

Inspection report for Ockendon Children's Centre

Local authority	Thurrock
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Linked school if applicable	Shaw Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Sure Start – Where Kids Come First, EY 337731

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 inspection of the co-located registered early years setting was carried out on 21 July 2011 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 centre staff, representatives of the local authority, health professionals and partners who offer services, parents and carers, and the headteacher of the co-located primary school. A telephone meeting was held with the chair of the advisory board. Inspectors observed the centre's work and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Ockendon Children's Centre is a new-build project completed in 2005 and located in the grounds of Shaw Primary School. The phase one centre forms part of Thurrock Borough Council's Lakeside locality, comprising four centres. The locality is led by a senior locality manager and the centre is managed by a deputy children's centre coordinator, with six other permanent members of staff and five volunteers. It is accountable to the local authority and governed by an advisory board.

The main areas the centre serves are South Ockendon and Belhus, although parents from any area can access services. The centre serves approximately 1,500 children. It is in the 20% most disadvantaged areas nationally. Approximately 19% of children are of minority ethnic heritage. Some 30% of families in Belhus and 36% of families in South Ockendon live in poverty, against the Thurrock average of 20%. The area has a high level of worklessness. The centre offers integrated early education and childcare provision, access to health services and family support, outreach support and childminder networks.

The centre hosts a registered charity early years setting, 'Sure Start – Where Kids Come First'. The setting opens five days a week, for 50 weeks of the year, operating from 8.00am to 6.00pm. The setting may have a maximum of 33 children at any one time and currently there are 82 children on roll, attending for a variety of sessions including out-of-school care and full day care. Fifteen staff are employed.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The overall effectiveness of Ockendon Children's Centre is satisfactory. The local authority has a strong commitment to provide appropriate services for children and families in the area. It is undergoing a public consultation on the future model of delivery for children's centres. This is creating some disquiet among staff and centre users and has led to some disruption and non-completion of work. Managers have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the centre's services and the centre has a satisfactory capacity to improve further. Development plans identify appropriate actions to drive forward improvements, although current performance targets are not specific enough and do not provide sufficient challenge.

Staff have a good general understanding of the local community. Their use of data has improved recently, but too much statistical information relates to the borough as a whole rather than the specific local area. Good work is carried out to improve the communication, literacy and language skills of families.

The centre is successful at promoting healthy lifestyles among families. Particularly good work to improve the health of families is carried out by midwives and health professionals. Links with Jobcentre Plus and local further education colleges are underdeveloped. This is a barrier to parents and wider family members developing employability skills. Staff promote purposeful learning. Parents and carers often make new friends, develop self-confidence and learn to play with their children in new ways. One parent remarked, 'We come every week as there is so much to do and the children go home happy and tired.'

Families feel safe in the centre and appreciate the strong support and welcoming

atmosphere. They feel part of the centre and enjoy coming to it. The co-located early years setting provides good-quality provision and children make good progress. Children enjoy playing in the well-resourced indoor and outdoor play areas and parents and wider family members learn better ways to interact with them. Safeguarding arrangements are adequate and managers ensure everyone working in the centre, including volunteers, is checked appropriately. Staff listen to the views of users and act upon them whenever they can. However, there are too few ways in which families can provide their views formally or help to shape future services.

The promotion of equality and diversity is adequate. Staff have an inclusive approach and provide satisfactory care and support to centre users. The number of users of minority ethnic heritage reflects that of the local community. A satisfactory range of services is provided to meet the needs of the local community. However, more targeted work is required in order to increase the participation of fathers and vulnerable groups, such as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Parent outreach workers provide vulnerable families with high-quality support.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Raise the participation of local families, focusing more closely on identifying and supporting the most vulnerable families in the area, including individuals with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Improve the management of the centre by:
 - ensuring better use of data to ensure staff have a clearer oversight of the key performance indicators for the centre's local area
 - setting specific and challenging performance targets, with clear milestones to enable the progress towards them to be monitored regularly by managers and the advisory board.
- Extend the ways in which families and partners can give their views through formal processes to influence decision-making, shaping future provision and evaluating the quality of the centre's services.
- Improve the opportunities for centre users to develop employability skills and a better awareness of job opportunities through stronger collaboration with Jobcentre Plus staff and post-16 education and training providers.

How good are outcomes for users?

3

Regular antenatal, midwife and new birth clinics held at the centre provide families with good access to high-quality health care. These families are encouraged to attend further relevant sessions in the centre or they are signposted to other agencies where appropriate. For example, obese mothers are referred to dieticians. Information cards are placed in pregnancy testing kits sold in local chemists to

promote these maternity services. Good work is carried out to help users stop smoking and midwives check the carbon monoxide levels of all pregnant women who smoke to improve healthy outcomes. An organisation sponsored by the National Health Service, 'Yummy Mummy', runs a popular breastfeeding support group, and the number of women who breastfeed their infants for longer than eight weeks in the area has increased.

Staff and midwives distribute brochures and refer to these to discuss healthy eating practices with newly-pregnant women. However, staff do not always promote healthy eating with parents and children when the opportunity arises. Children are encouraged to exercise in the centre's well-resourced outdoor play area. Surveys indicate that the emotional health of children is good.

Families and staff feel safe in the centre. Security arrangements are good. They have been improved by the installation of a security fence which prevents unauthorised people accessing the children's centre from the co-located school site. The reception has securely controlled access and panic buttons are present in some rooms.

Staff place a strong focus on safety both outdoors and in the home. Free home-safety starter packs are available and popular with families. Road safety is stressed. Staff analyse the main reasons for accident and emergency admissions at the local hospital and run child-safety campaigns to highlight the common causes of accidents and how to prevent them. The managing behaviour policy includes guidelines on how to prevent and deal with bullying, and staff work well with children and parents to agree the boundaries for suitable behaviour. Risk assessments are carried out for all relevant activities. However, as acknowledged by managers, staff do not work sufficiently with families in their local area who have child protection plans.

The co-located early years setting provides a vibrant and interesting environment. Children are happy there and become well-motivated and independent learners, making good progress. Families enjoy their time in the centre greatly, particularly sessions such as those offered by the Ockendon 'Mums and Dads' group. Children display curiosity and demonstrate understanding of the wider world through their play.

Staff develop children's communication, language and literacy skills well. The centre has strong links with the speech and language therapy team and actively endorses the 'Bookstart' and the 'Every Child a Talker' campaigns. The average points score for communication, language and literacy has improved in the locality. In addition, the average Early Years Foundation Stage profile score for schools in the local area increased from 75 in 2009 to 86 in 2011. The number of pupils in the lowest 20% for Early Years Foundation Stage scores in the area has reduced from 60 children in 2009 to 38 children in 2011. Staff do not evaluate the progress of children attending the centre and there is insufficient liaison with school staff, so it is not possible to evaluate the full impact of the centre's work on children's learning and attainment.

All families are welcomed warmly by staff and users feel they belong to the centre.

One user commented, 'I do not know what I would do without the centre,' and another reported, 'I walk 40 minutes to get to the centre.' Parents attending group sessions often make new friends and gain in self-confidence. Family Lives, a national charity that runs a successful parenting support group dealing with anger management, has improved the self-esteem of parents and enabled them to play a fuller role in the community. Volunteers make a valuable contribution to the work of the centre, although their numbers are low.

Centre users make use of information on job vacancies through a Jobcentre Plus information kiosk in the reception, and staff provide information on benefits. Parents and carers are signposted where appropriate to adult learning opportunities such as courses on basic literacy and numeracy, and English for speakers of other languages. However, the area has a high level of worklessness and managers acknowledge that links with Jobcentre Plus staff and post-16 education and training providers are underdeveloped.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable 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	3
The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
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	3

How good is the provision?

3

Assessment of the needs of centre users is satisfactory. Staff take some account of the needs of vulnerable groups and plan programmes accordingly. A small number of individuals are assessed using the Common Assessment Framework and staff ensure these vulnerable families receive sufficient attention. The collection and use of data have improved following the implementation of a new database. A comprehensive profile of the local area provides staff with a good overview of the local community, but too many key indicators apply to the borough as a whole, rather than being specific to the locality. To increase participation in the centre further, staff require more information about families in the local area who do not use the centre.

The centre promotes purposeful learning. Families are positive about their experiences. They feel less isolated and make friends. Parents learn to interact with their children in a more meaningful way. One parent described how, 'We meet every

week here and it's like a home-from-home.' Very experienced and highly motivated parent outreach workers provide targeted support for vulnerable families, and their work leads to improved outcomes for these families. Staff in the co-located early years setting organise a celebration ceremony for children who are leaving in which parents participate, but the celebration of success is not overt generally across the centre. For example, certificates are seldom issued when children and adults complete a programme. No programmes provided within the centre lead to formal accreditation.

A satisfactory range of services is provided to meet the needs of the local community. These include effective parenting sessions, counselling and a mix of appointments and sessions to promote good health. Individuals with support needs not directly covered by the centre, for example those abusing alcohol or drugs, are signposted to other relevant agencies. Some staff are undertaking training to allow them to drive a minibus which will make it easier for them to take centre users to other centres for services not offered at Ockendon. Some targeted work with fathers takes place, but managers acknowledge that more is required. The centre has identified that the local area hosts a number of Traveller, Gypsy and Showmen sites. Work with these groups took place previously and further work is planned, but little is taking place currently.

The care and support provided for families attending the centre are adequate. The layout of the centre was re-planned and a quiet room is now available for confidential use. Parent outreach workers provide good support for families at times of crisis. A broad range of information is held in the centre, including DVDs, wall displays and leaflets. Many of the issues faced by families are not dealt with directly by staff and centre users are signposted to other agencies. However, the progress and outcomes for these families are not tracked sufficiently.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users	3
The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Staff are highly committed and work hard to improve the lives of families in the area. Staff meetings are held regularly with staff working across the locality, enabling the sharing of good practice to take place. Staff training is very effective. Clear links are established between the strategic planning of the local authority and the centre's delivery plan. The centre receives effective support from local authority officers.

However, a local authority public consultation on the future delivery model for children's centres in the borough has led to uncertainty among staff. Some staff are stretched too thinly and agreed procedures for planned work are not always completed fully. The highly professional and very effective parent outreach workers are shared between different centres and they also run group sessions; this limits their effectiveness to contact and work with hard-to-reach families in the local area.

Governance for the four children's centres in the locality is operated through a joint advisory board. The board's membership contains a variety of representatives from local primary schools and other organisations working for families in the area. It receives reports on certain aspects of the centres' performance, such as finance, but insufficient focus is given to monitoring regularly the progress in other key areas of work, such as participation rates. Attendance is low for some meetings.

Managers evaluate the strengths and areas for improvement of the centre well. A comprehensive annual review is self-critical and accurate with relevant actions that are designed to lead to improvements. However, performance targets are not specific and challenging enough, and lack clear milestones to enable progress to be monitored rigorously. Also, the review does not take into account the views of centre users and partners sufficiently.

The centre offers a welcoming and friendly environment for families. Effective and imaginative use is made of space. Rooms are clean and fit for purpose, with informative wall displays. Children can play indoors and outdoors in a well-resourced play room. The centre benefits from the work of enthusiastic and skilled volunteers who run and assist in high-quality sessions. However, the number of volunteers is small. The centre offers satisfactory value for money.

Staff have an inclusive approach and all receive effective training to promote equality and diversity issues. Some cultural events are celebrated, including Black History month. Dual language books are available in the play room and positive images are displayed throughout the centre. The proportion of centre users of minority ethnic heritage reflects that of the local area. Saturday antenatal sessions successfully attract fathers to the centre, but managers recognise that the participation of fathers is too low and there are not enough services for children and parents with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Arrangements for safeguarding are satisfactory. Appropriate safeguarding checks are carried out to ensure the suitability of all individuals working in the centre, including volunteers. Information on Criminal Record Bureau checks is kept on a single record. All staff receive effective training for safeguarding procedures and some staff have attended additional programmes such as safeguarding issues for African children and safeguarding for e-learning. Designated safeguarding officers ensure staff know how to react if children or adults make a disclosure. Effective work on safeguarding takes place with a local group working to raise awareness of grooming and other child abuse issues. Active outreach and family support work ensure that parents experiencing domestic violence are signposted to appropriate agencies for additional

support.

Evaluation of the quality of work takes place regularly, mainly through questionnaires completed by families at the end-of-group sessions, where the views of families are obtained. Individual staff use these evaluations to improve the quality of their own work, but managers do not compile the findings from these evaluations to monitor overall trends and to inform general improvements. A 'Talking Wall' is also used to enable users to post comments and suggestions. However, families and partners have too few formal ways to influence decision-making and contribute to the centre's evaluation of the quality of services.

Strong collaborative work with midwives and other health professionals provides a good example of successful multi-agency work. Staff work well with a range of other partners, including Thurrock MIND where support on mental health issues is available, and the Citizens Advice Bureau which provides general guidance. Family Lives, a parent support group, provides good support through individual and group sessions. The speech and language therapy team arranges drop-in sessions if parents have worries about how well their children are communicating. These often lead to referrals to other services and improved outcomes.

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	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	3
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	3
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	3
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	3
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	3

Any other information used to inform the judgements made

during this inspection

Ockendon Children's Centre has a charity-based early years setting, 'Sure Start – Where Kids Come First', which operates from its premises. Information from its recent inspection on 21 July 2011 have contributed to the children's centre report and judgements.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Ockendon Children's Centre on 27 and 28 July 2011 and judged the overall effectiveness of the centre to be satisfactory.

We would like to thank you for your contribution to the inspection. Most of the individuals we spoke to enjoy coming to the centre and are grateful for the support you receive from staff. Some of you described the difference it had made to your lives and the way you now feel better equipped to deal with various problems. The parent outreach workers in particular work very well with families who are in need of support.

We agree with you that locating midwives and other health professions in the centre for clinics is an effective and convenient way for you to meet with them. We also agree that the centre has a safe and friendly atmosphere where families can learn and play together. Managers ensure that all staff and volunteers undergo suitable safeguarding checks before they work with families. The 'Sure Start – Where Kids Come First' that is located in the centre offers good provision where children make progress in a happy and well-resourced environment.

Staff organise a satisfactory variety of activities to meet your needs. However, we feel that more fathers should be encouraged to attend the centre and further services should be in place for individuals with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Staff carry out good work to improve the communication, literacy and language skills of families. We believe staff should forge better links with local schools so they can continue to track the progress of children when they begin to attend school. They also need to make better links with staff from local colleges, training providers and in particular Jobcentre Plus, so that you have better opportunities to develop the skills you might need for employment.

Managers evaluate the quality of the centre's work accurately. What we recommend they now do is set themselves more specific and challenging targets for further improvements. They should also aim to increase the number of people coming to the centre, particularly vulnerable families. We know that staff listen to you when you

discuss the centre's work with them, but we believe they should organise more formal ways in which you can put forward your views.

Once again, thank you to everyone who took the trouble to speak with us and we wish you every success for the future.

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