

Inspection report for Elms Road Children's Centre

Local authority	Oxfordshire County Council
Inspection number	383497
Inspection dates	17–18 November 2011
Reporting inspector	Champak Chauhan

Centre manager	Susan Dowe
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Botley School
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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/partner primary school was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The report of this inspection is available on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector. The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders and staff from the centre, members of the governing body and the advisory board, parents and carers, staff from the local authority, representatives from the health service, and a range of other partners who work with the centre. Inspectors observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Elms Road Children's Centre works in partnership with Botley School. The centre has been in existence since 2007 and it covers a wide geographical area, both urban and rural. Services are run from its purpose-built accommodation which is adjacent to the school and it also supports outreach sessions and groups in West Oxford, Appleton, Botley and Cumnor. The centre's reach area is predominantly White British. Target groups are from varied socio-economic backgrounds with levels of deprivation in the reach area ranging from relatively high to relatively low. West Oxford, for example, has relatively high levels of deprivation and a higher proportion of families from minority ethnic groups, particularly British Asian. Eight per cent of children under five live in workless households. Just over 7% of families are benefiting from the childcare element of Working Tax Credit and data for 2009, the most recent available, show that 145 individuals were claiming income support. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities are below those expected for their age when they enter the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The centre has been through some significant changes recently. Previously, it was managed by the governing body of Elms Road Nursery School, but the nursery was merged in September 2011 with Botley School. As a result, new governance and

accountability arrangements have been introduced. The governing body of the primary school has overall responsibility for the children's centre and the centre manager is responsible to the headteacher of Botley School. An advisory group and a parents' forum work closely with the governing body and the centre. The centre provides the full core offer of services and a wide variety of activities which are relevant to the needs of target groups in its reach area. These include, for example, stay and play sessions, adult learning classes, health visitor drop-in sessions, and Citizens Advice. The centre also works in partnership with other children's centres and extended schools' services to run sessions for parenting support.

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

Elms Road Children's Centre provides a good range of services for its target groups and this leads to good outcomes. It is highly valued in the community it serves and the inclusion of all is a key feature of its work. All individuals are made to feel welcome. As one parent stated, 'The workers and volunteers are so friendly and help everyone settle in.' Another commented, 'The centre was a lifeline for me ever since my daughter was born.'

The good range of services that the centre provides has been the result of strong partnership working with others, for example health professionals and adult learning services. Recently, this work has led to significantly higher user engagement from the various target groups. The centre deals with all teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers from within its reach area and beyond. The proportion of fathers accessing its services has more than doubled in the last three years and continues to rise, while numbers of lone parents with children under five have increased significantly over the same period.

The centre embraces cultural and religious diversity well, and this is a strong feature of its work. It is particularly successful in assessing and meeting the needs of minority ethnic groups in the reach area. Numbers of such children under five that it

deals with are rising considerably, and the centre reaches about 60% of this target group. The centre also successfully meets the needs of children under three years of age. In the first ten months of 2011, it had seen 60% of such children in its reach area. Crèche facilities are provided, enabling parents and carers to participate in the activities. These facilities are highly valued by them.

Participation rates are high and improving because services are geared towards meeting needs. Children and adults thoroughly enjoy the activities and they make good progress. Children's achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage is especially good and recent results are well above national averages. This has meant that the centre, in partnership with others, is conspicuously successful in narrowing the achievement gap between the bottom 20% of children and the rest. Parents and carers are achieving well too. They are improving their parenting skills, for example, and are successful in gaining formal qualifications in English and mathematics in their adult learning classes. This has enabled greater opportunities for people to secure better employment and to become more economically independent.

Relationships within the centre are very good. Parents have good opportunities to participate in the centre's decision-making processes and many do so. Families know how to adopt healthier lifestyles and there is good engagement with health services to support this, for example in breastfeeding and baby massage. This is complemented well by classes for physical fitness and through greater participation in outdoor activities. The centre has robust procedures for safeguarding, good information is displayed throughout the centre and families know how to keep themselves safe. Children behave well, and keep themselves and others safe.

Despite the profound changes the centre has undergone recently in its governance and organisation, it is led and managed effectively. Senior leaders provide clear strategic leadership and direction to the work of the centre. Staff morale remains high, there is good team spirit, and the staff are conscientious and hard working. Senior leaders check the work of the centre well and self-evaluation is accurate. They observe activities, analyse the available data, and seek the views of target groups and partners to ensure that the centre is responding well to identified needs. As a result, the centre demonstrates good capacity to improve further.

The governing body is strengthening its work. It is reviewing all policies and developing systems for checking the work of the centre. It currently relies on senior leaders and staff from the local authority to furnish it with relevant information about the effectiveness of the centre's work. It has not yet had time to create its own systems and procedures to gain a first-hand view of the work of the centre and to ensure that the centre's performance continues to be even better. Governors have access to a good range of data but some of it, for example from the health service, is not always up-to-date and does not always refer to the centre's reach area.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure that the governing body adopts rigorous procedures for checking the work of the centre so that it continues to improve even more.
- For the local authority and the health service to ensure that the centre is provided with more up-to-date and relevant information for its reach area.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Children and families in the target groups thoroughly enjoy the services and sessions offered to them. Children play together well, for example on the play bus, and they willingly share toys and other resources. They make good progress and achieve well. Their personal and social development is enhanced well through, for example, stay and play sessions and they are prepared well for their next stages of learning. As one parent commented, 'It's great for children to do many different activities they wouldn't do at home and also to get them ready to go into a nursery setting.' Children's progress is greatly enhanced through the quality of planning by the staff which meets the needs of each child, and which also takes into account the views of parents and carers.

Parenting skills are improved through sessions with health professionals and children's social skills are enhanced well by visits to the library, for instance, where they can choose books with adults. Parents and carers participate in appropriate courses and their achievement is good. They gain qualifications in English and mathematics and those from minority ethnic groups can improve their conversational English. Over a third of families using the centre are engaged in training and adult learning, and attendance rates are good. The outcomes for families seeking employment are good as they are signposted to appropriate services, for example Jobcentre Plus, whilst others are made more confident through the provision of good advice and guidance in applying for jobs. In a few notable instances, individuals have been successful in gaining qualifications as health professionals, enabling them to pursue a career. As a result of the centre's work, the majority of families are improving their economic stability and independence.

The centre is not only valued in the community but its ethos, the work and commitment of the staff are valued by other professionals who use it. Families have good opportunities to express their views, both informally and through formal feedback sessions held annually. The views of parents and carers are listened to and reasonable suggestions are acted upon. For example, parents and carers requested sessions for physical fitness and these were organised. This indicates the desire of families to be healthy and such outcomes are good. Breastfeeding rates at six to eight weeks are higher than local averages, whilst obesity rates for four-year-olds in the locality are lower than those for the local authority. Families adopt healthier lifestyles through, for example, having a more balanced diet. A large majority of

families engage well with appropriate health services and they have good access to integrated wider services. The emotional health of children and parents is enhanced well through counselling sessions, leading to generally good outcomes for the participants.

The children behave in ways that are safe for themselves and others. Families understand how to keep themselves safe and follow the centre's procedures, for example keeping hot drinks away from the children's play areas. This is supported by good attendance at first-aid courses run by the centre, where parents and carers learn of potential dangers to them and their children. Safeguarding has a high priority and staff are vigilant in safeguarding matters. Parents and carers stated that they feel safe and secure within the centre and they have no concerns about their own safety or that of their children. They also said that they would have no hesitation in sharing any concerns with the staff. Both mothers and fathers stated how much the centre had done to help them improve their parenting skills, leading them to become more confident as adults and as parents. Outcomes for children on child protection plans are good. Looked after children are integrated well with others, and their progress closely monitored.

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	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 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	2

How good is the provision?

2

The centre offers a good range of services to meet the needs of its target groups. The staff have very good knowledge of the needs of the various groups and they have built this up over the years. Needs are carefully assessed through good links with other partners, for example health visitors and midwives, who refer cases to the centre. There is also strong partnership working with the local authority, the Workers Educational Association, Jobcentre Plus, social services, local childminders, and Citizens Advice.

The centre has been successful at markedly improving the assessment of needs and in involving greater numbers from the targets groups. The centre has recently identified the need for minority ethnic parents and carers to be able to understand admissions procedures for local schools and is raising their awareness about this, including the need to fill in forms online. The centre is also assessing the needs of, and supporting significantly, more children and parents who are disabled. It has successfully undertaken speech and language therapy work with some children. It adapts services to meet local needs well and its outreach services are especially successful in meeting needs. These include running classes at community centres for conversational English, an Asian mothers' group, a baby group with drop-in facilities to see the health visitor, and the use of a sensory bus and a play bus.

The centre promotes purposeful learning well and activities are of good quality. As one parent stated, the centre 'provides a structured, educational and fun routine for my toddler'. Participation rates in the sessions are good and lead to good outcomes, for example in gaining accredited qualifications in English and mathematics, and improving parenting skills. The activities are of good quality and use a good range of resources. The information provided is of high quality and is available in various languages. The work of bilingual staff ensures that the needs of particular groups are more readily met. Personal development and achievement are celebrated well and detailed records of progress made, both by the adults and children, are kept. This is complemented by the good quality of care, guidance and support provided to all. Strong inter-agency links ensure that levels of support are individualised, for example health visitors work closely with family support workers and others to ensure that appropriate help is provided to families in difficulties. One parent said that the centre had provided 'invaluable and ongoing support during difficult family times'.

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

Day-to-day line management accountabilities are clear and understood by all. Staff value the systems for professional management and supervision which ensure that their performance is regularly evaluated and which lead to high levels of job satisfaction. Staff are reflective of their practice and are constantly striving to improve it. As a result, the centre has a good track record of improvement. The work

of the centre is underpinned by its strategic planning which is based on the explicit needs of the target groups. The strong partnership working ensures that a limited number of ambitious priorities have been identified and that all partners work well together towards meeting them. Some weaknesses, however, exist in monitoring and evaluating the work of the centre by the governing body.

A key underlying philosophy of the centre's work is to ensure that safeguarding arrangements are robust and that all people are included in its work. All staff, volunteers and governors are appropriately checked by the Criminal Records Bureau. Recruitment checks are thorough and relevant risk assessments for posts are made. Staff training on safeguarding is regularly undertaken and staff awareness of safeguarding issues is high. All safeguarding procedures meet more than the minimum requirements. This is also reflected in the centre's wider approach to child protection matters. Good procedures and protocols exist between different agencies so that child protection issues are identified early and appropriate referrals made. The work of health professionals plays an important role in this. Children on protection plans are regularly monitored by social workers in conjunction with staff from the centre, health visitors and, if appropriate, by family nurse practitioners.

The centre ensures that it meets the needs of families facing crises and that their emotional health and well-being are enhanced. Staff have successfully supported families that are experiencing domestic violence and they have involved other agencies when necessary. The health and welfare of children and mothers in such instances have been carefully monitored. Staff are caring and highly supportive of individuals. In some cases staff have accompanied expectant mothers to hospitals and stayed with them throughout their labour and subsequent birth. In one case this was 17 hours. As some mothers said, 'We cannot speak highly enough about the staff. They go beyond the call of duty.'

The centre is particularly successful in meeting the needs of families from minority ethnic backgrounds, especially those of Pakistani heritage. The work of the bilingual staff is especially valued by these groups. The centre improves outcomes for children with disabilities and is working with five such children, including those on the autistic spectrum. All families receiving such support value it highly. Overall outcomes for those in the target groups are good, and levels of user engagement are high and improving. As a result, the centre offers good value for money.

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 effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure 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

Inspectors also took into account the findings of the inspection of Botley School which was inspected at the same time as the children's centre. The overall effectiveness of Botley School was judged to be good.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected Elms Road Children's Centre on 17 and 18 November. We judged the centre as good overall. Thank you to all of those who took the time and trouble to speak to us.

Elms Road Children's Centre has many strengths and it is highly valued by all who use it. It offers a good range of services to you and your children and these lead to an improvement in the quality of your lives and in your achievements. All of you are made to feel most welcome and the staff are highly supportive of you and your families.

As you know, the centre has been through some significant changes recently, particularly in its governance and management arrangements, but it is a tribute to all concerned that the quality of its services has not been adversely affected. The staff are conscientious and they have continued to work hard. Their morale remains high and there is good team spirit. This is because the centre is effectively led and managed. Senior leaders know the centre's work well, they observe activities, listen to your views and make appropriate changes if necessary.

Such approaches have led to considerably higher participation rates by you in recent years, for example the proportion of fathers and lone parents using the centre's services has increased considerably. This greater level of engagement by you has resulted because staff know the needs of different groups well. The strong partnership working with others, for example health professionals and those from the local authority, has led to the provision of effective services for you. Many of you attend the stay and play sessions, for example, and relatively high numbers of you have dealings with the health visitors and midwives.

In addition to ensuring that your children are healthy, there is a strong emphasis on developing parenting skills and you value this. You are made more aware of adopting healthier lifestyles by participating in outdoor activities, for example Forest School, and by learning more about better nutrition and adopting a more balanced diet. You and your children are safe at the centre and safeguarding matters have a high priority. You recognise this because you said to us that you feel safe at the centre and would have no hesitation in leaving your children with the centre staff during activities. All staff, volunteers and governors have been appropriately vetted and the centre's approach to safeguarding meets more than minimum requirements.

The centre is characterised by good relationships and you are encouraged to participate in its decision-making processes. Some of you regularly attend the parents' forum and you feed back your views on the work of the centre every fortnight. You stated to us that your views would be listened to and acted upon when appropriate. Some of you wanted, for instance, sessions on keeping fit and these were introduced. The centre also ensures that it promotes your economic independence and stability through the provision of good advice and guidance, and relevant adult learning courses. Many of you value the guidance from Citizens Advice and the local authority project officer for economic well-being. The courses in English and mathematics that many of you have attended have led to qualifications that are helping you to secure better employment. Your children make good progress and their subsequent achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage is considerably better than national averages.

The centre is striving to make itself even better and it has a good track record of improvement. The good outcomes for you and your children mean that the centre provides good value for money.

The relatively new governing body is strengthening its work. It is reviewing all its policies and is developing systems for checking the work of the centre. However, this work is at an early stage and it relies on senior leaders and staff from the local authority to provide it with information about the effectiveness of the centre. It has not yet established its own systems and procedures to gain a first-hand view of the work of the centre and to ensure that the work of the centre improves even more. The centre has a good range of data but some of it, for example from the health service, is not always up-to-date and does not always refer to the area that the centre serves. We have, therefore, asked the governing body to formulate stronger systems for checking the work of the centre and we have asked the local authority

and the local health service to give more up-to-date and more relevant data to the centre to help it evaluate its services even better.

We wish you all the best for the future.

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