

Inspection report for The Ark Children's Centre

Local authority	Kent
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Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Linked school if applicable	Broadwater Primary School URN 118566 Last inspected March 2011
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 district and centre managers, staff, representatives from the advisory board, parents and other family members using the centre during the inspection, representatives from the centre's partners and the local authority.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the centre's evaluation of its services, development plans and safeguarding arrangements.

Information about the centre

The Ark Children's Centre, a phase two centre, was designated in March 2008 and opened in July 2009. It is one of seven centres in the Tunbridge Wells district. The centre meets its core purpose through coordinated activities and services, which are accessed by families across a number of centres. Most centre staff work in more than one centre. The urban reach area is mixed, with areas of significant affluence while one ward is in the country's 30% most deprived areas.

The centre is open for 50 weeks per year and runs holiday activities and occasional weekend special events. The centre operates in purpose-built accommodation which comprises crèche facilities with an adjoining outdoor area, a training room, a medical treatment room, a small meeting room and an office. It is sited at the entrance to Broadwater Primary School which provides education in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Midwives, health visitors and a community paediatrician hold weekly clinics in the centre. In addition, the centre runs activities in other community venues, including the Number 1 Community Centre and in the local library. The local authority provides the strategic management and direction of the centre through a

district advisory board and a centre steering group, both of which have parent representatives.

There are 1,254 children under five years of age living within the centre's reach area, of whom almost a fifth live in areas recognised as within the 30% most deprived nationally. Most families are from White British backgrounds, with a number of other heritages represented in small numbers. Very few families speak English as an additional language. For the area as a whole, employment is above average. Approximately 10% of families are dependent on workless benefits, which is well below the national average. The proportion of lone and young parents is below that found across the local authority. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to the Early Years Foundation Stage vary widely across the area, but taken as a whole, are typically in line with the levels 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

The Ark Children's Centre is well led and has, therefore, developed quickly since it opened. The centre is having a significant impact on the lives of many families within the reach area, particularly those whose circumstances may make them more vulnerable. Centre staff are energetic and passionate about their work, and they know the area and the challenges faced by families well. Parents say that staff often 'go the extra mile' to give them help when it is needed.

Staff use a wide range of data to target support towards the most vulnerable families and to evaluate the centre's effectiveness. It has had significant success in organising activities which help parents to gain confidence and understand their children's development from birth and how to prepare them for Nursery or starting school. As one parent said, 'I found it invaluable in understanding how play can help with language and social skills.' Other good outcomes are reflected in the rapid improvement in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile outcomes, which have risen at over double the national rate and are above both national and local averages. Similarly most health indicators are above national and local authority averages. The effective start made demonstrates the centre's good capacity to sustain further

improvement.

The centre gives everyone a warm welcome. Staff have built strong, trusting relationships with families using the centre. Because staff give families confidential and non-judgemental advice and guidance, they feel able to turn to the centre for help in times of crisis, such as when parents have been victims of domestic abuse. In its first years, the centre has prioritised its work in areas of greatest vulnerability. Consequently, the centre has regular contact with a large majority of children and their families in target groups and in the most deprived area in the reach. It has had considerable success, for example, in working with teenage parents to support their parenting skills and prevent second pregnancies. A majority of families within the reach area are registered and use centre facilities regularly, although less so in the more affluent areas. Staff are now extending outreach activities into more affluent areas, such as the planned pantomime in a venue in the centre of Tunbridge Wells to raise the profile of the centre's work more widely.

Staff have close partnerships with other agencies and voluntary organisations, including health and social services, to increase the range of services available in the centre. Parents particularly value the clinics and advice from midwives and health professionals in a non-medical setting. The impact of these links is seen in improved health outcomes, for example in a doubling over a two year period of mothers beginning and sustaining breastfeeding, and the rate is continuing to rise. Because many staff work across more than one centre in the district, they network well with others and rationalise activities. As a result, activities are financially viable because they are full to capacity, and families have a broad choice because they are encouraged to attend events in other district locations.

Parents enjoy contributing practical skills and suggestions for the children's centre programme. For example, parents have run sessions where they have shared their expertise in art and language with others. However, the centre has found it more difficult to sustain parental representation in groups which influence decision-making processes at both centre and district level. Similarly, there are many examples where individuals have been supported to seek advice from other agencies such as Citizens Advice Bureau and Connexions to address financial difficulties, or to access further training to improve their employment chances. However, this aspect of the centre's work has not been developed as quickly as its other activities and has not had an impact on the economic well-being of as many families.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase adult chances of future employment through access to training and improved qualifications, and easier access to employment and money management services.
- Improve the contribution parents make by increasing family representation in the centre steering group and on the district advisory board.
- Extend outreach activities to increase the registration of and contact with

families in areas where they are less well represented.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

The centre has focused well on working with health professionals to promote family health. Midwives and health visitors hold regular appointments and drop-in clinics, such as the weekly sessions with the healthy weight midwife. There is a strong emphasis on promoting aspects of health in all sessions, including regarding the food for snacks during activities and events involving food preparation. The success of this approach is reflected in a declining trend in children who are obese at the end of Reception and in good adult emotional health. Sessions such as Stay and Play and Baby Café help children to be physically active from a young age. The promotion of breastfeeding has been a particular success. Centre staff have cooperated with health colleagues and hospital staff to train over 60 'Breast Buddies' across the district, so that mothers have immediate and ongoing support to address concerns as they arise.

Families feel very safe in the centre. The entrance to it is carefully controlled and detailed risk assessments are in place to ensure safety during activities. Parents understand the centre's policies, for example on safeguarding and using cameras. They help their children to keep safe in activities, teaching them how to play safely together and pre-empting possible accidents such as toddlers pushing toys into babies. Parents say that children play very happily and actively together, and are rarely upset by the inconsiderate behaviour of others. Children who are assessed through the Common Assessment Framework processes are given good support. Centre staff work closely with social workers to ensure continuity of support when cases are transferred between agencies or when children are removed from formal child protection plans. Although emergency hospital admissions were in decline overall, when there was a slight increase last year the centre took immediate action to work with a group of agencies, including the fire service, to introduce an enhanced home safety scheme. Many parents have strengthened their understanding of paediatric first aid and become more confident by attending first-aid events, such as learning about baby resuscitation.

Good analysis of weaknesses, such as children's communication and language skills in targeted areas, has informed the centre's work well. For example, effective support to local early years settings is seen in the Acorn Project which was initiated by the centre and which supports pre-school staff to monitor speech and language milestones and address any identified weaknesses for individuals. Such activities have been used effectively to promote a smooth transition into school. The emphasis on language in almost all activities for children and their parents, including Small Talk, has made a successful contribution to reducing the gap between lower attaining children and their peers by the end of Reception at a faster rate than that seen nationally.

Family members actively share their views about how centre activities meet their needs. Many evaluations require parents to reflect closely on their own learning.

Case studies show that individuals have been supported to develop workplace skills, such as by volunteering in the centre, which has led to enhanced qualifications and entry or return to work. Some information is available in the centre and parents are signposted to other agencies for advice about benefits and jobs, such as to the Money Advice Support Team and Connexions. However, the centre has identified the need to provide more opportunities about money management, and it is a district priority to develop a stronger partnership with the Jobcentre and Adult Education to help families improve their economic well-being.

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	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	3

How good is the provision?

2

The centre has taken a systematic approach to its service development, focusing first on the areas of greatest vulnerability alongside setting up a range of universal services, often in partnership with other professionals. There are clear plans for how the centre's work is to be extended into areas where fewer families are currently engaged, such as developing activities which are more accessible to working parents. Staff assessment of need is good and they set themselves challenging targets to improve outcomes, for example, to reduce the proportion of children who are obese from 7% to 5% over the coming year, although the rate is already lower than national and local authority rates.

Provision to help children learn and develop is good because the activities planned are stimulating and based on children's interests. Many give parents practical ideas to support their children's learning at home. Staff observe and plan for children's progress in every crèche session. Where there is ongoing attendance, such as when parents are following a learning programme themselves, parents are helped to reflect on and record their child's development.

The centre works well with its co-located school, for example in supporting families experiencing difficulty or in sharing resources and programmes. This recently

included a drama workshop about stopping smoking in the school, which complements the centre's well-timed new year smoking cessation plans. The centre uses the school grounds for its holiday events, integrating older children alongside their younger siblings. Links with other partners are effective in integrating services and avoiding duplication of those provided by others such as local voluntary groups. Parent and toddler sessions at the library and support for the pre-school at the local community centre give families ready access to events close to their homes.

Case studies indicate the good range and quality of care, support and guidance valued by families who need support. Individuals turn to staff for help and guidance at times of particular difficulty and are never turned away, for example when grandparents take over care of their grandchildren. There is particularly good support for younger parents through focused sessions addressing issues of particular relevance to mothers and fathers in the age group, helping them to develop the confidence and skills in order to equip them with a stronger future for both themselves and their children.

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	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

2

The centre manager, staff and advisory group members have high aspirations for the centre. Improvement planning is focused well on actions which will bring about rapid improvements for families. Day-to-day management arrangements and staff supervision are good. Staff share information, use available local authority data very well to identify priorities, and have begun to establish additional baseline data to measure future effectiveness. Training is carefully coordinated and shared to ensure that staff have the expertise they need before introducing new approaches. The vast majority of users of the centre are very satisfied with the service they receive. They are confident that their views are valued. For example, the timing of activities has been set to suit the greatest number of participants. However, representation on the steering and advisory groups has been sporadic and hard to sustain. Currently, the centre has begun to implement a plan to help parents to engage in single activities, such as joining staff appointment panels, before undertaking a longer-term commitment to consultative and advisory groups.

The centre is very inclusive and effectively promotes equality and tolerance among families. Disabled children and those with special educational needs within the area receive specialist support in another centre, and also join in Ark activities. Parents

who speak English as an additional language value the Around the World group, which promotes a wider understanding of different cultures, and helps those at the early stages of speaking English to gain confidence to join in other centre events.

Good safeguarding practices are adopted across all areas of the centre's work. Thorough risk assessments are in place to protect staff and families using the centre and at other venues. The centre complies fully with safe recruitment policies, including Criminal Record Bureau checks, and staff, volunteers and partners receive regular training about procedure and policy. Social care partners say that the good quality of care, guidance and support helps to ensure that cases are resolved quickly. Effective joint working practices ensure continuity of care for those involved through smooth 'step-up' and 'step-down' procedures. This is only one example of the effective partnership work, which enables the centre to make good use of limited resources and demonstrates good value for money.

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	2
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

The inspection report of Broadwater Primary School was considered and a discussion took place with the acting headteacher of the school about links with the centre.

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from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected The Ark Children's Centre on 3 and 4 December 2012. We judged the centre as good overall.

Thank you to those of you who came to talk to us during the inspection and for making us so welcome. Our conversations with you were very useful in helping us to understand the impact of the centre's work. You told us how much you value the non-judgemental support of staff who often 'go the extra mile' to help you, particularly through difficult times. We judge that the centre offers good quality activities which make a difference to people's lives, particularly in helping parents to develop their parenting skills.

The good start made since the centre opened shows that it is well placed to continue to develop further. 'The Ark' has developed quickly because it is well led and run by energetic staff who are passionate about improving the life chances of families in the area. The centre gives everyone a warm welcome. Staff know you very well, and use this information to make sure that the activities on offer give you the support you need. Although the majority of families in the centre area use its facilities, staff are keen to find ways to bring in more families and have begun to run events more widely across the area so that more people know about the centre's work. This includes the pantomime to be staged soon in the centre of Tunbridge Wells. Many of you also attend events in other centres, and because most staff work across more than one centre you always feel welcome there. This is a very effective way of sharing resources to give you a wider offer than the centre alone could provide. We saw that activities are full to capacity. Because you trust staff and the confidential advice and guidance, many of you have felt able to turn to the centre at times of particular difficulty. You find the centre a safe and secure place, and staff hold the safeguarding of children as a high priority.

Staff work closely with others, such as health and social services, so that you can attend a range of services within the centre. You told us that you particularly value the clinics and advice from midwives and health professionals in a non-medical setting. As a result of this work, health outcomes are improving in the area. Immunisation rates are good. The proportion of mothers sustaining breastfeeding has doubled over a two year period, largely because of the number of volunteers who are 'Breast Buddies' so that help is available quickly when it is needed. Another impact of the centre is the increase in children's achievement by the end of their Reception Year in school. You told us how the centre has helped you to promote your children's language development. As one parent said, 'I found it invaluable in understanding how play can help with language and social skills.'

Many parents have given their time to help with activities such as art projects and events which celebrate different cultures and language. A few of you told us how

much you had learned about the centre's work when you joined a staff appointment panel. We think that there is potential for more parents to contribute to decision making by becoming members of the Centre Steering or District Advisory Groups, and have asked staff to try to find ways for more of you to be involved in this way. We saw that some of you have been helped to link with other agencies such as the Money Advice Support Team or Citizens Advice Bureau. A few of you have been encouraged to pursue further training to improve your employment chances, but this aspect of the centre's work has not developed as quickly as its other activities.

We would like to wish you and your families the very best for the future.

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