

Inspection report for Ray Allen Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent
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Reporting inspector	Helen Hutchings

Centre leader	Monica Williams
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
Centre address	Stanhope Road Ashford TN23 5RN
Telephone number	01233 620495
Fax number	01233 623257
Email address	monica.williams2@kent.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Little Rays 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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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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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 an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre staff, representatives from the centre and district advisory boards, parents and family members using the centre during the inspection, some of the centre's partners and a representative of the local authority.

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

Information about the centre

Ray Allen Children's Centre is a Sure Start Children's Centre in south Ashford, opened in October 2006. Children's centres in the Ashford area are based on a locality model of eight centres, covering the town of Ashford and a wide surrounding rural area. The centres work in partnership, with many staff appointed to work in more than one centre. In particular, the Ray Allen Centre works closely with the Willow Centre which was the founding centre in the town, and because they are located within easy reach of one another, many families use services in both centres. The local authority has delegated the governance of the centre to the Strategic District Early Years Advisory Board, which monitors the work of all the children's centres within the locality. The centre has its own Local Early Years Advisory Board, which includes representatives from the range of partners and takes account of the views of Parents Voice, a parent forum. A separate privately-run nursery, Little Rays Day Nursery, operates on site under a service level agreement with the centre. It was inspected separately by Ofsted in December 2011. A number of other partners are housed within the building, including the local health visiting team and the Action for Children charity.

There are 795 children under five years of age, including 340 under the age of two, living within the centre's reach area. During a period of regeneration of the area's housing, there have been high levels of mobility. This is now reducing and many

families are relatively new to the area. Most families are from White British backgrounds, with a number of other heritages represented within the area, including families of Nepalese, Eastern European and Traveller backgrounds. The area is economically diverse, and approximately two in five families are living in areas identified as being within the 20% most deprived areas in the country. There is an above average level of unemployment in the area, and a large majority of children live in households dependent on workless benefits or in low income households. The proportion of families living in rented accommodation is above average. Children's levels on entry to early years provision are below those expected for their age, particularly in their social and communication, language and literacy skills.

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

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

Ray Allen Children's Centre is an outstanding centre. The key to its success is the shared vision and drive of the centre manager and staff, which leads to very high levels of consistency across the centre's work. Partnership working with the other centres in the locality underpins all that the centre does. Staff have a first-class understanding of the needs of the reach area and use this to plan well-targeted and respected support for its families. The centre has established itself as a valued and well-used community resource. Its café provides a hub for families to socialise and support one another in a friendly and relaxed environment, and is also used by groups other than parents with young children. For example, a 'Very Important Pensioners' group meets regularly to have lunch and give additional support, such as making story sacks for the centre's use. This is only one example of how the community gives practical support to the centre's work.

Families have high levels of trust in staff because of the exceptional care, guidance and support, and the take-up of activities is high. This helps to ensure outstanding outcomes for all target groups. A locality initiative has developed excellent systems to share information with other professional partners, such as health and social services. Consequently, the centre identifies the needs of vulnerable families at an early stage and coordinates the help needed. For other families, the exceptionally

wide range of activities and events means that there is something to suit all needs. Parents and children develop skills and knowledge which support their rapidly improving educational outcomes. Many parents improve their parenting skills through specific programmes, but also because staff are alert to when a parent needs help and advice, and the practical support and messages they give during activities are consistent. Children's levels at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has improved quickly over the last five years, but the gap between the lowest attaining children and others has not narrowed in line with the national picture. The centre has researched the issue and introduced new programmes based on keeping babies active, and there are early signs of significant improvement. Staff have identified the next stage is to develop stronger links with more nursery settings across the area.

Leadership and management are outstanding. Governance arrangements and the sharing of some management functions across the group of centres have resulted in an exceptionally forward looking and effective approach in securing additional resources, for example with charities and local primary schools. Positive steps are taken to ensure that families, including those who have disabilities and those who speak English as an additional language, are enabled to access the range of services available. The centre's capacity for sustained improvement is exceptionally secure because staff undertake comprehensive evaluations of the impact of its work and use this information to plan for the future. There is no complacency and staff are constantly striving to improve the impact of their work.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Reduce the gap between the lowest achieving children and the rest in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile by widening the centre's influence and developing the partnership with early years settings beyond the centre.

How good are outcomes for families?

1

Parents attending activities are drawn evenly from all sectors of the reach area, and all groups are well represented. The wide range of activities helps parents to promote family health and well-being, contributing to improving health outcomes as families. The healthy eating policy adopted within the centre, including readily available fruit, and programmes such as 'Stress Free Cooking on a Budget' are particularly appreciated by parents who say that they have learned so much about nutrition and how to manage their finances more effectively. In combination with the emphasis on physical activity, such as extensive use of the outdoor area in 'Stay and Play' and the 'Wiggle and Giggle' session for toddlers, obesity rates have fallen quickly and are now marginally lower than those found nationally.

Staff develop strong links with parents at the earliest possible stage, and have been

highly successful in engaging all teenage parents within the area. They support parents in building strong relationships with their children, for example in 'Baby Massage' sessions. The centre places a strong emphasis on physical activity for children from birth and has linked well with health visitors and speech and language professionals to monitor the impact of baby movement programmes such as 'Tummy Time'. The proportion of babies crawling at an earlier stage has increased and there has been a dramatic fall in the proportion of children identified as having communication difficulties. These children have not yet entered the Reception year in schools, and the centre will continue to monitor their progress as they move through primary school to validate the early impact of the programme over a longer period of time. Through the use of children's 'Learning Journey' records, parents are helped to monitor their child's achievements against developmental milestones so that any children requiring additional specialist help are identified early, and parents are helped to support children's learning as they move into school.

Safety is promoted at every opportunity, and children behave and play together very well during activities. Staff use the Common Assessment Framework well so that families requiring additional help are identified at an earlier stage than was previously the case. Adults are confident to share their concerns and problems, including at times of crisis, knowing that support will be readily provided. Staff work very seamlessly with other agencies, including police and social services, to ensure highly effective multi-agency support. The emotional well-being of families is promoted very effectively in programmes such as 'Freedom', and case studies show how the centre's ongoing steady support has become a 'lifeline' in helping parents to develop confidence and work their way through difficult and challenging circumstances. Similarly, because of the trust between the centre and families, issues such as autism are discussed and screening takes place to identify conditions and provide early specialist support.

Families are well supported to give their views about how the centre is managed and where improvements could be made. For example, the highly regarded 'Swap Shop' was set up as a result of requests, and parents value the sense of community developed through organising and running the events. Adults are encouraged to improve their levels of skills through activities run in conjunction with adult education and the adjacent further education college. Because these programmes are run on site, parents are able to use the crèche facilities, and there has been significant success in improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. This has enabled some parents to gain employment as their children enter nursery or school. Others have developed specific skills, such as in first aid, which they say has a profound impact on their confidence as parents.

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	1
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare	1

concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	
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	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	1

How good is the provision?

1

The evaluations of activities and conversations with families using the centre during the inspection show extremely high levels of satisfaction of the centre's provision. In discussion, parents summarised provision as 'fabulous'. As such, activities, including the extensive volunteering programme, are highly effective in improving the life chances of children and families in the area. Some of those spoken with indicated the importance of the long-term friendships they have established, particularly for families new to the area, which has reduced isolation. The exceptionally wide range of activities meets the differing needs across the area. The number of fathers involved with the centre has steadily increased because they are made welcome and enabled to feel comfortable attending universal services alone or alongside their partners. Meanwhile, because of work commitments, some prefer to attend groups specifically organised for fathers, such as 'Chill With Dad'. Families living in difficult financial circumstances are supported sensitively. For example, help is given for those who are vulnerable to access childcare through nursery funding for two-year-old children. The centre's engagement with children and families with disabilities is second to none, having substantial contact with all those families known in the area. The vibrant sensory room is in constant use and is a resource valued by other partners, including local schools. Other services, such as sexual health or support to stop smoking, are signposted well by the centre.

The negotiation of a full holiday programme with Action for Children provides continuity of support for families, and the centre complements this provision with additional events to engage with older children and their families. Developments of the site, such as the community garden, are appreciated by families, many of whom live in flats, promoting healthy outcomes as families grow vegetables and share produce through the centre. Adults particularly appreciate that they have open access to the garden and enjoy the peace and quiet that it provides, with the result that it is well tended and cared for by the wider community.

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	1
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?

1

The district and local advisory boards fulfil their governance roles exceptionally well. Lines of accountability are clearly understood and followed. Members not only keep the impact of the centre's work under constant review, but contribute to the success of the partnership across the locality through the close targeting of funding to meet identified needs, and ensure outstanding value for money. The structure of 'champions' for a range of activities sitting on the locality advisory board very effectively ensures that the needs of all groups are addressed at a strategic level. The centre ensures that the highest possible quality is secured when negotiating aspects of provision undertaken through service level agreements. A large part of the centre's success lies in the highly skilled staff team and the strength of teamwork between those staff employed directly in the centre and staff from other partner organisations. Partnerships are well established, and families benefit from the facilities available to access other services. For example, an electronic link in the café enables centre users to investigate their entitlement to benefits and work opportunities, often in preparation for 'surgeries' held in the centre.

All activities run by the centre are carefully planned against identified needs and with clearly expected outcomes against which success is evaluated. For example, the 'Tummy Time' programme is one example of how the centre evaluates its provision. Because of the rigorous evaluation, this project is contributing to national research. The locality development of the use of data has had a marked impact on staff knowledge of the area and their capacity to set priorities and targets.

The centre is leading the locality on equalities and is seeking nationally recognised accreditation, illustrating the centre's strong commitment to promoting diversity and tackling discrimination. This is seen, for example, in the promotion of support for disability and in the centre usage which closely matches the diversity within the area. Information is available for families in a range of languages, and families from different backgrounds get on exceptionally well together during centre activities. However, the centre's effectiveness in promoting equality is not yet outstanding because the lowest-achieving children are not doing well enough in their early learning. Child protection and safeguarding arrangements comply with current requirements, and the centre's duty in regard to safeguarding children is made absolutely clear to families using the centre. Because these systems are clearly understood and levels of trust are high, the centre is seen and used by some families

as a sanctuary in times of greatest need.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	1
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	1

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

The outcomes of the Ofsted inspection of Little Rays Day Nursery where every aspect was judged to be outstanding was taken into account when assessing how well children are cared for and how they learn and develop.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Ray Allen Children's Centre on 21 and 22 March 2012. We judged the centre as outstanding overall.

We would like to thank those of you who gave time to speak to us during the inspection. You were all exceptionally positive about what the centre does for you and how the range of activities gives your children 'fabulous' experiences and helps them to develop. During our visit, we looked at and discussed the centre's plans for

development and numerous other documents and records with staff. We spoke with staff from a number of partner agencies, including those from other centres, and representatives from the advisory boards and the local authority. We also visited most of the activities taking place during the inspection.

The key reason for the centre's success is the drive of the centre manager and staff who, in partnership with families and the other centres in the locality, ensure that there are high quality activities for you to attend at the Ray Allen Centre. Staff know the needs of families in the area exceptionally well. Because the support they provide is prompt and practical, you have high levels of trust that help is always on hand, particularly when needed most. The café is a relaxed and welcoming place for you to relax and enjoy new friendships after centre activities. The community garden and children's play areas are important to you and being able to use them even when the centre is closed is a real bonus. Many of you spoke about how you have developed a love of gardening.

The take-up of activities is high because you appreciate the exceptional care and support readily on hand. The centre has developed excellent systems to share information with other professional partners, such as health and social services, so that you can access the information you need quickly and easily. Because of the range of events, many of you have been successfully helped to develop your parenting skills. Children's achievements, particularly in their social and communication skills at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, have improved quickly over the last five years, but there is still too great a gap between the lowest attaining children and others. However, the emphasis on physical activity and programmes such as 'Tummy Time' are improving children's communication skills well. We have suggested that the centre should develop its relationship with childcare providers to further share expertise and promote children's learning.

The way in which the centre manager and staff work with other centres is outstanding in making sure that you receive the maximum benefit from the available funding. Because of its achievements to date, and because staff are constantly trying to make things better, the centre is exceptionally well placed to continue to improve further. Staff ensure that all are given a warm welcome and are involved in events, including those who have disabilities, those who speak English as an additional language or are new to the area. During the inspection, you emphasised how much you appreciate that the centre is a safe place for you and your children to learn new skills.

Thank you once again for your time and we hope that in future even more parents will benefit from the services that the centre provides.

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