

Inspection report for St Thomas Children's Centre

Local authority	Birmingham
Inspection number	362576
Inspection dates	14–15 October 2010
Reporting inspector	Anna Coyle AI

Centre governance	Local Authority
Centre leader	Cynthia Knight
Date of previous inspection	n/a
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Linked school if applicable	St Thomas Children's Centre Nursery
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	The Willow Room Day Care

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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.

An inspection of the maintained nursery was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre leader, the family team coordinator, a representative from the local authority, groups of parents, teachers and other staff, health workers, family support workers and representatives from the management board, social services, childminders and the Optima Housing Association.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

St Thomas Children's Centre is a Phase 1 children's centre situated close to the centre of Birmingham and is among the highest 20% most deprived areas in the country. There is a very wide mix of ethnic minority families, including White British, Asian and Black heritage, and 36 spoken languages. The centre is in an area of regeneration and is housed in a fully refurbished multi-storey school building with a small outdoor play area. The community is characterised by high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. Local authority data indicate that a significant proportion of children in the reach area live in poverty, as defined by the Children in Poverty Indicator. Most children enter childcare and early education with skills that are lower than those expected for their age. The centre provides the full core offer and has its own management board which is made up of representatives from the local community, childminders, social services, educational research, parents and centre staff. The centre has achieved accreditation in Healthy Eating and also in Baby Effective Early Learning (BEEL).

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

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

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

The centre serves its richly diverse local community exceedingly well because it has an outstanding range of integrated services and it is led and managed extremely well. The high quality of the centre’s work, the dedication and commitment from the staff and the excellent cooperation between many agencies indicate that there is outstanding capacity for sustained improvement.

Excellent provision for users in the locality, which is known as the ‘reach area’, is a notable characteristic of the centre. Through cooperative working practices, the centre leader and her staff have worked hard to ensure that the centre meets the needs of its users extremely well. This means that parents, carers and families receive practical advice and support within a very welcoming, friendly environment. High quality, sensitive advice is available for pregnant teenagers, new mothers, fathers, childminders, carers and children. The most vulnerable users receive outstanding care from health professionals and educational, social and outreach services. The centre deals exceptionally well with all who choose to use the facilities and those who are referred by external agencies. Closer links with Jobcentre Plus and local providers are being considered so that adult users have better access to employment opportunities.

Personal, social and emotional outcomes are outstanding and many children and parents achieve well and grow in confidence as a result of attending the enjoyable activities at the centre. Data are used well to record the rapid progress children make, although the use of assessment is not fully developed across all areas of learning so that staff can track progress more accurately. The centre’s strong focus on promoting equality and diversity ensures that all adults and children feel highly valued. This means that all users thrive in the centre’s stimulating learning environment and through the excellent outreach services provided.

Safeguarding arrangements are thorough, from the safe recruitment of staff and safe working practices to the support provided for families to help them understand home safety. The local authority maintains good oversight of the centre’s provision and

provides effective governance, support and challenge for the staff. The management board evaluates its own work very well and conscientiously seeks the views of users. The clean, safe accommodation and co-location of the nursery contribute well to the needs of users by providing easily accessible facilities. The views expressed by parents and carers reflect the exceptionally high standard of care, guidance and support provided by the centre.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Extend the use of assessment to track children's progress more accurately across all areas of learning and identify the next steps.
- Develop closer links with local providers to increase parents' and carers' access to employment.

How good are outcomes for users?

1

The centre's outstanding health outcomes for children from all groups, including those who are most vulnerable, are based firmly on the effective promotion of close partnerships with health professionals. Children eat healthy snacks and fruit at the centre, and parents attending healthy cooking sessions speak highly of staff and how they have helped them change the eating habits of their families. This is helping to reduce obesity rates. Improving trends in breastfeeding and the reduction of teenage pregnancy rates have resulted from very strong links between health professionals, inter-agency working and carefully targeted individual support. Immunisation and dental health is promoted very well through visits to new mothers, when staff also encourage healthy lifestyles and signpost the services available. Midwives and health visitors encourage pregnant and new mothers and their families to give up smoking during home visits and so increase the proportion of children living in smoke-free environments.

Children achieve exceptionally well in their personal, social and emotional development. The centre's provides excellent support to parents and carers and childminders. As a result, children's early communication skills increase rapidly. Parents and carers say that they thoroughly enjoy the varied opportunities to play with their babies and toddlers at the centre and so develop their parenting skills. They especially enjoy the 'Willow Room' activities with their children. Staff help them understand how to manage children's behaviour effectively at home through courses such as 'Parenting without Smacking'. Children attending day care are settled and comfortable because the adults working with them are very friendly, caring and they provide excellent nurturing. 'Chatter Box' sessions support children's speech and language development very effectively. Data confirm a steady trend of improvement in children attaining the expected level in all areas of learning by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Children who use the centre know how to keep themselves safe. Users comment on how the centre provides a safe environment for them and their children. Through the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) the group supervision and team meetings, individual needs are discussed and support provided to help children and their families, including looked-after children and those who have child protection plans. The centre works very effectively to raise the awareness and develop the knowledge of parents and carers about how to keep their families safe and secure. Home safety is introduced in the antenatal clinics, postnatal sessions, new parents groups, 'Stay and Play' sessions and through one-to-one support for users. Parents are able to access safety equipment to use at home, such as stair gates. Fully trained staff carry out home safety checks and give out safety packs at new birth visits. These are much appreciated by parents who say, 'The centre is making us better parents' and the staff are 'a life-line'.

The centre's welcoming, friendly ethos and encouragement of users to express their views means that they make a positive contribution to the centre's work. Many parents become volunteers which enables them to become actively involved in a wide variety of sessions. Teenage mothers make good progress in their personal development and many are enabled to return to education. The centre signposts users to relevant courses at local colleges and to job vacancies, although links with local providers are not fully developed to increase parents' and carers' access to employment. Literacy courses and the 'Women's Language Group' helps mothers build their English vocabulary and signposts access to support networks in the reach area.

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	1
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	1
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	1

How good is the provision?

1

The centre's outstanding provision to help users learn and develop is firmly based on the staff's exceptional knowledge of the children and their families within the reach area. The centre makes good assessments of users' personal and social

development, although it is still developing its procedures for tracking children's progress in other areas of learning. The information gathered in children's journals and users' records contributes well to the assessment of individual needs and is used effectively to help staff tailor activities. Enjoyable day care sessions for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage help prepare them well for starting school. Parents are enthusiastic supporters of the centre and say such things as, 'The centre enables you to find yourself' and, 'It gives us strength, confidence and motivation'.

Health visitors and family support workers liaise very effectively with a wide range of integrated services to assess and review the welfare needs of users. Excellent links with external agencies and outreach services further enhance the centre's provision so that it caters very effectively for the community it serves. For example, adults enjoy outreach health promotion programmes such as, 'Cook and Taste' and 'Healthy Smile' and they have good opportunities to attend 'New Parents' groups as well as home safety sessions. The provision for pregnant teenagers and new mothers is particularly strong. Midwives provide valuable advice and medical checks during antenatal and postnatal clinics in the annex. Parents and carers especially like the 'Promoting Happier Parenting' sessions held at the centre. Links with other local groups are also strong. The centre has developed a fathers' group, which is well attended and enjoyed by users.

The outstanding care, support and guidance provided for adults and children who attend the centre and day care facilities has a very positive benefit on their well-being; for example, the centre signposts parents to good quality support for smoking cessation. Very caring staff effectively build trust with parents and carers of the youngest children. Adults who work at the centre are particularly sensitive to parents who are in need of emotional support and activities like 'Stay and Play' provide valuable opportunities for parents to make friends and feel less isolated. Plenty of information and advice is available for parents seeking work, particularly for lone parents and those who are keen to increase their basic skills prior to their return to work. Suitable links with Jobcentre Plus further increase their employment opportunities and regular classes for 'English Speakers of Other Languages' (ESOL) equip them with literacy skills and help build their confidence in preparation for the world of work.

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	1
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

1

Leadership and management of the centre are exceedingly well focused on providing high quality services and driving improvement. Staff understand their roles well and have very high expectations of themselves and of each other. They work in unison to ensure a great sense of enthusiasm and enjoyment in all that they do. The work of other agencies is integrated very effectively into the centre's day-to-day activities. The dedicated and conscientious approach of leaders and the flexible deployment of staff and resources ensure excellent value for money. The local authority provides the centre with very effective governance and support, and holds the leaders and managers accountable for the services they provide. Members of the management board give their time willingly and bring a vast range of expertise to the centre. They monitor and evaluate the centre's provision rigorously to ensure that the provision meets the needs of the community, including the most vulnerable groups, those with disabilities and those who are hard to reach.

Safeguarding arrangements are excellent and staff training is thorough and up to date. Leaders have very good understanding of the principles for ensuring the safe recruitment of staff, and the centre's records show that all staff are checked carefully before they take up employment. Regular referrals of children and families in need and the outstanding cooperation between multi-agency groups contribute extremely well to improving the emotional health and well-being of users.

The centre actively promotes equality and celebrates diversity, and the range of users reflects the wide ethnic mix of the reach area, which includes thirty-six spoken languages. The views of users are sought regularly to help the centre refine its provision and meet the needs of the whole community. Excellent relationships with others who share the same building ensure that expertise is readily available for those who need it. For instance, the nursery school, the centre for research in education (CREC) and other services which are all co-located on the same site contribute very well to the outstanding effectiveness of the centre.

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	1
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	1
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	1
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable	1

adults	
The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	1
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	1

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

The inspection of the maintained St Thomas Children's Centre Nursery school took place at the same time, and the findings were taken into account. The 2008 report for the day care provision was also scrutinised.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected *St Thomas Children's Centre* on 14-15 October 2010. We judged the centre as outstanding overall.

We really enjoyed talking to you and finding out about all the things you are involved in. We visited a wide range of activities during the inspection, such as the 'Willow Room' sessions, 'Stay and Play' and 'Keep Fit'. You gave us a very positive picture of the work of the children's centre and we were pleased to hear that you value the centre's work and enjoy the activities it provides.

The sessions provided at the centre are well planned and of good quality. You told us that you particularly like talking to the health workers and family support workers about topics such as how to ensure your families receive a healthy diet. There are good opportunities for new mothers and fathers to receive advice and guidance on how to look after young children or how to deal with children's behaviour at home through the 'Promoting Happier Parenting' sessions. The centre seeks to support those of you who are looking for employment by providing information about jobs which are available in the locality.

We were very impressed with the outstanding quality of care, guidance and support which the community receives from the centre. Many of you told us that the staff show great sensitivity and consideration of your needs. The very wide range of services that are brought together under one roof are organised extremely well through close partnerships between the centre staff and the range of professionals who contribute to the centre's activities. These services provide you and your families with help for many of the needs which you have to deal with. For those of you facing difficulties, staff and professionals who provide outreach services ensure you get the support and help you need.

The centre is led and managed exceptionally well. The local authority keeps a careful check on what is happening and provides the centre staff with valuable support and advice. Leaders make sure that they provide a very safe environment for those who use the centre and they ensure that all staff are qualified and suitable for working with children and families. We know that the centre asks for your views and opinions and we are aware that many of you are actively involved with the centre, either during day-to-day activities or as a part of the management board. In order to increase the effectiveness of the centre even more, we have asked the leaders and managers to extend the use of assessment so that they can track children's progress more accurately across all areas of learning. We have also asked them to develop closer links with local providers so that you have better access to employment opportunities in your area.

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