

Inspection report for North Oxford Children's Centre

Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	365824
Inspection dates	26–27 January 2011
Reporting inspector	Helen Barter

Centre governance	Governing Body of Cutteslowe School and Oxfordshire local authority
Centre leader	Mrs Shilpa Bhatt
Date of previous inspection	NA
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Linked school if applicable	Cutteslowe Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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 manager and staff, representatives from the local authority, the committee of the governing body of Cutteslowe Primary School, representatives from health care services and users on the parent forum group.

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

Information about the centre

North Oxford Children's Centre is situated on the site of Cutteslowe Primary School and is a Phase 2 centre. The centre's reach area covers Cutteslowe, Jericho, Wolvercote, Summertown and North Oxford, some parts of which are the most affluent areas of the city. However, within this, there are small but significant pockets of deprivation. There are five state primary schools in the area and a wide range of childcare options available to families. The area is ethnically very diverse and many families are transient, being post-graduate students or university employees. The level of worklessness and number of families on benefits are lower than in other parts of the city due to the close proximity of employment at the university and hospitals, and the number of professional families in the reach of the centre.

Children's levels of entry to early years provision vary due to the wide socio-economic profile of the reach area. However, those starting at the link school, Cutteslowe Primary, join with levels of skills which are significantly below those expected for their age, particularly in relation to their communication, language and literacy skills. At the time of the inspection there were 10 children with a child protection plan.

The centre was originally managed by the governing body of Cutteslowe Primary School, but has been managed directly by the local authority since January 2010 through a variation to the contract with the school. A sub-committee of the governing body of Cutteslowe Primary School has responsibility for the committee management arrangements. An advisory group has been in place since May 2010. The centre manager, who is employed by the local authority, joined the centre in January 2010 and splits her time between this centre and the management of MarstonNorthway Children's Centre. The staff are employed by the school.

The centre offers on its site 'stay and play' sessions, 'baby massage', PEEP groups (Peers Early Education Partnership), midwifery and health visitor clinics, Jobcentre Plus advice, childminding network, baby café, baby groups, family learning, GEMS for parents of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and a fathers' group. Other services are provided at Jericho Health Centre and a playbus at Wolvercote Primary School. The centre provides outreach work across the geographic reach area.

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 users and the wider community

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

North Oxford Children's Centre provides a friendly and welcoming environment for all its users. 'I am happy coming here because the staff are very caring and always ask how things are going,' said one parent, and others readily agreed.

The centre provides good overall care, support and guidance to children and families. One of the strongest aspects of its work is the identification of families' individual needs when midwives or doctors see an expectant mother at a clinic or health visitors visit a new baby. Staff use their good knowledge of the community, the views of parents and carers, and well developed partnerships to provide services that effectively meet the needs of the centre's users. There are many good examples of how staff have made a real difference to users' lives by taking swift action to find appropriate support or simply by being a caring listener at a time of stress.

The centre is striving to increase its outreach into the wider community, particularly

to make contact with young parents. A current project to survey non-users of the centre at the primary schools in the area is helping the centre to assess the needs of the wider community and to develop its activities to meet any gaps in its services. Staff listen to parents' views and take these into consideration when determining what services to offer. For example, they have set up a Saturday group for dads and changed some session times to help working mums. The 'baby café' is now run in the centre at the same time as midwifery and health visitor clinics. This has enabled mums to attend the different activities and had a very positive impact in increasing breastfeeding rates. This excellent partnership with health services has had a very positive impact on the number of families accessing the centre's services and in supporting the development of healthy lifestyles for children and adults.

Users from a wide range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds say that they feel very welcome at the centre and that their views are valued. Parents and carers feel that diversity is celebrated well, for example through different religious festivals, and staff have a good commitment to promoting equality and inclusion. Good safeguarding arrangements are in place. Staff have appropriate training and work productively with other agencies to protect children. Parents say that they and their children feel safe in the centre and they are able to turn to adults for help in confidence and knowing their concerns will be taken seriously.

Parents clearly are delighted with the enjoyment they gain from their links with the centre. As one said, 'The centre gives us a structure of things to do with our children and keeps me sane because I am interacting with adults.' The centre is particularly successful in improving children's personal, social and emotional development with most children making good gains in this area. Children who attend the 'stay and play' sessions benefit particularly from focused support to develop their speech and language, and social skills.

The good leadership provided by the manager is a key strength of the centre. In the year since her arrival, she has established fundamental systems to root the centre's work firmly in what is required to meet the needs of children and families. She has built a cohesive staff team who work with a sense of purpose and commitment to meeting the needs of the centre's users. Day-to-day management arrangements are rigorous and understood by all. The centre's self-evaluation is accurate and firmly based on good data provided by the local authority as well as case studies and staff's in-depth knowledge of the families they serve. As a consequence, the centre knows what needs to be done to help improve life for people in the area and has good capacity for further improvement. However, although action plans contain well focused priorities, targets for improvement are not sharp enough. This prevents the centre's leaders from accurately evaluating the full impact of its work.

The advisory group is relatively new but already has a good range of partners and users in its membership. The committee of the school's governing body meets regularly and has good oversight of areas such as buildings, health and safety, and staff welfare. Both groups have appropriate systems of governance and accountability, and good commitment to the future development of the centre.

However, there is a lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of each group in supporting and challenging the centre, and these are not sufficiently defined to help staff and users understand fully how they can contribute fully in identifying priorities for the future.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Define the terms of reference for the advisory group and the committee of the governing body so that:
 - each party is clear about their roles and responsibilities in leading and managing the centre and holding it to account for its performance
 - governance is consistently understood by staff and users.
- Bring greater rigour to the systems for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the centre so that:
 - action planning sets measureable and ambitious targets for future success
 - the centre is able to demonstrate the full impact of its provision on the outcomes for users.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

A broad range of programmes helps families to improve their physical and emotional health. During clinics, midwives and health visitors provide good advice about issues such as smoking cessation, dental health and immunisation. The 'baby café' is a great source of support for breastfeeding mums. Initiation and retention rates at three to six months are much higher than average because of all the help, encouragement and advice given. Case studies and discussion with parents show that these services are of great benefit in helping parents and carers understand how to improve the health of their children and themselves. Parents demonstrate improving knowledge and skills in the preparation of a balanced diet and understanding about healthy food. A comment such as 'We are encouraged to bring in healthy snacks and to understand what our BMI (Body Mass Index) means so that we do not get obese' is typical of many. Children who attend 'stay and play' sessions enjoy opportunities to play in the fresh air in the newly renovated outdoor area which parents helped to design and build. Physical exercise is promoted through 'welly walks' and parents say that children love activities such as planting and digging in the vegetable boxes.

Children and families are safe at the centre. Users are supported well to recognise their own skills and build confidence in parenting and developing safety for their children at home and outdoors. Staff and partners effectively engage families with a range of issues such as behaviour management, development delay guidance and worries about parenting skills. Those children with child protection plans are well supported and families are helped to understand how to keep their children safe. The

centre is able to signpost parents and carers to groups in Oxford who support those suffering from domestic violence. The use of the Common Assessment Framework for coordinating support programmes is consistent. Case studies illustrate how effective the support of professionals, such as the speech and language therapist or Jobcentre Plus advisor, is in helping parents and carers to become more confident and successful in managing their family lives. Staff provide strong role models that successfully support children's positive behaviour and a culture of mutual respect and supportive relationships is evident in the centre. Baby massage classes with a trained physiotherapist help parents to bond with their babies. The babies 'coo' with delight as their mums sing 'jelly on the plate' to them. Parents say how the centre not only helps their children but helps them to forge strong and supportive friendships with other parents and carers, and that this helps to build their local community.

These positive features are contributing to improved outcomes for many early years children attending local primary schools where standards are generally average at the end of Reception and sometimes higher. At Cutteslowe Primary School, where there are a greater proportion of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, children generally make good progress. The communication, language and literacy skills of those children with special needs continue to lag behind their peers at the end of Reception and standards are lower than in neighbouring schools. The centre's focus on developing language skills through the 'Every Child A Talker' programme and PEEP groups is well founded and proving effective in helping to close the gap in children's achievement.

Discussions with parents and carers, and case studies, comment positively on the difference that activities and support have made to theirs and their children's well-being. Parents and carers say they feel 'very well included' and comment on the difference that the centre has made to their aspirations and achievements as well as their children's development. Parents really enjoy the 'learning circle' where they share and develop each other's skills, for example learning to sew fabric 'fruits' and 'cheese' for the Hungry Caterpillar story sacks. An increasing number of users are taking up training, adult learning courses and finding employment as a result of good gains in their increasing confidence and personal development, as well as effective support and guidance from services such as Jobcentre Plus and advice from the local authority's Achieving Economic Well-being Officer.

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable 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 users 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 users contribute to decision-making and	2

governance of the centre	
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training	2

How good is the provision?

2

All provision at the centre is of good quality and helps to improve outcomes for children, parents and carers. Not only that, it is greatly enjoyed by the users who say that they 'wouldn't know what to do without it' and that it 'gives them a purpose in life'. Every effort is made by staff to work with families in need, whether through activities in the centre itself or through outreach work. Good support is provided to those who feel isolated, for example parents who arrive from Europe and further afield to work in Oxford or those who are lone parents. The partnership with childminders is strong through the Trio network, so they regularly bring children to the 'stay and play' sessions and access services provided by the centre.

The recently appointed project coordinator is establishing productive links with the local primary schools. The playbus is a very welcome facility provided at Wolvercote Primary School and is helping users in that part of North Oxford to learn about the other services provided by the centre. Apart from that, the children have a fun time on board and even get to 'drive' the bus when they first arrive!

Assessment of individual cases is robust, especially for children and families referred to the centre by external agencies or for those who self-refer. Families are then provided with timely, good quality multi-agency support that meets their needs well. The 'Team Around the Child' approach is well embedded and strong partnerships with other agencies ensure that assessments of all children, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, are accurate.

Good care, guidance and support, together with good multi-agency working, ensure that families access personalised support. This includes parenting groups, one-to-one guidance and advice in the centre or at home, specialist health services and Jobcentre Plus advice. Staff make the centre attractive and a place that parents and carers want to attend. Some sessions are very busy as a result and more have had to be arranged. The centre is very good at spotting the potential of individuals and builds their self-esteem so that they have confidence to help others, for example volunteering for training to support breastfeeding mums in the 'baby café'. Having fun at events such as the music time during 'stay and play' attracts users to the centre and opens their eyes to other aspects of its provision. The new group for dads on a Saturday has kicked off well judging by the 'blog' written by one appreciative father. The Achieving Economic Well-being Officer from the local authority is a valuable and knowledgeable resource in signposting and referring users to training and adult learning courses. Case studies show that parents who speak English as an additional language are helped to gain confidence to apply for courses, while others are helped to learn about available benefits and how to apply for housing.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	2
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	2
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	2
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Effective leadership and management ensure that the centre provides good value for money. The centre manager, staff and partners share a vision for the centre that is based on high expectations for all users. The centre manager leads the centre with dedication and good expertise. She has used her experience from managing another centre to set in place robust daily routines and expectations, formal staff appraisal systems and a training plan which meets the needs of the centre, its users and the professional development of staff. With the staff, she has forged excellent relationships with families and has developed an in-depth knowledge of their needs.

The centre is an inclusive and welcoming setting where relationships are positive and productive. The centre manager has led the staff through a good audit of how well the centre meets the requirements of the Equalities Act 2010. This shows that staff understand value and promote diversity in all its forms, and recognise the need to reach out to all groups even if they are in the minority, for example the small number of young parents. The centre promotes inclusive practice for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, holding GEMS and HIPPOs groups and promoting the use of signing for all parents and children who attend activities.

All services and activities are planned with a clear target audience in mind which has been identified through self-evaluation or input from users and partners. For example, the 'story sack' group was introduced as part of the centre's drive to help parents improve children's language and literacy skills before starting school. More parents are breastfeeding because the baby café is now in the centre rather than a bus outside. The accommodation is small but very well used. It is bright and attractive and resources are easily accessible to all users. The development of the outdoors through 'Working Without Walls' is a much enjoyed feature.

The staff have a good understanding of the centre's successes and what needs to be further developed, although monitoring and evaluation processes are not rigorously applied across all activities. The action plan identifies the most important priorities for improvement. It includes what will be done to achieve them and sets appropriate deadlines but it does not include many references to targets based on national data indicators. As a result staff, the advisory board and governors do not measure how effective the centre is in improving outcomes for users as well as it could. The local

authority has management of the centre and is accountable for its effectiveness. It recognises that there is now a need to clarify the terms of reference of the advisory group and the governing body committee so that all are well informed about the quality of provision and can provide support and challenge where appropriate and necessary.

The centre has good arrangements for safeguarding all users. All appropriate policies and procedures are in place and up-to-date. The vetting of staff is secure and relevant training is up-to-date. All staff are vigilant in identifying and responding to any potential dangers that users may encounter. They understand their duty to safeguard every child and are effective in ensuring their ongoing safety, emotional health and well-being. Staff are very sensitive to parents' needs, for example helping to look after a crying baby to support a lone mother who is struggling to cope or giving a parent a lead role in a group to raise her self-esteem. Robust procedures and protocols for sharing information, together with strong partnership working, ensure that children and families at risk and in need are prioritised for support.

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day to day management arrangements are clear and understood	3
The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community	2
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community	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 evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities	3
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	2
The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community 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

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the North Oxford Children's Centre on 26 and 27 January 2011. We judged the centre as good overall. We observed a range of activities, looked at the centre's plans and documents and talked with a number of you, staff and others who work with you. We looked at what goes on in the centre and visited the PEEP group at Jericho Health Centre and the playbus at Wolvercote Primary School.

Those of you that we spoke to told us that you really enjoy coming to the centre and feel happy and safe because staff are always there to listen and help you. You also told us that your children enjoy coming to the centre and particularly enjoy activities such as 'messy play', dressing up in the role-play corner and playing in the outdoors area. You also like being able to meet up with other parents and carers, to share ideas and help each other, for example showing another mum how to thread the sewing machine when you make story sacks together. For some of you who live alone with your children or who do not have any relatives in the area or this country, you particularly value the opportunity to meet up regularly with other parents and say that the centre is a 'lifeline' for you. Others of you have home visits from staff, which gives you personal and individual attention to help you become more confident parents and carers and to help your children succeed in life.

From our observations, discussions and case studies, we were able to see what a good impact the centre is having on your lives. For example, some of you told us that you were able to improve your own health and that of your children when sharing healthy snacks together. The centre told us that they would like to provide cookery courses for you as well in the future. You told us how much help and care you had received when you had struggled to breastfeed your babies. You said how grateful you were to the baby café for helping you to keep going because you know the health benefits of breastfeeding for your baby. It's great that now some of you volunteer to help others as a result of the guidance you had yourself.

The manager and staff provide good care, guidance and support for all of you who use the centre. They are a dedicated and supportive team who do their best to build links with other skilled people, such as midwives and the speech therapist, so that you get all the help you need. Those of you who spoke to us said that you feel the centre is 'a lifeline' and that 'you wouldn't know what you would have done without

it'. Most importantly, you said it helps improve your lives, especially those of you who are facing particular challenges. As a result, you value the centre, which means you have no hesitation in using the services regularly.

The staff at the centre encourage you to engage in play with your children from a very early age at sessions such as 'baby massage', 'stay and play' and the PEEP groups. They are keen that the children develop good language skills in readiness for starting school and so there are lots of activities that help your children to listen to sounds, learn new words and practise their speaking skills. Staff look after your children well and make sure they are safe when you are busy with your own planned activities, such as when making lovely 'feely' toys to go in the story sacks. We could see how much you and your children enjoy the activities you access at the centre and the positive effect these are having on you and your families. The children's behaviour at the centre is good and there is a happy atmosphere.

Your children's centre staff team want your centre to be as good as it possibly can be. They meet regularly to discuss the centre's work and to plan for improvement. The fact that a new group for dads on a Saturday has just started is evidence that they listen to what parents and carers want and take action to put things in place for you. To develop further the work of the centre, we have asked it to make sure the targets in the centre's plans are really clear so that you know what it is trying to achieve. The centre then can use this information to let you know how successful their plans have been. The local authority has changed the way the centre is managed in the last year, but we think it is not clear who does what between the governors committee from Cutteslowe School and the advisory group. So, we want the governors committee and the advisory group to work out exactly what their different jobs are in checking that the centre is on track to achieve all the things it is setting out to do. It will help you, as well, to understand what it is they do. It is good that parents are already part of the advisory group. Don't forget that you can feed your ideas and views to them or through your parent forum meetings.

Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with us during our visit. We very much enjoyed talking with you and we appreciated your willingness to talk with us about some of your personal experiences. We wish you and your families all the best for the future.

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