

Inspection report for Acorns Children's Centre

Local authority	Suffolk
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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 one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre management team, the local authority, health professionals, representatives from the advisory board, frontline staff, parents and partner agencies.

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

Information about the centre

Acorns Children's Centre is located within the Stowmarket Health Centre. The premises also house a GP surgery, child development unit, dentist, podiatrist, chemist, social care assessment unit, health visitors and pharmacy. It is a phase two children's centre, designated in June 2007. It has been developed from a family centre with the premises being refurbished to provide a playroom, office space, meeting rooms and community kitchen. There is also outdoor space which includes a community garden.

The centre manager is responsible for the day-to-day running of the centre and also has responsibility for Sunshine Children's Centre. The centres work in close cooperation with each other. The centre provides full core provision and works in partnership with a number of agencies. Governance arrangements are provided by the local authority. An advisory board oversees the work of the two centres within the locality.

The centre covers the geographical area of Stowmarket, which is a market town in Suffolk, and some surrounding rural villages. The centre serves an area which is mixed in terms of deprivation, with no communities categorised as being in the top 30% of the most deprived areas. There are pockets of affluence and some of relative

deprivation. Homes consist of social housing, rented accommodation and privately owned homes.

There are 1,365 children under the age of five in the reach area. Around 170 families are claiming out-of-work benefits. The majority of children are from White British backgrounds.

The centre does not provide early years childcare, but offers advice and guidance to parents and carers on the day-care and childminding facilities available within the local community. On entry to early years provision, children's skills, knowledge and abilities are below with those expected for their age.

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

Acorn Children's Centre is a good centre where all staff work hard to ensure they meet the needs of all target groups in the community they serve. Those who use the services provided by the centre are full of praise for the supportiveness of the centre's staff and the quality of the activities provided. The centre provides outstanding care, guidance and support for users. Many users told inspectors the centre was their 'lifeline' and some described it as their 'second home'.

Partnerships are well established, and those with health services, Home-Start, the 'Opportunities Group' and social care are particularly strong and are based on mutual professional respect and frequent sharing of information. As a result, an increasing number of children and adults across all target groups understand how to lead healthy lives, keep safe and to make good progress in a wide range of achievements.

Centre users report they feel safe within the setting. This reflects the good attention given by staff towards ensuring the welfare and safety of all users. There are good safeguarding arrangements, and the promotion of children's safety is supported well through all activities. The mutual respect between users and staff ensures the former feel totally confident in sharing any concerns they may have. Well-trained staff and

strong multi-agency working provide clear and carefully targeted support and guidance for families, especially for those identified as being at risk, with the result that their well-being is improved. Assessments of need are thorough, and concerns are followed through with diligence by a range of professionals. Regular meetings about children whose circumstances make them vulnerable ensure that support is targeted effectively to ensure that levels of care within their families improve.

Inclusion is central to the vision of the centre and all staff have a commitment to promoting equality and diversity. The centre is meeting the elements of its core purpose well and is particularly successful in its targeted work to support children and families who are in most need of support. The carefully planned and well-organised provision by staff in the centre, and their ability to signpost families to all services available, make a good contribution to improving the knowledge, skills and enjoyment of families.

Effective leadership of the centre ensures good provision and good outcomes. The well-organised team of staff is committed to providing the best possible service to the families in the centre's reach area. The local authority provides the centre with useful data, and staff collect further data and information to add to what is already known about the effect of services on families and children. However, the data are not analysed sharply enough to provide really clear information to support the centre's self-evaluation and are not always specific enough to enable the centre to measure the impact of its services accurately. Nonetheless, the centre has an accurate understanding of its strengths and areas for development, and case-study evidence is robust and shows considerable impact for the most vulnerable families in the community. As a result, the centre is focused on the right priorities and targets resources efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families in the reach area, especially those most in need, thereby demonstrating the centre's good capacity to improve.

Parents are encouraged to contribute ideas and evaluate the success of the various activities and courses that the centre provides; they are not so strongly involved in the parents' group and the advisory board where decisions are made. This advisory board is well led and chaired; however, it recognises that the lack of sharp measurable targets in the action plans hinders the advisory board's ability to fully evaluate the impact of the centre's work and provide challenge.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Ensure the action plan contains sharp measurable targets to enable the advisory board to provide challenge.
- Sharpen the approach to collecting, collating and analysing data so that the centre is able to improve self-evaluation and to prove further that it is making a difference for all its users.

- Increase the opportunities for a greater number of parents to be routinely involved in the decision-making process to shape future services.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Outcomes for those with emotional or mental health issues are good because of close links with a range of voluntary and statutory services and the support of centre staff. Many identified the effective support they receive when they feel isolated, are new to the area or experience times of crisis, making similar comments to one parent who said, 'The centre workers are people I can talk to when things are getting too much, or just for reassurance as I don't have immediate family close to talk to.' Baby massage is enjoyed by parents and their babies and successfully promotes emotional bonding between parents and their children. Breastfeeding rates in the area are improving because the support group at the centre guides and encourages new mothers. Parents enjoy growing and caring for plants together with their children in the community garden and by taking part in the popular 'Little Diggers' group.

Families using the centre, especially those in often highly stressful circumstances, are unanimous that the staff have their trust to provide the support they need to keep their families safe. Free safety equipment packs are provided for the most vulnerable. Case studies show that effective multi-agency work and a clear understanding of the Common Assessment Framework process are helping to keep children and their families safe, including those subject to a child protection plan.

Parents and children enjoy a broad range of services to promote achievement, such as 'Toy and Toast' and 'Sing, Sign and Play'. As a result, children are making increasingly good progress. The percentage of children achieving 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is improving and is higher than the national average. The gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the rest is declining; in 2011 it was at 28.15% which is below the national average of 31.4%.

There are some examples of adults benefiting from attending parenting courses and, to a lesser degree, accessing adult learning and further training. The centre is in the process of introducing a 'Community Parents' programme and offering more general volunteering opportunities at the centre in order to build upon parents' increasing confidence and self-belief and to help them develop further skills to assist them in gaining employment and improving economic stability. The centre signposts users to other agencies for support with employment and training opportunities; however, it does not currently track these referrals. Therefore, the centre is not always able to demonstrate its impact in this area.

Families who attend the centre have strong and positive relationships with all the staff that help to promote their well-being and raise self-esteem. These help them to be confident to share their views. However, parents do not as yet have a strong voice in making important decisions about the centre's planning for the future.

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	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?

2

Case studies, discussions with families and evidence from regular evaluations by parents show that there is a high level of satisfaction with the services provided by the children's centre. Parents feel listened to and valued. Because the centre takes families' views into account, the activities meet their needs well and retention rates are high. Users report how much they enjoy socialising with the friends they have met at the centre.

The centre promotes the purposeful learning, development and enjoyment of children well, as reflected in their good achievement by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Parents develop a greater awareness of the importance of play and this helps them to support children's learning at home. Parents who have attended some parenting workshops and courses confirm they help them feel more confident in managing their children's behaviour.

Partners from health and social services comment positively on how the work of the centre has supported families and made a difference to their lives. The quality of care, guidance and support is excellent. Highly skilled, dedicated and enthusiastic staff ensure there is always a warm welcome and a listening ear readily available for users. Staff act as good role models and work sensitively and effectively with parents and children ensuring families can benefit fully from the provision. Strong outreach work gives good support to those who are not yet ready to attend the centre. By working in a firm and persistent way, the centre ensures that those who are hardest to reach, and need support the most, do in fact receive it. Evidence shows that families often turn to the centre in times of crisis as they are confident that they will be well supported and their well-being is of the highest priority.

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	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

Leadership and management focus well on the needs of the most vulnerable families in the area. The centre has, quite rightly, put its energy into ensuring that those families in most need have access to the services they need. Therefore, the centre has been successful in engaging with an increasing percentage of families from all target groups within the reach area, including disabled adults and children and those with special educational needs. This is partly due to robust multi-agency working being in place to ensure appropriate and timely referrals are made to the centre. It is all a reflection of the skill, enthusiasm and commitment of all staff. Persistent and concerted action is now being taken to ensure the centre reaches an even higher percentage of all families within the area.

The centre manager recognises that the staff, as yet, do not have the skills to interpret data to best effect. In response, the local authority has put in place training, on which the centre manager has secured a place. Despite this, the centre has a good understanding of its strengths and knows what the key areas for development are. A good range of monitoring and evaluation systems ensure high-quality services. Case studies are routinely collected to demonstrate the good impact services have for individual families. However, staff are currently reviewing their systems of evaluation to ensure that they include the full range of evidence from partners to demonstrate even more fully the impact their service has on outcomes.

The centre uses its resources well and there are clear examples of activities being adapted or developed in response to parents' requests and needs. Staff provide exceptionally good levels of care, are targeting the right priorities and have a beneficial impact on those parents and children who access the centre's services; therefore, value for money is good.

Safeguarding procedures are good. Procedures to check the suitability of all adults who might come into contact with children are thorough. Risk assessments are carried out for all of the centre's activities. There is a strong emphasis on safety in the groups and activities provided for users.

Governance and accountability arrangements are good. Staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities. Procedures for performance management are thorough and used well to develop the skills and expertise of centre staff. Staff supervision is

valued by staff, as are the professional development opportunities they receive. The local authority provides a clear framework for the centre and effective oversight. The advisory board provides good levels of support, but it is in the early stages of developing its ability to challenge the centre leaders. The introduction of sharp measurable targets in the action plans will assist the advisory board to evaluate fully the impact of the centre's work and provide challenge.

The advisory board has struggled to have consistent and sustained representation from parents. Therefore, parents are not yet sufficiently involved in the development of the centre. As currently only a very few parents attend, plans are in place to make more parents aware of the parents' groups, with the intention of supporting them to attend the advisory board.

Partnerships are pivotal to the centre's good work. All partners spoken to were unanimous in their appreciation of the services and support they could access at the centre. The work with the health and social work teams and Home-Start is extremely effective. Together, they provide a thorough 'team around the child' approach to ensure that the most vulnerable children and families are protected and cared for.

Equality and inclusion are central strands of the centre's work. The friendly and inclusive environment created within the centre is clearly valued by all users of the centre. Staff have a clear focus on supporting all users to ensure that no-one is left out and everyone feels valued. However, the centre does not have its own entrance and its reception area is not clearly signposted when entering the building. The centre is exploring ways of giving the centre a greater presence within the main entrance of the health centre and has organised for better signposting outside the premises so that it is more inviting to families who are passing by. Families with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are given a good level of support through the centre's work with the 'Opportunities Group'. Outreach work has been tailored to meet users' needs, and the centre has recently secured an additional outreach post which will enable the centre to reach more families.

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	2

adults	
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	3

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

None

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Acorns Children's Centre on 15–16 August 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

We would like to thank all of you who took the time to talk to us about your involvement and experiences at the centre. It was very enjoyable to meet with you and it was very helpful to hear what the centre means to you and your families. You made it very clear to us that you greatly appreciate the staff and services at the centre. Many of you told us about the positive impact the centre has had on your lives, particularly when you may be experiencing difficulties.

You told us that you think that the centre is a safe place for parents and their children. Inspectors agree with this view and think that staff work very well to ensure the health and safety of all who use the centre. The centre is also very good at helping children in need to be safe through very effective partnership and multi-agency working. Procedures for keeping children and families safe are good. Staff are dedicated to providing a secure environment and they work closely with other agencies to obtain the specialist support you need. This helps them to keep children safe and reduces accidents and harm. You told us how you value the safety equipment provided by the centre which enables you to keep your children safe in your home.

Staff are helping you to keep you and your children healthy by encouraging new mothers to breastfeed and by promoting healthy eating. It was a joy to see you enjoying caring for plants and eating vegetables that you have grown at the 'Little Diggers' group.

The centre is a very happy and well-resourced place. Many of you told us how much you and your children enjoy attending groups and developing new skills. We noted that children are making increasingly good progress. The percentage of children achieving 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage profile is improving and is higher than the national average. You told us how the centre has helped you to develop your confidence, self-esteem and emotional well-being. This has led to some of you beginning to undertake formal training and qualifications and be successful in returning to work. A few of you are in the process of becoming 'community parents' and developing new skills.

The care, guidance and support that you and your children receive are excellent. This is because the staff are very successful at helping you to decide how to improve your lives and then making sure that you access the right services to do this. Those of you we spoke to said how much you appreciated that there is always someone to help when you need advice. Many of you who have felt isolated and alone with your problems say you have made friends as a result of the centre's work.

We recognise how well the centre is managed. All staff work together very well and share a commitment towards meeting your needs and providing the relevant support. The centre is becoming an important part of the local community. In order to develop further, we have asked the centre to sharpen the approach to collecting, collating and analysing data so that it is able to improve self-evaluation and to prove that it is making a difference for all its users.

The centre has a parents' group and an advisory group which we would like more of you to attend. This will enable you to have a bigger voice in the decision-making process at the centre to shape the services and activities that the centre provides. We have asked the centre to encourage and support you to become involved in these groups.

The advisory board provides good levels of support but it is in the early stages of developing its ability to challenge the centre leaders. We have asked the centre to review its action plans so they contain sharp measurable targets to assist the advisory board to fully evaluate the impact of the centre's work and provide challenge.

We recognise how inclusive the centre is and staff ensure all families are welcome. The work with the 'Opportunities Group' is providing good support to children and their parents with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The centre is currently looking into providing better signage inside and outside the building to make it more visible for new families when they are walking past. We know that existing users are actively encouraging other families to use the centre.

We enjoyed our time at your centre. It was a privilege to be able to talk with you. Your honesty and openness helped us immensely during the inspection. We are very grateful for your help and we wish you every success in the future.

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