

Inspection report for Little Pebbles Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent County Council
Inspection number	383994
Inspection dates	17–18 October 2012
Reporting inspector	Christine Davies HMI

Centre leader	Hema Birdi
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable
Centre address	Little Pebbles Children's Centre Ordnance Road Gravesend Kent DA12 2RL
Telephone number	01474 327575
Email address	Hema.birdi@kent.gov.uk

Linked school if applicable	Chantry Primary School URN 118552
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	None

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

The inspectors held meetings with the centre manager and staff, parents, representatives of the steering group and district advisory board, health professionals and representatives of partner agencies and the local authority. The inspectors held informal talks with children and parents throughout the inspection

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

Information about the centre

Little Pebbles Children's Centre is located in a residential area of Gravesend and is managed by Kent County Council. It was opened in 2008 as a phase two centre in the grounds of Chantry Primary School. The centre manager leads this centre and one other within a group of seven that work in partnership in the Gravesham district. The centre's six staff work together with the district's core team for children's centres, which includes health practitioners, a social worker and two qualified teachers. To meet its core purpose, the centre provides services at the main site by home visiting and outreach in the adjoining school; in community venues; and at other children's centres. The Gravesham District Advisory Board, with parents among its members, holds the centre to account.

The area served is among the 30% most deprived in the country, with severe deprivation experienced by a small minority. The population of the area is expanding rapidly, mobility in and out of the area is high and the number of children aged from birth to four years, over 1200, represents an increase of 12% from 2010 to 2012. The proportion of families claiming worklessness and low income benefits is high; however, a further minority of the most deprived families do not count on these measures due to their undetermined immigration status. The proportion of the population from minority ethnic backgrounds is high (65%). Families of Indian and

Pakistani origin make up 30%, from Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, Russia and Lithuania, represent 10% and a further 10% are Slovakian-speaking Roma Travellers. Most children enter Early Years Foundation Stage provision with skills and knowledge that are below 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

Little Pebbles Children’s Centre gives good support to families in the area. Staff reach out to offer a warm welcome and are adept at building nurturing, positive relationships. With the help of strong partnerships, the centre ensures that it establishes contact with new families in the area, identifies families who are most in need of support and successfully encourages these families to take up services. A good range of integrated health and family learning services is adjusted with great care to meet the community’s most pressing needs. Because of this flexible approach, a large majority of families identified as most in need, living in poverty and overcrowded circumstances or those who have not previously accessed any services, attend regularly. Although the centre only has regular contact with one third of children in the area it has good impact because its services reach a very large majority of families who are in greatest need of support. Outcomes for these families and the wider community are improving strongly.

Giving personalised advice and guidance is a real strength. This is making a positive difference to parents’ aspirations, knowledge and skills and to children’s health, well-being and development. Staff and partners give the highest priority to keeping all families in the area safe from harm. Common Assessment Framework and child protection protocols are effective. Parents develop an excellent understanding of dangers and how to keep safe. The intervention of staff and partners has regularly resulted in prevention of neglect and physical abuse of children. Partnerships with the police and social care assist families in cases of domestic violence. The centre helps to secure good up take of maternity and family health services so that the health of families in the area is improving strongly.

The environment created at the centre allows children to explore, learn and play

safely and children's physical development improves. Children quickly become sociable and are keen to learn. Under the guidance of children's workers and a qualified teacher, they make good progress in developing their communication skills. Children, including a higher than average proportion with disabilities, develop self-confidence and are well prepared for starting school. The gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children and their peers at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, although still wide, is narrowing rapidly (down from 36% to 31% 2011 to 2012).

Parents, including teenagers, fathers and parents who speak English as an additional language, gain confidence from learning alongside their children at drop-in play sessions. A few parents make great strides in developing their own skills through volunteering. The small number of volunteers speaking English and an additional community language make an appreciable difference in lives of some families through companionship and interpreting. Parents new to the area and speaking English as an additional language often have few qualifications and skills for employment. The centre devises innovative courses and ways of giving guidance so that the large majority of parents attending the centre take up courses to improve their chances of employment; parents are fully supported through workshops and interviews to take steps towards further training and into work when they are ready. This work has been held up as a model of good practice by the local authority and has been shared throughout the county.

The role of the district advisory board in the governance of the centre is well established. Together with the work of the steering group and through local operational links with partners, the board provides for effective exchange of information. This enables the centre to gain clear insight into changing local needs. Families have many opportunities to give their views and their satisfaction is an influential factor in the centre's self-evaluation. Some families are routinely involved in the governance of the centre. There is representation of parents' views via the parents' forum, although, reflecting the high mobility of the population, the presence is not consistently strong as it can take time for new parents to understand their role and make an impact in it.

Priorities are often founded on the centre's own accurate analysis of data, for example when the centre reduced universal play provision and increased targeted home visiting in the areas most in need. Because the centre has taken innovative action on its priorities and worked concertedly with partners to understand needs and fill gaps in provision, outcomes are improving and the centre has good capacity to improve further.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Work with the local authority and partners to extend the benefits of volunteering and peer mentoring in the diverse community.
- Work with the local authority and partners to make support available so that parents can sustain good levels of parental involvement in decision making and governance of the centre over time if they so wish.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Staff and partners take exceptionally good care to safeguard and build the resilience of local families. Parents learn to manage children's behaviour well from the role models staff present. Extensive home visiting enables staff to give personalised guidance under the RoSPA accident prevention scheme. Good relationships with the community ensure that groups that have never approached public services before, trust and turn to the centre in times of crisis. Vulnerable families benefit from parenting courses, which are often broken into shorter runs and put on in community languages. The centre's contribution to Common Assessment Framework process and child protection plans means that joint work is focused and effective and there is rarely a need to escalate concerns. Children who have been looked after by the local authority often return to their parents with ongoing support from the centre.

The large majority of families in the area attend their midwife and child health checks and family health is improving, particularly among the groups identified as vulnerable. The baby-weighing clinic at the centre is so popular additional facilities to enable parents to weigh their own babies have been added. A Slovakian-speaking staff nurse is employed to ensure that the vulnerable Roma Traveller families understand and get access to health services. Immunisation rates are good and although low numbers of mothers are initiating breastfeeding, uptake is improving rapidly. Obesity and nutrition awareness is improving among parents at the centre and families enjoy joining in with physically active play. A speech and language therapist works directly with families in groups and in their homes. Good use is made of bilingual staff on joint visits. Access to further support with children's development is effective through the district core team.

Children and parents enjoy companionship and their emotional well-being improves as they participate and learn in baby-talk and drop-in play sessions. A qualified teacher offers play therapy for children who have severe barriers to their learning so that they make good progress from their starting points. Children with additional social and health needs, whose development in the Early Years Foundation Stage is tracked closely, get additional support so that their achievement is good, the gap between themselves and their peers closes and this contributes to rapidly improving achievement of children in the area as whole. The percentage of children in the area reaching an overall good level of development is markedly lower than the national

average but improving rapidly, rising from 40% to 52% from 2011 to 2012. Children’s good experiences of playing in a group at the centre enable them to settle in to school well.

Parents’ learning is supported in English and in additional community languages. Most parents who are not working take up basic educational skills or English as a second language courses. Nearly all participants attending courses provided directly by the centre complete their courses. The majority progress beyond level 1 to courses held by other providers in the community. However, the centre does not always learn about the qualification or employment outcomes for all parents who are referred on. Innovative work with Chantry Primary School gives some of the most vulnerable parents from the Roma Traveller community their first taste of learning in a group since the age of 10. Young parents are building their aspirations through the ‘Recharge’ personal development course put on by the University of Kent.

Access to benefits and employment advice is an essential service enabling the majority of families to improve their economic stability. Parents who volunteer at the centre have good success rates in moving on to employment and further or higher education. Parents attending the centre regularly give their views to centre staff and routinely contribute to the evaluation of services and activities. Parents help enthusiastically with community events

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

How good is the provision?

2

The centre shapes services well to ensure that the changing needs of the population are met. The impact of the outreach and networking is that most of the families in regular contact are from the communities identified as being most in need and the volume of attendance is constantly rising. Children’s workers are often on hand to provide support and guidance at baby clinics so that services appear seamless to

families. This is particularly evident for first-time mothers as they move from midwives appointments to baby clinics, massage classes and baby play.

The centre knows the families who are attending very well. The nurturing skills of staff and managers are evident in their choice of sensory resources and outdoor play to promote children and parents' learning. The centre has secured the outside play space to improve the learning environment, particularly for the many families living in overcrowded conditions. Courses for parents are often run as 'family learning' to support cultural preferences and families' emotional needs. This stems from the centre's understanding that some parents and children are unused to separation will not use a crèche. Well-qualified staff plan together to make the programme and each activity as relevant to families' lives as possible. Although little formal recording is done, staff give continual feedback so that parents are encouraged and understand their own and their children's learning journeys.

Outstanding levels of care, guidance and support are built in to all activities. The centre restructured children's workers' time to provide fewer universal drop-in play sessions in order to carry out more one-to-one work in families' homes. Although this was not directly suggested by families, it has proved a powerful way to personalise the support to improve safety, health, learning and economic well-being for those most in need. Families like the arrangement and more are now accessing wider community services, such as benefits advice. This approach has had a positive impact on some of the most disadvantaged parents taking their children to school as required and getting the medical help that they need.

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

The inspirational lead of the centre manager coherently pulls the services together and drives the centre staff to create new and better ways of working for their community. Health and other core team workers bring in skill and expertise from their disciplines. Governance and accountability arrangements are clear to partners as they fit within the established district model. The centre manager keeps track of the good, and rapidly improving, outcomes for families. The centre's own data collection and the strong contribution of data from partners ensure that the centre's work takes account of local needs and is aligned clearly with the local authority's strategies and priorities.

The network of children’s centres, together with the core team, provides good levels of peer scrutiny and robustly monitors the quality of provision. All relevant partners contribute to the centre’s thorough and accurate self-evaluation. Although parental representation is not always formalised through an active forum linked to the steering group, consistently good partnerships with families elicit their views. The centre reaches out to gather the views of the wider community and families not yet attending the centre. In the best instances the centre has the help of volunteers to interpret and explain, which helps the centre to gather a wide range of views to shape provision. The expressed satisfaction of families in contact with the centre is overwhelmingly positive.

The work of the centre is rightly held by others as an example of good practice in drawing diverse communities together. The centre’s standing in the community is high. Resources are managed well to suit the needs of families attending and the good value for money is evident in the improving outcomes and growing participation at the centre. Managers’ and leaders’ drive to include as many families as possible, particularly those who are in the greatest need, shines through in the safe, respectful and welcoming environment and the effective deployment of staff. This is having good impact on narrowing the gaps in achievement for children and adults and improving opportunities for the most deprived families.

Day-to-day management is effective in delivering a well-balanced, thoughtful programme throughout the year. The very high priority given to safeguarding ensures that staff and volunteers are recruited and supervised safely and training improves staff knowledge and skills. Robust referral systems for child protection concerns are used without fail and the centre plays a leading part in partnership work to monitor those subject to Common Assessment Framework processes, child protection and care plans so that children are exceptionally well protected. Comprehensive risk assessment is integral to all the centre’s activities and the exemplary good practice of staff is taken up widely by parents. Communication and management of relationships with partners are outstanding and have excellent impact on improving outcomes.

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

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

None.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Little Pebbles Children’s Centre on 17 and 18 October 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you very much for taking the time to speak to us and for letting us sit in on your classes and groups.

We could see how the manager and all the staff at the centre warmly welcome you and respect your different backgrounds and cultures. Staff know the area very well and try to help the families that are most in need, as well as the families that find it easy to get to the centre. You told us, and we agree, that the manager is an inspiration to staff and families.

You told us that you like the activities and the staff very much. Staff always tell you about other activities that you can do and they help you get onto the right courses if you want to study and help you find work if you are ready.

We were very pleased and impressed to see how well the staff give information that is particular and helpful to each of you.

Many of you told us how helpful it is to have midwives, health visitors and a play worker all under one roof and we agree. You and your children’s health, learning and well-being improve quickly when you attend the centre regularly. Some of you are taking up more active lifestyles because of what you have learned at the centre.

The centre is extremely good at helping you to keep you and your children safe and to improve your lives all round. With personal advice always available to you, the centre helps you to find and get the health, education and advice services you need.

Your children make good progress in their learning, no matter what their starting point. This is all the way through from baby play to drop-in play and story times. Teachers help children when they are stuck and always keep you informed about how well your child is doing. Children who have been to the centre are well prepared for school and settle quickly.

You learn well in courses that are designed just for your group. Some people go on to other courses and work. Volunteers do very well in finding work. We have asked the centre to look at ways of helping more people to get the benefit of volunteering. We have also asked the centre to find out more about the courses and work that parents go on to do so that they can check that the centre does enough to help parents and they are on the right track.

The team gives great thought to the services that are provided. At the centre they listen to your views and this helps the team to decide how many drop-ins and clinics, what type of courses and whether to see you at home. We have asked the centre to make sure that opportunities for parents to get together and talk about the important decisions affecting the centre are in place all the time.

The management of the centre is good on a day-to-day basis. The centre works extremely well with partners to make sure the priorities are right for you. Services join up really well and are helpful to you and are good value for money. Because of these factors the centre has the good capacity to go on improving.

Thank you once again to all the families at the centre and we wish you every success for the future.

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