

Inspection report for Saxon Way Children's Centre

Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	383808
Inspection dates	30–31 May 2012
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Saxon Way Primary School
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Saxon Way Children's Centre EY368494

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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 the centre leader, the headteacher, representatives of the local authority, members of the centre's advisory board and the school's governing body, front-line staff, representatives of partner organisations including health, and families who use the centre.

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

Information about the centre

Saxon Way Children's Centre was designated in April 2008. It operates from within Saxon Way Primary School. The school's governing body manages the centre on behalf of the local authority. Following a period of significant disruption to staffing at the centre, and considerable building work, most centre staff have taken up post within the last year. Since July 2011, the school's Early Years Foundation Stage leader has been interim centre leader. A substantive centre leader was due to take up post immediately following the inspection. The school's headteacher retains overall strategic responsibility. An advisory board also contributes to the governance structure.

Saxon Way is a phase 2 centre, although the community it serves includes areas that are in the 10% most deprived in the country. The proportion of families living in workless households and/or in receipt of benefits is high. Most families in the area are of White British heritage. Children typically enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills that are much lower than those expected for their age.

The school's governing body manages the on-site full-time day care for children up to five years. This provision was inspected separately as part of the coordinated inspection of the school. The centre offers services either directly, or through signposting to other providers and links with partner agencies. Services include health and family advice and support, and Jobcentre Plus. Activities are also provided to promote children, adult and family learning.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

Leaders have correctly evaluated that Saxon Way Children's Centre provides a satisfactory service to the community. It has rapidly improved in the last ten months. Families that use the centre value the difference it makes for them. As one parent attending the centre with her daughter fed back, 'Not only has the group taught her many things, it's a great support for us mummies too!' Leaders have correctly identified that although attendance is rising fast, not enough families take up some of the opportunities offered. Consequently, the centre has a satisfactory rather than good impact on improving the lives of those living in the reach area.

Supporting children's learning and development is a particular strength of this school-based centre. Children are well prepared for the next stage of their learning. Enjoyment and achievement outcomes are satisfactory overall because opportunities for adults' learning are more limited. That said, the centre is able to demonstrate that services offered are adequately developing families' economic and social well-being.

Leaders have rightly identified the need to shift the balance of the centre's offer further towards those in the community identified as most in need of support. This includes increasing reach and support for children that are part of Common Assessment Framework (CAF) procedures, or those subject to child protection plans. Where there is current engagement, links with social workers are positive. However, this partnership has not led to the centre supporting enough of these most vulnerable children in the community.

Partnerships with health teams are developing well and mutually valued. Most of the centre's activities include a 'be healthy' focus. However, the centre does not have consistent systems to evaluate the impact of its services fully. Therefore, it is not always able to demonstrate the difference these activities make to increasing families' understanding or adoption of healthy lifestyles. Use of data provided by the local authority to evaluate how well the centre is doing against longer-term performance measures is developing well, although this work is at an early stage.

Staff often seek users' views informally. Views expressed are overwhelmingly positive and parents have recognised and appreciated the recent improvements. Plans are in place to introduce a parents' forum to engage families more formally in decision making.

The local authority provides an effective balance of challenge and support to the centre. The interim centre leader has successfully implemented a number of necessary systems that are improving the centre's effectiveness. She has united new and existing staff in a shared determination to improve. Leaders have an accurate and realistic view of how well the centre is doing. Clear plans prioritise appropriately the most important next steps, including securing continuity during the transition to the new centre leader. Taking all of this into account, alongside the rapid development in the last ten months, the centre is demonstrating a satisfactory capacity to sustain improvements.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Engage more families from the centre's reach in services and activities.
- Implement a consistent structure to evaluate services to demonstrate the centre's impact, including those targeted at improving health outcomes.
- Increase services that are targeted specifically to improve outcomes for those identified as most in need, including:
 - strengthening the centre-level partnership with social care services to extend work with children that are subject to child protection plans or Common Assessment Framework procedures.
- Improve outcomes for adults, in particular:
 - increasing opportunities for adult education and parenting courses
 - implementing plans to form a parents' forum.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Through varied groups, including Next Steps and Tumble Time, children are developing skills well. Daycare staff commented that when children start, those that have accessed centre activities settle quickly. They link this with the children having more advanced personal, social and emotional skills.

In the reach area, the gap between the lowest achieving children and the rest is much narrower than that seen nationally. It is also reducing further at a much faster rate, having gone from 27.3% to 22.8% in the last two years. At 44%, the overall proportion of children that reach a good stage of development remains lower than the national average, but is rising. The rapidly increasing proportion of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage that has previously accessed centre services indicates that this trend is set to continue.

Parents attending sessions with their children also report their own enjoyment. Their feedback, and the centre's activity evaluations, show some improvements in parents' confidence or interaction with their children, such as getting more involved during Little Chefs, then implementing the ideas at home. They also appreciate the positive social opportunities these sessions bring for adults. As one parent commented, 'It's a good opportunity to meet and make friends but still be near to the children.'

Almost one third of families have engaged in services that develop skills towards future employability, from confidence building to computer skills. Out of the 44 clients that to date have engaged with the Reach Out to Work (RO2W) scheme, 43% secured employment and 9% progressed to further training. Volunteers make a valuable contribution. They were instrumental in sustaining some services through the staffing difficulties. The previous Parents' Voice group has not recently met, but a number of parents have expressed an interest in contributing to the planned Parents' Forum. The majority of families using the centre express their views informally, through either talking to staff, or writing comments on speech bubbles.

The emphasis placed on health matters through activities is rightly a priority area for the centre. Obesity levels at the end of Reception Year remain above both national and local authority averages at 11.1%. The centre can demonstrate an immediate impact of some of its services. For example, participants' rating of their own fitness levels before and after a Dance for Health course showed an average 67% increase. Most of the participants in sessions such as Let's Get Active report increased awareness of their child's fitness levels. However, the centre uses such systems inconsistently, so the centre is unable to evaluate the impact of all services in this or similar ways.

Centre figures show that breastfeeding peer-support is securing a broadly average success rate at six to eight weeks, at 45%. Figures for the health visitor base area as a whole previously showed an improvement of around 11%. After changes to the base area, latest figures are lower, and below the national average at 39%. Although arrangements are in place now, due to the changes it is too soon to use these figures to determine longer term trends. Midwifery services are now located on site, and strong working relationships have led to the centre successfully engaging all pregnant teenagers in the area and most teenage mothers.

The behaviour of children and adults contributes suitably to a safe, welcoming environment. Where the centre has occasionally been involved with children that are subject to child protection plans, records demonstrate some improvements to the

well-being and protection of vulnerable children. Leaders recognise that the centre could be part of a package of support more often. Staff are trained in Common Assessment Framework procedures but currently have no open cases.

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	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 children and parents, including those from target groups, 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 parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
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?

3

The centre engages directly with approximately 22% of children aged from birth to five years living within the reach area, although 68% from the reach area attend Saxon Way or another local centre. Previously, families tended to access services at other centres where they saw the midwife. Now, with on-site midwifery services four days per week and a much wider range of services meeting families' needs better, attendances at the centre's activities are satisfactory, but rising rapidly and consistently; comparing the last two years they have more than doubled. While the centre has had to increase a couple of sessions to cope with demand, many activities have available capacity. With the exception of the significant success in engaging teenage mothers, the proportions of other target groups reached are broadly similar. This includes fathers, ethnic minorities, lone parents and children or families with disabilities.

Staff use consistent formats to plan and review individual sessions adequately. Parents' views and staff's own observations enable staff to adjust the provision between sessions to ensure they meet families' needs. Session timings and combining separate services to create Let's Get Active/Little Chefs are just two examples of changes made in response to parents' views. Links with partners to support the assessment of families' needs in the area are developing well, but not enough services are targeted precisely enough. The centre currently offers nineteen services that welcome all families, but only five that target specific areas of particular need for identified groups or individuals.

Activities for children take good account of the approach of the Early Years Foundation Stage. In Toddler Bizz, for example, staff model play through varied opportunities that support all areas of children’s development. Such sessions also promote adult and family learning adequately because staff encourage parents to participate and model how to interact with children. One father reported how sessions at the centre had helped encourage his child’s development and helped him manage their behaviour, adding, ‘I feel I have learned so much.’ Previously, the centre has offered specific parenting courses, such as Toddler Tantrums, but leaders recognise that recently these opportunities have been limited.

Those who use the centre constantly report how staff are ‘extremely approachable and friendly’. One parent commented, ‘Staff notice if you are feeling stressed. They don’t fuss but will make you a cup of tea and play with baby while you drink it.’ Others talked of the centre being ‘a lifeline’. Plentiful and accessible information is available in the centre about a wide range of other services. The centre has correctly begun to track where it signposts to other providers so it can check if families’ needs have been met and the difference the service has made, but it is too soon to evaluate the impact of this.

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	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	3

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Effective support from the local authority is enabling the centre to be increasingly strategic. Leaders have implemented appropriate systems, from consistent planning and evaluation formats for individual sessions to recording and tracking the impact of signposting to other providers. Important aspects of this work are too recent to have significantly improved outcomes for families. The local authority has correctly identified that greater consistency in overall service evaluations, to demonstrate their impact, is still a priority.

A representative range of partners makes up the centre’s advisory board. Recent training from the local authority for members of both the advisory board and the governing body has rightly focused on how both can balance their support for the centre’s work with increasing challenge to centre leaders and each other to secure improvements. Staff and leaders are very motivated to secure these improvements and plentiful ideas and suggestions inform the well-structured plans of how to get there. Some parents are involved in the governance of the centre as representatives

on the advisory board. Considering satisfactory attendance levels and outcomes for families, the centre adequately meets the needs of families, including target groups, and provides satisfactory value for money.

Strengthening partnerships are supporting the increasing effectiveness of the centre well, for example the link with Jobcentre Plus to provide the RO2W scheme or health to bring midwifery services on site. The local authority has a clear strategy for sharing information between agencies. However, links at ground level between different partners are not sufficiently developed to maximise opportunities for the centre to contribute to packages of support for the most vulnerable children.

Arrangements are in place to ensure adequate safeguarding of children and families. Statutory background checks of staff and volunteers are carried out and records kept to ensure all have relevant and up-to-date child protection training. The centre distributes safety equipment during its annual Child Safety Week, although does not monitor the uptake or impact of this. Where necessary, staff guide victims of domestic violence towards Freedom programmes or refuges locally. Children and families with disabilities are welcomed and included in centre activities so that the proportion that is engaged is broadly similar to other groups. However, beyond drop-in sessions with the speech and language therapist, there are no services targeted specifically at this group.

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	3
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	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 partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services provided by the centre to meet its core purpose	3
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	3

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

The coordinated inspection of Saxon Way Primary School, and early years and childcare provision, 29–30 May 2012 was included.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Saxon Way Children's Centre on 30 and 31 May 2012. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

This is also how those responsible for running the centre judge it. It has recently been improving quickly, as a number of you have noticed and commented. Leaders have identified appropriate things to work on next to help the centre continue to improve. They were already aware of many of the areas that we have made recommendations for further improvement. They also recognise how they can improve one or two other areas we have identified.

You told us that you really value the difference the centre makes for you and your families. We saw lots of other evidence to support this. In the last ten months, the numbers of you coming to the centre have risen rapidly. This is very important, because we judge a children's centre on the difference it makes for those living in its reach area, not just those who attend. The centre knows it still has more to do to reach even more families and we agree that it should continue to work hard at this.

Supporting your children's learning and development is a particular strength of the centre. Activities help your children settle quickly when they start nursery or school. They also give you ideas to support your children's development and a number of you told us how you use these at home. Leaders agree that the centre could provide more opportunities for adult learning or specific parenting courses too. We were particularly pleased to see how well many of you have done that have accessed the Reach Out to Work (RO2W) scheme in partnership with Jobcentre Plus.

Most of the activities run by the centre include a 'be healthy' focus. We were very interested to see how those of you who had taken part in sessions like Dance for Health and Let's Get Active said you had developed a greater awareness of your own and your child's fitness. We have asked the centre to make sure that it always evaluate services to see what difference they make. The centre's links with its partners are developing well. We were delighted to see that you are able to see the midwife on-site and particularly impressed how the teenage specialist has helped engage so many of you that are already mums, or expecting.

The centre has put required systems in place to make sure that you and your families are safe and protected when using the centre. We have asked that the centre works more closely with other agencies to make sure they can offer more support to the most vulnerable children and families in the community too.

There are many ways that the centre has used your views to make sure activities meet your needs. Staff work hard to balance different opinions and their own expertise to make the right decision. We were pleased that a number of you have said you may be interested in being more involved in decision making at the centre. We have asked leaders to put into place their plans to create a Parents' Forum. We hope many of you will take the opportunity to join in with this group.

We would like to say a special thank you to all of you who spoke with us during the inspection. Your views are an important part of the process and we appreciated the time you spent to either meet with us, or chat during activities.

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