

Inspection report for Steppingstones Children's Centre

Local authority	Surrey
Inspection number	384117
Inspection dates	31 January–1 February 2012
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Earlswood Infant and Nursery School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not applicable

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.

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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 one additional inspector and one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, members of the senior leadership team, centre staff, school governors, members of the advisory board, staff from the local authority and professionals from organisations representing health, education and other services. They also met parents.

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

Information about the centre

The Steppingstones Children's Centre is a phase two centre in Surrey which operates from a new purpose-built building. The centre was opened in 2010 and shares its site with Earlswood Infant and Nursery School. Separate arrangements are in place to inspect this provision and reports can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk. The centre covers the areas of Reigate, Earlswood and Meadvale and offers services from its Earlswood base and also at venues managed by other organisations in Reigate.

Most families in the reach area are of White British heritage but there are a growing number of families from minority ethnic backgrounds. There are pockets of deprivation in parts of the reach area but also areas of affluence in other parts of the community. In 2010, the percentage of families claiming benefits in the Reigate area was 6% and 11% for the Earlswood area. Obesity rates are low in the area. The centre did not have the data for the number of workless families in the reach area.

The centre meets its core purpose and offers a range of universal and targeted services which include health provision, early years activities, family support, outreach provision and parenting training. Governance of the centre is the responsibility of the governing body of Earlswood School. An advisory board also supports the centre. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities are below those expected for their age on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage.

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 families

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

Steppingstones Children's Centre offers good provision. 'It's a warm and welcoming place to come,' was the view expressed by one parent, which reflects the views of many others. Although the centre was only established in 2010, staff have made good progress to establish the centre's role in the community.

The centre works very well with partners from the health services and families benefit from a wide range of health provision, such as clinics and individual guidance from health professionals. Tracking of outcomes shows good improvements in health outcomes for families. Parents feel safe at the centre and safeguarding is a priority for staff. They have a good understanding of what actions need to be taken to protect families. The centre works effectively with social care teams and other agencies to safeguard families and to provide early intervention support.

The centre's capacity to offer accommodation staffing resources is limited. However, through good partnership working, the centre is able to extend the range and location of provision. The centre works closely, and in partnership, with a range of statutory, voluntary and private sector organisations.

The quality of care and support offered to families, particularly to key target groups such as young parents, is excellent. 'They make you feel important,' was the comment from one parent about the support she received from staff. 'They do that extra bit to help you,' said another parent. These comments, together with case studies and evidence from linked services, demonstrate that the centre makes a sensitive and very effective response to families during times of crisis.

The centre is well managed and can demonstrate its success in improving the lives of families. Registration rates are around 58%, and improving, and participation rates are high at around 84%. However, because many families from outside the reach area choose to use the centre, registration and participation figures do not accurately reflect take up and use of services of those within the centre's reach area.

Systems for monitoring performance are thorough at all levels of leadership and management. The process of evaluation involves managers, leaders and families. However, the centre's self-evaluation report does not fully reflect all aspects of the evaluation process. In addition, systems to collect and analyse data are not consistently reliable, particularly in relation to wider community needs analysis and participation rates of different groups. Nonetheless, leaders and managers have good knowledge of the community and its needs because they work hard to get to know families. Governance and accountability arrangements are secure. The good outcomes and the success of the centre in a relatively short space of time demonstrate that it has good capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Work with the local authority to make best use of data to monitor more effectively the impact of provision, and to assess accurately the participation rates for different groups.
- Further improve the quality of the self-evaluation report to ensure it reflects all aspects of the evaluation process

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Outcomes for families who use the centre are good. Evidence from health partners demonstrate that the centre has made a positive contribution to the health of families. For example, breastfeeding rates are above average in the reach area. The well attended 'Baby Café' has been instrumental in providing one-to-one support to mothers who breastfeed. Comments from mothers who attend the café include, 'It's the best thing I could have done,' and, 'It offers invaluable support.' Parents, including lone and teenage parents, value the advice, guidance and encouragement to mothers because this enables them to feel confident about weaning, breastfeeding and other health issues.

Families also benefit by feeling more in control of their lives. The 'Mums in Mind' programme offers infant massage sessions to help mothers and their children improve their emotional health and their relationships. One parent said of the programme, 'It's an invaluable service offered at time when mums really need it.'

Parents comment positively about the safe environment at the centre and how their awareness of safety issues has increased. Safety for families at the centre and in the home is well promoted. For example, the fire service gives families helpful advice about safety at home.

The centre responds well to families whose circumstances make them vulnerable. There are close links with child protection teams so that effective support is provided for the few children in the area who are on child protection plans. The Common

Assessment Framework is also used effectively to identify needs of families in relation to safeguarding issues.

Children and their parents enjoy attending the centre. Through the centre's partnership with a local charity, many families also enjoy outdoor play activities and attend 'Toddler Trail' activities that are carried out in local historical parkland, which aids their all-round health and outdoor learning. Fathers also comment positively about the improved relationships they share with their children as a result of participating together in centre activities.

Transition to school is good for children but it is too soon for the centre to demonstrate fully the impact of its work to support children's progress through to school. Data for the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores are complex to analyse because of changes to the centre's reach area and also because the school's catchment areas do not directly correlate to the centre's reach area. However, recent data show that around 83.7% of children in one part of the reach area perform very well in achieving 78 points across the profile, but in another part of the reach area children do not perform as well. The gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children who achieve 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile and the rest is shown to be narrowing. Children develop good skills for the future, particularly through the opportunities to socialise with other children from a range of backgrounds and to develop their language and communication skills. Parents also enjoy and achieve positive outcomes by gaining qualifications such as first aid. They also develop their learning and skills through attending cookery, parenting and other courses.

The centre has quickly established itself as a significant part of the community. Children behave well and good behaviour is encouraged by the centre staff who role-model positive behaviour, a feature which parents take on board when learning how to manage their own children.

Parents are actively involved in the centre's governance through their role on the advisory board and also at a more operational level through their membership of the parents' forum. They also contribute well to decisions about services and provision. Some parents have progressed well from being centre users to becoming volunteers and then becoming employed by the centre. Other parents have trained and are training to be breastfeeding mentors. About 50% of the staff are former centre users. Unemployment rates are low in the area, but Jobcentre Plus provides information and guidance as required. The personal development of parents is good and for some this has led to opportunities as volunteers and employment.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from target groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles	2
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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 children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	2
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre uses its links with partners, evaluations from families and the data it collects to ensure provision is well matched to the needs and interests of the community. Effective individual assessments, which show an effective partnership especially with the health services, ensure that the centre meets the needs of its key target groups, such as young parents, lone parents and families whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Outreach provision often provides targeted services to meet their needs.

Where data have not been centrally provided by the local authority, the centre manager has been diligent in conducting research to collect relevant data, especially when informally talking to parents. As a result, centre staff know their community well and provide a good range of services to meet the needs and interests of different target groups such as fathers and the most vulnerable families.

Purposeful learning and enjoyment are well promoted through activities for children and for adults. These activities have clear learning outcomes. The centre manager has worked with local schools to identify areas for improvement in relation to the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores, such as those relating to communication skills and literacy development.

The centre embraces suggestions from families for courses and activities. For example, parents have made suggestions for changes in courses to ensure greater participation from many families.

Families receive excellent care from the centre. For example, case study evidence demonstrates that some families have had to overcome significant barriers to reach the point where they have the confidence to travel on their own to the centre. During times of crises, families feel well supported. One parent said about the support she received from centre staff, 'They gave me coping strategies to succeed.'

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Leadership and management at all levels are effective. Governance of the centre is good. Management responsibilities are clear and arrangements for monitoring the performance of the centre are well understood. One governor acts as a link governor for the centre and holds regular review meetings with the centre manager to monitor performance. In addition, meetings with the local authority are also regular. The 'annual conversation' process is used well to monitor performance.

The quality of data provided to the centre from the local authority is improving but is inconsistent in quality and range. As a consequence of this, leaders find it difficult to measure the impact of the centre's work as effectively as possible. Nonetheless, they set challenging targets to improve.

Families provide regular feedback about activities and make suggestions for improvement. The report that emerges from the self-evaluation process does not sufficiently reflect all aspects of the evaluation process, such as the views of families, nor does it sufficiently reflect how data have been used to inform judgements.

The small team of staff work very well together and are led by a highly competent manager. Staffing and other resources are well used and given the good outcomes for families, value for money is good. The centre is committed to promoting inclusion for all families, and parents comment about the 'welcoming environment at the centre'. Specialist toys have been purchased and offered to families through the additional needs toy library. 'We can find toys that are sensory – this is absolutely amazing, never found this anywhere else,' was the comment from one parent. Diversity is celebrated and learning about festivals associated with different cultural groups is incorporated into centre activities. In addition, the centre works diligently to close the gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children who achieve 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.

Through its good partnership links with other agencies, such as social care teams, the centre makes an effective response to any safeguarding issues that arise. Information sharing and referral mechanisms work well. Staff have completed relevant safeguarding training as appropriate to their roles and statutory requirements are well met. Early intervention action is used to ensure problems for

families do not escalate. Social care teams report that the centre is 'very supportive' when working with families who have children on child protection plans. The centre is also responsive and sensitive to the needs of families who are affected by domestic violence. For example, good support is provided for women living in a local refuge. Criminal Records Bureau and other recruitment checks are carried out on staff and volunteers as appropriate.

The centre works productively with a wide range of partners who are well represented on the advisory board. Partners talk highly of their links with the centre. One partner said, 'We could not continue without the centre.' It is clear from the testimonies of partners that the centre plays a pivotal and cohesive role in bringing services together to improve the lives of the community.

Through the parents' forum, families express their views and contribute ideas for promoting the centre to other families. Parents' views are also well represented through the advisory board and parents are regularly consulted about the development of services.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages families in the reach area 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 inspection took account of the findings of the most recent inspection of Earlswood Infant and Nursery School inspection report which was judged to be outstanding.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Steppingstones Children's Centre on 31 January and 1 February 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Many thanks to those of you who took time to speak to us during the inspection. We really appreciate your time and also your honesty in telling us how much the centre supports you and your children.

Like you, we found the centre to be a very welcoming place. We also found it to be a safe environment for families. Many of you told us how much the centre had helped you to overcome barriers or to receive the support you needed, and at times when you most needed it. We feel that the quality of the support offered at the centre is a real strength of its work.

We also like the range of activities that are offered at the centre to promote good health for families. From our discussions with health professionals, and from what you also told us, we can see that the centre is making a positive difference to the health of the community. Attendance was good at all the events we observed and we could see how much you and your children enjoy and learn from the sessions you attend at the centre.

Many of you have also participated in activities, such as adult learning courses, which have helped you develop your skills. We also know that some of you help out at the centre as volunteers and, with the support of the centre, some of you are training to be breastfeeding mentors. The centre certainly encourages children and adults to develop their learning.

During our visit, we were able to meet many of the professionals who work with centre staff to provide services. The way the centre works with a wide range of partner organisations is very effective because it means families can participate in a variety of activities at the centre or at other venues.

The centre has achieved much in a short space of time and we want this to continue. This is why we have asked staff and the local authority to improve the way statistics

are collected and used to assess what the community needs. We also want the centre to become more effective at measuring and recording the effectiveness of its work. This will help the centre to become even more successful in encouraging more families to use the good services it provides.

Once again, many thanks for contributing to the inspection process and we wish you and your families all the best for the future.

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