

Inspection report for Elm Park Children's Centre

Local authority	London Borough of Havering
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Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
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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 the acting centre manager and staff, the area team leader, and representatives of Children's Centres' Local Advisory Group (CLAGG). They also spoke to partner agencies, for example health services and social care, Havering Adult College, parents and other users of the centre.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the business plan, evaluations and numerous case studies.

Information about the centre

This phase two centre was designated in February 2008. Its services fulfil the full core purpose and are offered from a purpose-built building that is open from Monday to Friday, 52 weeks of the year, apart from Bank Holidays, from 8.30 a.m. until 6.00 p.m.

The centre is managed directly by the local authority, with strategic matters discussed at the CLAGG meetings. There is an acting centre manager covering the temporary absence of the substantive manager. The centre manager's post has been held by five different people since the centre opened. Significant restructuring of the local authority's services was completed in April 2012. As a result, the borough's children's centres' main role is now to support the most vulnerable in the community by delivering targeted services to families with children up to the age of 13.

The reach area covers nine super output areas and is relatively affluent, ranked in the 62% most deprived areas in England. White British heritage families account for 92.3% of the population of Havering. Black residents are estimated to be the second largest ethnic group within Havering, making up 3.9% of the population, with Asian residents being the third largest ethnic group at 2.5%. The percentage of children

aged from birth to four years living in households dependent on workless benefits is, at 22.3%, largely in line with the national figure. The proportion of eligible families benefiting from the childcare element of Working Tax Credit, is, at 14%, lower than the national average.

There are 650 children under five years old living in the reach area; 73% are registered with the centre. Children’s skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are typically above the level 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

Elm Park Children’s Centre makes good provision for the majority of families who use it, leading to good outcomes overall. There are some outstanding aspects of its work namely the care, guidance and support provided, especially for families whose circumstances make them the most vulnerable in the community. Extensive and highly effective partnerships established by the very well-trained and knowledgeable staff provide this intensive support and ensure that families are safeguarded extremely well. Consequently, all families feel secure at the centre and have total trust and confidence in staff, succinctly summed up by one parent saying ‘I just wouldn’t have got through it without them.’

Families are confident that they have a voice in shaping services at the centre. However, the numbers who do so in a formal way through the parents’ forum and representation on the CCLAG fluctuate and are currently relatively low. This is partly as a result of the recent significant changes to services, when many of the free sessions open to all stopped and more bespoke services took their place. Families continue to engage well and their request for replacement groups run by outside providers charging a small fee was met fully by the centre.

The centre is able to show that it has made a significant impact on the lives of many of its most vulnerable families. However, it is hampered in this task as the local authority does not provide sufficient data to enable it to measure this precisely. Centre staff have to seek out this information from various sources, which is time-consuming. Much of the information they now have has only recently been retrieved

and so is not yet being used to inform target setting. In addition, although the CCLAG actively supports the centre and partners' involvement is good, it has yet to use data and other information to look critically enough at its performance.

Nevertheless, there is a good capacity for sustained improvement because the centre has already secured good outcomes for the majority of families through having a clear understanding of their specific needs. Despite a number of changes in staff and managers over a relatively short period, everyone, including partners, works effectively to improve the lives of families, especially those who need support most. There is a very clear understanding of the centre's strengths and what needs to be developed further and plans for the future are well targeted to further improve services that meet local needs.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase the involvement of those who use the centre in parent forum meetings and the CCLAG.
- Work with the local authority to ensure there is a full range of robust, informative and recent data to enable the centre to set measurable targets, assess the effectiveness of all aspects of its work and target where future services are needed most.
- Develop the work of the CCLAG so that it is fully involved in a critical analysis of the centre's performance.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The centre works well with families to assist them being healthy. Children's health in the local area is improving well, with sustained breastfeeding and immunisation rates rising and childhood obesity falling. A weekly breastfeeding cafe, promoting healthy eating and exercise and one-to-one healthy lifestyles advice for some families result in the large majority having a good understanding of how to lead healthy lives. Midwives' clinics held several times a week in the centre, and very close working links with health services, ensure that a large majority of families engage well. Specific concerns raised, for example about children's speech and language development, are dealt with effectively through programmes such as the 'Play and Language' sessions. The centre is particularly effective in improving outcomes for families with mental and emotional health problems or drug and alcohol concerns, which leads to profound improvements in many families' circumstances.

Parents develop an excellent understanding of how to keep their children safe through courses that nurture family relationships, attendance at first aid classes and access to home safety advice and equipment. Excellent relationships have grown between staff and families so that parents turn to the centre with complete confidence when there is a crisis in their lives that may affect their families' safety such as domestic violence or homelessness. The outcomes for these families are excellent, as they are for most children who are subject to child protection plans. Also, highly effective use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) process by

centre staff, combined with excellent partnerships with social care, ensures families are supported to such an extent that the level of supervision is reduced or prevented from escalating.

Parents and children thoroughly enjoy activities such as 'Stay and Play' sessions and messy play which are still very popular despite there now being a small charge. Children behave well and develop positive relationships, modelled well by staff. Children who attend the respite crèche have their progress monitored over their allotted 12 weeks and records show they make good and often excellent progress, developing their confidence and early learning skills well. Detailed planning for activities linked to early years development matters ensures that children are ready for their next step in education. Early Years Foundation Stage results for schools in the reach area show a significant improvement in the number achieving 78+ scale points which, at 68.8%, is an increase of 19.3% over three years. Similarly, the gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the rest has narrowed by 3.5% to 23.6%. Both outcomes are much better than the local average.

A high proportion of adults from all target groups access courses delivered at, or provided by, the centre. Their participation has a positive impact on their achievements, particularly in developing family relationships and their confidence and self-esteem. Links with various partners have led to good outcomes for those who are seeking work. A significant number of families' economic and social well-being has improved through being supported in accessing benefits, securing funded child-care places for two-year-olds, seeking community grants and charitable donations such as baby equipment through 'Moses Basket' and furniture through the 'Lighthouse' project. This has a beneficial impact on their lives, especially those of young parents.

Although numbers attending some sessions have declined recently, parents' views still play an important role in ensuring services meet families' needs and that the centre develops its role in the community. For example, parents of children with special needs are involved in planning the sensory garden that is nearing completion. Some parents help at the breastfeeding cafe through volunteering as peer supporters which has given them greater confidence as well as improving outcomes for breastfeeding mothers and their babies.

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	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	2
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop	2

positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	2

How good is the provision?

2

Centre staff have a very good knowledge of families using the services and of the community as a whole. This has a positive impact across all outcome areas. Although the remit has changed, they are still engaging good numbers from most of the target groups; high numbers of families from outside the reach area also access services. Families of disabled children, young parents and those from Black and minority ethnic groups are well represented at centre activities, some of which are especially for them, such as the 'Sensory Sensations' group. The numbers of lone parents accessing the centre are relatively low but staff, who know the families well, feel that a lack of accurate data and a reluctance to provide such information at registration means that the number is an underestimation. There are very high participation and retention rates because courses and activities are set up in response to specific needs, for example first aid and the second level of 'Play and Language' courses.

Personal development and achievement are celebrated well, with staff recognising that 'small steps' may in reality be 'giant leaps' for some of the most vulnerable families. Highly effective targeted support and the good quality resources at the centre ensure that most target groups are encouraged to learn successfully. A common view expressed demonstrates this: 'The support I received helped me to remain focused and to keep things in perspective.' The centre's work with children with special needs, the most vulnerable families, and also with young parents has led to particularly good outcomes for them.

Families who use the centre are unanimous in feeling they receive excellent levels of care, guidance and support. This is especially so in times of crisis, where families have been in despair or placed in high risk situations. One such family summed up the support by saying: 'They helped me with everything; I came to Havering with nothing.' The majority of the many referrals to the centre are linked to domestic violence, mental health and drug and alcohol issues. The staff, very well-trained in all those aspects, also make use of the excellent bonds with partners to ensure that the most effective support is put in and outcomes are followed up. Looked after children and those on high levels of supervision are very well cared for through excellent links with foster families and the contact team.

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,	2

development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	
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, management and governance at all levels are good and all partners understand their roles in supporting the centre and families using it. The day-to-day management of the centre is very effective. Staff professional supervision and development is having an increasingly positive impact on outcomes measured by detailed evaluations and case studies. The acting centre manager and the team leader set high expectations and there is a clarity amongst all staff about the centre's strengths, challenges and priorities. However, the lack of sufficient data from the local authority has impeded the centre in setting measurable targets to aid improvements.

The centre is highly inclusive and reflects the changing community it serves. For example, although still small, the increasing numbers of Black and Asian families in the local area are successfully encouraged to access services through the role of the black and minority ethnic worker. The promotion of equality and diversity permeates the centre's work. Celebrating festivals such as Diwali and focusing on Black History Month ensure high levels of respect amongst families. The centre has been successful in ensuring that families are still coming along in high numbers despite the change in emphasis to primarily supporting targeted families, by using outside providers and partners. Consequently, the centre has been effective in narrowing the achievement gap, especially for the most vulnerable groups by giving them confidence and excellent support that improves their lives.

The spacious and easily accessible building is very welcoming. It is well used by many other agencies such as social care, who run adolescent pod meetings, and by children with special needs and disabled children who have use of the excellent sensory room. Staff resources are also well managed and all of this is having a positive impact on outcomes. All resources are used efficiently and the centre gives good value for money.

Safeguarding procedures are excellent, as are the levels of staff training such as recognising signs of neglect or mental health concerns. All appropriate Criminal Records Bureau checks are done and risk assessments are detailed. Family support workers are highly proficient in instigating and managing CAFs and children's centre plans. The extensive range of well-established partnerships is also key to the highly robust approach to safeguarding matters and excellent outcomes for those most at risk. High levels of professional dialogue and mutual respect ensure that bespoke support packages for the most vulnerable families are very effective.

Outreach work and partners' extensive advocacy of the centre's services to families

in the area have encouraged the large majority to register. Very good relationships with staff mean that those families then feel able to voice their opinions and so shape services. Although there is no annual survey undertaken, it is clear from the many evaluations, case studies, and in talking to parents that they have high levels of satisfaction with centre services, with a typical view being 'We really love this centre.'

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	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	2

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Elm Park Children's Centre on 24–25 October 2012. We judged the centre as good overall. There are several outstanding features, such as the way the staff safeguard families and provide excellent levels of care, guidance and support. Much of this is because staff are very well trained and have established excellent links with a very wide range of partners. As a result, you all have a great deal of confidence in staff, who are frequently described by you as 'considerate, approachable and helpful', and feel extremely safe in the centre.

Thank you for your participation in the inspection and for taking the time to tell us about the centre's work. We especially appreciated those of you who came to talk to us about your personal contact with the centre. During our time there, we looked at a range of documents, including the business plan, and we spoke with many of the partner agencies that work alongside the centre, such as Havering Adult College and social care. It was very helpful to visit all of the activities, and thank you for welcoming us into your classes and groups such as the 'Play and Language' session, messy play and baby yoga.

We found that the centre makes good provision for the families who use it. This is especially so for those who have had a lot of specific and sometimes very difficult problems to deal with, such as mental health issues or children with a special learning need. One comment summed up the views of many of you: 'The support I received helped me to remain focused and to keep things in perspective.' The packages of care family support workers put in are tailor-made to meet your needs by using the services that can provide the best help. This means that outcomes across the board are good, with some outstanding, such as how well you and your families are kept safe and looked after, summed up by a parent saying, 'I just wouldn't have got through without them.'

The centre helps you and your children to learn and develop well. Lots of courses build family relationships and improve your skills, such as in first aid or helping your child's speech and language skills. This is leading to good levels of achievement and helping many of you improve your lives. Good advice about benefits, grants and, in some cases, getting back to work is also making a difference to many families. Facilities such as the respite crèche are much appreciated by you and are having a very positive impact on families' lives.

Many of you were concerned when the local authority's change of policy for all children's centres meant that some of the sessions anyone could attend were cut. However, it was good to see that the strength of feeling about how important those services are to you meant that the centre acted on your suggestions and now has outside providers running groups for a small charge. This shows that your views are important and listened to. However, the numbers who now attend the parents' forum or represent the centre at the Children's Centres' Local Advisory Group (CCLAG) are low. We have asked the centre to encourage more of you to attend and you can be a great help to your centre by showing your support in this way.

We have also asked that the local authority provides more information to the centre to show how effective it is in improving outcomes in the local area. At the moment, centre staff have to try to find this information themselves and this is time-consuming and may not always give an accurate picture. When this information is available, we have requested that the centre uses it to set targets that are easier to measure.

The final thing we have asked the centre to improve is the extent to which the CCLAG gets involved in closely monitoring the work of the centre rather than just providing support as it does now.

Elm Park Centre is a very safe, secure place, where all are welcome. All of the staff and the partners who work with them are very committed to ensure that this inclusive centre continues to improve outcomes, especially for the families who most need support. There is a very clear understanding of all its strengths and the areas that need to be developed further and, with good leadership and management, excellent partnerships and the support of those who use it, it is well placed to continue to improve.

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