

Inspection report for Marsh Green Children's Centre

Local authority	London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
Inspection number	404400
Inspection dates	2–3 October 2012
Reporting inspector	Kath Beck

Centre leader	Jill Gallagher
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Centre address	New Road Dagenham RM10 9NH
Telephone number	020 8724 1553
Fax number	Not applicable
Email address	marshgreenchildrenscentre@lbbd.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	Marsh Green Primary School: URN 101211
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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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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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 the centre manager, the headteacher of the co-located primary school, six volunteers, and two outreach workers. They also met with parents and representatives from the local authority, partner agencies, health services, the Children's Centre Community Forum and parents' forum.

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

Information about the centre

Marsh Green Children's Centre is a phase 2 centre that opened in November 2006. It is situated on the same site as Marsh Green Primary School and is operated by the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The Children's Centre Community Forum acts as the advisory board. The centre is one of four children's centres situated in the south east corner of the borough that work together in partnership. The manager is also the manager of another centre nearby. Marsh Green serves part of Goresbrook ward, and Village and River wards. These are among the top 10% to 40% most deprived areas of the country and include large industrial zones.

To meet its core purpose, the centre provides childcare, child and family health services, employment and benefits advice. Outreach services are arranged in the local library and other locations within the community. There has been a rapid rise in the number of families with children under five-years-old across the borough. Some 24.7% live in workless households and the proportion on benefits is high. The majority of families come from White British, Asian, African or Black British backgrounds. Many speak English as an additional language. Families live in semi-detached or terraced homes, or high rise flats. Children's knowledge, skills and abilities on entry to early years provision are below those usually found, especially in

communication and language skills. The centre is taking part in a national payment by results pilot.

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

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

1

Main findings

Marsh Green Children’s Centre plays an essential role at the heart of the community in enabling a very large majority of families to gain the skills to make important changes to their lives. Excellent leadership and management at all levels inspire staff to bring about outstanding outcomes for families using the centre. The need to safeguard children and their families permeates all aspects of the centre’s work and results in them being exceptionally well protected. Ground-breaking approaches and highly-effective partnerships with a range of agencies, especially to improve the financial well-being of many families, and the communication skills of young children are having a significantly positive impact. One parent said, ‘I am so pleased I attended all the sessions to help my son talk as they helped me to overcome the frustrations of trying to communicate with him.’

Excellent care, guidance, and support provided by staff help parents to make decisions that alter their lifestyles for the better. Careful analysis of individual needs and assistance to access a wide range of courses are raising parents’ confidence, self-esteem and aspirations for their families. The ‘work club’ provides parents with the skills they need to enter the workplace. Skilled sharing of information and volunteering help to set parents on the career path they wish to follow. The promotion of equality and diversity is a strength of the centre. Families who speak English as an additional language, and who represent the diverse nature of the community, are fully included in all that the centre has to offer.

An exceptionally rich range of activities and courses is enabling parents and children to make excellent progress in their personal, social, and educational development. Parents and children have many opportunities to play and learn together. However, the provision for children’s outside play is not planned consistently to be as engaging as indoor provision. The centre places considerable emphasis on promoting healthy lifestyles, and is very successful in helping families to be emotionally, physically and

mentally healthy. The centre has, over the last year, made extensive provision to encourage families to cook healthy food and take exercise together. Its work is contributing fully to the borough-wide initiative to enable more children to have a healthy start in life and has helped reduce the number of five-year-old children who are obese. Despite this, obesity rates remain above the national average. Plans to extend the provision to help reduce obesity levels further are at an early stage of implementation.

The local authority has very high expectations for staff and families and, through its quality assurance, provides considerable challenge to the centre as well as support to bring about the best possible outcomes. High-quality, sophisticated and accurate self-evaluation, linked to the very effective collection and use of data, gives all leaders and managers an excellent understanding of the strengths and areas for development within the centre. These factors, together with the sharply-focused improvement plan, innovative strategies to track the impact of developments, and the full involvement of parents in decision-making, show that the centre has an outstanding capacity to improve.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- In conjunction with the local authority, implement fully the plans to extend provision to promote healthy lifestyles to further reduce the levels of obesity of Reception-age children.
- Refine the plans for outside play so that activities engage children as well as those provided indoors.

How good are outcomes for families?

1

Keeping children safe is at the heart of the centre's work and its highly effective provision leads to outstanding outcomes. Families feel safe and are confident that any concerns they have will be dealt with quickly. Excellent working partnerships with multi-agency teams, and family support teams allow staff to intervene at an early stage and this results in a higher number of children who are safeguarded. Families are assessed carefully by the multi-agency team for the level of support they need and whether they should be subject to Common Assessment Framework processes, child in need or child protection plans. Parents are required to attend parenting courses at the centre, or are supported by outreach workers. Their progress is monitored carefully to ensure children are safe. Individual support with regard to safety in the home, including that to help prevent domestic violence, is contributing very well to keeping children safe. Robust risk assessments, to which families contribute, also keep them safe especially when attending events in the locality.

Children and parents really enjoy the activities provided for them. Staff are extremely successful in raising the aspirations of families. Through the work club, the centre is very effective in enabling high numbers of parents, 71 in the past year, to gain the

skills they need and the confidence to return to work. One parent said, 'Without the centre, I would not have had the courage to go back to work.' Those who speak very little English attend 'conversation' classes and enhance their personal development as well as their speaking skills. These classes enhance their language skills and enable them to move on to taking English for speakers of other languages courses when ready. All who attend pass. Parents who become volunteers follow personalised programmes that develop their skills. Many undertake courses that lead to qualifications, and they have gained paid employment. Two volunteers have achieved a university degree in social care due to the high-quality support provided by the centre.

Through fun activities, children make rapid progress in their learning. The initiative to help families to play and communicate effectively with their children at an early age is raising the quality of children's speech to nationally expected levels. Data show that the percentage of children gaining 78+ scale points in assessments at age five in the locality, an average of 67% across three schools, has risen rapidly from a low level of 28% across the same schools since 2009. This compares well to the national average. Last year the gap between the 20% lowest achieving children and the rest within the locality was reduced by 2.7% and reflects well on the impact services are having.

The emotional well-being of families is strengthened by attendance at parenting classes and the relief gained when financial and legal anxieties are eased. In partnership with an outside agency, the centre has helped a large number of families to access the benefits to which they are entitled, and free legal advice. The coffee morning run by parents is one of many activities that reduces their sense of isolation, and helps them to make new friends. One parent said, 'I moved here and did not know anyone until I came to the centre.'

Healthy weights for children are strongly promoted at an early stage. The new 'love mums' initiative, to promote healthy breast and bottle feeding when children are very young, is the first step to reducing obesity at the age of five. The percentage of mothers sustaining breastfeeding has risen and is now above the national average. In partnership with schools and local park rangers, the centre is providing many programmes for families to cook, eat and exercise together throughout the year. Food in the centre is nourishing and sessions result in parents knowing how to promote healthier ways to eat on a budget. This programme has brought about a significant reduction in obesity levels, to 13% this year. The centre has robust plans, along with its partners in health, to build on its successful programme and achieve a further reduction to the national average of 9%.

Parents play a major role in decision making in the centre through the Children's Centre Community Forum. Their views have influenced the 'love mums' initiative, 'work club' and the broad range of activities in the centre and the locality. Parents are enterprising, having set up a parents' forum with a constitution and bank account for fundraising activities, and to support local celebrations, such as the Jubilee.

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	1
The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them	1
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	1
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	1
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	1

How good is the provision?

1

Staff make excellent use of a rich range of data, local knowledge, and information from the local authority, parents and key partners to plan a broad programme that meets universal and targeted needs exceptionally well. The centre is extremely successful in reaching almost three quarters of families in the area. This represents a rise of 60% in the past year as more fathers and White British, lone parents, workless families, and teen parents use the centre regularly. Participation rates are high because staff use text messages as reminders and telephone conversations to ensure that courses and activities are relevant to parents' wishes and needs. Parents are confident that their children are cared for really well in the crèche while they undergo training. Timings of sessions are arranged to ensure good attendance, and art and craft activities at the weekends are popular.

Provision to help children learn is outstanding, especially with regard to their speech and language development. Baby massage helps parents to bond with their child and Babbling Babes, Toddler Talk, Little Rhyme Makers, that include signing, allow parents to learn alongside their children and develop their communication skills successfully. Stay and Play, the crèche and coffee morning give further opportunities for children to enhance their personal, emotional, social and physical development. On occasion, however, the provision for young children outside at these times is not as engaging as inside.

Course leaders, line managers and outreach workers use parents' prior learning and achievements to develop individual programmes so parents can achieve their goals. Parents work with key partners, such as the local college, or private and voluntary providers, to gain the skills they need. Feedback from parents and these partners shows that parents are building on their successes and gaining higher levels of qualification. A recent customer service training course, presented at the request of

parents, was well attended and resulted in some attendees gaining work. To prevent duplication, parenting and other courses are presented in different centres in the locality, and at different times, and parents are therefore keen to attend.

Families speak highly of the warm welcome they receive when they visit the centre. 'The staff have always got time for us,' one said. Case studies indicate that families receive intensive support during times of crisis. On occasion outreach workers, or staff from key partners, act as advocates for families when there are difficult legal, benefits or housing issues to deal with. Health services provide much useful advice to reduce the number of children in homes where parents smoke or abuse a range of substances. Staff at the centre are well trained to provide information, advice and guidance to parents wishing to return to work. Those working in childcare are skilled at teaching parents to help their children to become independent.

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	1
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	1
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	1

How effective are the leadership and management?

1

Those responsible for governance, including leaders and managers at all levels, are ambitious and highly successful in the pursuit of excellence in provision and achieving excellent outcomes for families. The local authority's participation in the payment by results pilot programme has brought many positive changes and innovations to the ways in which senior leaders and those in the centre monitor and evaluate the impact of their work. In particular, it has brought about a strong sense of common purpose. All staff understand how they can help families to change their lives for the better in the short and longer term. Data collected show that many more families are sustaining their contact with the centre for longer periods of time and are taking up the wide range of services on offer. This is because the centre enables them to build on their successes and enjoyment of courses. Frequent evaluations, including the views of parents, ensure that progress towards achieving sharply-focused developments and challenging targets in the centre's improvement plan are maintained at a brisk pace. Where changes are needed they are implemented rapidly.

Decision making at all levels is robust. There are excellent, clear lines of responsibility, supervision and communication. All staff are held to account for the success of the centre through personal targets and appraisal. The strong links between strategic planning, local developments and the centre's provision have

contributed to the outstanding outcomes. Families know about the centre’s priorities to help them gain skills to return to work and enhance their child’s play and communication skills, supporting the activities fully. Parents serving on the Children’s Centre Community Forum review the centre’s provision and its impact, and offer suggestions for changes regularly.

The centre exemplifies high-quality practice in safeguarding. Borough policies and structures are exceptionally clear about roles, responsibilities, policies and procedures to be followed at all times. Volunteers and all staff have been trained well to recognise safeguarding matters and are subjected to enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks. Concerns raised are forwarded to the multi-agency team for assessment as to the best protocol to follow to safeguard the children. This enables a rapid response and involvement of the relevant key agencies. The smooth transfer of information informs assessments carried out under the Common Assessment Framework.

The inclusion of families and children in the area is promoted very effectively as indicated by the high levels of engagement from all target groups. Locality events contribute greatly to improving community cohesion. Inequalities are swiftly identified, such as those who cannot yet access classes to learn English as they cannot speak the language sufficiently. As soon as this was recognised staff introduced sessions that develop conversational English, until the appropriate level for entry to accredited courses is reached. Different faiths, cultures and events are celebrated, such as Black History Month. Songs in Little Rhyme Makers have been provided and recorded by families from different backgrounds. The centre engages with many families with a disability or special educational needs, liaising closely with the specialist provision in the Heathway Centre.

Partnerships with other professionals, childminders, and representatives from the private, voluntary and independent sector are highly successful in supporting high-quality outcomes for families, especially with regard to their economic well-being. Parents welcome their partnership with the centre that enables them to grow in confidence with their children.

The centre provides excellent value for money. Space is used very efficiently and resources for young children are high quality. Staff expertise is shared with other centres in the locality. Costs to present courses and activities are always calculated at the planning stage and reviewed rigorously at the end for their cost effectiveness.

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	1
The effectiveness of evaluation and its use in setting ambitious targets which secure improvement in outcomes	1
The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and	1

effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups	
The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties	1
The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults	1
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	1
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	1

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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Marsh Green Children's Centre on 2 and 3 October 2012. We judged the centre as outstanding overall.

It was a pleasure to meet with you when we visited the centre recently. Thank you for making an important contribution to the inspection. We were pleased to talk to you and listen to the many ways in which staff have helped you to make important changes to your lives. You said that you are always made to feel welcome at the centre and have received excellent support in times of crisis.

Many of you mentioned that the centre has given you a great deal of confidence to do things that you did not feel were possible before. One of you said, 'Without the centre, I would not have had the courage to go back to work.' Those of you who volunteer told us that the work experience provided by the centre helped you to get work. Sometimes you thought you wanted to work in an office, but the centre staff helped you to realise that a career with children or in customer service met your needs better.

Everyone at the centre is very keen for you to be healthy, stay safe, achieve well personally and help your children to do as well as they can. Staff help you to have

fewer worries about finances as they put you in touch with experts who help you to receive the benefits to which you are entitled, who can advise you about housing, and provide legal advice. The parents' forum and Children's Centre Community Forum enable you to have your say in the decisions that the leaders and managers are making about the centre. You made an important contribution to Little Rhyme Makers, suggesting songs from your home country and making a recording of them to share. The parents' forum helps you to be enterprising and to raise funds for the centre. You mentioned you would like a 'work club' to help you to gain the skills to return to work. The centre has provided this and it has also helped many of you to successfully return to work.

In recent weeks you have contributed very effectively to the development of the 'love mums' project to encourage mothers to feed their babies in healthy ways. The centre has also made provision for you to cook and take exercise with your children to show you how to eat well on a budget. This has helped to reduce the number of obese children at the age of five, but there is work to do to reduce this further. We have asked the staff at the centre to work with the local authority to implement their plans to extend this programme, so that even fewer children are overweight at age five.

You told us that you really enjoy the many opportunities for you to play and have fun with your children. We agree that your children are cared for to a high standard in the crèche, and activities such as Stay and Play, Babbling Babes, and Toddler Talk are great fun. Staff make the most of all the opportunities to help you to help your child to speak well and communicate with you clearly. Resources indoors are better than those outside. We have asked the centre to improve the types of activities they provide for the children to play outside.

Staff provide you with excellent care, guidance and support, especially in times of crisis or if you are unsure what to do to keep your children safe. Safeguarding is at the heart of the centre's work and the family support workers help you to think of the ways you can keep your children safe at home. The centre is extremely welcoming to everyone in the community. We were very pleased to hear that those of you who are keen to learn English can sign up to conversation classes before taking the next step to a course with a qualification.

Everyone who has a responsibility for the centre wants to make it the best it can be. They listen carefully to your views and choose the parenting programmes that are known to be successful in assisting you to understand your children and their behaviour better. It is good to know that many more of you are making the most of the rich range of activities the centre provides for you. You said that the staff had helped you to find success, and so you attended other enjoyable events. Some of you said that once you had passed one qualification you wanted to move on to another.

An outstanding centre can continue to improve and we are sure that you will add your ideas to its outstanding provision by further improving the outside play area and

to find ways to help some families to lead even more healthy lifestyles. We wish you continued success for the future.

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