

Inspection report for John Smith Children's Centre

Local authority	Tower Hamlets
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	None
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	John Smith Children's Centre

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

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

An unannounced inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Early Years Inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with managers, staff, parents, carers, a member of the advisory board and representatives of partner organisations. They talked to parents, carers, staff and children throughout the working day at the centre. Inspectors observed the centre's work, reviewed case studies and looked at a range of relevant documentation. They looked at some evaluations of the sessions and the latest report on the questionnaires completed by users.

Information about the centre

The centre is located in the Stepney area of Tower Hamlets and until the time of the inspection served Whitechapel and St Dunstan's and Stepney. It is a phase one centre providing a full core offer of services including 22 Early Years Foundation Stage daycare places and crèche for 11 children under eight. The centre, built in 1995, was designated as a Sure Start children's centre in February 2006. The premises is a purpose-built, single storey building with a suite of rooms for daycare in one wing and further facilities including areas for family learning, a crèche, health, midwifery, employment and other services. There is a shared reception hall and extensive, safely enclosed, interconnecting garden spaces for all users.

The area that the centre currently serves is among the 20% most deprived in the country. About 60% of the community are of Bangladeshi origin, speaking Sylheti, which does not have a written form. The next largest group is of Somali origin. Most of the centre users follow Islam. Seventeen languages are spoken by the centre's users and 90% of users speak English as an additional language. Overcrowded housing for families is one of the greatest challenges in the area. Some 80% of

families face worklessness and receive benefits. Children's levels of skills and experiences when they come into the centre are lower than is typical for their age, especially in language development.

The centre is managed directly by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. An advisory body is in place. A far reaching review of children's centres in the local authority was under way at the time of the inspection. The reach area to be served and specialist services to be provided by this centre, the composition of the advisory board, management, accountability and staffing arrangements were all under reconsideration. It was the first week in post for a new centre manager, who at the time was assisted by two deputies managing the childcare and community services, including family support, teams of childcare and family support staff, an office manager and a data manager. Staff moves between children's centres, and changes to the types of services provided, are anticipated within a year.

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

The centre is running smoothly with consistently very high attendance during a time of radical changes in the organisation of children's centre services in Tower Hamlets. The programme of events continues to run, providing the full range of services that have been built up over a number of years to match the needs of the community. The centre has a good understanding of the main challenges facing many families in the area, which are lack of economic opportunity, overcrowding and social isolation resulting in risks of poor health, harm, exploitation and abuse. Resilient partnerships are in place. The centre and partner organisations share information and resources to succeed in placing inclusion and safeguarding at the heart of the services that are developed.

The centre has been at the heart of the community, providing much valued early years childcare services and a growing range of family support for about 16 years. Since the centre took on the full Sure Start designation the attendance of local users and others from further away in the borough has grown steadily. Most activities are full. Attendance figures are very good and the expectations set by the local authority for reach and attendance have been exceeded.

Users who are in the current reach area show loyalty to the centre. They return year on year as their families grow. Their evaluations show how all aspects of their lives improve through the support from the centre's services. Many users are troubled by the changes that have very recently taken place and told inspectors that they do not have any clear news of what is happening and do not feel part of the change process. One parent represented the views of many in commenting that 'We tell them [the senior managers] how good everything is in the annual questionnaires. The staff are brilliant, perfect! They seem to be ignoring what we have already told them.'

Current users are keen and enthusiastic learners in stay and play and toy library drop-in sessions. Children are confident and settle quickly in the centre's daycare. Users thrive in the welcoming atmosphere, benefiting from the spacious gardens and the carefully prepared activities. Young families improve in health, communication skills and economic stability. Adults, including the high proportion who speak English as an additional language, take up the many opportunities to get involved in organising outings and planning sessions. Parents and carers say that their children 'love coming to the centre'. One of the few sources of dissatisfaction of parents and carers is that some would like access to more flexible, part-time daycare. Children in daycare, including children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, are expertly supported in finding the right place and settling in to schools. All children attending develop good attitudes to learning.

The highly vigilant work of staff ensures that users at risk of harm or abuse are protected promptly. The centre's support reduces the need for intervention by children's services in the majority of cases. When families attend over a long period of time they gain knowledge in how to protect themselves and their children.

Most aspects of management are good as the work of the centre is underpinned by a long history of outstanding partnership work. This has resulted in good and improving outcomes for the great majority of users, including some hard to reach and vulnerable families. Staff are well qualified for their jobs. The mix of skills among staff ensures that all activities are well run and are of good quality. Staff are working effectively to maintain high standards during the period of review and changes. The inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage childcare in its own right showed that managers do not always share their knowledge and challenge each other to achieve the best possible practice. An example is the recording of risk assessment processes to make this aspect consistent between the childcare and community provision.

The centre currently uses resources efficiently, monitors and analyses its activities well and the work represents good value for money. The capacity to improve even further is good at present although the governance and accountability arrangements and priorities are set to change very soon. The centre has the potential to go on building on the strong regard of users and partners to continue improving.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- The centre and the local authority should:
 - make sure that there is no interruption to the services offered, particularly for the most vulnerable, and maintain a sense of purpose and direction
 - ensure that all current and potential users are helped to understand the proposed changes fully and give their views about options for the future shape of provision at the centre
 - provide timely updates about the changes that are taking place to staff, partner organisations and users.

- The centre's managers should share their knowledge and work as closely as possible together:
 - to make sure the best recording systems for risk assessments are put in place across all the work of the centre
 - to consider what additional flexible childcare can be put in place to meet more users' needs.

How good are outcomes for users?

2

The outcomes for parents and carers and families who use the centre are good and improving. Families with young children say that they thrive and feel safe when attending the centre. The numbers coming to sessions are among the highest in the borough. The centre focuses on giving a warm welcome to all individuals and as a result users' self-esteem and emotional well-being improve. One parent said: 'We feel we are in a safe family when we come here. We all learn something from each other and give help when it's needed.'

Partnerships with health professionals help to raise awareness of general health issues. The well-being of users is good. Young women are supported into parenthood with midwifery services based in the centre. The centre actively promotes healthy eating, smoking cessation and is a successful 'breastfeeding friendly' centre. Parents and carers are encouraged to take up health checks, immunisations and dental treatment, which are priorities for the area. The centre's staff refer children expertly to specialist speech and language or child development services for exceptionally prompt specialist help when needs are identified. Parents and carers appreciate being able to see specialist physical and mental health practitioners at the centre.

The centre is effective in supporting home safety through the skill and knowledge of family support workers who visit homes. A source of funding for home safety equipment has just come to an end, although the advice and guidance continue. The frequency of home accidents in the area is falling. The centre's staff work well with families through the Common Assessment Framework. Families facing a crisis or danger from domestic violence are protected immediately by joint work of the centre and other services, including some voluntary sector organisations. Safeguarding

policies and procedures are clearly understood by staff. Children and adults learn good safe working practices from the examples set by staff.

Parents and carers enjoy the opportunity to meet others and to get informal support and advice. In the Thursday language focus group, the children and their parents thoroughly enjoyed developing their vocabulary about colours as they heard 'Brown Bear' read aloud with exciting stick puppets to hold up. Learning to be confident parents and how to stay healthy continues in all activities. One parent told us how good it is that the centre only gives organic fruit at snack time. Young parents take up learning while their children are safely cared for in the crèche. About half the group attain City and Guilds level 1 qualifications.

Parents and carers enthusiastically give their views in evaluations of the activities for them. A few are fully enabled to take part in consultations and give their views in questionnaire surveys. Staff use a variety of languages and non-verbal means of communication to ensure that as many as possible are included. Successes and achievement are celebrated. The end of the 'Mellow Parenting' course was marked with a day out organised by the parents themselves.

Jobcentre Plus staff provide good informal and formal support although there are no set times. The service is responsive to users' needs and wishes, providing guidance when users want to find work or training. Many adults take their first steps to further training through the popular English as a second language classes at the centre and the sewing group. Parents and carers can access information readily through face-to-face contact with staff or through picking up leaflets on housing and benefits. Individuals, particularly in the young parents group, get one-to-one support to write their curriculum vitae. Opportunities for well-paid part-time work that parents and carers want are limited in the area. A few users have progressed locally through volunteering arranged by family support workers into positions such as mid-day assistants.

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

How good is the provision?

2

The provision at the centre is good with outstanding skill shown by staff in gathering information to assess the needs of all users when they start at the centre and as they progress. The details that staff collect sensitively from the users themselves, and from other organisations working alongside, enable all staff to get to know the users exceptionally well and to tailor the services to their needs. Expert views on users' progress spur users on in their English as a second language classes, in 'Mellow parenting' and in the courses that young parents take up. Children's progress is tracked well in the childcare provision. Staff record children's development extremely well in language focus groups.

The centre contributes routinely to assessment for other services, such as children's statements of special educational needs or their individual education or care plans, ensuring that services are effectively integrated. Informal information sharing among health, social care and early years professionals in the area ensures that the centre adapts their services well to users' needs. The range of classes and groups is highly appropriate to the current priorities identified with partners in the area, although users say they are uncertain how well this will continue. Provision of a good crèche supports the centre's planned work with groups of parents and carers although it is not used as a casual crèche as some parents and carers would like.

Users who attend regularly gain confidence and learn from the expert tuition, play-leadership and advice offered by skilled staff. Children's learning and development in the childcare provision are good. Staff are well skilled and qualified for their roles. Skilled staff carefully select the resources to suit each activity. The layout of the care rooms and the garden are exploited well by staff and users so that learning continues, flowing indoors and outside to enable all to make the most of their time in the centre. The provision of activities outside and on outings is a real prized strength of the centre. The gardens are particularly valued by families in accommodation with no outdoor areas of their own. Other affiliated groups and individuals from outside the area come to use the provision.

The childcare provision is good and caring attitudes extend into all activities. Staff and others working with the centre pool their information to give advice and to secure resources for users, notably in times of crisis. Case studies show the in-depth support that the centre can coordinate for users. The situation for many vulnerable families, for example in poor housing, is improving because of the information and guidance given. Users and partners are uncertain at present how they will work with the centre when the planned changes in areas to be covered and staff groups come into effect within the year.

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	1
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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

The governance and accountability arrangement in place up until just before the inspection worked well and provided rigorous systems for monitoring the centre's performance. The internal management information systems are still in place. New line management arrangements have been implemented with some staff changes in the centre and the local authority. The advisory board is being re-configured to bring in a wide range of expertise and local involvement for each of the borough's children's centres. The reach area for John Smith centre is being redrawn in May 2011. Although the general needs of the area are well known to strategic managers and those in the centre, the priorities for the new area are not yet set. There is adequate continuity of management and governance in place to ensure that strategic links to operational plans are satisfactory now. All legal requirements continue to be met.

Inclusion of all children and parents and carers in the area has been central to the vision of the centre. It remains central and drives the centre's welcoming, full range of activities. Celebrating and working with the diverse aspects of the local community have secured very high attendance and good use of the resources. Partnerships have had an outstanding impact on helping the centre learn about needs in the area and deliver integrated services in health, well-being and development often in the centre itself as users wish. The centre has been an important venue for most families in the area for many years and involves the whole community in open days.

Partnerships help the centre to fulfil safeguarding requirements well. Good, safe recruitment, vetting and visitor procedures are in place. Parents and carers are fully involved in keeping the centre secure and as a result users are safe. They told inspectors that they really appreciate this care. Managers ensure that the environment is safe. However, the procedures are not consistent between the community and the childcare sides of the centre because managers do not work closely enough to share good practice under the current arrangements.

Partners' and users' contributions to evaluation mean that the centre has known accurately how it was doing. For example, the centre found that fathers do not want separate provision for male carers and this provision was discontinued some years ago. Understanding their success, and what they do not need to provide, has helped the centre maintain good value for money over a long period of time. However, the centre's managers state that the self-evaluation will need to be completely refreshed with the changes to come in the near future. Some parents and carers feel that their views have been ignored and that they are not informed well enough about what is

going on.

The management and leadership of the centre are good overall at present although the timing and content of news about the proposed changes are unclear to some staff, users and partners. The centre has a strong track record of adapting to meet changing situations with good outcomes, loyal support from parents and carers and sound operational links with partners. As these are in place, the capacity to improve is good.

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	3
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	2
The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide	1
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

The John Smith Children's Centre Early Years Foundation Stage and childcare regulated provision was inspected on 16 May 2011. This daycare provision is located on the premises and managed by the children's centre managers. The findings of the inspection contributed to the children's centre inspection judgements.

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 John Smith Children's Centre on 18 and 19 May 2011. We judged the centre as good overall.

We were very pleased to be able to talk to some of you about the centre's work. I would like to thank the people who came in especially to meet with us. Here is a short report of what we found.

The John Smith Children's Centre is a popular, well-attended centre. We see from the questionnaires that you filled in about the centre's work that you are very pleased with the services and the guidance that the centre gives you. You get good advice about caring for your children, benefits, moving on to schools, housing, health and support services and employment. You are particularly pleased that the services are under one roof. Groups are full and attendance is high because many of you have continued coming to different sessions for many years.

You told us that your children love coming to the centre and we agree. They are happy, confident and enthusiastic when they arrive. They cannot wait to get inside. We were impressed while we were at the centre to see children pulling you along to the door and asking you to 'hurry up'.

The centre has a good reputation at the heart of your community. Your relationships with staff are very positive and some say the centre is like a family. We found that a high number of parents and carers bring their children to this centre from other neighbourhoods because they enjoy the range of services that are offered and the friendly atmosphere.

You and your children feel safe and secure when taking part in all the activities provided by the centre. Many of you are learning how to keep your children safe at home. In situations where you and your children are at risk of harm or suffering abuse, or in times of crisis, the family support services work quickly to arrange the help that you need.

We found that you become healthier because of the support and advice given by the centre. You learn about healthy eating, particularly about choosing snacks. A parent told us, 'I really like the centre because they give organic fruit to our children.' Babies of new parents get a good start as most mothers take up breastfeeding.

We were particularly pleased to see you and your children enjoying the centre's outdoor spaces. We loved hearing that having the extra space and going on outings encourage you to take up healthy, active lifestyles. You said this is vital to the high numbers of you who live in overcrowded housing with no garden. You told us that you make good friends, which helps you cope with problems and feel happier.

While we were visiting we could see that the centre gives a warm welcome to all from the many different ethnic, religious and language backgrounds among communities in the area. Everyone is treated with respect. We found that no matter what your age, needs or background, all adults and children enjoy the stay and play

sessions and the sessions, like the Thursday language focus and young parents' groups, that are put on to meet particular needs.

Children are keen to learn. They explore the equipment, books and natural things that the staff expertly set out to help them in all areas of their learning. New children quickly join in and children really behave well in the centre. All children, including those who do not speak any English when they start to attend, and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, are well prepared for moving on to nursery classes or school.

We found that you learn skills that help you look after your children, such as setting up routines for bedtimes, and you become more confident when attending the centre. Most people can find the course they want. Some of you, including fathers, attend English as a second language classes regularly. A few go on to further training and get good advice when looking for work.

The staff work exceptionally well with other organisations to get to know what to provide for the community and how to help you as individuals. The managers work well to make sure that as many young families in the area as possible can take part.

Staff are well qualified for their jobs. The mix of skills among staff ensures that all activities are well run and are good quality.

We inspected the daycare in its own right and found that children are well cared for although there are points on which the management can improve to offer the best possible service. There is a separate report about the daycare on our website. We were pleased to hear some parents' and carers' comments about how much they value the day care. Long waiting lists for all but those in the most immediate need show how attractive you find the daycare and some of you would like more flexible part time daycare. To help the centre run even more seamlessly, and improve your lives, we asked the centre to make more of the opportunities for staff and managers in the childcare and community/family support sides to work together to share good practice.

At the time of our visit, the future programme of activities for the centre was uncertain. This was because of the review of children's centre services in the whole local authority area. New management arrangements had just started that week in the centre and the borough. We noticed the sadness that some of you were feeling that the staff group that you trusted was breaking up. Managers and staff working day by day in the centre ensured that the same services for you were kept up but many of you did not know about the changes and felt left out of the discussions about the future plans. We asked the centre and the local authority to make sure that they explain plans and policies so that you can comment fully on all current work and the changes to come.

We found that the centre has good potential to go on improving. This is because of the strong history of providing good services and the excellent network of support from other people who work with the centre.

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