

Inspection report for Cornfields Children's Centre

Local authority	Suffolk
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Linked school if applicable	Not applicable
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	Crocus Early Years Centre: EYR 258381

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 centre managers, frontline staff, a range of partners, advisory board representatives, local authority officers, and parents. They also observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation including the self-evaluation form and service delivery plan.

Information about the centre

The centre was designated as a phase two purpose-built centre in December 2007 and delivers a range of services that meet its full core purpose. It is located on Thomas Gainsborough High School campus along with Crocus Early Years Centre which also leases part of the centre's premises. Both are subject to separate inspections. The centre delivers some services from the high school library and Stevenson Community Centre and is open all year round from 9am until 5pm, Monday to Friday.

The centre serves Great Cornard, an area located to the east of Sudbury, which includes a large housing estate built in 1967. Housing comprises a mixture of owner-occupied, housing association and privately rented accommodation. There are also nine housing sites within Great Cornard that are under development with a total of 693 additional properties to be built by 2015. The mixed tenure schemes will include homes for affordable rent, shared ownership and shared equity. Cornfields Children's Centre has the second highest deprivation score for the south Suffolk locality including the highest deprivation score for education, skills and training. Most families are from White British backgrounds.

Of the 774 children under five years-old living in the reach area, 18% live in workless households, with a similar proportion of families claiming the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities when they enter early

years provision are typically at the level expected for their age, but assessment data show that some are delayed in their school readiness.

The local authority oversees the governance of the centre, which is managed by two part-time job sharing managers; one new in post in December and one recently returned to work from maternity leave. They also manage two other children's centres within the Sudbury cluster. The other two children's centres are each subject to separate inspections. A cluster advisory board has been established to both support and challenge the work of the clustered centres. There are two support and information officers working as a job share, and there are a further eight practitioners working across the three clustered children centres. Families access services at any of the three centres.

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

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

The centre's effectiveness is satisfactory and improving as more local families engage with its services. Current priorities arising from the managers' robust and accurate evaluation of the centre's strengths and shortcomings rightly include the need to increase the participation of families living in the areas of highest social and economic disadvantage. The plan they have formulated provides a clear agenda for extending services and targeting improvement. Managers have a well-articulated vision and a strong drive and determination to move the centre forward. However, their relatively recent return to work means there has been a limited time in which the impact of actions already taken can be measured or a track record established. For this reason, the centre's capacity to sustain improvement is currently satisfactory rather than good.

Outcomes are satisfactory overall with high quality family support work and good partnerships resulting in families' emotional and physical health improving significantly. Parents who are in contact with the centre speak positively about how the staff's well-timed interventions have empowered them to take control of their lives, particularly in times of crisis. The words of one mother sum up the general view, 'Someone was always there for me, the support was invaluable and I have not

looked back'. Safeguarding procedures are effective and case studies provide useful evidence about the centre's work in protecting some very vulnerable families, including children in need, but numbers are very low. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and Team Around the Child (TAC) procedures are used effectively to enable the sharing of information and integrated working between partners.

The gap in achievement between the lowest achieving 20 per cent of children and the rest is reducing over time and, at 23.1%, is currently narrower than seen nationally. This reflects positively on the good work the centre does to promote equalities. The centre recognises that a key priority is to capitalise on its good partnership with nurseries and schools to develop a rigorous system for tracking how well children who have attended the centre achieve relative to their peers and to use this to help shape future provision. The tracking of the progress made by adults who are signposted by the centre to further learning opportunities is also yet to be tackled.

Governance and accountability arrangements are satisfactory. Minutes show that the cluster advisory group has been effective in helping shape services to meet local needs but has not routinely acted as a 'critical friend' in decision-making. Parent representatives are infrequent attendees at meetings and, as such, their voice in governance is limited. Parents make a satisfactory contribution to the life and development of the centre through evaluations of activities and surveys. Parent volunteers include 'breastfriends' who help mothers who want to breastfeed their babies; and Community Parent volunteers who support regularly at centre activities and co-lead sessions. Some volunteers have gone on to paid employment. These experiences result in some families improving their financial independence and enhancing their economic well-being.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Increase the number of families engaging with the centre, particularly those most in need of support from the most disadvantaged communities, and across all target groups.
- Strengthen governance by:
 - re-defining the role of the cluster advisory board so that it not only supports but also challenges the centre
 - providing full information to members about their responsibilities and the timings of meetings
 - ensuring that parents have a clear voice in decision-making.
- Develop a consistent method for tracking the progress of children and adults who access the centre and, hence, measure the impact of provision and identify where precisely to target services by:
 - working with nurseries, schools and early years settings to devise a system for tracking children when they move on to the next stage in their

- education
- liaising with partners to develop a consistent method for tracking the progress of adults when they have accessed training, further education or employment advice.

How good are outcomes for families?

3

Health outcomes are good because of the effective work the centre does in partnership with health services. At 94%, immunisation rates are high while at just over three percent, obesity levels are a third of the level seen nationally. The weekly 'Weigh and Play' drop-in sessions are well attended and are one example of how the centre seeks to monitor the healthy weights of young children alongside promoting the value of a healthy diet. Fruit snacks are provided and physical activities promoted by 'Live Well Suffolk'; these involve fun ways to encourage exercise and health-related fitness. The percentage of mothers who continue to breastfeed their babies over six weeks is rising, not least because of the centre's well-integrated approach that places high value on this important start to life and the support of 'breastfriends' and 'breastfeeding friendly' places for mothers to feel comfortable to use.

Parents say that they have a trusting relationship with staff and feel safe when using the centre. Consequently, they turn to them when difficulties arise such as coping with a child's specific behavioural needs. Safeguarding is promoted adequately. Some parents have undertaken first aid training to raise their awareness about personal safety in emergency situations, while others have been given home safety packs to overcome potential risks in the home. The centre is working with a growing number of parents suffering from domestic abuse and, through the delivery of a structured programme of support, is pro-active in empowering them to take control of their lives. Well-conceived plans arising from CAF and TAC assessments are devised and implemented to support families most at risk, including children subject to a child protection plan as appropriate. The rate of emergency hospital admissions is reducing but is above the local average.

Children enjoy the groups such as 'Play Matters' where they build positive behaviour and resilience through experiencing a range of activities geared towards helping them prepare for nursery school. Twenty-seven families have claimed the funding available for two-year-olds to give potentially vulnerable children a positive start, usually in partnership with the co-located nursery, over the last year. The centre plans group activities appropriately and has begun to assess how well children learn. Staff have recently introduced a 'learning journey' system in which to record children's development. Plans are in hand to work with other education providers to more robustly track children's achievement over time. At 57%, the proportion of children achieving a good level of development by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is rising but is below both the local and national average.

Families from different target groups are invited specifically to attend services with groups such as 'Chatterbox', established in response to speech and language referrals arising from health service development checks. Parents build their confidence as 'first educators' as they play alongside their children and assist them in

developing their communication skills. Some parents identify how much their participation in parenting courses has strengthened family relationships and helped them to manage their children's behaviour positively. 'I now get on better with my children and I see the good in them more as I am more confident as a mother' is a typical comment in the post-course evaluations. Parents express their views in their discussions with staff, by posting ideas in the suggestion box or pinning them on a specific display board. All suggestions are responded to by the centre on a second display board entitled 'You Said - We Did'. Despite repeated attempts to revitalise the once active parents' forum, it is no longer operating. Community parent representatives have been nominated onto the cluster advisory board and until fairly recently the board was chaired by a parent. Nevertheless, the centre rightly recognises that it would be beneficial to engage more families directly in the centre's governance.

A City and Guilds accredited 'Community Parents Volunteering Programme' equips a sizeable number of parents to build new skills and enhance work experiences as they support staff in the three centres located in the cluster. A few parents benefit from the advice they get about managing debts and securing the benefits for which they are eligible. Some adults are signposted to courses such as floristry, counselling or confidence-raising, with a handful going on to further education or paid work. However, the centre is not systematically tracking the progress made by adults who access further learning, and this is a missed opportunity to measure the impact of provision and identify where precisely to target future services.

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	3
The extent to which all children and parents, including those from target groups, enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development	3
The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and parents, including those from target groups, contribute to decision-making and governance of the centre	3
The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents, including those from target groups, are developing economic stability and independence including access to training and employment	3

How good is the provision?

3

At 61%, the centre is reaching a majority of families in its area, but only 50% of families are registered from the most disadvantaged area. Managers are already working effectively to raise the profile of the centre and target services in response to identified needs. The use of the high school library for 'Tot Rock' sessions, that typically involve 50 or more children and their parents in singing and music-making

activities, is one example of how the centre is extending access and raising the profile of what the centre has to offer.

The centre promotes purposeful learning experiences through a range of activities. Sessions observed during the inspection, such as 'Sensory Babies', were very well resourced and of very good quality. Children's achievements are celebrated well through photographs and displays while adults receive certificates at the end of courses which enhance their self-esteem. The 'Opportunities' group for children with special educational needs is well attended, and described by one lone parent as 'Simply brilliant.' Sometimes, chances to help individuals build their skills for the future are missed. For example, 'Stay and Play' sessions which attract large numbers can become overcrowded and this restricts staff's interactions with targeted children as they concentrate on health and safety aspects. The centre is considering how better to manage the success of the group, for example, by extending the time it operates.

The quality of care provided by the centre for families is good. Families using the centre benefit from well-targeted outreach provision, including home support. They receive effective, tailored support that develops their health and emotional well-being. A high proportion of the home visits that take place concern housing problems alongside other pressing needs. The team of family support staff is held in very high regard by parents and co-professionals for the work its members do in helping families whose circumstances make them vulnerable so that they are able to improve their lives and get back on their feet.

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	3
The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all families, including those in target groups	3
The quality of care, guidance and support offered to families, including those in target groups	2

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Day-to-day management by the two managers is working well. They share the same vision for ensuring services make a positive difference to those in their community who most need support. In the two months they have worked together they have undertaken a probing audit that has resulted in a very accurate evaluation of what the centre does well and where it needs to improve. Staff are fully on board and keen to play a full role in building the centre's effectiveness to a good level. The plans devised to drive improvements provide a firm base on which to do this.

Good partnerships bring added capacity as managers endeavour to reach more families living in the most disadvantaged area. Services are being carefully integrated

as they develop and there is compelling evidence that outcomes are improving as a result. For example, the delivery of health checks from the centre enables staff to channel target families to bespoke services. Families using the centre are pleased with the service they receive and say their views are listened to and acted upon. However, given that outcomes overall are currently satisfactory, value for money is also judged as satisfactory.

Good attention is paid to promoting equality and diversity and all legal requirements are met. Parents identify the centre as 'welcoming', 'friendly' and 'greatly appreciate the non-judgemental approach of the staff.' Parents with children with special educational needs say the group they attend helps them share common concerns and explore how these can be overcome. One mother said she felt 'stronger and able to cope better' due to the centre's 'wonderful care and support'. The toy and book libraries have been carefully chosen and enhance the opportunities for parents to use high quality resources as they learn and play with their children at home. The gap in the achievement of children is closing more rapidly than seen nationally and strategies are in place to further improve children's readiness for school.

Effective lines of communication with partner agencies ensure that safeguarding matters are kept at the forefront of the centre's work. Regular allocation meetings enable information to be shared in order that families at risk are appropriately protected. Step down procedures are clear and currently no children in contact with the centre is subject to a child protection plan. Staff are suitably trained in health, safety and first aid and are booked onto CAF update training next month. Criminal Records Bureau checks are carried out on anyone working in the centre.

The local authority keeps good oversight of the centre's performance. The cluster advisory board quarterly meetings are well attended by a range of partner organisations including a town councillor, the Jobcentre Plus lone parent adviser, Home Start staff, the health visitor, a midwife, early years practitioners, social care representatives and centre staff. Nevertheless, not all partners routinely receive the dates of meetings, agendas or minutes of past meetings. The board's role and responsibilities are clearly set out in its terms of reference but these are not well implemented, especially in terms of holding the centre to account, and injecting constructive challenge into decision-making. The board was chaired by a community parent until six months ago but her successor has not yet been found and attendance by other parent representatives is infrequent.

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	3
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	3

groups	
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	3
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 findings of the most recent inspection of Crocus Early Years Centre: EYR 258381 were used to inform the judgements made during this inspection.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Cornfields Children's Centre on 22–23 January 2013. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We would like to thank all of you who took the time to talk with us about your experiences and involvement with the centre. It was a pleasure to meet you and your children and to hear how pleased you are with the centre's services. It was great to see so many families turn out on such a cold day for the 'Stay and Play' session - the busiest ever according to staff and it was a bit of a squash. It was lovely to see your children behaving so well as they enjoyed the healthy snacks provided.

The experienced managers are working well together to set the centre on an improving course and the united staff team is on board with implementing the action plan recently devised to achieve this. You told us that the centre listens to and takes account of your views to shape its services and that through the trusting relationship with staff, you are able to raise any worries or concerns.

The centre's work is having an increasingly beneficial impact on helping more families improve their lives. It is already successful in working with key partners to help you improve your health and well-being. Breastfeeding rates are on the rise and

data shows that an increasing proportion of young children in the area achieve healthy weights. Having the 'Weigh and Play' sessions at the centre means more local families are getting to know what else the centre has to offer. We have asked the centre to increase its contact with more families in going forward, especially those whose circumstances make them particularly vulnerable.

Those of you who are regularly in contact with the centre told us how well the staff's well-timed support has given you confidence to overcome particular challenges, particularly in times of crisis. The words of one mother sum up the views of many of you, 'Someone was always there for me, the support was invaluable and I have not looked back'. Safeguarding procedures are effective and you told us that you always feel well looked after when you use the centre.

The centre's strong inclusive practices promote equal opportunities really well. For example, activities such as the 'Opportunity' group are helping children with special educational needs to build their skills. The centre has a strong partnership with the co-located nursery and other schools and work is taking place to help children be prepared ready for the next stage of their education. Data shows the gap in children's achievement is closing over time.

You identify clearly how much more confident you feel about parenting because of the programmes run by the centre. Some of you access adult education courses or volunteer your support at centre activities, including co-leading sessions. The centre's partnership with the Citizens Advice Bureau and Jobcentre Plus has resulted in a few families improving their financial independence and enhancing their economic-well-being. We have asked the centre to take a closer look at the progress you and your children make when you access different services so that staff can identify where precisely to target future provision.

Governance and accountability arrangements are satisfactory but currently the parental 'voice' in decision-making is not as strong as it was. We have asked the centre to strengthen this and to re-look at the role of the cluster advisory board so that it not only supports but also challenges the centre.

Thank you once again for your helpful contributions to the inspection. We wish you and your families every success in the future.

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