastfeed and by promoting healthy eating.

The centre also provides excellent resources, including high quality staff, to help your children enjoy their learning through play and develop their full potential. They also help you to support your child's learning and development at home by providing services which help you bond with your child such as baby massage and baby yoga. They encourage you to engage in play with your children from a very early age at sessions such as 'fun start' and 'messy play'. You told us that this has helped you to develop closer relationships with your children. We could see how much you enjoy the activities you access at the centre and the effect these are having on you and your families.

Although you are provided with a wide range of services and activities the centre agree that proving the impact of the services they provide needs to be better. They have started to look at ways of collecting information to show how successfully their services are at improving outcomes for children and families. They also agreed that they need to strengthen the contribution made by, and links with some associated services such as those providing guidance on employment, adult education, English speaking classes for adults and speech therapy for children. This will improve your access to these services.

We would like to thank everyone who came to speak with us. It was a privilege to be able to talk with you. Your honest and open discussions with us 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.