

Inspection report for Little Owls Children's Centre

Local authority	Wakefield
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Centre leader	Helen Challenger
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Linked school if applicable	South Kirkby Common Road Infant and Nursery School 130864
Linked early years and childcare, if applicable	St Luke's Nursery EY256122

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

The inspectors held meetings with families using the centre, the head of centre and centre manager, members of staff, the Chair of the Governing Body and representatives of the local authority, partnership agencies and the Extended Services Committee.

They observed the centre's work, including visits to a family, St Luke's Nursery and an outreach session at Northfield School. They looked at a range of relevant documentation including minutes of meetings, case studies, users' evaluations, the centre's self-evaluation form, service plans and data reports.

Information about the centre

Background information for Little Owls Children's Centre

Little Owls Children's Centre is based in the south-east district of Wakefield and District Metropolitan Borough Council and serves the community of South Kirkby. This phase two centre, designated in 2007, has offered a full range of services since 2009. Its premises are co-located with South Kirkby Common Road Infant and Nursery School and the centre shares an entrance with the school nursery. The school's governing body has been commissioned by the Primary Care Trust to manage the centre on the local authority's behalf. The centre manager has responsibility for day-to-day operation of the centre and reports to the headteacher of the school in her role as head of centre. The centre has experienced a number of staffing changes over the last two years.

Within the reach area there is a wide mix of social backgrounds. Approximately 15% of the 615 children under five-years-of-age in the reach area live in workless households in receipt of benefits. Almost a quarter of the children live in the 10% most disadvantaged areas in England, with 80% of children living in areas which are in the 30% most deprived nationally.

Since the closure of the local coal mines in 1986, the community has experienced high levels of unemployment. Over half the adult population has no qualifications and aspirations are low. Vandalism, crime, anti-social behaviour and substance misuse are prevalent. The vast majority of families are of White British heritage, with no other dominant ethnic group in the community. When children enter early years provision, their skills, knowledge and abilities are below, or well below, those typical for their age.

A range of services are delivered from the centre by the staff team to meet the core purpose. These include play and learning sessions, speech and language support, targeted support for families with circumstances that make them vulnerable and provision for disabled children and those with special educational needs. The community health worker, health visitors and midwife provide services directly from the centre. The centre provides a crèche for parents attending courses but does not offer early years childcare provision. St Luke's Nursery in South Kirkby is the centre's designated childcare provider. The nursery was separately inspected in October 2012. The report for this provider can be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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 Owls Children's Centre provides good services and support for children and families. Centre staff are highly regarded by the community and by other professionals, as they are reliable, swiftly responsive and sensitive in approach, particularly when working with families experiencing a crisis in their lives. The dedicated and highly motivated staff team provide good quality care, guidance and support during centre sessions and outreach activities, in addition to their work with individual families. Innovative partnership working with a wide range of agencies helps to increase accessibility to services and achieve better outcomes for the children and families.

Good relationships between centre staff and families and effective multi-agency working promote early intervention and well targeted support for families with circumstances that make them vulnerable. Staff are strong advocates in ensuring children are safeguarded and

parents are supported well to take difficult decisions to protect their children. Several parents commented that they would not have been able to care for their children without the centre's help and that they now have the confidence to be, 'proper parents'.

Children's early learning and development are supported very effectively. Staff provide positive role models in how to engage with children and promote good communication skills. Parents benefit from a broad range of courses that enhance their parenting skills and extend their understanding of children's development. The centre's strong focus on increasing the skills and confidence of parents has successfully extended purposeful learning into the home. Effective early identification of children who need additional help to progress their learning ensures support is in place prior to starting school, which facilitates smooth transition.

Adults are enthusiastic learners when supporting their children's learning. Retention on courses such as 'Painting Together' and 'Communication Counts' is high and a few parents gain accreditation for their work from similar courses. However, there is no clear pathway into further training for adult learners and the centre does not track rigorously the longer-term impact of its work in supporting users in to employment. Long-term staff absences have reduced the centre's capacity recently to encourage users to volunteer; those who do are well supported in their role and make a positive contribution to the centre's work.

Health outcomes, although improving, are satisfactory overall. The proportion of mothers who sustain breastfeeding has increased by 10% recently but is still below national expectations. Despite several initiatives in place to encourage healthy eating, the number of children who are obese at the end of Reception Year has not yet reduced to local and national averages.

The centre has a good understanding of the local community and ensures that provision is closely matched to meet families' needs. Parents are regularly involved in decision-making and their ideas are used well to shape services. For example, families who have disabled children or children with special educational needs appreciate greatly the summer playscheme provided as a result of their identified need.

The governing body's commitment to the centre is evident as governors regularly visit sessions to talk to users. However, their performance management of the centre lacks rigour. Nevertheless, leadership and management are strong overall as the local authority provides increasingly robust challenge to promote continuous improvement. The centre's leadership team are reflective practitioners who maximise the centre's impact by regularly reviewing staff roles and adapting provision, based on their scrutiny of data, information from partner agencies and users' evaluations. This monitoring ensures an accurate understanding of the centre's strengths and areas for development, and clear, ambitious priorities which are linked to identified local need. There is recognition that further improvements in data are needed to reflect more comprehensively the centre's work and aid a more analytical self-evaluation.

Capable leadership, quality provision linked to families' needs, strong partnership working and improving outcomes demonstrate the centre has good capacity for sustained improvement.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve outcomes by:
 - increasing the number of babies who are breastfed at six-to-eight weeks
 - reducing the levels of obesity in children at the end of Reception Year
 - establishing a pathway for adult users to increase their skills for employment, including provision of additional opportunities for volunteering.
- Work with the local authority to:
 - extend data collection to reflect more accurately the impact of the centre's work across all aspects of its work
 - develop the quality of data to strengthen analytical self-evaluation.
- Strengthen the role of the governing body to ensure it rigorously monitors the centre's performance.

How good are outcomes for families?

2

Skilful use of Common Assessment Framework procedures result in the needs of families being assessed thoroughly and individualised support agreed with parents. Well maintained case files, discussions with parents and partner agencies evidence that the staff's sensitive and empowering approach with families results in positive outcomes for most children, including those who are subject to a child-protection plan or deemed to be children 'in need'.

Parents feel safe in the centre and have built trusting relationships with staff to share confidently any safeguarding concerns. Regular safety advice helps parents to have a better understanding of how to keep their families safe. Very few children under five from the reach area are admitted to hospital as a result of accidents. Following a first-aid course, parents describe how much more confident they are now in dealing with choking incidents, or severe burns.

The sensitive and supportive work with families to improve their emotional health and well-being results in parents feeling less isolated and increasingly in control of their lives. Parents accessing parenting programmes use tools, such as a 'Pause Button' and fridge magnets, as effective reminders of techniques that enable them to manage children's behaviour confidently and deal with stressful family situations in a positive way. Careful design of sessions such as 'Baby Massage', 'Baby Yoga' and 'Bumps and Babies' encourage positive relationships and development of early communication between parents and their young children.

The centre provides a relaxed and supportive environment for breastfeeding mothers, including some teenage parents. Expectant mothers value having support arrangements in place before the birth of their baby. However, the centre is aware that more work is needed to increase the proportion of mothers breastfeeding to match national levels. The introduction of 'Weaning Parties' is helping to reverse the trend of increasingly early weaning practices and promote good eating habits from an early age. Parents attending cooking sessions develop useful skills and continue to use recipes to prepare inexpensive, nutritious meals at home. They explained how to use different ingredients and herbs to enhance the flavour of meals and extend their children's tastes. However, although obesity levels are reducing they are still high compared to other areas of the country. Fluoride treatments, smoking cessation clinics, a health trainer and counselling services are all available at the centre. Anecdotal evidence indicates these initiatives support families to improve their health and well-being appropriately.

Very effective systems are in place to track the progress and achievements of individuals and groups of children, particularly those two-year-olds who receive funded places. Sessions are well focused to foster children's skills that have been identified as under-developed. The vast majority of parents attending the 'Rhyme Time' sessions are increasingly confident to spend more time singing with their children and report an improvement in their child's speech and language as a result. During the inspection, staff used the theme of '*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*' effectively to promote mathematical learning. For example, activity prompts on the dough table encouraged parents to ask their children if they could, 'make three different-sized bears'.

Activities are well designed to keep children busy and interested. As a result they behave well, develop good relationships with their peers and adults, while learning good social skills and developing healthy eating habits at snack time. They demonstrate good awareness of safety as they use oven gloves in the role play area while cooking their 'food' in the oven. Big smiles appear as they participate enthusiastically and rhythmically in music and singing time. Early Years Foundation Stage profile data show that over 60% of children reach a good level of development, and the achievement gap between the lowest 20% and the rest is now much lower than the national average.

Effective advice is given to parents, particularly on issues around housing, benefit claims and financial management, which improves their economic well-being. Job vacancy displays in the centre are updated regularly and Jobcentre Plus cites positive examples of a few local parents engaging in job-seeking activities and being supported into work through the centre. A few users have gained accredited units as a result of courses offered but very few parents go on to access training at local colleges or seek access to higher education. In addition there are currently few opportunities for parents to gain additional experience through volunteering in the centre, although there is a strong tradition of users volunteering to support children's learning when their children go to school.

Regular engagement of community police officers in play sessions actively promotes community cohesion and social responsibility. Staff and parents treat each other with mutual

respect. Several parents commented that they feel comfortable coming to the centre as everyone gets on well together and they do not feel judged as parents. Users take responsibility for ensuring the safety of children and confidently remind each other of the centre's rules and boundaries. Choices of equipment and use of a camera to indicate their preferred activities encourage children's involvement in decision-making.

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	3
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

Registrations are high with a very large majority of children under five known to the centre and engagement rates are rising rapidly. A full complement of staff has increased flexibility of delivery by incorporating a number of outreach venues and extending home visits to all new parents. Consequently, families in all parts of the reach area are much more aware of, and benefit from, the centre's services, such as access to loans of play resources and purchase of low-cost safety equipment.

Careful thought is given to assessing the needs of individual families and those of specific groups to ensure that services are well targeted. Effective information sharing between partner agencies enables sensitive, tailored early intervention which helps prevent complex situations accelerating. Families facing extreme difficulties are supported well in applying for funding to purchase essential household items, and those in need of respite care are provided with much-appreciated childcare places. Parents who experience domestic violence are offered referrals to 'Safe at Home'. Staff thoughtfully provide childcare alongside this service, which allows parents uninterrupted time to consider the options available to them. The centre has a wealth of useful information attractively displayed which supplements the advice offered by knowledgeable staff.

Individual consultation with teenage parents has established that their needs are being met sufficiently either by current services, which the majority access, or by alternative support systems. A proactive partnership with local childminders has increased their confidence,

improved the quality of their practice and prepared them, well in advance, to provide additional places that will be required for two-year-olds when funding is extended later this year. The centre has found an effective way of encouraging more fathers to use the centre with the introduction of family days on Saturdays. These events are valued equally by working parents, who enjoy spending time with their children in purposeful, themed activities.

Play and learning sessions such as 'Make and Take' are carefully planned and delivered within a richly resourced environment. Although all activities have clear learning objectives, there is sufficient flexibility to ensure that children can still enjoy digging in a sudden fall of snow and spend time exploring its properties. Children's experiences and achievements are celebrated through observations and photographs collected in 'Learning Journeys.' Sessions to aid children's transition onto their next stage of learning, such as 'Families Enjoying Everything Together', are well established and continually improving due to the good partnerships developed with local schools and childcare providers. Adult learners' progress is well charted through individual learning plans and 'before and after' assessments.

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

Good integrated working practices between the health services and local authority are mirrored in very effective local multi-agency working. There is a clear, shared vision of all involved in the centre to improve the life-chances of young children and their families. The head of centre and centre manager work together well, are ambitious in their plans and inventive in their development of services. Close monitoring of delivery and users' feedback ensures provision is of consistently good quality and well targeted to reduce inequalities. Evaluation increasingly focuses on the impact of services delivered by the centre. Both the commissioners and managers recognise that current data do not reflect fully the extent or impact of the centre's work with partner agencies and that the presentation of some information does not facilitate easy analysis to ensure a sharp, critical self-evaluation. Work is in hand to address these matters.

Users' views are regularly sought and have been instrumental in informing the development of services, such as the 'Bumps and Babies' session, which now runs alongside the midwife's drop-in. Activity sessions and courses are popular and users' evaluations indicate high satisfaction levels of all the centre's services. The head of centre and centre users who are

parent governors ensure the governing body is kept well abreast of centre developments but this involvement of governors does not extend to rigorous monitoring of the centre's performance.

Staff morale is high as they are consistently well supported, have clear targets linked to the centre's priorities and receive pertinent feedback on their performance. The staff team is deployed effectively to ensure the widest possible influence through outreach work in the other school in the reach area, the local nursery, community-run toddler groups and child health clinics. This outreach work has extended engagement with the centre and improved the quality of provision. The centre's premises are maintained well and bustle with activity. Partner agencies are keen to use the centre as it is easy for parents to reach and child-friendly, which improves the quality and consistency of their engagement with parents. These factors, together with good and improving outcomes for children and families, demonstrate that the centre offers good value for money.

Managers place high priority on safeguarding all who use the centre. Risk assessments are thorough and the regular reviewing of accident records ensures that steps are taken to minimise any additional hazards identified. The centre implements rigorously its safer-recruitment procedures, including ensuring Criminal Record Bureau checks have been carried out for all who work with children at the centre. All staff and volunteers receive safeguarding and child-protection training appropriate to their role.

The centre offers a warm and welcoming environment for all. The diversity of the wider community is well represented in displays and celebrated through carefully planned activities. Families who speak English as an additional language are included fully in activities as staff learn a few key words in their home language, children are taught to use signs as well as words to aid communication and, when needed, documents are translated into home languages. Provision of crèches for all courses at the centre improves accessibility to training opportunities. Occupational therapy sessions at the centre and very practical assistance, for example with travel arrangements, improve attendance at medical appointments significantly, thus helping to reduce inequalities further.

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 secures 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.	2

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

The recent inspection reports of South Kirkby Common Road Infant and Nursery School and St Luke's Nursery were used to inform judgements about outcomes for children's educational achievement.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the Little Owls Children's Centre on 23–24 January 2013. We judged the centre as good overall.

Those of you we talked to and the staff from other agencies told us how effective the staff are at providing you with help when you need it most. They are sensitive in their approach and help you to take decisions for yourselves, which you told us helped you to become better parents. They provide you with good care, guidance and support at the centre and at the outreach sessions staff attend. Those of you who have disabled children or children with special educational needs are supported effectively as the centre's staff are skilled at recognising your children's needs quickly. They ensure that children have the help they need in place before they start school so they are ready to learn and make good progress. You also very much appreciate the summer playscheme, which is offered because you said this was something you needed. More fathers are now involved in the centre since the introduction of the 'Family Days' on Saturdays. Some of you who are working told us this also provided an event for you and your family to enjoy together as the activities are enjoyable and well organised around themes such as last year's Jubilee celebrations.

A wide range of activities and services are offered, which are designed to support your families. This is possible because the staff work closely with other agencies to find out about your needs. The centre has been keen also to encourage both you and your children to

make your views known about what you like about the sessions. They regularly ask you what difference the courses and activities are making for you and your children so they can plan their work to ensure it is making a difference for you. The centre is particularly good at supporting you to help your children learn. We observed how engaged you were in talking to your children and you told us how the sessions you attend help both you and your children to make friends. Using signs learned at the centre has helped you and your children to communicate from an early age and sessions such as 'Baby Massage' helps both you and your baby to relax and bond together well. It was particularly pleasing to hear how enthusiastic you are about helping your children to learn at home as this is making a big difference for them when they start school.

We also found that many of you have attended courses which have helped your own learning and development, such as parenting programmes and first-aid courses. The centre supports those of you who want to find work by advertising job vacancies and referring you to additional advice from Jobcentre Plus advisers. Some of you have undertaken training which has helped you find work and we heard how a small number of parents had gained accreditation for their work on courses. However, the centre does not have a clear pathway of support to help more of you prepare for work and does not look at the progress you make in the training you undertake to help plan your next steps in learning. We have asked them to improve this aspect of their work.

Everyone attending the centre told us how staff and parents respect each other and how well you all get on together. We saw how you took responsibility for ensuring the children are safe in the sessions and checking that everyone understands and follows the rules of the centre. Your children are actively involved in the activities on offer which develops their independence and helps them to share and develop good relationships with each other and with the adults present. Although there are not many opportunities available at the moment for you to volunteer in the centre, it was good to hear that some of you volunteer at the school and have gone on to become parent governors. As the school is responsible for the children's centre, this ensures that the views of centre users are well represented to decision-makers. We have asked the centre to extend the opportunities for volunteering within the centre.

The centre is good at helping you to keep your families safe, especially when you are experiencing a crisis in your lives. Most of you feel that you and your children are safe at the centre and are confident to share any worries you have with staff as they build good relationships with you. We have asked the centre to develop their work in encouraging breastfeeding and helping you to provide healthier diets and exercise for your families as fewer babies are breastfed locally and more local children are obese at the end of Reception Year than in other parts of the country.

The managers of the centre use the information they receive from the local authority and the feedback that you provide very effectively to develop the services they offer, assess how well they are doing and identify the next priorities for their work. They regularly meet with staff to discuss how their work is progressing and ensure that each member of staff is meeting the targets set for them. The governing body receives reports about the centre's

work but does not check how well it is making a difference for you, so we have asked the governors to ensure they are more involved in monitoring the centre's work. We have also asked the centre to make sure it records all the information about the work it does with you and the difference the services of partner agencies it puts you in touch with are making for you. In addition, we have asked the local authority to ensure it continues to improve the details it provides for the centre, to help the centre assess even more thoroughly how well it is doing.

Thank you very much for your welcome and for taking the time to talk with inspectors. We thoroughly enjoyed meeting you and sharing your experiences. We wish you every success in the future.

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