

Inspection report for Orchard Childrens Centre

Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	384042
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Shefford Lower School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	The Acorn pre-school and Mighty Oaks after-school Club EY371758

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 of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the children's centre manager, the head of the lower school, the chair of the advisory board, a local authority representative, parents, partner agencies, key professional staff and the community development officer from the local army welfare team. Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Orchard Children's Centre is situated in the market town of Shefford, Central Bedfordshire. Its reach area covers Shefford, seven surrounding villages and the Chicksands military training base. The centre manager has been in post since the centre opened as a phase two Sure Start centre in December 2007. A team of locally employed staff provide services with partner agencies to support families and young children in the area, including health and social care services, advice and guidance, childminder networks and family support. The centre delivers outreach services in a range of local community venues. One of the key features of the centre is its established working arrangements with the army welfare office.

The centre serves a semi-rural community within the town of Shefford and across a large area of countryside and villages. The area is generally prosperous but there are pockets of disadvantage and an estimated 8% of children live in poverty. There is a large number of new housing and many families have recently moved into Shefford. The number of workless households and families on benefits is lower than the England average. The centre serves a predominantly White British population but there are some families from an Afro-Caribbean, Asian or Eastern European heritage in the area. When children start early years provision, their skills, knowledge and abilities generally match those expected for their age.

The children's centre is managed by Shefford Lower School on behalf of Central Bedfordshire local authority and is situated on the same site, in a building shared with the local community run pre-school. All children's centres in Central Bedfordshire are being reconfigured and the Orchard Centre is to be amalgamated with a neighbouring phase three centre, The Flying Start Children Centre, from 1 April 2012.

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

'This is an excellent place to come every week; the staff are very welcoming; you are never judged.' 'Both our husbands are in Afghanistan and we get so much support from this group.' These comments typify those expressed by many parents and help to explain why Orchard is a good and improving centre. Some of its features are outstanding. The good quality of the provision is a result of the commitment of the staff and professional partners and the drive of the senior team. Staff morale is high and there is a buzz in the place. Excellent partnership work ensures that services are very well integrated and cohesive. Relationships between agencies are highly professional with effective transfer of information to ensure the needs of families are met quickly, particularly at times of crisis.

Outcomes for children and families are good and improving. The centre is outstanding in keeping children safe and protected and in developing positive relationships with families. The highest priority is given to safeguarding all children and their families and the quality of care, guidance and support provided is excellent. As one parent reported, 'I had nothing when I arrived here; coming to the centre was the only part of my day when I would be speaking to someone.' The range of provision on offer meets the needs of families well.

There are many opportunities for parents to express their views and they are very effectively involved in making decision through the well-established parents' panel. The advisory board is very open to parents' views and is run effectively. However, its role in supporting the centre to improve is underdeveloped. This is because data are

not yet being used to the full to assess the individual progress of children or inform future developments. Parents are encouraged and supported in accessing relevant training courses, securing benefits and embarking on training for qualifications to return to work. At present, the centre is unsure of the impact of its collaborative work with adult learning providers and Jobcentre Plus in raising families' aspirations and ensuring their economic well-being.

Considering that outcomes are good and improving, together with its other strengths, particularly the highly efficient use of resources and excellent partnership working, the centre has good capacity to improve further.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve the economic stability of families most in need of intervention and support by assessing the impact of the collaboration with adult learning providers and Jobcentre Plus.
- Improve the effectiveness of the advisory board by developing rigorous procedures for checking the work of the centre to inform future development.
- Use data more effectively to assess the impact that the centre is having on children's individual progress and well-being.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Many children start attending the centre with their parents or childminders from the time they are babies. The centre encourages families to use the drop-in sessions for ante-natal support and many new mothers attend the Best Start post-natal course run in partnership with the 0-19 health team. There is good advice on speech and language development to help children develop their talking skills. Parents have easy access to weaning support groups. Good health advice, in collaboration with the army welfare office, is given to mothers on the military base which reduces feelings of isolation. Healthy lifestyles and healthy eating are promoted well and early referral ensures that families who may be more vulnerable than others are appropriately supported. Young toddlers were observed learning to eat together at a table; they did this very successfully. The food served at all sessions is healthy. The buggy walks in the summer are particularly appreciated. As a result of these initiatives, outcomes for promoting healthy lifestyles and well-being are good.

The extent to which children engage in safe behaviour and develop positive relationships is outstanding. Toddlers, for example, willingly share toys and older children are calm, polite and well mannered. The centre is highly effective in ensuring that families and children keep themselves safe and free from harm. Children's safety in the home is promoted very effectively and a wide range of preventative measures and advice, such as first-aid courses, ensure that families

understand their responsibility for the ongoing safety of their children. The centre is a very safe and welcoming place to be due to its location and the vigilance of all adults. Very effective use of the Common Assessment Framework process and 'team around the child' approach ensure that the few families needing multi-agency help are involved in preventative work rather than situations reaching crisis point. Links with health visitors and housing associations are particularly strong.

The stimulating range of learning and playing activities ensures that enjoyment is high. There are good opportunities for parents, childminders and children to play and learn together. Parents enjoy opportunities to engage in their children's play and gain an understanding of how to support their learning. For example, parents said that they feel more willing now to allow 'messy play' at home. The centre manager is a trained teacher with in-depth knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage. All activities are planned with children's development and learning in mind. The centre has not yet been established for long enough to make a substantial impact on the Early Years Foundation Stage, however there is strong evidence that children in the nursery unit at the lower school are better prepared to settle and develop friendships. Action Dads is a successful event when fathers promote learning and enjoyment with their children very effectively.

Children and families show high levels of respect, care and concern for others. Parents and childminders have many opportunities to express their views, including parents from target groups. These include direct links with the advisory board and regular evaluations of activities. As a result, for example, the timings of some sessions have been adapted to ensure an even better match with the needs of families.

The centre helps to promote economic stability, for example, by supporting mothers in attending local training courses, securing benefits and managing tight budgets. Through a number of case studies, inspectors saw how specific families whose first language is not English are helped to access services, such as English for Speakers of Other Languages courses (ESOL) courses. However, the centre is currently unsure of the impact of its work on developing employability skills or further learning of the families in its reach area most in need of support. It does not have evidence to support this aspect of its work being any better than satisfactory. There are excellent links with the National Childminding Association (NCMA) officer to ensure that there are sufficient childminders of high quality in the area for parents who wish to return to work.

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	1
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from	2

target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	
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	1
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?

2

The children's centre provides good quality services with outstanding care, guidance and support. The use of the Common Assessment Framework is well embedded and exceptionally strong partnerships with a range of agencies ensure that welfare assessments of children are robust. There are clear programmes in place to promote the health and social well-being of children and a strong emphasis on addressing the emotional and mental health needs of families, particularly of new mothers. The centre works very well with the forces' welfare office to support families when they arrive at the base and when fathers are deployed for military duties. Mothers receive very good advice and support to produce high quality memory books to show fathers how their children are developing while they are away.

There are many examples of good quality outreach and support work, including the regular stay and play sessions, parenting classes and community baby clinics. The centre is very aware of the difficulties and challenges faced by some families within its reach area, including the specific needs of families from minority ethnic groups. The 'Me Too' drop-in group for children who have a disability offers some well-targeted support. Parents told inspectors that there is always someone to talk to at the centre and that they feel valued and listened to by everyone they speak to. The Rural Area Vehicle for Education (RAVE) bus is used well to visit two estates where engagement is low and the centre's van transports staff and equipment to community venues in the seven small villages scattered across the reach area. The centre signposts users to Jobcentre Plus and adult education for help with training and employment but the impact of this work is not sufficiently recorded. Personal development and achievement are celebrated. The centre supports the Shefford Gala each year providing good facilities for the children and families who wish to attend.

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 are consistently good and are outstanding in relation to safeguarding, use of available resources and partnership working. Senior leaders have a clear vision for the development of the centre and ensure that the centre is effective in improving the life chances of children and their families. The imminent amalgamation of the Orchard Children’s Centre with the Flying Start Children Centre is being managed very sensitively. Staff report that relationships between staff and key agencies are excellent and that everyone pulls together to improve outcomes for children. The centre focuses on activities that are sustainable, and shares resources with other agencies where possible leading to excellent value for money.

The inclusion of all children and families is threaded through the centre’s work. This is particularly well promoted for parents on the military base; one mother said ‘there is no rank here, we are all military wives together’. Staff ensure that children and parents, regardless of background, aptitudes or other differences, have the same access to the range of experiences on offer, although ensuring that families with children who have a disability are helped to participate fully is not yet sufficiently embedded.

Staff have a good understanding of the strengths in provision and where further improvements can be made. For example, the centre manager and the NCMA worker keep a close eye on the findings of inspections of childminders and support is targeted to those with weaknesses. Self-evaluation is ongoing and largely accurate although senior staff are not using some of the available data sufficiently well to assist the advisory board in assessing the impact of the centre’s work and inform future development. Staff training and regular supervision enable high levels of professional expertise and the sharing of good practice.

There are high quality arrangements in place to safeguard staff, children and families. The procedures for vetting staff are extremely robust and relevant training is up to date. All staff are highly vigilant in identifying and responding to any potential dangers that families and children may encounter. Robust protocols for sharing information with social services, together with high-quality partnership working, ensure that children and families with high levels of need are prioritised effectively.

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	1

effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	
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	1
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	1
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

Inspectors looked at the inspection outcomes for Shefford Lower School and the Acorn pre-school. Both were inspected in 2008. The lower school was judged to be good and the pre-school was satisfactory.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Orchard Children's Centre on 7–8 March 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

As part of the inspection we visited a number of activities, looked at the centre's documentation, and talked with a range of children and adults including parents and staff, community representatives and partnership workers. We were pleased to speak to so many of you about the centre's work and to listen to your views. We really enjoyed talking to you around the centre and in the various activity sessions you were engaged in. You expressed your views very clearly and we appreciated your straight talking in telling us how things really are. This is what we found out.

First, and most importantly, we are pleased to tell you that the centre provides good support to you and your families. The centre does some things extremely well, such as the way everybody works together to make things better for you and the way you are encouraged to keep safe and make a contribution to the centre and your own community. You told us that you and your children are very well cared for and that you are supported extremely well and we agree with you. We were pleased to hear

that more of you are coming to the centre, making new friends and getting involved. You told us that the staff are like friends to you and that you have complete and utter trust in them to look after your children.

The centre works hard with the local pre-schools and the lower school so that your children's educational achievements can be improved. They are supporting you and are helping to increase your knowledge about play and how children learn through the many stay and play activities and parenting sessions, which you told us are fun and worthwhile. We also know that many of you have learnt about nutrition and cooking healthy meals through a range of activities and discussions.

We were delighted to see that the centre is making a real difference to improving your lives and to hear how much more confident you feel as parents. You told us about the friends you had met through the centre's activities and outings. It was very encouraging to hear that so many of you feel less isolated in the community by coming into the centre and getting involved. We were also very pleased to hear that some of you have been helped to undertake training which may help you get back into employment.

You told us that the staff always go that extra mile for you and it was clear to us that they are working very hard to make the centre as good as it can be. To help them we have suggested they look more closely at how your children make progress. By doing this they will be in a stronger position to show how well they are doing and will be able to plan even better things for you.

We have also asked that the centre looks at its work with adult learning and Jobcentre Plus to support those of you who need training schemes and learning opportunities or want to gain the skills needed for employment.

Thank you once again for your welcome and your willingness to talk to us. We wish you every success in the future.

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