

Inspection report for Octopus Children's Centre

Local authority	Hampshire
Inspection number	384036
Inspection dates	1–2 December 2011
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Centre leader	Wendy Lee
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Not 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.

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

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

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

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with representatives of the centre's governing body, the local authority and the senior management and leadership teams. Employees of partnership agencies linking with and visiting the centre were consulted. Inspectors also spoke with centre staff and families using the centre.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including key policies, the centre's self-evaluation documents, its development plans, evaluations of services and data about people who use the centre.

Information about the centre

The Octopus Children's Centre was opened on 29 November 2008 and was fully designated as a phase two local authority run Sure Start Children's Centre on 31 January 2010. Governance arrangements also include a partnership board, a practitioners' forum made up of representatives of the community, partner groups, and a parents' forum. The centre also works in close partnership with Pebbles Children's Centre and the Discovery Centre to provide an additional range of services for families. Aided by its various partnerships across Basingstoke, the Octopus Children's Centre offers a graduated offer, which includes early intervention support for families in greatest need and services such as health, maternity, early years education and family support. In doing so, it serves as a hub for the local community.

Overall, the children's centre's reach area accommodates 1,222 children under the age of five years. The children's centre serves a mixed community with a broadly average level of social and economic disadvantage, as seen in the average percentage of families where the main wage earner is out of work. For example, approximately 16% of the children under five are members of families who depend on workless benefits. Children's skills on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage

generally match those expected for their age. The area served by the children's centre is made up predominately of families from a White British background, but the number of families from minority ethnic backgrounds is increasing.

The children's centre offers its services from the Octopus Children's Centre Gateway building, which is a purpose-built extension attached to Oakridge Hall For All Community Centre. It also provides outreach services at several community venues within its reach area.

Over the past year there have been significant changes to the staff team at the Octopus Children's Centre as the local authority continued the restructuring of its children's centres. During this period the centre has been supported by the Pebbles Children's Centre manager and local authority's children's centre services officer. More recently a new coordinator, who jointly manages another centre, and a new administrative/finance officer have taken up their positions.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

2

Main findings

The Octopus Children's Centre provides a good quality of provision which enables children and parents, including those with greatest need, to enjoy and achieve well. Children and their families also make good progress in adopting safe, healthy lifestyles. Parents say they have gained more friends by attending the children's centre activities and particularly welcome contact with the understanding and approachable centre staff. A parent's comment, which reflects the views of others is, 'I don't know where I would be had it not been for the caring support that I received.'

The centre's well-established partnership board, practitioners' forum and parents' forum, with the strong support of the local authority and from experienced temporary managers, have sustained good governance and provision during a period of staff change. All parent groups are well represented, including those considered vulnerable, and their views are fully considered. The centre's good self-evaluation is

based on a comprehensive range of information including data of differing groups accessing services and the quality of assistance provided, and this is used well to improve the quality of support available.

The centre is conveniently placed but also provides services at outreach venues across its area. It continues to work well with a range of partners to ensure that the majority of families with children under five years old in the local area participate in activities and sessions. The centre works very closely with the nearby Pebbles Children's Centre, which through its link with a special school, operates as a hub supporting children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The centre also promotes good multi-agency working, including with midwives and with other children's centres across Basingstoke. Such partnership working, which includes regularly signposting parents to specialist provision, for example, to the 'Quit 4 Life Stop Smoking Service', means that most families receive the individual support that they need. However, while there has been significant improvement in this year, partnerships are not yet as strong in supporting families more particularly affected by alcohol and drugs abuse.

Children and their parents attending children's centre activities are safeguarded well when attending the centre and outreach venues. The centre has an inclusive ethos, which welcomes children and families from a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds, enabling them to derive equal benefit. This is clearly seen in the children's equally good achievements in personal and language development at the end of their early years education. For example, over the past three years the gap in performance between the lowest achieving 20% of children and their peers has narrowed from 39% to a below average 29.6%. These data also reflect the centre's success in supporting parents in developing their communication skills so that they are better placed to promote their children's speaking and listening skills.

The centre has increased the number of vulnerable families accessing services through responding effectively to requests for courses and help from its partners. As a result, the majority of families supported are from vulnerable groups, who, because they have been helped to enhance their parenting skills, have gained in self-confidence. In particular, engagement with fathers, lone parents and children from minority ethnic backgrounds and workless households, has been much improved. Developments such as increased volunteering, adult education opportunities and strengthened partnerships with Jobcentre Plus staff are also tackling low aspirations and supporting families in workless households effectively in parts of the centre's reach area. However, as nationally, the number of workless households has increased recently in some locations showing that challenges remain. Even so, the good and improving outcomes achieved by families accessing the centre's effective services, especially those considered vulnerable, demonstrate the centre's good capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Develop the services provided to raise parents' aspirations, thereby enhancing their readiness to access education, training and employment.
- Make increasingly effective use of the information gathered by the centre and its partners to further meet the needs of children and their parents in families affected by alcohol and drugs misuse.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Good procedures for safeguarding children, including effective implementation of the Common Assessment Framework, help the children and their parents to feel safe. Requests from pre-school providers, including the adjacent Timbers Nursery School, and follow-up guidance from the outreach worker during home visits, also further secure children's welfare by advising families how to stay safe at home.

Drop-in and specific group meetings are well organised and much appreciated by parents and their children. These include the 'Story, craft and rhyme-time' sessions held at the centrally placed Discovery Centre. Such activities present a welcoming environment where children have fun learning together, behave well and respond enthusiastically to adults. Staff provide good role models; as a result, children cooperate well and learn to share when looking at books. Overall they make good progress in personal and language development, as seen in data, which show not only increased attainment at the end of their early years education, but also significant narrowing of the achievement gap.

Parents describe the boost the centre makes to their lives, by welcoming them into 'one big family', lifting confidence and independence and reducing feelings of isolation. As a result, parents, including a good proportion from those needing most support, contribute well to governance of the centre. Parents also help to improve services by completing evaluations of sessions, which inform future planning, for example, locating drop-in events such as the coffee morning at St Bernard's Nursery, an easier-to-reach location. Very supportive relationships during the 'Stroll and Roll' walks around the local area, showed parents' continuing friendships previously made at 'Bumps and Babes' parenting sessions. By these means, the centre enables parents to join in and learn well alongside their children, extending their own communication skills and ability to support their children's good development.

The centre has increased engagement with families affected by unemployment, especially through encouraging volunteering and partner working with adult learning and Jobcentre Plus teams. This has led to increasing numbers of parents accessing training, benefits and employment. However, challenges remain in some parts of the centre's reach area where unemployment is rising.

Pregnant women in the local area are well supported. Sessions such as the twice weekly health checks by the midwife and regular home visits by the outreach worker enable staff to provide advice and to signpost parents to sessions more relevant to their needs. Lone parents too are well supported and report how helpful signposting to drop-in and 'Bumps and Babes' sessions has been in reducing feelings of isolation

and encouraging them to follow up health concerns. Requests from health teams to the family support outreach worker have also aided her in significantly increasing the number of mothers breastfeeding their children, including some who previously bottle fed their first child. As a result, the take up of breastfeeding has been raised from a below average position to exceed that found nationally. Similar strengthened partnership with the 'Quit 4 Life Stop Smoking Service' has also significantly reduced the number of parents smoking during and after pregnancy.

The centre has been successful in supporting fathers, for example at the Saturday 'Dads and Me' clubs. As a result, data show a threefold increase in fathers attending activities over the past two years. Evaluations of these sessions show fathers becoming more willing to enjoy time with their children, more able to help their children to live healthily and more confident to access training and live economically independent lives.

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	3

How good is the provision?

2

Strengths in the centre's care and outreach services underpin much of the effective support provided for individual families. As one parent commented, 'The children's centre has made a huge difference to my life!' Two main features reflect the centre's continuing success in ensuring that a majority of families with children under five are fully engaged and derive benefit from its provision. The first is the strong work of family support outreach workers in supporting individual families, signposting them to other groups and, as several parents and practitioners commented, 'showing great sensitivity to our needs', encouraging breast feeding, developing parenting skills and instilling confidence. The second aspect is the way activities are provided at well-placed locations easily accessible to families, especially those in greatest need of help. As a result, there is good parental engagement, including for example, in 'MAD4KIDS' at the Roger Morris Centre. In addition, new venues such as 'Stay and Play' at Oakridge Hall have been located even more conveniently across the

community to ensure that the larger proportion of families supported are those who need help the most. Effective partner working with other children's centres also ensures increasing contact with vulnerable groups, including families affected by domestic violence. However, the centre has identified that hard-to-reach families subject to alcohol and drug misuse are not supported as well as other groups and is now tackling this issue. Even so, the good range of activities, including 'Baby Yoga' and 'Sing, Sign and Learn Together', promote enjoyment and develop good overall learning and progress for families.

Staff use assessment well to meet the complex range of needs of families in their area. As a result, families make good progress in their personal development and in other areas such as communication skills. Strong partnerships, notably with the Pebbles Centre, ensure that families accessing services, especially the most vulnerable, are supported well. This is particularly the case during the collaborative implementation of procedures outlined in the Common Assessment Framework for children on child protection plans and in supporting families with children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Evidence also shows that home visiting by the family support outreach worker, midwives and health visitors is helping to keep children safe and ensures that their needs are met effectively. Such individual support also provides evidence of improved and good health and learning outcomes for children with emotional and/or behavioural needs.

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

Managers work well as a team and collaborate effectively with a well-established range of multi-agency partners. Together, they have strengthened the way services are adapted to support the most vulnerable families. Senior managers aided by a good representation of parents, members of the local community and specialist agencies on the partnership board, practitioners' forum and parents' forum, account well for the centre's work and ensure that day-to-day management arrangements are effective, clear and understood. As a result, strong partnership working and collaborative assessment procedures continue to underpin a good level of self-evaluation.

Parents, including a majority representing vulnerable families, contribute to good governance. Feedback from families reflects a high level of satisfaction and their

suggestions are used well to bring improvement, for example, providing increased physical activities such as 'Gymfit' at the Active Life Centre and locating events which are more easily accessed in the town centre. Managers continue to make good use of data to reach and tackle the needs of all families in need of support, most notably lone parents, fathers and minority ethnic families. Currently steps are being taken to provide more support for families affected by increasing unemployment and others in need of help to combat alcohol and drugs misuse. Nevertheless, staff communicate well with families and network effectively with partners to sustain good quality provision, care and outcomes for parents and their children; therefore value for money is good.

Good procedures safeguard the children's welfare. These include carefully implemented child protection strategies and secure systems to ensure that all staff at the centre and visiting specialist staff are accurately vetted. Inclusive practice lies at the heart of the centre's work and staff are fully trained in respecting and sustaining equality and diversity, including for children and/or families with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Regular multicultural events and conveniently located activities across the community bring families together and contribute well to community cohesion. In addition, the children's good achievements at the end of their Early Years Foundation Stage education and the narrowing and now below average gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and their peers reflects the centre's good commitment to equality of opportunity and provides further evidence of the centre's good capacity to sustain improvement.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood	2
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which 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

There were no other inspections of services and Early Years Foundation Stage provision that directly informed these inspection judgements.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Octopus Children's Centre on 1–2 December 2011. We judged the centre as good overall. We would like to thank you for allowing us to join with you during some of your sessions and for sparing the time to give us your thoughts on the centre and its activities. You told us how much the centre has helped you to develop your confidence and for some of you it has helped to turn your life around. You told us how the parenting groups in particular, help you to support your children especially in preparing them for school and settling them when they start school. We found that this is helping them to make better progress once they start school, including those who find learning more difficult.

The management of the centre has experienced some change over the past year, but with good support from the local authority, close teamwork with the nearby Pebbles Children's Centre, and well-established partnerships with other providers across Basingstoke, the centre has sustained good quality provision. The centre has also continued to increase the number of families attending its groups, especially some of you who need help the most. It has accomplished this by responding to your ideas and suggestions and relocating some activities at venues which are more easily reached, for example, at the Discovery Centre and by making use of venues more appropriate for physical activity, such as the Active Life Centre. We very much enjoyed observing some of these sessions and others such as the 'Stroll and Roll' walk where the pleasure you and your children get from learning new things and meeting friends was so clearly apparent. In addition, we found that the 'Dad and Me' Saturday sessions for fathers are particularly popular, with several dads attending sessions at more than one centre. We were also pleased how much the centre has helped you to make your homes safer by raising your awareness of how to take better care of your children.

Some of you also told us that because you feel respected by staff you very confident in talking to them about your personal concerns, especially when you need help in dealing with your child's problems. We also found that the centre's close partnerships, for example, with staff at the Pebbles Children's Centre and with health

and local authority staff when following the Common Assessment Framework processes, has helped to provide some of you with valuable additional support.

We found that many of you make a good contribution to the running of the centre offering views as members of the partnership board or parents' forum, completing regular evaluations at the end of courses or by becoming volunteers, for example, in helping to maintain the centre and keep it an attractive and welcoming place. Staff at the centre work very well together and with colleagues in other children's centres to ensure they provide services that meet your needs. They ensure that systems are in place to keep you and your family safe when you use the services.

However, the centre still faces some important challenges. An important one already recognised and being tackled with some success, is to continue to engage as much as possible with those families disadvantaged by a lack of employment.

With good assistance from the local authority the centre has set up good systems to collect data about how many families use its services. Much of this information is used well to evaluate the effectiveness of services that are offered to you. The second challenge though is to share and use this information even more effectively with partner providers to make sure that those families specifically affected by alcohol or drugs abuse are fully supported.

Thank you for your help.

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