

# Inspection report for First Start Children's Centre

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Local authority	Sheffield
Inspection number	362477
Inspection dates	15–16 September 2010
Reporting inspector	Sue Pepper HMI

Centre governance	Advisory Board
Centre leader	Ms Gwyn Fields
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	First Start

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## Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents and carers, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents and carers, 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 of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an additional inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre's staff and senior managers, Chair of the Board, health professionals, local community partners, user groups, and parents and carers. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

## Information about the centre

First Start Children's Centre is situated within the Firth Park area of Sheffield. It shares accommodation with health and council personnel. The purpose-built centre opened in 2004 and was developed from a Sure Start Local Programme in collaboration with Sheffield Primary Care Trust. The centre is a phase 1 centre and it provides the full 'core offer' of services to children and families. It serves a multiculturally diverse area which is facing significant deprivation. The obesity rate is higher than average and the rate of unemployment and the proportion of people who leave school without qualifications are much higher than average.

Early Years Foundation Stage provision is provided on site from the First Start Nursery which operates from the ground floor of the building alongside equipped training and meeting rooms and accommodation for health visitors. The Nursery also currently runs an extended facility at the Centre for Life in a nearby church building. Both childcare facilities are subject to their own inspections. The inspection reports can be found at [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The main reception is on the ground floor where there is a café, office space and a range of multi-purpose meeting rooms. Health visitors are based on the lower-ground floor where there are further offices and multi-purpose meeting rooms. Sheffield City Council parks and garden personnel are also based here.

The centre is open from 8am until 6pm five days a week, 52 weeks of the year and signposts users to a range of specialised services. It serves as an administrative hub for both Shiregreen and Tinsley children's centres which it is linked to. The centre's manager is the programme manager for both First Start and Shiregreen and Tinsley. The centre has an established advisory board which meets regularly and membership includes an independent chair who is a local parent.

## Inspection judgements

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

<p><b>Overall effectiveness</b> The effectiveness of the children’s centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community</p>	2
<p><b>Capacity for sustained improvement</b> The centre’s capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management</p>	2

### Main findings

This is a well-established children’s centre which provides very good support to children and families and serves its diverse community well. One parent described the centre as ‘the best place ever’. A key strength of the centre is the remarkable leadership provided by the manager with the support of her senior management team and settled workers who inspire the centre to work towards meeting ambitious targets. Partnership arrangements with health, local authority and the Primary Care Trust are strong which means that they deliver a highly cohesive package of integrated services. The centre works hard to develop links with all relevant partners and plans are in place for developing closer working partnerships with Jobcentre Plus and local schools who are the weakest partners. Unemployment is high in this area and current partnership with Jobcentre Plus does not fully ensure that those seeking work related training and employment are fully supported to do so. Governance promotes enterprising behaviour and ensures that services are shaped to meet the changing needs of the local community through ensuring that parents’ and carers’ voices are heard.

The provision is strongest when the centre acts on feedback from users to influence change in order to further improve services. The centre evaluates rigorously the activities and courses it provides. The centre’s high expectation for users continually drives improvement of services. Self-evaluation of the centre is accurate and the team’s well-established reflective practice demonstrates good capacity for improvement. Feedback from consultation with parents and carers evidences that most users are satisfied or very satisfied with the services the centre provides. The centre is further developing partnerships with schools to ensure that children’s transition onto the next stage of their learning is more seamless and gaps in their attainment can be more fully addressed.

Observations of data, evaluations and case studies by inspectors demonstrate that most outcomes for users are at least good. Healthy lifestyles are well promoted through the superb allotment facility in the surrounding park which is not only well used by the centre’s children and families but also attracts the wider community.

Safeguarding and equality procedures are both good. One parent described the centre as being, 'my safe place'. Community cohesion is well promoted through the warm welcome visitors receive on arrival to the centre and use of the café which is very popular with members of the public. The extent to which children are encouraged to develop positive relationships is another real strength of the centre. This is due to excellent assessment of family needs by the professional multi-disciplinary teams who have extremely positive working relationships with one another.

Staff's morale is extremely high. The centre has had many successes in enabling parents and carers to develop their understanding of child development, achieve educationally and raise their aspirations. If courses the centre runs do not meet the needs of users, it either adapts the programme or effectively signposts them to other appropriate services. Practitioners support and empower parents and carers who are willing to develop new skills to attend a good range of courses. Those known to the centre are prioritised and very well targeted. However, data gathered about the reach area needs to be further improved to ensure that no disadvantaged families or those whose circumstances make them vulnerable are missed.

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

### Recommendations for further improvement

- Local authority to improve outcomes in the reach area further by improving city-wide data which informs the work of the centre to identify and engage those groups who are particularly disadvantaged or whose circumstances make them particularly vulnerable and who do not currently access the centre's activities.
- Work with the local authority to develop the partnership with Jobcentre Plus further, to increase involvement in supporting parents and carers into work-related training or paid employment.
- Strengthen links with families and wider communities including partner schools to ensure that gaps in children's attainment are successfully acted upon and longer-term outcomes are further improved.

## How good are outcomes for users?

2
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The centre offers a range of child and family services which promote children's, parents' and carers' emotional well-being, physical health and understanding of how to adopt healthy lifestyles. This includes a rolling programme to encourage dental health. The exciting allotment project set up to promote a healthy town has motivated many users of the centre and members of the local community to develop skills to grow vegetables and fruit at home. A cohesive programme of events is planned so that either tailored workshops or one-to-one support can be organised from the allotment. Parents and carers proudly told the inspectors of their experiences, failures and successes. Even those with limited garden space are not deterred, and some have successfully grown produce in containers at home. Samples

of tiny carrots which a child had grown at home were observed to be proudly displayed for all to see. This celebration of achievement and interest in good-quality food is admirable and very influential in promoting healthier eating.

Positive parenting courses are exceptional and help parents and carers tackle the stresses of parenting by learning new ways to manage challenging behaviour. Levels of obesity in this area are higher than average compared with other areas in the city. Effective visual aids are used to enable parents and carers to understand the fat and salt content of foods and to encourage more healthy choices. Teenage mothers are closely targeted by a dedicated midwife who offers support on sexual health, contraception and further education which has had a positive impact on some. Regular sessions at the sports centre, swimming and occasional walks arranged with the park rangers encourage more physical exercise. The number of mothers who smoke during pregnancy in this reach area is above average compared with numbers in other areas of the city. The midwife who is the smoking advisor runs cessation classes and she has successfully encouraged some pregnant mothers and young parents to give up smoking. A family support worker is also trained to deliver smoking cessation advice.

The percentage of mother's breastfeeding and sustaining breastfeeding has increased; this is acknowledged to be more successful when the breastfeeding peer support worker is in place. Most parents and carers speak positively about the safety and care provided by the centre and they are able to describe the difference this has made to their lives. 'It's our saviour, if it wasn't here I wouldn't leave the house,' was the view of one. Children are encouraged to learn about keeping themselves safe through topic discussions and through play-based learning.

As a result of the trusting relationships developed between the centre's multi-disciplinary workers, families, parents and carers have the confidence to speak out if anything concerns them. For example, when parents and carers complained about having to queue to see the health visitor at the baby clinic this resulted in 'social weighing' being introduced. Parents and carers can now have their children weighed by an early years practitioner who will direct them to a specialist health colleague if there are any concerns. This good practice is successfully in place as a direct result of users' views being effectively used to shape and improve services.

Some parents and carers have been subject to domestic violence and abuse. Family support workers provide good support in these circumstances working well with other agencies to resolve situations and to protect children. Case studies and research evidence the success of the centre in helping to raise parents' and carers' self-esteem, developing their knowledge and equipping them with the confidence to manage their personal situations more effectively which leads to good outcomes.

The pilot enabling two-year-olds to access the well-resourced Nursery leads to improving outcomes for younger children and increased involvement of families in services that increase parents' and carers' understanding of the importance of play. The educational attainment data shows a mixed picture, but some improvement over

time; however, results are below average with communication, language and literacy being the lowest. A high percentage of children speak dual languages and this is valued. Effective strategies are used to support those who speak English as an additional language, such as using bilingual support workers. They run courses which explain how children acquire language skills and they run small intensive language groups. There are also courses which parents and carers can take to develop their English. Early years practitioners are satisfactorily monitoring individual children's achievement to narrow the gap between the lowest achieving and the rest.

Transition from the centre into the local feeder school is developing, but the impact of the centre's work with families and children is not yet fully documented in schools. There is a good range of information to promote parents' and carers' pursuit of further education, employment or training opportunities. One parent said, 'Parenting classes help children have a bright future.' Teaching methods are adapted to respect diversity and culture and there are both mixed and female-only groups. Case studies and discussions with parents and carers show the positive impact that home visits and access to parenting courses have on their enjoyment of their children and sense of well-being. The childcare training pathway has been a great success for some, leading to accredited qualifications and paid employment working with children.

Children's behaviour was observed to be good. Young children are encouraged to express their feelings through the use of symbols. Children relate well to one another. Early years practitioners provide good role models and they promote children's independence well. For example, children were observed to show care and concern for new children who were finding it difficult to settle and children are routinely actively involved in preparing snacks.

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	1
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 meets its core offer well. 'There are some special people and parents who have helped me,' was the view of one parent. Excellent partnership working within the centre means that systems in place for assessing users' needs are extremely



effective. Partners are rigorous when completing the Common Assessment Framework and responding to disadvantaged families and those whose circumstances make them vulnerable. These partnership arrangements are monitored by the Multi Agency Allocation Meetings (MAAM) which ensures that good levels of support are consistently provided for all families. Clear routes for adult learners to work towards accredited courses have led to some excellent results. The centre has good knowledge of the reach area and provides varied programmes of activities, including holiday play schemes, which are very popular. One parent stated, 'Me and my two children love all the sticky and gluing activities. Every time we come to play there is a different activity for all ages.'

All provision is of good quality and helping to improve outcomes for children, parents and carers who come to the centre. The users of the services provided by the centre are generated from links in the community which health partners, involvement with parents and carers, and the family support workers make. Any families whose circumstances make them vulnerable or disadvantaged families identified are well supported; however, it is highly likely that there may be others in the reach area that are not benefiting from the activities and good support that the centre can provide. Information available to the centre is not yet developed to ensure that this does not happen.

Antenatal classes effectively help prospective parents to understand what to expect at the birth of their children. All prospective parents are made aware of the benefits of breast feeding; this includes the importance of close skin contact with babies when they are born. Later, after their children's birth they are given useful one-to-one sessions when they are advised on techniques which can enable mothers to be more successful at breastfeeding. Health visitors are aware immunisation rates are currently low and are working on ways of improving this through regular assessments of children. The 'My Amazing Baby' massage course has a waiting list due to its popularity; therefore the centre is looking at ways to accommodate more than one session at a time.

Health partners work closely with the community food worker and other early years professionals to raise awareness of the importance of diet in order to prevent obesity. The extensive, extremely well-stocked allotment not only allows children, parents and carers to grow, harvest and taste a wide variety of different foods but it also offers the opportunities to cook fruits and vegetables outdoors. The Nursery garden also provides plenty of opportunities for young gardeners to practice and refine their developing gardening skills. It promotes understanding of where food comes from and which foods are good for us. A male family support worker has increased the involvement of fathers through the dads' group which meets regularly and has encouraged some to work as volunteers.

Children are well safeguarded in the centre and in all other provision. Security at the centre is good and underpinned by effective risk assessments. The centre no longer has access to basic home safety equipment for children's homes but other routes can be followed if families need any essential safety equipment.

The special educational needs co-ordinator in the Nursery has links with specialist services which parents and carers are signposted to if required. The centre runs groups to meet children's additional needs and also teaches Makaton sign language. All users of the centre have access to a well-equipped sensory room which users find inviting.

Places at the Nursery are in demand and there is a waiting list. The centre has set up an additional group, the 'Early Birds', due to this. Children's transition from home to the Nursery is well planned and transition from the Nursery into school is improving. Delay in language development is identified and specific groups are set up to support families, such as 'Talking Toddlers' or 'Every Child a Talker'. The Early Years Foundation Stage profiles indicate that many children's skills are below average, especially in personal, social and emotional development and in communication, language and literacy. The early years professionals, health visitors and family support workers fully understand how important it is to work hard on these areas to improve children's futures. The centre is changing its database system over to the new city-wide arrangement. This should enable more effective tracking of children's and families' long-term outcomes.

Attendance at the centre reflects the community it serves. The majority group is White British but there is a high percentage of families from minority ethnic groups, the biggest being from Pakistani origin, and some Black African, Bangladeshi, Caribbean and a range of other unspecified ethnic groups. In the Firth Park area over half of the adults have no qualifications and are living in workless households. Jobcentre Plus has a named contact who provides weekly job vacancies and who visits the centre to keep them updated of any changes. Adults are also signposted to groups like 'Action for Jobs'. They have access to a computer to search job vacancies but this was stated not to be terribly well used. The local authority acknowledges this is an area which could be improved and is negotiating a joint action plan for improvement with Jobcentre Plus. Basic courses are facilitated by offering crèches and they often act like stepping stones onto level 1 and 2 courses. Adult learning journeys evidence some good individual progress and award ceremonies are undertaken at the local college or in the park to celebrate all achievements.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	1
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
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The effective 'team around the family' approach works extremely well here due to the strong partnerships within the centre which enable close liaisons and prompt responses to difficult or complex situations. For example, a parent said, 'I would be lost without Sure Start and their friendly staff.' The health partners deliver universal and targeted service well. Specialists have specific roles in terms of groups, for example one midwife is responsible for teenage mothers and the homeless service has a specialist health visitor. A range of students have undertaken work experience in this rich resource and some have undertaken valuable analysis and research of the centre's work.

Rigorous monitoring and reflective practice is encouraged and one parent stated, 'It's fantastic here, very accessible, with a wonderful welcoming atmosphere.' The active childminding network is signposted from the centre and further complements services offered. The majority of services provided are effective and efficient due to the high-quality cohesive package of integrated provision. Robust systems are in place for performance management and self-challenge which underpins the good quality of the highly successful services provided. All the required policies and procedures are in place and centre workers are fully aware of them.

The partnership board has reconstructed and become the advisory board and the independent chair who is a parent and grandparent is tenacious in her advocacy of the work still to do to build the capacity of the board and raise aspirations in the area. Members of the board ensure that their voice is heard and they were actively involved in the self-evaluation process of the centre. There are clear procedures in place for consultation with users of the centre and the administration team are proactive regarding finding solutions to any issues so that the centre constantly improves. For example, the registration form has been simplified and an attractive, user-friendly, pocket-sized programme of events as been created because of users' suggestions.

Community cohesion and celebration of the diversity of the community is effectively promoted through the combined celebration of any special events. This is an inclusive centre and any inappropriate or discriminatory comments are always tackled. The charismatic leader manages two other children's centres and she has an ambitious vision regarding the centre's engagement with the community. Despite some cuts in funding, good-quality services continue to be delivered. Currently, the centre finds some data regarding the reach area difficult to obtain and acknowledges that improvements in this area would ensure that it was more able to meet the needs of all in the wider community within the reach area.

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	1

integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	
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	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

The inspectors looked at the centre's self-evaluation form, data provided by the local authority and the centre, documents and policies and minutes of the advisory board. They also looked at the inspection outcomes for the pre-school providers and schools with Early Years Foundation Stage children in the centre's reach area.

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### Summary for centre users

We inspected the First Start Children's Centre on 15–16 September 2010. We judged the centre as good overall.

The children's centre has established itself at the heart of the community. It provides a good range of services that are helping families to improve their lives. Its superb location in the park means that access to the fantastic allotment is very convenient. This facility has raised your awareness of the importance of a healthy diet in order to prevent obesity. You have learnt to grow, harvest and eat a wide variety of different foods and the allotment also offers you the chance to cook fruit and vegetables outdoors. It provides plenty of opportunities for both younger and older gardeners to develop gardening skills and to understand which foods are good for you. We were

very impressed by how many of you are now growing fruit and vegetables in your own gardens or containers at home.

Parents and carers from different backgrounds were eager to share with us how welcome they feel at the centre and how much they appreciate the extremely positive support that their families have received. It was a pleasure to see how much children and users of the centre treated each other with respect and consideration. Breastfeeding advice and support has helped many mums successfully to breastfeed and then wean their children. The 'Positive Parenting' course has enabled many of you to understand child development more, to cope with the stress of parenting and to develop more effective ways of managing your children's behaviour. We have asked the local authority to improve outcomes in the reach area further by improving the information the centre receives so that it ensures that anybody in the wider community who needs the centre's help can also access it.

First Start Nursery offers good-quality childcare and education, it is so popular that it has a waiting list. The 'Centre for Life' was set up due to the increasing demand to provide more childcare places for you and the 'Early Birds' group enables good transition from home to Nursery. The Nursery has formed links with local schools and we have asked it to strengthen these to ensure that gaps in children's attainment are successfully acted upon and longer-term outcomes for your children's futures are further improved.

The midwives, health visitors, early years practitioners, family support and parental involvement workers and the community food worker all work very well together to combine their professional experience, knowledge and resources. They assess your family's needs exceptionally well. This is because the centre has high expectations and wants the very best for you and your family.

The centre does some things particularly well. For example, it has built trusting and extremely positive relationships with most of you because it values and respects your views and uses them to change and improve services they provide for you. The centre is hoping that more of you will want to join the advisory board to help ensure that the centre's plans are constantly meeting your families' needs. We hope that you will be interested in doing this.

Many of you have attended courses to develop your knowledge and skills, which has increased your confidence and self-esteem. Some of you have been successful in completing courses which have led to paid work. We have asked the centre to work with the local authority to develop the partnership with Jobcentre Plus further to increase the involvement in supporting you all into further work-related training or paid employment.

We would like to thank everyone who was willing to speak to us, we are very grateful for your help and we wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Sue Pepper  
Her Majesty's Inspector

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