

Inspection report for Oakfield Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Out of Mischief Day Nursery

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.

An inspection of the co-located primary school 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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector. Inspectors held meetings with the centre manager, the headteacher of the school, a children's centre teacher, the nursery manager, representatives of the health services, family support workers, volunteers and parents using the service. They also met with representatives of the local authority, and the advisory board. They observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Oakfield Children's Centre is a phase one centre located on the same site as Oakfield Primary School. Governance arrangements stem from the Kent Children's Trust and the Local Children's Trust Board. Oakfield is one of seven centres in Dartford which are overseen by the Dartford Children's Centres Advisory Board and a Preventative Services Manager. The centre manager has full responsibility for its leadership and management. Oakfield serves the Princes, Town and Wilmington wards. The area has pockets of deprivation ranging from 20%– 80% of the most deprived areas in the country. The centre was designated in September 2006 and received full core offer status the following year. It provides childcare, family support, child and family health, job and benefits advice. The centre accommodates a 25-place full-day-care nursery, health visitor and midwife teams. Services are delivered by the National Health Service and staff at the centre, adult education or by providers such as the crèche, commissioned by the local authority. The area includes private developments, but mostly it consists of social housing and flats. The number of lone parents and workless families on benefits is above the national average. Families come from diverse cultures, with the largest groups coming from White British and Eastern European backgrounds. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities when they first start in the Early Years Foundation Stage are broadly in line with national expectations.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Oakfield Children's Centre is satisfactory. Some aspects are good; for example, partnerships with health services and outreach workers ensure a cohesive approach to supporting families in the area. Relevant information is easily shared and outreach workers provide significant individual support to those most in need. Consequently, care, guidance and support for those in crisis is good. Staff providing assistance from a range of services are well informed. One parent said, 'If I had not been looked after and given good advice by the centre my son would not be in mainstream school now.' Courses to raise skills in parenting, safety in the home, knowledge of healthy foods, and overcoming depression and domestic abuse help families to develop mentally and emotionally, and to have healthier lifestyles. They also help to reduce the risk of harm to children. Through the ante-natal clinic 93% of families living in the reach area are registered with the centre. Two thirds go on to use its provision. A growing number of minority ethnic families have moved into the area and have been encouraged to set up support groups within the centre. The level of engagement of fathers is limited because there is no contingency for the long-term absence of staff leading in this area.

The centre has a wealth of data. The local authority uses this data to set challenging targets for improvement, but these are not built into the centre's development plan. Consequently, progress towards these targets is not monitored carefully enough. In addition, data are not used well enough by the centre to track the educational achievements and progress of the different groups who attend. For example, it does not know how many of the parents are in adult further education or have gained qualifications in literacy, numeracy and learning to speak English. Children's knowledge, skills and abilities are not assessed in the crèche. This makes it difficult for the centre to check its contribution to improving children's progress.

To improve the economic well-being of families, some staff give guidance with completing claim benefits forms, for example the disability attendance allowance. Job Centre Plus has limited involvement in the centre, constraining opportunities to reduce the number of young children in workless households.

While there is some formal and informal evaluation of the centre's programmes, not all of the services or parents are aware of the centre's targets and priorities for development or how they can help to meet them. Each service carries out its own evaluation of its effectiveness. The information from these evaluations is not included sufficiently in the centre's overall self-evaluation to demonstrate fully its effectiveness. The children's centre wants more parents to become involved in the decisions that are made. While they are interested, parents say that it is not easy to understand the documents they receive because they are not written in a way that makes them easy to understand.

With the support of senior managers, the centre's track record is one of improvement. The advisory board has been reorganised this year and offers greater challenge. Outcomes in health, safety and children's achievements at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage have risen quickly. The local authority has conducted its own audit of the strengths and weaknesses of the centre and is taking action to ensure its continued improvement. The centre has a satisfactory capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure that the challenging targets set by the local authority are included in a sharply focused centre development plan and that progress towards them is tracked carefully.
- Implement well-coordinated self-evaluation procedures that enable all services involved in the centre to demonstrate their contribution to its overall effectiveness and progress towards its targets.
- Monitor and track the achievements and progress of all groups using the centre, but especially the provision and educational progress of children who attend the crèche.
- Together with the local authority, enable more:
 - families to access advice about returning to work and benefits from Job Centre Plus
 - fathers to become involved in the learning and development of their children
 - parents to contribute to decision making in the centre by making relevant documents easy to read and understand.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Families are safe in the centre. They know that they can visit at any time and spend time in the 'chill-out area' where there is always someone available to offer advice. Interventions by family support workers, health services, first aid and parenting courses and the provision of home safety equipment are helping to limit the risk of injuries. Data indicates that this provision is having a positive impact as there was a 3.6% reduction of emergency admissions of children to hospital last year.

Much of the centre's work relates to helping parents to overcome post-natal

depression, to gain confidence in preventing domestic abuse and to reduce the sense of isolation for those who speak English as an additional language. The centre has recently responded to parents' wishes to establish a group for Russian speakers. Overall, there are limited opportunities for parents to contribute to the running of the centre. Parenting courses and targeted support by family support workers are promoting good relationships within families.

Good partnerships with health and social services provide a well-coordinated approach to identifying, assessing and supporting children subject to a child protection plan or Common Assessment Framework. Levels of intervention are reduced as families gain the skills they need to keep their children safe. The number of teenage pregnancies fell from 19 to 13 last year. The percentage of mothers sustaining breastfeeding at six to eight weeks improved by 20% from 30% to 50% in a year, giving more children a healthy start to life. Cookery courses provide advice about healthy eating, but the centre has little information to show if this changes eating habits over time. Advice from a speech therapist helps families to enhance their children's language development. Snacks in the crèche do not reflect the centre's ethos for promoting healthy eating.

Parents enjoy activities, such as those in 'Rhythm and Rhyme' where they can play and sing with their children. Activities for children in the crèche lack challenge and limit their achievement and enjoyment. Data shows that the percentage of children reaching the national average at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has risen recently. The gap between the lowest-achieving children and others has narrowed by 2%. However, the centre does not record assessments of children's educational achievements or progress in the crèche or the nursery. Consequently, its impact on learning is unclear. Some volunteers who now work in the centre have enhanced their knowledge and skills. One said, 'I love this centre, it gave me the boost I needed to start my own business after volunteering.' Overall, the centre has little information to show how effectively parents, including those who speak English as an additional language, are accessing further learning and gaining qualifications.

Effective advice from family support workers enables some parents to gain access to the benefits that they need. The percentage of families receiving Working Tax Credits has increased. The lack of engagement with Job Centre Plus and weak provision to enable parents to acquire skills that enable them to return to work are hindering opportunities to improve their financial situation. The number of children in workless households is broadly similar to the previous year.

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
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	3
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	3
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	3

How good is the provision?

3

An appropriate range of services and activities serves the interests of most target groups, except fathers. A programme for teenage parents is not operating currently as it is under review. Good collaboration between health services and family support workers means individual assessments are thorough. Help is targeted to meet the specific needs of the most vulnerable, and those with a disability. The local authority makes effective use of data to identify target groups in the area. It encourages centres in the group to work cooperatively and take turns to provide accredited courses, such as 'Fresh Start' and 'Big Feet, Little Feet' in a cost effective way.

'Blossom Babies', 'Tree Drop-In', and 'Rhythm and Rhyme' help parents to learn how to play and have fun with their children. They aid children's language development, especially for families who are new to speaking English. 'Changes' supports families affected by addiction issues, 'Sure Talk' allows parents time out to talk about matters of concern to them, and 'The Developer' offers English language support. While these support groups are popular, the centre does not do enough to promote adult learning leading to qualifications in spoken English, literacy or numeracy. Crèche facilities enable parents to enjoy a break from their children, but do little to enhance children's learning. Overall, provision is having a positive outcome in enabling families to become healthy and keep their children safe. Provision to support adults to acquire work-related skills is weak and there is little engagement with Job Centre Plus. A recent course aimed to help parents manage their money better has yet to be evaluated to establish its impact.

Case studies show that families whose circumstances are known to make them vulnerable receive good quality personalised advice and guidance, especially from family support workers. They indicate good improvements in family relationships, reduced reliance on alcohol and other substances, and safety for the children. As a result of the information, advice and guidance provided by the centre, three volunteers are now employed there.

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	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability are clearly defined, but not fully understood. Changes to the advisory board mean that it now challenges and holds the centre to account. Demanding targets are linked to the local authority's long-term strategic planning. These targets are not included in the centre's development plan, nor are they shared sufficiently with the service providers or families. This limits the extent to which all involved in the centre contribute to its development and demonstrate their impact on outcomes for families. Self-evaluation procedures do not identify sufficiently local priorities for development. Centre monitoring of the quality of provision, especially that provided by commissioned services, lacks rigour.

Arrangements for safeguarding families are good, especially in reducing incidents of domestic abuse. The centre and partner agencies ensure that staff and volunteers have received Criminal Records Bureau checks and are suitable to work with young children and vulnerable families. Regular child protection training keeps staff up to date about symptoms of abuse and neglect. Family support workers know how to keep safe when working alone. The smooth flow of confidential information among relevant partner agencies reduces the risk of harm to children subject to child protection plans or the Common Assessment Framework. The decision to locate health services in the centre to work in partnership has proved successful in supporting many families.

Equality and diversity are promoted effectively. Information printed in different languages enables those whose first language is not English to gain the help they need. The centre listens to the views of families to shape its programme and recently consulted some parents about the development plan. The way this was presented made it hard for them to understand. The centre has a significant amount of data. It is used to show that the achievement gap for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage is narrowing. It is not analysed to show how the achievement gap for the most disadvantaged adults is being narrowed.

The accommodation provides easy access to those who have a disability, and is utilised effectively. Resources for children to play with are good quality. Staff are deployed appropriately, but the quality of commissioned services is variable. The management of resources does not promote consistently good outcomes. The centre provides satisfactory value for money.

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	3
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
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	3

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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Oakfield Centre on 1-2 March 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

Thank you for meeting with us to talk about your views and your children's experiences in the centre. We noticed that you enjoy the sessions where you can play and sing with your children, as well as those you attend without them. You appreciate the opportunity to drop into the 'chill-out' area where someone is on hand to give you advice at any time the centre is open. The centre listens to your ideas about the groups you would like to attend. The 'Developer' group is helping some of

you to learn English and a group for speakers of Eastern European languages has been arranged. Unfortunately the dads' group is not operating at the moment as a member of staff is unwell, and the course for young parents is under review.

Health visitors and midwives are based at the centre. This is helping many of you to breastfeed your children, giving them a healthy start in life. In addition, family support workers, and others working in the health service, are well informed about the difficulties you face. The centre gives you good care, guidance and support when you are finding life really challenging. Staff provide you with good advice about where you can get the specific help you need and the ways to make your lives better. You particularly appreciate the help you receive when completing forms to claim benefits and managing your children's behaviour. One of you said, 'If I had not been looked after and given good advice my son would not be in mainstream school now.'

Courses and support groups are proving successful in helping you to overcome your worries, and to keep your children healthy and safe. You can also attend courses to help you become better parents and help your children with their learning at home at other centres. As a result, children are doing better in the assessments made at the age of five. However, the centre does not know enough about the courses you attend to gain qualifications in English, literacy and numeracy. A new course is helping some of you to improve the way you manage money, but Job Centre Plus is not easily available for you to get the advice and skills you need to get back into work. Children in the crèche do not learn as well as they should as activities are not always challenging and the progress they make is not checked.

The local authority has a lot of information about the area and uses it to set targets for the centre to help more of you to change your lives. These targets are not included in the plans the centre makes to improve its provision. This makes it hard for the manager to check if the improvements are making a difference to you. It is also hard to measure how well the centre is making progress towards meeting the targets. Some of you were asked to discuss the centre's plans for its development recently. The papers you were given were written in a way that was difficult for you to understand. This meant you could not contribute sufficiently to decisions about the way the centre is run.

You know that you are often asked to say what you enjoyed about a course and how it can be improved. Except for the crèche, all the services in the centre identify the things that they do well and what needs to be done to improve. This information is not included in the centre's self-evaluation to identify the most important things it needs to do to improve.

We have asked the centre to work with the local authority to enable:

- Job Centre Plus to work more closely with the centre
- more dads to become involved in the learning and development of their children

- you to contribute to decisions about the way the centre is run by making the papers you need easy to understand.

We have also asked the centre to look again at the way it:

- coordinates the reviews of the different services to check how successful it is
- includes targets in its plans for improvement and checks its progress towards them
- checks the achievements of everyone who uses the centre, especially children in the crèche.

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