

Inspection report for Acorn Children's Centre

Local authority	Wakefield
Inspection number	366910
Inspection dates	21–22 March 2012
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Centre leader	Karen Kemp
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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Linked school if applicable	Ackton Pastures Primary School 108241 Castleford Half Acres Junior & Infant School 108238
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Brambly Hedge Private Day Nursery 322070 Hillside Private Day Nursery EY443938

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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 one early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, members of staff and partner professionals from other agencies. Discussions were held with the Chair of the school Governing Body, representatives from the local authority and parents. They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's development plans, evaluations, key policies and the centre's equality and safeguarding procedures.

Information about the centre

Acorn Children's Centre is a phase one centre which was established in 2006 and received its full core offer status in 2007. The centre is on the site of Ackton Pastures Primary School in Castleford, West Yorkshire. The centre does not have full day care on site, but is affiliated to Brambly Hedge and Hillside private day nurseries. Early years activity is also provided by private and voluntary early years organisations in the local area. There are approximately 1018 children under five years of age living in the reach area. The centre's reach area encompasses the wards of Altofts, Castleford and Whitwood. The area is quite diverse in terms of social factors. Some parts are relatively affluent, particularly parts of Altofts. However, the remaining wards are ranked among the 30% most deprived areas, and two areas being 10% most deprived, in the country. Social issues affecting these areas are a growing number of lone parents, teenage parents, families on workless benefits and adults with low-level skills and qualifications. Health issues affecting the area include relatively low numbers of women sustaining breastfeeding, high levels of obesity, women smoking during pregnancy, depression and some pockets of drug abuse and domestic violence.

There is low ethnic diversity in the area; most families are White British. The reach area is characterised by social and private housing. The centre takes referrals from and supports

families with children in five local schools. The majority of children enter school with the skills and knowledge expected for their age.

Governance of the centre is provided by the federation governance of Ackton Pastures and Half Acres schools. An extended services sub-committee, which is made up of representatives from neighbourhood partners, health and centre staff contributes to the strategic management and direction of the centre. The parent representative is a member of the school governing body and the parent’s forum. The children’s centre manager, with the oversight of the federation headteacher, carries out day-to-day management of the children’s centre.

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

The overall effectiveness of the centre is good. Parents are very appreciative of the centre and say how very welcoming and safe it is. The outcomes for users are good. This is because the centre responds well to local needs. Parents and children enjoy a wide range of activities. They have a good understanding of safety and the centre ensures all are very well safeguarded. The centre promotes a satisfactory understanding of the importance of healthy lifestyles. Parents attend a good range of activities, from nutrition workshops to advice on breastfeeding, weaning and attachment. However, there is still some reluctance within the area to give children a healthy start in life, for example by reducing obesity, and end long-standing acceptance of practice, such as bottle feeding from one generation to the next and smoking during pregnancy.

Parents and their children develop new skills and knowledge and grow in confidence in structured 'Stay and Play' and 'Make and Shake' sessions by sharing stories in role play, experiencing messy play and socialising with others. The centre staff, particularly the family play and learning worker, along with early years partners and local headteachers, have been determined to improve children’s skills and knowledge by the time they enter school. They have been exceptionally successful in this. Children from all target groups have now been given the bedrock they need to reach their full potential throughout their journey in

education. However, less evident in the activity programme are training courses for adults to gain formal qualifications to help benefit their families' welfare and economic well-being.

The centre has clear management and staffing structures. A very significant feature is the strong teamwork. It is the centre leader's passionate drive to provide a well-integrated experience for its users. Those in charge have a clear vision and accurate understanding of the centre's strengths and areas for improvement. The good partnerships with key professionals such as health visitors, midwives, social services, special educational needs specialists, local early years providers, and others ensure good quality early intervention work for those children and families who need it.

Leaders and managers successfully promote equality and respect for diversity and work hard to include those at risk and those families most vulnerable due to their circumstances. Cultural diversity is celebrated well in practice. Staff get to know individual families well. This is evident in the trusting relationships between centre staff and parents and the close, highly effective work with other agencies and specialists to protect children at risk. The centre runs smoothly, and good quality resources and well-trained staff are used effectively. As a result, parents are very positive about what the centre offers. This, together with the good outcomes and provision ensures the centre has a good capacity for sustained improvement.

Although priorities for the centre's development are clear and management has a good idea of its success, the data the centre receives from the local authority do not always align with local data. As a consequence, the centre is sometimes hindered in measuring its success and fully knowing when to amend its activity programme to meet users' needs. The school governance of the centre has been through a turbulent time. Nonetheless, they have maintained a clear focus on the core purpose of the centre and its vital role in the community. As a result, the early ambitions to register and engage a large majority of users and enable children to be well-prepared for school have been met and sustained. The centre manager is supported by a joint advisory board made of an extended services sub-committee and an active parents' forum. All have a clear view about their role and recognise that while the parent representative is very active in the community, it is just starting to have a more strategic part to play in decision making.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve health outcomes by:
 - increasing the number of mothers who are breastfeeding in line with the national indicators
 - boosting the number of pregnant mothers attending smoking cessation sessions to help reduce the number of mothers smoking during pregnancy
 - reducing the levels of obesity in young children starting school.

- Improve economic stability and independence outcomes by:
 - extending the range of opportunities available for adults to access training and learning opportunities that will lead to employment.

- In liaison with the local authority:
 - ensure that the centre receives an accurate overview of key measures, trends and benchmarks against which they can evaluate further strengths and areas to develop.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Outcomes for users are good. Parents and carers who attend the centre are very positive about their experiences. Most evaluation forms confirm high levels of confidence and satisfaction. Typical of many were: 'Life is just getting better and better. I have my confidence back and so have my children.' Individual case studies and parents' conversations with inspectors confirm some awareness of the importance of leading healthy lifestyles. Parents take part in a variety of physical activities and healthy family workshops where they learn about what it takes to lead a healthier lifestyle. However, activities such as this have yet to have an impact on reducing obesity in the area. Parents and children show a good understanding of accident prevention, for example locking cupboards containing dangerous substances and turning electrical sockets off at night. Children in the centre move around safely and are extremely well supervised by centre staff. The strong partnerships with different services ensure that those at risk of harm are identified early on and are supported effectively. Well-established relationships and a sensitive approach ensure parents are confident to seek professional support.

Through 'Chatter Matters' parents learn skills and activities they can try out at home to support their child's speaking and listening skills. In addition, parents have made rhyme bags with their children to provide opportunities in the home to explore sounds in meaningful contexts and learn about rhyming patterns. These are all now proudly displayed in the entrance area for all users to access. Children make good strides in their communication, language and literacy skills and personal and social skills, with a large proportion of children in the area reaching, and in some cases, exceeding the levels expected of them when they enter school. Data show that the achievement gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile and the rest has narrowed overall across all five schools, including those serving the communities whose circumstances make them vulnerable, from 41.7% in 2008 to 21.1% in 2011.

Parents contribute their views through the parent's forum that meets with the leadership team. A representative from this group sits on the governing body to ensure that any requests and suggestions are shared at a strategic level. The 'Parent Survival' course enhances self-esteem and helps to build bonds between the parents and their children. Through this course parents learn about behaviour and the impact of their actions on their children's lives. Fathers are regularly seen in the centre and attend a good range of the

activities with their children. The centre can point to parents accessing further training leading to employment, and signposts users to Jobcentre Plus. However, these are relatively few in number. Disabled children and people benefit from specific equipment and resources and from the close portage and special educational needs team that link with the centre.

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	3
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.	3

How good is the provision?

2

The centre provides a wide range of integrated services and activities, which has resulted in an increasing number of families accessing what is on offer. More lone parents, teenage parents and those families with complex needs are attending the centre as they see it as a place where someone will listen to them and help them. 'My children would have been taken into care if I had not had the support from this centre', typifies how many families view the centre as a place of safety and security, and a place they feel they can turn to when they have nowhere else to go.

Outreach is a vital and successful part of the centre's work, and this is exemplified through the parent support worker's effective involvement in the community. The centre successfully ensures that families receive a coordinated approach and where difficulties arise in attending, home visits are made to provide support and engagement with other services. Very good crèche facilities enable users to attend courses at the centre, safe in the knowledge that their children are having as much fun as they are. In some cases centre staff arrange transport to enable parents to attend activities and meetings in the centre. Barnardo's works closely with centre staff to offer a good level of support to pregnant teenagers and young parents under 20 years of age. 'Young Families' support group provides information, advice and sign posting to relevant services for young people in order to improve their life chances and parenting abilities. Parents under 25 years of age with a

learning difficulty are supported to attend the group so they, too, can benefit from the advice and support Barnardo’s can offer. The centre has established good links with the neighbourhood police team. The local police officer is very visible in the centre and attends activities to talk about personal safety, car safety and help children to check their bicycles to ensure they are safe to use.

The ‘FEET’ transition into schools programme is extremely successful and well attended by parents and children across the area. As a consequence, transition into the local schools from the centre and early years providers in the reach is seamless. The antenatal sessions and close links with local health visitors ensure that parents are alerted during pregnancy and when their children are very young to what the centre can offer them. The health team assists centre staff to educate pregnant mothers on the harm smoking can cause to their babies while in the womb. The ‘Stop Smoking’ programme is helping some mothers to stop, but these are few in number. ‘Little Angels’ work alongside midwives to offer assistance and support to new and expectant mothers to breastfeed. However, further work needs to be done to ensure that more mothers understand the important advantages breastfeeding can have for them and their babies.

The centre provides good support for user groups such as childminders. They are helped to deliver quality provision for children through their attendances at a range of activities which are run by the early years team. Early Years Foundation Stage planning is on display in the centre so childminders can link this to children’s development records and can provide purposeful learning outside the centre.

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.	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The leadership team is committed to extending services and providing the very best life chances for local children and their families. Regular parent evaluations and consultations help the centre staff to gauge if they are meeting needs appropriately. However, the assessment of local needs is sometimes hindered as the data the centre receives from the local authority occasionally conflict with data held at the centre. Operational management is good and financial resources are carefully managed. Governance is very supportive. There are regular performance management arrangements and supervisions in place. Staff feel valued and able to develop their own professional expertise through a wide range of training opportunities. Taking all this into account, the centre provides good value for money.

Safeguarding procedures are robust and include the vetting of staff and others who have unsupervised contact with children and vulnerable adults. Child protection procedures are very thorough and the centre’s records reflect best practice. Safeguarding arrangements comply with the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board requirements. Clear procedures are in place for reporting child protection issues and are fully understood and followed by all staff and key partners. There is close attention to child protection and all staff are well trained to use the Common Assessment Framework.

The centre promotes equality and diversity well. Early intervention arrangements are good, exemplifying the good partnerships within the area, including a wide range of agencies and services. Wakefield’s Early Support, Advice, Information and Liaison Service (WeSail) fund ‘KIDS’ to deliver a service to disabled children and those with special educational needs. This good working relationship ensures cohesion and coordination across a range of services for some of the centre’s most disadvantaged children.

User engagement is good. The centre has sought the voice of parents and children through regular questionnaires and surveys. Outcomes are shared on a noticeboard which is strategically placed so that users know their views have been considered and what action has been agreed. For example, activities such as ‘Do It Yourself’, ‘First Aid’ and a wide range of courses to help with safety in the home are now offered at the centre. Children’s views are valued and their opinions were sought to help with the design and layout of the outdoor play area.

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 secures 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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Acorn Children's Centre on 21 March 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank you for allowing us to join with you during some of your sessions and for sparing the time to talk with us about the centre and its activities. Through your comments we found that the centre promotes equality and diversity well. Everyone is included, treated with the utmost respect and able to access all that the centre provides. It is clear to us that the staff know local families and the wider community very well and we can see how the centre is making a positive difference to your lives. Everyone we spoke to told us how much the centre had helped you and your families. We were delighted to hear that some of you now feel more confident to support your children's learning at home and that the centre has had a huge impact on improving how you feel about yourselves. It was really encouraging to hear that many of you feel less isolated in the community and have been able to socialise more by popping into the centre or some of the sites used by the centre. We were particularly impressed by how much the centre has done to raise your children's knowledge and skills as they enter their first year in school. This is a tremendous achievement and one which we are sure you are equally proud of.

The people in charge of running the centre are doing a good job in helping you find the support and practical help you need to give your children the best start in life. The centre manager works extremely hard to make sure that everything the centre does for you will make a difference to the area in which you live. The whole family is at the heart of what everyone is doing and this is seen in the good quality of the individual support that is provided by the centre staff and the wide range of partners that work in the centre.

We have said that some elements of the centre's work need to improve. We have asked the local authority to make sure that the centre receives the specific, accurate data that it needs so that it can be sure it is targeting its work more efficiently. While some of you told us that you are learning new skills yourself, such as 'Do It Yourself' and basic first aid we found that there are too few opportunities for you to gain recognised qualifications. We have therefore asked the centre to look at how it can help more of you gain the skills you need to be able

to enter the workplace. Many of you told us that you value the support provided by health professionals and the centre staff in helping you to develop a healthy lifestyle. However, we found that there is further work to be done to ensure that more women in your area consider breastfeeding when their children are born and also try to stop smoking during pregnancy. While some of you are now cooking healthy meals in the home, there are still too many children in your communities starting school overweight. We have therefore asked the centre to look at ways in which it can help all of the children in your area get the healthy start in life they need. We have raised these issues because once they are in place the centre will be in an even stronger position to see how well it is meeting all of your needs.

Thank you to all that we met for your input into the inspection. It really was appreciated. We hope that you, your children and many more parents who live locally will continue to enjoy and benefit from all of the services available to you in the future.

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