

Inspection report for EPP3 Little Oaks Children's Centre

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| Local authority | Essex County Council |
| Inspection number | 383926 |
| Inspection dates | 20–21 March 2013 |
| Reporting inspector | Joan Lindsay |

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| Centre leader | Kimberley O'Sullivan |
| Date of previous inspection | Not applicable |
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| Linked school if applicable | Not applicable |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | Not applicable |

The inspection of this Sure Start children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

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Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

This inspection was carried out by an additional inspector and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with the centre leader and staff, representatives from the local authority and Spurgeons, the lead body, who manage the centre on their behalf. They also spoke to partner representatives from family support agencies, community groups, parents and other users of the centre.

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

Information about the centre

This phase two centre was designated in December 2007 and has met the full core purpose since 2010. In September 2012 the centre moved to a new site but was not fully operational until January 2013. It shares this site with Loughton Resource Centre that provides day care for adults with special needs.

A major reorganisation in the local authority resulted in children's centre services being commissioned out. Consequently, since April 2012, the centre has been managed by the children's charity Spurgeons on behalf of the local authority. Little Oaks is in the west quadrant of Essex and is one of eight children's centres in Epping Forest. It is part of a cluster of three local children's centres. Quadrant and district boards act as the strategic managers as there is no separate advisory board. The full time centre leader, early years worker and part time administrator work across three centres, a senior family support and outreach worker works across eight centres, and two full time family support and outreach workers work only at Little Oaks. Services are available from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. Monday to Friday all year apart from Christmas and bank holidays.

The centre serves an area of mixed economic and social backgrounds with 21% of children living in households dependent on workless benefits, which is in line the national average. The percentage of eligible families benefiting from the childcare

element of working tax credit at 12.9% is below the national figure of 17.4%. Of the 10 Lower Super Output Areas in the reach area, three are ranked in the top 20% most deprived in England with a further two in the top 30%. White or white British heritage families make up the large majority living in the area with 16% from a wide range of other ethnic groups. A relatively high number of families do not give their ethnicity.

There are 955 children aged under five years living in the reach area; 53% are registered at, and 35% overall have contact with the centre. Children's skills, knowledge and abilities on entry to early years provision are typically below the level expected for their age.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for families

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

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

3

Main findings

EPP3 Little Oaks Children's Centre provides a satisfactory service to families. Staff have worked hard over a prolonged period of upheaval to ensure they maintain good levels of care, guidance and support for families who need help most. This has led to a high degree of confidence and trust in staff reflected in comments such as 'They are fantastic, really good, they have been brilliant support'. Parents feel safe and have a good understanding how to protect their children. Safeguarding is good as safeguarding policies and procedures are robust and comprehensive. They are consistently applied by staff who are well-trained in all aspects of safeguarding especially in protecting children and in supporting families where there is domestic violence. Much improved information from social care ensures staff are made aware of, and can provide effect support, for the most vulnerable families.

Outcomes are satisfactory overall. There are strengths in the good progress children make as reflected in results at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Parents feel the centre does much to help their children's inter-personal skills and confidence to develop. However, there are only limited opportunities for adults to extend their skills or education. This is partly due to the period the centre was effectively closed during the move but also because no strong links have been established with adult education services. In addition, the longer term outcomes for adults and children are

not being tracked to enable the centre to measure its effectiveness and fine-tune services to meet their needs. This is because there is no consistent method to monitor the progress of children when they move on to other settings or schools. Furthermore, the centre is not using data effectively to measure its impact when setting targets in the delivery plan.

Parents voice positive views of the centre and feel they have a role in shaping services. However the reorganisation and the impact of the move have meant that the parents' forum, Little Oaks Children's Centre Community Group (LOCCCG), has dwindled in size. The community engagement and volunteer coordinator, who attends this group is the parents' voice on the district and quadrant boards as there is no direct parental involvement on those relatively new bodies. Consequently parents' involvement in governance is not strong enough.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The committed staff team has weathered a difficult period of change and staff absence which saw numbers of families attending sessions fall. However, registrations are now picking up again and the centre has been particularly successful in engaging families from the most deprived areas. There is a clear understanding of the centre's strengths and areas for development and evidence that outcomes are beginning to improve. However the centre is not measuring its impact effectively enough and there is scope for those who work with the centre and for parents to be more meaningfully involved in self-evaluation. For these reasons, the capacity for sustained improvement is satisfactory.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Provide more opportunities for adults to extend their skills and achievements by linking with adult learning providers and facilitating a wider range of courses.
- Improve self evaluation processes to enable services to be fine-tuned to meet the needs of those who require most support by:
 - working with the local authority, reach area schools and other partners to establish a consistent method to track the longer term outcomes
 - using this data to set measurable targets in the centre's delivery plan
 - increasing the involvement of partners and parents in self-evaluation.
- Increase the number of families directly involved in the governance of the centre by strengthening the children's centre community group and increasing the parents' voice on the district and quadrant boards.

How good are outcomes for families?

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The majority of local families, including those from target groups engage with health services as shown by high and improving district-wide immunisation rates of 96%. The sustained breastfeeding rate is remaining steady at around 46%, similar to rates found nationally. Although there are no specific trend data available for childhood obesity figures, the reach area combined figure for 2009-2011 is 12% which is above local and national levels. The centre makes healthy living a focus of many of its activities and most parents feel they have a satisfactory understanding of how to

lead healthy lives as a result. 'My child will eat fruit here that they wouldn't at home' expressed parents' positive views. Staff attend local baby clinics and offer effective support for emotional needs such as postnatal depression through baby massage courses. At present there is no link health visitor or midwife although the centre can help families access specialist support through signposting to speech and language therapists and ensuring links with the medical practices are maintained.

Parents who have accessed structured parenting programmes, first aid sessions and the child safety week events say they have been 'invaluable' in helping them protect their families. Most families are confident to share even the most difficult issues with staff. They and their children feel secure at the centre because staff know them well and offer good one-to-one support. Assessment tools and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) are used effectively to assess families' specific needs and to harness support for the most vulnerable families. Good inter-agency working through the multi-agency allocation group (MAAG) and staff knowing which families are subject to child protection plans or are children in need or looked after, means that the outcomes for the majority of children requiring this support are good.

Children benefit from enjoyable and fun sessions such as Stay and Play and music activities that are focused on developing their early communication and confidence. Reach area data show a significant improvement in the number attaining a good level of development at 52%, up from 38.9% in 2009, although this is still below local and national levels. The achievement gap between the lowest 20% and the rest has narrowed to 28% which is better than that found nationally. At present there are no systems in place to measure the specific impact of the centre on children's progress although learning journeys are planned to be used in the near future. Enjoy and achieve is satisfactory overall because whilst there are examples of some adults improving their personal skills, the number who enhance their educational development and progress on to work is more limited. Staff have been trained to deliver benefits advice and do so through budgeting lunch clubs and on a one-to-one basis. They support families accessing employment services and have also obtained funded nursery places for seven families. Consequently some families from various target groups say staff have been instrumental in improving their economic and social well-being. However the centre is not recording the short or long term outcomes effectively to enable it to measure its success and where to best target its support. Furthermore, whilst some families have been supported back to work more need to be helped to do so.

Staff have been proactive in establishing the new location in the heart of the community developing good links with the Restore community centre. Everyone shows respect for each other and children model this in their good behaviour. Families feel they have lots of opportunities to voice their opinions through quarterly satisfaction surveys, social networking sites and feedback at the end of sessions and a good number do so. They feel they are listened to such as having a lone parents' lunch time club set up. However, the reorganisation of the centre, staff shortages and the long period when the centre had no permanent base caused numbers who attend the LOCCCG to fall. In addition, although there are two potential volunteers

being recruited, none are active in the centre at the moment. Consequently, families have a limited direct role in governance at present.

These are the grades for the outcomes for families

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| 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 | 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?

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The provision made for families is satisfactory. Although registration numbers fell during the protracted period of the move, the centre successfully ensured that families who most needed their support still had access to services. Numbers are beginning to pick up again aided by outreach work and partners such as Job Centre Plus and health services distributing 'consent to contact' cards. Although all target groups are engaged with services to some extent, the number of families from workless households and lone parents who do so is relatively low although this also reflects a reluctance of families to disclose this information. A good number of fathers attend the centre and a high percentage of disabled children are supported through links with other services providing specific sessions such as the SENSES group.

The centre promotes purposeful learning adequately. The opportunities for adults to enhance their education and wider skills are not having as positive an impact on their achievement as they are for children who access the centre. Generally, however activities are of good quality although the numbers who attend some of the targeted sessions are relatively low at present. New templates to plan sessions highlight children's early development goals and are beginning to be put to effective use to ensure progression. Personal development and achievement are celebrated through the awarding of certificates to adults who complete courses such as the parenting programme and displays of children's artwork.

The quality of care, guidance and support is good. Families spoken to and case studies show that programmes of home visits, very bespoke support for families for example with mental health needs and close links with specialists and charities such

as Home Start, lead to good outcomes for those most vulnerable families. Comments made to inspectors such as 'I'd be lost without it' and 'It's invaluable...just getting me out of the house keeps me sane' summed this up. Effective work of family support and outreach workers, the use of CAF processes and the good information exchange all have had a positive impact on how safe and well-supported families feel. This is especially so when families have come to the centre in times of crisis such as when they are in dire financial straits.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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| 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

Strong team commitment and good day-to-day leadership have ensured the centre's satisfactory effectiveness during an unsettled period. The local authority and the lead body have maintained good levels of monitoring and support throughout. The district and quadrant boards are relatively new and still embedding their working practices and developing the level of parent representation on each. The delivery plan has appropriate priorities but there is not a consistent use of data to measure the centre's impact and there is a need for partners to be more involved in this and in self-evaluation. Consequently, governance and evaluation are satisfactory overall.

The centre provides satisfactory value for money. It is inclusive and welcoming and so the services are used by all target groups to some extent. However, equality and diversity are judged as satisfactory overall as the number who regularly access the centre is relatively low and so the impact on narrowing the achievement gap between different groups is limited at present. Nevertheless, parents say they all mix well and feel at home there, typically described as 'I always feel welcome and respected'. It is accessible to all, including disabled children and displays and activities celebrate a range of cultures such as Chinese New Year. Resources are generally of a good quality but at present children do not have the benefit of a suitable outdoor area although plans are in place to develop one. Staff resources and expertise, such as that of the early years adviser are used efficiently across the cluster. Outreach work linked to a good understanding of the community and the use of venues such as the library are starting to have an impact on the numbers benefiting from the services. Reduced funding has meant that crèches are more limited and this has had a negative impact on the numbers able to access certain courses.

Safeguarding is very much at the forefront of the centre's work. This is reflected in the fact the use of the new premises was delayed whilst health and safety

requirements were met. Policies and procedures are robust and combined very effectively with high levels of staff training including in how to spot and deal with signs of child abuse and domestic violence. Vetting procedures for staff, volunteers and any agencies working in the centre are thorough and effective. Information-sharing and good mutually-respected professional relationships also ensure that the most vulnerable families are safeguarded well.

Partnerships are satisfactory overall. Links with adult education providers and local schools are not as strong as with other partners such as community groups, voluntary organisations and childminders. The latter group feel they benefit significantly from the centre's support summed up by one childminder as: 'We can ask the staff about anything: planning, childcare issues or safety concerns'. The centre is currently without a link health visitor although there are still regular visits to baby clinics made by centre staff.

Parents using the centre have regular opportunities to voice their opinions, although there are fewer opportunities to capture the views of young children other than by observing their preferences. Families feel comfortable to talk to staff and have generally positive views of the services. However the lack of more formal channels to share their ideas and the drop-off in numbers at the LOCCCG restricts parents' direct involvement in decision-making and governance.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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| 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 | 3 |
| The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of families, including those in target groups | 3 |
| The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties | 3 |
| 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 | 3 |
| 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

Not applicable.

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Summary for centre users

We inspected the EPP3 Little Oaks Children's Centre on 20–21 March 2013. We judged the centre as satisfactory overall.

We thoroughly enjoyed our time at your centre. Thank you for being involved in the inspection and for taking the time to tell us about the centre's work and how positive you are about how staff support you and your children. It was very enjoyable and useful to visit the activities taking place such as the Stay and Play session, the childminders' session and the music group.

As you know the centre has had a fairly disrupted period, with changes to who manages the centre overall when Spurgeons took over, some staff absences and then the move to the new premises. As it took a while to sort everything out, the number of families coming to the centre dropped. However, more families are starting to come along again and the staff were effective at making sure that those of you who most needed support over that time continued to receive it. As a result of the effective safeguarding systems, high levels of staff training and regular exchange of information between the different partners that support families, you receive good levels of care, guidance and support. This leads you to have a lot of confidence and trust in staff with typical comments made to us being: 'They are fantastic, really good, they have been brilliant support' and 'It's invaluable, just getting out of the house keeps me sane'. You also feel that the centre does a good job in helping you to protect your families through courses such as first aid and parenting programmes.

Outcomes overall are satisfactory. You feel you are helped to have a better understanding of how to lead healthy lives and your children like the chance to try different fruits for example. The majority of you make use of the local health services as can be seen the high percentage of children who are immunised. However, levels of obesity when children leave reception classes are higher than other local areas and the number of mothers who are still breastfeeding at two months is remaining steady rather than improving. So health outcomes overall are satisfactory.

Children in the local area make good progress in their early development and you told us how the centre helps improve their independence and inter-personal skills. One parent summed up the views of others saying 'My son is much happier, more confident and there have been lots of learning outcomes'. However, because staff are not monitoring children yet when they are at the centre or when they move on to nursery or school, it is difficult to measure its impact. This is also the case for

adults. We have asked the centre to improve the links with local adult education providers to increase the number of courses available to you to help you improve your skills and then for the centre to monitor the longer term outcomes. This is so they can see where most people need help and what the impact is in relation to moving on to work or aspiring to more qualifications. We expect that the local authority, schools and other partners will support the centre in its efforts to set up consistent systems to do this.

All of those spoken to feel that your views are listened to and where possible, acted on such as in setting up the different lunch clubs. However, the Little Oaks Children's Centre Community Group, which is a formal means to collect your views and feed them on to higher management levels, has seen the numbers who attend fall. Also, at present there is no parent voice on the quadrant and district boards that govern the centre, although the community engagement and volunteer coordinator does attend on your behalf. This is another area we have asked the centre to improve and you can help them a lot by going along to meetings, continuing to put forward your ideas and volunteering to act in a more formal capacity representing families' views.

Staff have worked hard to cope with all the recent changes and still remain cheerful and committed to improve the services to those who need it most. As one of you commented 'Staff always have a smile on their faces!'. They have already had some success in re-establishing the centre's place in the community and there are good links with the library and the Restore community centre. They are beginning to see higher numbers coming along to the new venue from all different groups in the community. You can help with this by spreading the word about what is on offer in your centre. Leaders and managers at all levels know the centre's strengths and areas for development and they have already had some impact in improving outcomes especially in relation to families' safety. As a result there is a satisfactory capacity to continue to improve and a strong commitment to do so.

We really enjoyed our time at the centre. Thank you again for being willing to share your views and we wish you all the best for your future.

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