

Inspection report for Cherry Tree children's centre

Local authority	Knowsley
Inspection number	20669
Inspection dates	9–10 June 2010
Reporting inspector	John Coleman HMI

Centre governance	Advisory Board
Centre leader	Gerry Allen
Date of previous inspection	NA
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Linked school if applicable	Holy Family Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	4Children

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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 two of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the local authority representatives, staff and parents. Inspectors looked at the centre's self evaluation form, data provided by the local authority and the centre, documents and policies, minutes of the advisory board and inspection outcomes for the nurseries and schools with reception classes in the centre's reach area.

Inspection judgements

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

Information about the centre

The centre is run directly by the local authority. It serves a community which includes some of the 30% most deprived wards in the country. A strategic manager provides the principle local authority leadership for six children's centre areas including Halewood in which Cherry Tree resides. The area children's centre manager and deputy share the management of two centres, which in partnership share some services, and divide their time between these. Almost all families are of White British heritage. There are very few children for whom English is not their first language.

An advisory board, which includes parents, contributes to the strategic management and direction of the centre. It provides a wide range of commissioned services some of which are accessed through the partner children's centre. There is childcare provision with places for 20 children under two years located on the neighbouring primary school site; however they are also registered for a total of up to 55 children 0-8 years. The nursery in the centre is registered for up to 79 children in total aged

2–8 years. Currently, there are 31 children aged 2–5 years, on roll. The management of the childcare provision at Cherry Tree and the partner centre is run by a private provider named 4Children which was appointed in June 2009 following a tendering process. Provision for nursery education for three and four year old children is at Holy Family School, and there are 26 full time equivalent nursery education places available. There are currently five children in the two centre based nurseries with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Evidence indicates that the skills and knowledge with which children enter the nursery are well below those expected nationally for their age. The centre is also in partnership with an adult learning centre on the site. Family support services are based in the centre. The centre was extensively refurbished during 2009 resulting in some services being transferred to nearby alternative venues and some temporary suspension of other activities.

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 good and improving children's centre which achieves good outcomes because of good provision and leadership and management. The outstanding leadership of the centre manager has been instrumental in building an effective staff team and in establishing a wide range of very effective partnerships with external agencies and in the local community. Collectively, these make an outstanding impact on the services available to users and the outcomes they achieve. There is very good communication at all levels with parents, the local authority, service providers and between centre staff. Systems and processes are well established to ensure effective monitoring of the centre's work and of the staff who provide the services. Consequently, the centre's capacity to improve is good.

The centre works hard to reach the families and children whose needs are greatest. Many opportunities are taken to distribute information about the centre's services through leaflet drops, attendance at community events and by visits to local services such as the doctors' surgery, library and supermarket. The staff are very good at signposting services for visitors to the centre and for those who already use a service. Parents who spoke to inspectors held the view that users of the centre were great ambassadors for its work through word of mouth in the community, but they agreed with inspectors that there are still some children and families who do not take full advantage of the services on offer. For example, while the centre has above average percentages of children aged 0–5 registered at the centre compared to other areas locally, the percentage of these who attend nurseries or engage in activities is

about the same as elsewhere.

Parents and carers told inspectors that they feel welcome and valued when they visit the centre and inspectors agree that the staff are courteous, polite and extremely helpful. Relationships between staff and with users are very positive with parents expressing much appreciation for the guidance and advice offered by the centre. Some parents have gained from adult education courses which have enabled them to gain accreditation and qualifications. One parent told how she has been helped to successfully take up employment following training and sound advice from the centre. Parents are helped to develop parenting skills through courses such as 'speak easy' which builds parental confidence in talking to their children about sexual health and relationship matters.

The use of data which specifically measures the impact of the centre's provision on the outcomes for Cherry Tree users is at an early stage of being developed. There is a good range of data measures for the wider authority and in some cases for the local Halewood area, but relatively little precise data is available for the immediate reach area of Cherry Tree. The centre and the local authority are working closely together to improve the availability of centre-specific data and this is rapidly improving. Nevertheless, targets are not yet set which relate to all of the national indicator sets despite these being included in the improvement plan. Also, the plan lacks any evaluation of its current performance against these indicators. The plan does not outline sufficient opportunities to regularly evaluate the progress towards meeting the targets it sets for improvement.

The centre and childcare staff have a good understanding of how to keep children safe within the centre and in the childcare provision. Comprehensive risk assessments are used to identify and take action to minimise risks. Children were observed by inspectors to behave in ways that are safe for themselves and others. Parents and centre users told inspectors that they feel safe and secure in the building and that their children are safe when accessing childcare provision and activities within the centre. Parents have access to a range of courses and activities which help them to identify positive behaviour management techniques to help them manage their children's behaviour successfully. A good range of strategies are used to increase parents' awareness of home safety, and courses are followed up by safety equipment loans which have a positive effect on keeping children safe at home. Health and safety is a strength of the centre with all staff taking an active role in ensuring the health and safety of service users and safeguarding procedures meet the required standards.

The quality of childcare is good and improving. Inspection reports show that children are well cared for and make good progress in their personal and educational development. The percentage of children in the lowest 20% of achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage is falling. Similarly, the percentage of children reaching the expected levels of attainment by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is increasing and compares favourably with what is expected nationally.

Opportunities for adult learning are increasing and improving. The number of adults engaging in courses run in the adjacent provision in the centre building is growing and the provider is on course to meet its challenging targets for this by the year end. Parents say that the range of courses fits their needs very well.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase the percentage of users, especially those most in need, who engage in the services provided by the centre.
- Further develop the availability of data information which is specific to the immediate reach of the centre including the national indicator sets.
- Improve the centre's improvement planning so that targets are measurable and are matched against the national data indicators. Establish interim milestones to measure these more frequently.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

Outcomes for children and families are good and improving. Following the temporary interruption to services during the period of refurbishment, the range of services has increased through excellent partnership working and the level of user engagement has increased due to the leadership's effective strategies to promote this.

Highly effective partnership working with health care professionals has led to good coordinated provision for health. Breastfeeding support and mentoring groups have been successful in increasing breastfeeding initiation and continuation rates. Close collaborative working with speech therapists has developed the skills of childcare staff in order to support children's speech and language development in the early years. This is also supported by the involvement of children's centre staff with the local library initiatives to encourage children and families to enjoy books and read together. Levels of child obesity have been targeted by the centre which is committed to healthy eating within the centre during all activities. For example, there is an abundance of fruit throughout the centre for parents and children to help themselves to. Parents indicate that the healthy eating programme within the centre has been of good benefit in helping them understand the importance of healthy eating. Parents told inspectors that children have been actively encouraged to try new foods and lead active lifestyles through the 'Stay and Play' sessions, and courses on cooking and nutrition have all improved the health of families .

Recent inspection reports show that children in the Early Years Foundation Stage make good progress in the nursery and reception class settings throughout the area. Their attainments by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are similar to those found nationally and the percentage of the lowest 20% of children is decreasing.

Good relationships have been built between the centre manager, his staff and many local families. There is a strong focus on providing services for the most vulnerable children and to ensuring that they are well cared for. The processes for the common assessment framework are well established and together with effective child protection procedures result in prompt intervention and support. Entry to the centre facilities is effectively monitored and the systems ensure that all visitors are identified. All staff are subject to the required vetting checks including to the criminal records bureau.

Parents' views are sought, particularly after participating in courses, and these are taken into account when planning additional services, including the opportunity for parents to make contributions towards the planning of refurbishments. The advisory board includes parents and they make a full contribution to strategic management decisions about the centre's provision. An increasing proportion of parents are being empowered to access services by building their confidence and self-esteem. Across the centre some parents have been encouraged to run or be involved in the running of sessions themselves. Children's views are actively sought, for example, when purchasing new resources for the nursery.

Good, effective partnership working with Jobcentre Plus on site enables parents to access information on employment and retraining for employment. Effective links with adult learning support this well. Lone parents in particular have benefited from this integrated approach and parents who spoke to inspectors indicated that the centre is helping to raise theirs and their children's expectations. Children are active inquisitive learners and make good progress in developing skills for the future. Childcare provision supports children's development well with effective planning designed to meet children's individual learning needs. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those for whom English is not their first language are well supported and make good progress.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

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	2
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

Achievement is celebrated throughout the centre and there are photographs which display the participation of children and families in a variety of activities such as 'Super Dads' and 'Stay and Play'. Children are awarded stickers for borrowing books and attending the 'words and pictures' group at the library. The centre website has many good examples of how achievement is recognised with many examples of happy children and parents involved in the centre's programmes. Newsletters and leaflets carry articles which illustrate a wide range of enjoyable achievements.

The centre's leaders liaise well with other professionals in social care and health to identify those children and families who are most vulnerable. The common assessment framework is well embedded and is used effectively to provide robust assessments and ensure a coordinated response from multi-agency support. Good multi-agency working is making sure individual needs are assessed quickly so that interventions and outreach support are targeted appropriately. Crisis intervention is particularly good and parents state that the respite care and counselling are extremely helpful and welcomed. Careful exit strategies help parents to build confidence, develop their parenting skills and support them to be independent.

The quality and range of services offered by the centre are good. Services are integrated and cohesive. There is good delivery of childcare services on site and in the local community to enable parents to access other services. A childminder network meets regularly in the centre. Meetings are used to update childminders on childminding issues. Childminders enjoy the continuous support and resources within the children's centre and find that the social occasions for both childminders and children are highly beneficial. Services provided by the centre, including childcare, are adapted effectively to meet the needs of users and childcare placements are available for those families wishing to access services. The centre meets the needs of users well, adapting the range of services to meet local needs. While numbers registered with the centre are high, participation is average but improving.

Childcare is good within the centre as evidenced in their recent Ofsted inspection. Good progress has been made to address the areas for improvement identified in the inspection report. Sensitive, individualised and tailored support is provided to all families and children who access support from the centre. Highly effective multi-agency working ensures families can access the right kind of support, such as mental health services, speech and language therapists or support and advice on benefits. Parents told inspectors that help and support is readily available to individuals to help overcome barriers to learning, such as through childcare placements and by ensuring training times meet parental needs for school drop off and collection.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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 manager is an outstanding leader who is very well supported by the deputy manager. There is a shared vision and commitment to making a real difference to the community based on a robust analysis of its needs. Together they have built a team committed to improvement and all are enthusiastic about making a tangible difference to the lives of children and families in the local community. The senior leadership team has a good understanding of the centre's strengths and weaknesses. Strategic management is committed to further development of the centre's services and leaders are actively seeking ways to encourage attendance, particularly of those most vulnerable. Members of the advisory board are fully supportive of the work of the centre and are ambitious for the centre's work and improvement. However, as yet they are not always sufficiently challenging and probing about the data and information they receive. The board manages the centre's finances well and appropriately. Outcomes are good and consequently value for money is good.

There are suitable performance management systems operating at all levels. Line management is robust, although the targets against which staff are held to account are mostly qualitative and there is underdevelopment and use of the national data indicators to drive improvements to provision and outcomes. This is because the improvement planning makes insufficient use of the national data to target areas for improvement and consequently this does not inform the performance management targets for staff.

The staff receive regular training to ensure that equality and diversity are promoted in the front line services. Around the centre positive images and displays are used well to promote equal opportunities. Policies are in place to support the centre's inclusive approach to reaching users. Parent evaluations are well used to identify any groups that are hard to reach. For example, 61 fathers were consulted regarding the dads/male carers strategy. As a result, many dads now attend Saturday activities with their children. 'Super dads' and 'healthy heroes' are examples of initiatives

which have successfully engaged dads and activities have included trips to Everton Football Club, soccer tots and the safari park.

Safeguarding is good; comprehensive policies and procedures meet statutory requirements, training is regular and recruitment is robust. Good information sharing procedures and protocols are in place and good partnership working ensures that children and families at risk and in need are prioritised. Childcare providers and workers have access to training and support and demonstrate a good understanding of the correct procedures to follow. All agencies using the centre have a good understanding of the protocols and procedures and what to do if they suspect abuse. Parents and users of the services spoke with confidence that their children are well protected.

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	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 and activities	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	1
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

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Cherry Tree children's centre on 9–10 June 2010. We judged the centre as good overall.

The centre's outstanding manager has built a staff team which works hard to provide a good range of courses and activities to serve the children and families in the community. Together they use a wide range of other agencies such as the health visitor, adult learning and Jobcentre Plus, to make sure that the most needy children and families are particularly well supported. These partnerships are an outstanding feature of the centre's work. Parents who spoke to inspectors told us that they get on very well with the centre's staff who are welcoming. They appreciate the advice and guidance which is given, especially when times are difficult. There are high numbers of children and families registered at the centre but not enough of these actually use the services which are on offer. We have asked the centre's leaders to improve this.

We also heard from parents that they like to be asked about what they think about a course or an activity. We think the staff do this very well and then use it to plan future courses and we judge that there are many suitable opportunities for parents to improve their learning and skills.

Parents told us that they felt sure that the right checks are made before any member of staff works at the centre. Inspectors agree with this and judge that the arrangements to keep children and families safe are good. The centre is governed by an advisory board and some parents are members. Although we think the degree of challenge from the board needs strengthening, it is well established and provides good support to the centre's leaders. Children are well looked after and are making good progress in their learning.

The local authority gives good support to the centre and works closely with the centre's leaders. At present, the improvement plan lacks specific targets for improvement and again we have asked the centre's leaders to make this better. It is providing increasingly good data, however, to help the centre target improvements but these often cover an area which is too broad and we have asked that the data is made more specific to the Cherry Tree community area.

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

