

Ambleside Children's Centre

The Ambleside Centre, Ambleside Close, Woodley, Reading RG5 4JJ

Inspection dates	8–9 July 2014
Previous inspection date	Not previously inspected

Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good	2
	Previous inspection:	n/a	n/a
Access to services by young children and families		Good	2
The quality of practice and services		Good	2
The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for children and families

This is a good centre.

- The centre has strong working relationships with its partners and with the local community, providing a valued hub for families. With the support of the council and other local services, it serves its community well, reaching a very large majority of children and their families.
- It is very good at identifying and reaching families most in need of help, including families of all children in the area who are in need or who have a child protection plan.
- Parents are listened to and they value the help they and their children receive and the care and understanding with which they are treated.
- Professionals meet the needs of families well in an increasingly diverse area. The centre ensures that families from all backgrounds feel welcome.
- Requests for services quickly lead to offers of help.
- Most eligible children take up their entitlement to funded childcare places.
- Most children make good progress, including children with additional needs. In cases sampled by inspectors, the well-being of adults and children improved as a result of the help they received.
- The centre is well run. Staff are suitable and receive the training and supervision they need to be effective.

It is not outstanding because:

- The centre is not yet helping enough parents to develop their literacy, numeracy and work-related skills.
- Volunteering is established, but there is no systematic approach to recruiting, training and developing volunteers to enable them to gain qualifications and move on to good jobs.
- Casework planning and discussions are recorded on workers' supervision notes, but not always in children's files. This makes it difficult in some cases to understand the purpose of the centre's involvement with families and to monitor their progress.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen education and training to improve adults' personal and employability skills.
- Establish a structured programme to help volunteers gain qualifications, develop work-related skills and improve their employability.
- Ensure that plans, reviews and management oversight in individual cases are recorded on children's case files, as well as in workers' supervision notes, and that where required parents' written consent to information sharing is consistently recorded.

Information about this inspection

The inspection of this children's centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as amended by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. It was undertaken by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Additional Inspectors.

The inspectors held meetings with the children's centre leader, the nursery school headteacher (head of centre), the local authority's children's centre lead officer and data officer, centre staff and volunteers, professionals in other local services, the chairs of the advisory board and the nursery school governing body, parents and centre users.

The inspectors visited Ambleside Children's Centre and saw outreach activities at Woodley Airfield Centre. They observed the centre's work, including joint observations of practice with the centre leader, tracked a sample of six cases and reviewed case studies, personnel records and staff supervision files. They looked at a range of relevant information including the centre's self-evaluation, business plan, budget, safer recruitment records and safeguarding policy and procedures.

Inspection team

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Her Majesty's Inspector

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Full report

Information about the centre

This children's centre in Wokingham borough was designated in 2008, having previously been an early excellence centre. It shares a site with Pastures early years provision for children from birth to three and with Meadows local authority maintained nursery school. This is the centre's first inspection. Pastures was inspected in May 2014 and judged to be good; Meadows was inspected in December 2012 and judged to be outstanding.

Meadows maintained nursery school, through its governing body, is responsible for the running of the children's centre, under an agreement with Wokingham Borough Council. The nursery school employs the centre leader and staff team. In addition, a multi-agency advisory board has been established to provide support and challenge for this and a neighbouring children's centre.

The centre serves a mixed community in an area which, although affluent overall, being close to a range of employers, includes some pockets of deprivation. The reach area is increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, language and faiths. Services and activities on offer include a mobile play bus which the centre uses to reach families who may be unable, or initially reluctant, to come in to the centre itself. Centre staff work alongside social workers, health practitioners, teachers and early years professionals, with whom they share the building. This helps them to identify and support those children and families who are likely to need extra help.

In particular, the centre has identified and is focusing on specific target groups of families likely to need support. These are:

- children subject to a child protection plan, child in need plan or common assessment, or referred to the centre by the midwifery team
- pregnant teenagers
- young parents under 25
- Black and minority ethnic families and families first language is not English
- lone parents
- male carers
- children living in household where there is a mental health issue
- children living with domestic abuse
- children with additional health or education needs
- vulnerable two-year-olds, eligible for funded places
- children living in workless households.

Inspection judgements

Access to services by young children and families Good

- The centre has strong working relationships with its partners and with the local community, providing a valued hub for families. It offers a variety of activities, at the centre itself and in other local venues. Through sustained outreach work, partnership with other services and running community activities, the centre has significantly increased the proportion of children under five it is reaching, up from 65% to 80% of the 1,595 children in its reach area in the last year. This high level of engagement with local families extends to parents

who are expecting children, including all pregnant teenagers in the reach area.

- The centre serves an increasingly diverse population well, creating an environment in which families from minority ethnic, language and faith communities feel welcome and respected. Successful crèche-supported English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses, run with a local college, attract parents whose first language is not English.
- The centre is very good at reaching families most in need of help. All of the most vulnerable children in the reach area, those who are subject to a child protection plan, child in need plan, common assessment or team around the family plan receive services from the centre. The majority of families in other priority groups are registered with the centre and have used its services. Cases sampled by inspectors showed that staff sustain regular contact with families. For example, family workers attend core groups and family group conferences, supporting families well and helping keep children safe from harm.
- The strong, inclusive ethos of the centre helps it engage families from all parts of its reach area and beyond. Children and parents are encouraged and supported to attend universal sessions. The centre also runs short term 'pop up' courses for parents, where a specific need is identified, as well as individual support for particularly vulnerable families.
- Co-location with high quality early years provision and children's social care, parenting and speech and language therapy teams provides a rich professional environment, through which referrals lead quickly to offers of help. The appropriate professionals support families well when a need is identified. Information is shared effectively between teams. Meetings involving all professionals take place regularly, ensuring that families receive a joined-up service.
- Health visitor drop-in sessions, speech and language support and good communication with the link nursery and other providers also help ensure that most young children and their parents are in contact with the centre. There is over 90% take up of two-year-old funded places and family workers run monthly play sessions for the families involved, to help parents support their children's progress.
- Community activities, such as family picnics, attract families who might not be aware of the centre and what it offers. Introducing a play bus has improved access to services for children living in neighbourhoods where there are few other facilities.

The quality of practice and services

Good

- Referrals are responded to swiftly, so families in target groups access services they need in a timely way. Families make good use of available services and sessions are well attended.
- Planning, observation and tracking of children through to school are strong. Most children make good progress through the Early Years Foundation Stage, including children with additional needs.
- Parents are helped to understand and respond to their children's needs. Evidence-based parenting courses are available through the local authority. Parents report they benefit from these courses, although there is no systematic tracking of outcomes, and they are not yet integrated into the children's centre service. Centre staff are being trained to run courses, to make it easier for participants to access other services and to strengthen follow-on support for families.
- Feedback parents give to the centre shows that most are satisfied with the services they and their children receive. Those who met inspectors said the centre had made a significant difference to their own and their children's lives. Leaders recognise the need to work more closely with adult focused services, such as mental health and drug and alcohol services,

and to track longer term impact for families more systematically. They have recently introduced a family outcomes star tool for this purpose. This is a promising development, although so far the tool has only been fully used with 17 families.

- The centre has good pastoral and supportive links with local private, voluntary and independent providers and it promotes events to develop good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- Children and families benefit from strong partnerships with other services, including speech therapy, educational psychology, special educational needs support and domestic abuse services. A recent joint campaign with the community dental service has been effective in raising parents' awareness of dental decay in young children.
- Families benefit from a good variety of universal services, with targeted support often given within these services. The centre's outreach work includes home visits to families in most need of intensive support.
- While parents are encouraged to use the National Careers Advice Service, Next Steps, Jobcentre Plus and the Citizen's Advice Bureau, not enough are offered courses to improve their English and mathematics skills and employability.
- While some volunteers are working at the centre, it does not have a systematic approach to recruiting, training and developing the skills and employability of volunteers.
- Families whose first language is not English are encouraged into programmes to improve their language skills.
- Parents are very positive about the care, guidance and support provided by the centre. Cases tracked by inspectors indicate adults' and children's well-being improving as a result of the help they receive. Parents spoke of the knowledge, warmth and empathy of the staff team and centre leader. One vulnerable parent said of the worker who had helped her and her children through a difficult time, 'She just knows what I'm going through, as if she were in my shoes.'
- Case files include much detailed information, but are not in a standardised format. Many records of meetings are unsigned and files often include sticky notes and other informal documents. Some files lack a clear overall plan of intervention and only limited use is made of chronologies.

The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

Good

- Leadership, governance and management of the centre are strong. The local authority has a positive vision for the centre as the focus for early help for vulnerable children. Leaders and partners have driven improvement, helping the centre significantly increase its reach over the last year, from 65% to 80% of children under five. Reach data and service users' views are used well to target outreach work and partnership activity.
- The centre makes effective use of strategic partnerships and works closely with health, social care, police, local authority services and community groups to identify and engage target groups. Nearly all reach targets set for the centre have been met or exceeded.
- An effective advisory board, with good multi-agency and community participation, and strong links to the nursery school's governing body provide good support and challenge to help the centre improve.
- The centre knows itself and its community well. The centre's self-evaluation is well considered and accurate. Leaders recognise the need to increase the emphasis on adult education and employability. The local authority sets appropriate targets, although

weaknesses in the data, which the authority recognises, make it harder to ensure targets are realistic, and the emphasis has been on delivery rather than impact.

- The centre leader and head of centre model and promote an inclusive and proactive approach. The language skills, cultural awareness and sensitivity of the centre leader have helped the centre build effective links with faith groups and develop its services in response to the changing needs of local families, in an increasingly diverse area. This helps overcome potential language and cultural barriers to engagement of target families.
- Parents are involved in, and can influence, services. Individual parents who spoke to inspectors said they and their children were listened to and they felt respected. A recent consultation exercise run by the local authority about the future shape of children's centre services in the borough prompted strong representation from families who use this centre.
- Well managed recruitment procedures and regular supervision ensure paid staff and volunteers are suitable. This helps to keep children and vulnerable adults safe. Supervision, performance management and professional development are strong, although there is a need to improve record keeping. There is a strong focus on safeguarding, with families of children in need and children at risk of harm identified and prioritised for support. Although small, the staff team is proactive and resourceful. Resources are used well to progress key local priorities and to meet families' needs.
- The centre has a visible presence in the community and continues to attract new service users, in part through word of mouth between families. Several families have agreed to the centre using their experiences in a pack of case studies, highlighting the difference the centre can make, in order to encourage others to use its services.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	Practice consistently reflects the highest aspirations for children and their families and, as a result, inequalities are reducing rapidly and gaps are closing.
Grade 2	Good	Practice enables most children and their families to access good quality services that improve children's wellbeing and achieve the stated outcomes for families.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	Performance is not as good as it might reasonably be expected to be in one or more key areas.
Grade 4	Inadequate	The needs of children and families in its area are not being met and/or the leaders and managers are not providing sufficient challenge to bring about improvement to the quality of services.

Centre details

Unique reference number	23143
Local authority	Wokingham Borough Council
Inspection number	442898
Managed by	The Meadows maintained nursery school, on behalf of Wokingham Borough Council

Approximate number of children under five in the reach area	1,595
Centre leader	Archana Kakar
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